Listening Comprehension: Aligning Instruction and Assessment

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to present some instructional ideas for second language (L2) listening comprehension and their alignment with listening assessment. Among the suggestions are using spoken texts as instructional input, introducing the micro- and macro markers and providing students with authentic texts. In addition, the paper also highlights the importance of awareness-raising on the differences between spoken and written language among L2 learners. To expand the extant of the scope of possible instructional ideas for L2 listening, the discussion on pre-teaching of listening input and its connection to learners' schemata is also included. To consolidate the discussion on instructional ideas, communicative reciprocal listening instruction is recommended for L2 listening instruction. Apart from instructional ideas, suggestions on how to develop a 'considerate' listening assessment that is in alignment with classroom instruction are also presented in this paper.

Introduction

In order to teach second language (L2) listening comprehension, it is essential for L2 teachers to have the relevant knowledge and understanding of the listening comprehension process. Such knowledge and understanding may facilitate a more effective listening comprehension instructional design and implementation. Based on this platform, this paper discusses the process of listening comprehension

Spoken Texts

Tyler (1994) proposes the use of spoken texts that signal relationship between ideas, indicate the relative importance of ideas, have cues for students to evaluate ideas. The discourse signaling cues in texts are such as preview(e.g., *The* are fo*ur stages of this culture* shock), summarizes(e.g., *To sum up* so far), emphasis markers(e.g., *This is the key*), logical connectives (e.g., *and, or,* first**,** and second). Jung (2003) also stated that given the support for the facilitating effects of cues on L1 listening comprehension, one can hypothesize that L2 listeners' comprehension would also benefit from the presence of these cues in the texts. Jung (2006) also found that discourse signaling cues play a significant role in L2 listening comprehension. Some studies have indicated that L2 learners are often not understood by L1 listeners because they have little knowledge of cues as well as their inability to use cues correctly (e.g. Rounds, 1987; Tyler, 1994; Williams, 1992).

Macro- And Micro Markers

In addition, introduce the macro-markers (e.g., *What I'm going to talk about today is*) as suggested by Chaudron and Richards (1986). Based on the study of these two researchers, the findings indicate that macro-markers significantly helped the learners comprehend the lecture. Besides the macro-markers, also introduce texts that contain micro-markers that function as intersentential relations or as pause fillers (e.g., *and,* so, and well as defined) as defined by Chaudron and Richards (1986). The reason why teachers should also introduce the micro-markers because they have been proven to increase listening performance when listening to texts contain naturally occurring micro-markers as indicated in some studies (e.g., Flowerdew & Tauroza,1995; Jung, 1999). In Jung's (1999) study, the combination of micro- and macro-markers had led to significant better performance in the signaled groups in recalling both high level and low level information and high students' perception of their comprehension.

Authentic Listening Input

Apart from the above features, Jung (2003) and Field (2002) also suggest that teachers use authentic listening texts. Jung stated that by using authentic texts, students will gain familiarity with the naturalness of spoken language in L2 while Field reasons that authentic texts mirror real life listening experience. According to Field, when teachers use real life spoken texts, teachers are actually training the students using a strategic activity. Since understanding spoken text in real life involves a lot of inferencing and guessing on the listeners' part, Field states that strategic activity will develop risk-takers among L2 listeners to make inferences using identifiable resources.

Field also recommends that teachers encourage students to monitor the accuracy of their guesses based on the new upcoming input from the speakers. Students should be informed that they are not expected to understand everything or partial understanding is acceptable. This will assimilate real life situation where very often we understand only part of what is being said by a native speaker. Field also suggests that when using authentic texts, teachers should simplify the listening tasks and not the language. As indicated by Chin-Shyang & Read (2006), one of the difficulties faced by L2 listeners is lack of experience in hearing fluent natural speech. By exposing students to authentic speeches in the classroom, students will be equipped to be tested in L2 listening where listening support such as repeated listening is minimal (they normally can only hear once (Chin-Shyang & Read, 2006) or twice) in an actual test setting.

Awareness-Raising

In relation to using authentic materials, Lam (2002) promotes the idea that teachers raise students' awareness of the different features between written texts and spoken language. She suggests that teacher provides both reading and spoken scripts to students so that they are able to unravel the differences between the two scripts with teacher's facilitation. According to Lam, teachers can use authentic materials produced by the students' themselves. Geddes and White (1978) purport the idea of teachers assisting their students to write semi-scripted speeches (using brief notes, flow charts or role play) that assimilate authentic speeches. This way, they will better understand the nature of listening input and able to respond to the listening input more effectively whereby this is also a good integration of listening and speaking practices.

Lam also encourages teachers to draw students' attention to pause fillers (Olynak, Anglejan, & Sankoff, 1990), stock phrases as a facilitation device (Bygate, 1987), and less complex structures as a compensation device (Bygate, 1987). By knowing and understanding how these devices can be manipulated, learners can use this knowledge to manage real life L2 discourse, to guess and infer meaning as well as to respond appropriately with spontaneity.

Pre-Teaching And Schemata

As mentioned by Underwood (1989), L2 students are lacking everyday experience with the spoken language and this calls for listening support in the classroom such as tuning the students into the listening text rather than getting them to deal with the task right away (Ching-Shyang & Read, 2006). As proposed by these two researchers, teachers can use pre-listening activities such as preteaching vocabulary and sentence structures, previewing questions, prelistening to relevant topics, and pre-discussion relevant topics. Field (2002) also recommends pre-listening activities to create students' motivation when they are able to build connection between the topic and their real life experiences.

