

# ***Listening strategies— I beg your pardon?***

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*This article explores the relationship between written and spoken language, and questions whether skills and strategies supposedly used in reading can be effectively transferred to listening. It suggests that, in listening, working from the text, or from texts in general, may be a more productive way of approaching comprehension than working from the notion of 'strategies'.*

## **Introduction**

Strategies have become a bit of a bandwagon in ELT over the past 20 years or so, and they have spread from language learning to communication to reading comprehension. However, one problem about strategies is that there is still some confusion over their definition, which has varied widely, from broad, almost meaningless definitions that could have almost anything to do with language learning—such as that suggested by Wenden<sup>1</sup> (1987), for example—to more specific characterizations, as provided by Oxford and Cohen (1992). As the latter point out, researchers often disagree about whether strategies are conscious or unconscious. Their own conclusion is that ‘Strategy use involves some degree of conscious awareness on the part of the learner’ (p. 9). In fact the line between conscious and unconscious is not a fixed one, and differs from one individual to another, because of automatization. If they are repeated often enough, operations which once cost us conscious effort are later performed automatically and unconsciously—think, for example, of the effort we made as children puzzling out new words, which we now process automatically. So if we name a particular process a ‘strategy’, we may find that in one individual it is conscious, and in another it has become automatized, and therefore too rapid to enter consciousness. However, as teachers we need to concentrate on the conscious, because as Oxford and Cohen (*ibid.*: 12) point out, ‘If strategies are unconsciously and automatically used, then explicit strategy training makes little or no sense.’

Once we have decided what strategies are, and whether they have validity as psychological entities, we come up against a second problematic question—how useful are they in pedagogic practice? Once we have discovered that ‘predicting’, say, is a strategy; is it useful to then go and teach it to our students? Swan (1985: 8) displays a healthy scepticism here:

... it is often taken for granted that language learners cannot transfer communication skills from their mother tongues, and that these must be taught anew if learners are to solve the ‘problem of code and context

correlation which lies at the heart of the communicative ability. (Widdowson 1978)

### ***The impossibility of direct listening strategies***

Scepticism is also well-placed when it comes to applying the comprehension strategies of reading to listening (Field 1998). If we want to count going to the cinema as an indirect strategy to improve listening, then well and good; but if direct strategies are conscious—and if they are not, there is no point in teaching them—there is not enough cognitive knowledge to employ them during most kinds of listening.

Listening and putting into operation a conscious strategy can be seen as performing two tasks simultaneously. This can be done, but as Eysenck and Keane point out:

Two tasks are performed well together when they are dissimilar, when they are relatively easy and when they are well-practised. In contrast, the worst levels of performance occur when two tasks are highly similar, rather difficult, and have been practised very little. (1995: 121)

Listening in a foreign language is a task at a high level of difficulty in cognitive terms, and therefore demands full attention. In this context it seems odd that in some experiments on listening strategies (e.g. Vandergrift 1997) subjects are stopped during the listening process and asked what they are thinking about!

### ***The importance of practice***

One danger with a strategy-based approach to the receptive skills is that it may depreciate the value of practice. Field (1998) remarks: 'For 15 years, it has been axiomatic that more reading does not necessarily mean better reading.' This could only possibly be the case if the materials used were hopelessly inappropriate. In the same issue of the *ELT Journal* (p. 70) Carolyn Walker comments on the new version of Nuttal's *Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language*, noting that 'A marked change from the first edition is the repositioning of the chapter on extensive reading... reflecting the current acknowledgement of the key role which extensive reading of easy material plays in language development and the acquisition of reading skills'. Certainly the current emphasis on automatization of word recognition and its vital role in an interactive-compensatory model of reading would tend to contradict this supposed axiom. A study by Robb and Susser (1989) indicated that a group which was explicitly trained in reading strategies did less well than one which only did reading in reading lessons. Again, Walker points out, quoting from Nuttal, that 'the basic answer to learning to read is "to read and read"' (p. 40), a point which is taken up later in the chapter on the 'teacher as reader', in which we are reminded that reading is 'caught not taught'.

