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Teaching ESL/EFL Listening and Speaking

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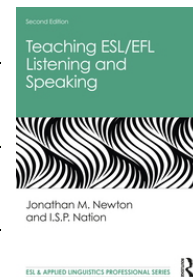
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The drive to constantly improve language teaching and learning characterizes the field of teaching English as a second language (TESL). The second edition of *Teaching ESL/EFL Listening and Speaking* by Jonathan M. Newton and I.S.P. Nation embodies this quality, both with its changes from the first edition and in the sections that the authors have kept. Newton and Nation advance the field with their claim that communicative language teaching (CLT) is only part of the puzzle. While CLT gained popularity in the 1980s because of the “urgency” that it gave pronunciation (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010, p. 2), Newton and Nation posit that, rather than adhering solely to one approach, it is “much more sensible to draw, where possible, on research-based principles that can be adapted or discarded as new research evidence becomes available” (p. viii). Thus, the authors ameliorate past techniques by resisting the impulse to simply do what has been done before.

The purpose of this textbook is to provide guidance for teaching listening/speaking to second language (L2) learners; however, several other aims are established in the preface. First, Newton and Nation work to appeal to a wide range of TESL instructors by making their book eminently practical and accessible. They accomplish this goal by establishing a framework that builds upon fluency development, attention to language, meaning-focused output, and meaning-focused input. To support this framework, the authors rely on recent research. An example demonstrating the

connection between pedagogical suggestions and recent research is their discussion of the 4/3/2 technique (i.e., having the L2 learner give the same talk in decreasing increments of time). The efficacy of this technique is supported by research from Boers (2014), who concluded that this technique increases the speed with which students can comprehensibly communicate.

The authors often situate listening and speaking in the context of all four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). In fact, one of the goals of the book is to develop fluent use of the four skills, though listening and speaking take precedence. This focus on speaking and listening is reflected in the first six chapters: 1) Parts and Goals of a Listening and Speaking Course; 2) Beginning to Listen and Speak in Another Language; 3) Listening; 4) Extensive Listening; 5) Language-focused Learning through Dictation and Related Activities; and 6) Pronunciation. The latter six chapters focus on general teaching techniques applicable to any skill. The chapters are as follows: 7) Learning through Task-based Interaction; 8) Learning through Pushed Output; 9) Teaching Using a Course Book; 10) Language-focused Learning: Deliberate Teaching; 11) Developing Fluency; and 12) Assessing Progress. Together, the chapters cover the knowledge necessary to create an informed teacher, while taking the critical step of providing insight for using newly acquired knowledge in the classroom.

One of their new chapters—Chapter 4: Extensive Listening—is of particular interest. Newton and Nation claim that extensive listening “reflects the increasing interest in extensive reading and the continuing awareness of the importance of comprehensible input through listening and reading for learning” (p. vii), thus positioning itself at the helm of TESL innovation. The authors define extensive listening as “lots of listening with the right kind of support so that the spoken input is comprehensible” (p. 60). The first part of the chapter is spent positioning extensive listening within Newton and Nation’s framework, specifically within the meaning-focused input strand. The second part of the chapter describes how the L2 teacher can support extensive listening for the learner by using recent research. Perhaps more engaging than their references is the practical application of the presented ideas, as well as the tools provided to teachers. For example, after claiming that TV and movies are helpful resources for extensive listening, the authors acknowledge that these kinds of mediums present vocabulary problems for L2 learners. Their response to this problem is to analyze several movies for the learners’ respective vocabulary sizes. They found that *Toy Story* was more L2 learner friendly (in terms of the movie’s limited vocabulary) and that *Aladdin* was less L2 learner friendly. This information is immediately practical for L2 teachers because it provides a specific selection of texts to consider for lessons. At the end of the chapter, the authors present several online sources that teachers can utilize for extensive listening. They also include several exercises that ask the teacher to complete tasks that could reasonably be applied to the classroom.

Despite its many strengths, it is important to consider areas for improvement. The web-based resources offered at the end of every chapter (which are simultaneously one of the book’s strengths) could also alienate potential users. Most of the resources require access to the internet and a computer. For ESL teachers who do not have access to these tools, this book’s associated resources are largely inaccessible. Additionally, an improvement for this textbook would be to provide an in-depth discussion about individual learner differences and their effect on listening and speaking instruction. This discussion is particularly pertinent because pronunciation is an “external representation system” which, if performed inadequately, can threaten the learner’s “language ego” (i.e., “a pronunciation barrier that safeguard[s] psychological integrity”) (Guiora, 1992, p. 19). Therefore, a TESL teacher needs to be fully aware of how the learner’s individual characteristics may be affected by demands of a speaking/listening classroom, yet this topic is not broached in *Teaching ESL/EFL Listening and Speaking*.

On the positive side, true to the claims delineated in the preface, the two greatest strengths of this book are its accessibility and practicality. Newton and Nation are considerate of their audience in their goal to make the book applicable to the classroom. In fact, Chapter 9 is focused on helping teachers develop their ability to utilize a course book when constructing their curriculum. Similarly, the Chapter 5 is dedicated entirely to dictation and related activities. Even in more theoretical chapters, like Chapter 2, the authors provide step-by-step lesson plan ideas. The combination of accessibility and practicality culminates in a product bridging the gap between theory and practice. An ideal classroom to complement this book is one with internet access to make use the suggested resources. In addition, this book would be useful for a beginning instructor venturing into research-centered teaching for the first time. Indeed, the book equips TESL teachers to ensure their learners “are learning useful things” (p. viii), as well as preparing TESL teachers to create fruitful opportunities for learning and balancing their listening and speaking course.

Ultimately, Newton and Nation aimed to create a textbook that would appeal to teachers-in-training of all levels in its direct relation to classroom practices by relying on a balanced course of fluency development, attention to language, meaning-focused output, and meaning-focused input. They accomplish this goal in careful consideration of the most recent research available. Indeed, based on these achievements, this book will be an invaluable addition to any ESL teacher’s bookshelf.

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