By pre-teaching, teachers can provide context for interpretation and activate students' prior knowledge (Buck, 1995) so that they can build connection with the listening text and thus able to perform the listening tasks better. By providing pre-listening activities, teachers can still give students listening text topics that are unfamiliar because these activities build schemata with the topic at hand. Nunan (2002) also promotes schema building activities when there is a gap between learners' knowledge and the listening topic. This activity, according to Nunan, may help learners prepare for the upcoming listening tasks.

Jacobson, Davis, and Davis (1989) stated that background knowledge helps students to get the global meaning of the text. This means that the absence of schemata may cause students to misinterpret the macro idea of the text as in the case of the subjects in Jung's (1999) study. Considering that students' schemata is one of the important elements to create connection between the listener and the text (as indicated by studies such as Markham & Latham, 1987; Long, 1990; Schmidt-Rinehart, 1994; Chiang & Dunkel, 1992; Teng, 1998), teachers should use listening texts that enable students to use their schemata as a scaffold to listening comprehension if they choose not to do pre-listening activities as recommended by the abovementioned researchers. As suggested by Nunan (2002), it is beneficial to teach students top-down processing skills so that students can

use what is within their knowledge to comprehend the listening text.

Communicative Listening Approach

Nunan (2002) also proposes that teachers employ communicative listening activities that are reciprocal in nature rather than using the non-reciprocal ones. By making it communicative, students will have some control over the lesson. By personalizing the content of the listening task, students will be able to bring their knowledge and experience to the task. This can be done by providing extension tasks where learners have to provide content on their own. For example, after listening to the text, learners have to prepare interview questions or responding in writing to a situation. This way, listening activities are more student-centered where students have to be actively involved and the use of language can still be maximized in a listening lesson.

Nonetheless, this is not to say that non-reciprocal listening activities should not be conducted in the classroom. As indicated by Nunan (2002), teachers can still use non-reciprocal listening activities such as listening to answering machine messages etc when it suits the listening purpose like listening for specific information, listening to a procedure, directions or sequence where these activities are meant to sharpen students' basic listening skills before students can function in more communicative listening activities.

Assessment

Assessment should be aligned with classroom teaching. Therefore, when assessing listening, it is important to provide listening support to learners (Chin-Shyang & Read, 2006). It necessary to give learners some prelistening activities that serve as an orientation (Underwoood, 1989) before learners are asked to carry out any listening task. This is especially crucial when authentic texts are used to assess a listening performance. This is because L2 learners face difficulties in understanding natural speech in the target language due to limited knowledge and experience (Chin-Shyang & Read, 2006). Thus, the pre-listening activities will help activate background knowledge and provide context of interpretation of the listening topics (Buck, 1995) and help learners use the pre-listening experience to form "hypothesis-information, prediction and inferencing" (Mendelson, 1995, p. 140) about the topic. This will make students less anxious about the test and thus increases the validity of listening test results (Chin-Shyang & Read, 2006).

Part of the pre-listening activities could be pre-teaching some vocabulary that is critical to listening comprehension (Field, 2002). The pre-listening activity may also include pre-teaching sentence structures, previewing questions, pre-listening to relevant topics and pre-discussing relevant topics (Buck, 1995). Allow learners to pre-listen twice to relevant topic by having a question preview session in between or before hearing the topic for the first time (Chin-Shyang & Read, 2006).

Studies have indicated that pre-listening activities may produce better result because they provide necessary listening support (e.g., Sherman, 1997) especially to low proficiency learners. Again, considering that in this context the listening test is for low proficiency learners, studies (e.g., Chaudron, 1983; Bern, 1995) have indicated that besides repeating input, the repetition should be focused on nouns that this type of learners can use as "the most easily perceptible device" (Chin-Shyang & Read, 2006, p. 379). Furthermore, Cervantes and Gainer (1992) found that learners were able to cope with syntactically complex

text by providing support such as repeated listening. As Chin-Shyang and Read (2006) emphasized, input can always be repeated more than two times depending on learners' needs.

Therefore, by providing a non-test situation through pre-teaching vocabulary, for example, may help learner to deal with text propositional level understanding and the pre-listening experience may enable learners to close comprehension gap by activating prior knowledge for "more global understanding of the text" (Stahl, Jacobson, Davis, & Davis, 1989). As indicated by Clerehan (1995) and Olsen and Huckin (1990), L2 learners' difficulties in understanding L2 listening texts at the propositional and discourse levels.

Hence, teachers may choose to use either simplified input or authentic input but accompanied by repeated listening (Cervantes & Gainer, 1992) together with the abovementioned listening support (pre-listening activities) to carry out a more equitable listening performance assessment.

Concluding Remarks

There are many ways to approach the teaching of L2 listening. However, many researchers have come to a consensus that in order to increase L2 students' listening comprehension, it is imperative that teachers expose learners to the authentic features of real life speeches such as pause fillers, facilitation device, compensation device, the differences between reading and spoken texts and increase their awareness in these areas. Findings of studies are also inclined towards the use of authentic listening materials so that what learners are exposed to in the language classroom may help them function in real life situation due to their familiarity with authentic speeches. However, teachers must also be aware of the importance to provide appropriate listening support to make listening assessment more valid and equitable across L2 learners. To enhance the authenticity of listening lessons, teachers are also encouraged to move towards communicative type of listening activities because more often than not, listening and speaking are two associated online activities in real life situation.

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