### ***'Authentic' texts for the FL learner***

Another assumption which is widely made these days is that there is something out there which we are all aware of and all approve of called 'authentic'—surely a cousin of 'reality', in Nabokov's famous character-

ization of it as ‘one of the few words that means nothing unless it is in inverted commas’. Strategies are meant to compensate for the difference between the learner’s level of comprehension and this goal of authenticity. But what is an ‘authentic’ situation for an FL learner—a native–native interaction? Native speakers all attempt to adjust their speech for the benefit of foreigners whose level of understanding may be limited, yet according to some criteria which are currently applied this would be considered inauthentic. If we revert to the principle of automatization, and the concept that reading or listening are good things in themselves, then reading or listening to a text with a high degree of comprehension will be more profitable than reading or listening to a text of which one understands little. In other words, one is practising comprehension, not incomprehension. Grading texts is problematic, and the difficulty of a given text will depend to a great extent on the learner (Anderson and Lynch: 80), but the difficulty in taking a generalized approach to grading texts should not obscure the fact that for any given listener, some texts *will* be more difficult than others.

### **Differences between written and spoken text**

This brings us on to the most important point about strategies as a concept applied to reading and listening, which is that they are essentially different because of the different nature of written and spoken text, so that caution is needed when transferring this concept from one skill to another. As spoken text is only present in time, and not in space as well, like written text, many strategies—such as breaking down a word into its component parts, looking a word up in the dictionary, or guessing the meaning of a word from its context—are either less available, or not available at all. Listening places a far greater load on the memory, as there is no option of going back to previous text in order to check or revise comprehension. In listening we do not have the option of focusing our attention on something aside from the main argument of the text, and then returning to the thread later, as one does in reading. With our attention focused on the spoken text, there is no time or mental capacity for other conscious operations. What happens, of course, is that in real situations our attention wanders on and off the text, or we listen with ‘half an ear’. One process that could be called a strategy in listening is that of controlling the allocation of our attention to the parts that are most important for our purpose. This is a common practice when we are listening out for flight departure announcements in airports, for example, or simply waiting for a particular news item on the radio. A less realistic exercise is that of making inferences from texts in order to perform tasks in examinations where often two listenings of a recorded monologue are required in order to get from Step A (comprehending the text) to Step B (making the correct inference and performing the task). This is essentially an artificial task without any particularly useful counterpart in the real world—another example of the misapplication of a valid reading process to listening, to the point where it becomes inauthentic as a task type, however ‘authentic’ it may be as a text.

The essential unit in reading comprehension is the word, clearly separated as it is from other words on the page. There is no such separation of words in the unbroken flow of speech (the 'segmentation problem'), and word identification is further complicated by the variability of phonemes in different environments (the 'non-invariance problem'—see Eysenck and Keane: 276) and when spoken by different individuals. All this means that word recognition is a complex listening skill in itself, before one even begins to consider higher-level skills that may also be applicable to reading.

Native speakers only recognize individual words which have been spliced out of a text, approximately half the time, (Lieberman 1963), so word comprehension must be far more dependent on co-text and context in listening than it is in reading. Top-down processes must play a more important part in (fluent) listening than in reading. This would account in part for many of the differences between spoken and written text. We are all familiar with the phenomenon of hearing a stretch of spoken text in our own language and finding it totally incomprehensible until clues in the co-text or context begin to make it more transparent. So topics must be clearly set, frequent repetition or paraphrase may be necessary, and monitoring for comprehension and back-channel behaviour are important elements of the conversational event—think how quickly most people recognize that the listener does not understand what they are talking about. Listening is typically one side of a co-operative activity.

There is an over-reliance on recorded texts in the lower-level language classroom. Many of the 'strategies' we apply in listening are associated with visual clues—watching body language and lip-reading. Listening without visual clues is something we do for a relatively small proportion of our listening time. Much spoken interaction is more interpersonal in nature, whereas written texts tend to be more ideational. In interpersonal interactions, 'comprehension' is more concerned with giving an appropriate phatic response than with understanding the ideational content, and although functional approaches to language teaching recognize this, recorded texts tend to concentrate on comprehension of ideational content, because most task-types are oriented in this way (the open dialogue being a notable exception).

### **Conclusion—skills and strategies—a useful approach?**

Prosodic features are an important aid to comprehension, and differ from one language to another. So what does all this add up to? I don't think we can agree with Field that 'the subskills of listening closely parallel those of reading'. As a reading specialist I am somewhat sceptical of a strategy-based approach even to reading. For one thing, it is very difficult to define strategies or subskills, or to differentiate them in any empirically significant way. Rost (1993) produces a wealth of evidence that '... a reliable and valid diagnosis of reading profiles is not possible' (p. 79). In other words, repeated attempts by a number of researchers have failed to isolate any proof that subskills of reading

comprehension exist. Subjects' reading comprehension scores show a remarkably high degree of correlation between supposedly different subskills, to the extent that it is not possible to pick out a particular subject who has problems with guessing words from context, for example. All the research has been able to do is to isolate a global rating for comprehension, or at most a differential between two variables—inferring and vocabulary—though even this distinction is not well-established. Studies which show differences in strategy use between 'effective' and 'ineffective' comprehenders (e.g. O'Malley, Chamot, and Küpper 1989) beg the question as to whether particular strategies are more cognitively appropriate than others at different levels of difficulty for a particular listener, or indeed whether motivation is a significant factor here. Robb and Susser's results, referred to above, though tentative, provide further cause for scepticism. Because of the differences between the two skills highlighted here, it seems that with one's attention focused on the activity of listening it is even less likely that listening can meaningfully be broken down into a number of component subskills and strategies, unless these are unconscious, in which case how can they be taught? The point here is not so much that skills and strategies don't exist, but that since they cannot be differentiated empirically, and since practice appears to be at least as good a way of developing them as explicit training, they are not useful concepts for developing a methodological approach in the receptive skills, particularly in listening.

### **Practical consequences**

By looking at the nature of spoken text, as we have just done, we can come up with recommendations for listening classes, and these recommendations from a text-based approach have several advantages over a strategies-based approach:

- 1 Text is real, something one can get to grips with. Strategies are concepts of presumably varying validity.
- 2 Listening is the engagement of the listener with the text. When this engagement is complete, there is no cognitive capacity remaining for conscious strategies to operate.
- 3 A text-based approach is flexible, and can be adjusted according to each particular listener–text interface. A strategy-based approach relies on a fixed armoury of supposed cognitive processes.
- 4 A text-based approach avoids a situation where the teacher is instructing in communicative skills which students already possess innately (e.g. guessing, predicting), making the process redundant and the teacher appear patronizing.

The recommendations based on a text-based approach are:

- 1 Practice is the most important thing. The more listening the better, and the subskills will take care of themselves as they become automatized.

- 2 Whilst guessing skills are useful, learners learn the skills of listening comprehension from what is comprehensible to them. They need to practise listening comprehension, not listening *incomprehension* (automatization again). Graded texts, not necessarily authentic, will be the fastest way forward for them. They will probably get plenty of practice in listening to texts which are largely incomprehensible to them anyway.
- 3 Teachers do not need to get too hung up on syntax in listening skills lessons. In listening, as in reading (see Ridgway 1994) syntactic cues are often overshadowed by semantic and pragmatic cues. Of course, listening is an important component of the grammar lesson, but not *vice versa*.
- 4 Teaching listening strategies such as making inferences is a waste of time. There is no cognitive space for employing such strategies in real-time listening. Either the inference is made or it isn't. There can be no going back to make inferences as we do in reading—the next part of the text is already being processed.
- 5 Intensive listening activities are excellent practice in coping with aspects of spoken text, such as the difficulty of word recognition.
- 6 At lower levels, the teacher should not forget that lip-reading and body language are important aids to comprehension. Over-reliance on audio material means one must use easier texts or make comprehension more difficult. It also practises a type of listening which in real life does not happen for a very large proportion of the time.
- 7 Conversation or other interactive speech situations are great ways to practise listening comprehension and to get away from texts that are ideational in character. Anderson and Lynch (1988: 121–2) mention six listening strategies, of which four involve speaking.<sup>3</sup>
- 8 It is important to learn the prosody of a new language. Field also has some good suggestions for activities here.

In conclusion, there are good strategies for listening in the type of situation where perhaps most listening takes place—verbal interaction—but these are more like communication strategies than comprehension strategies, such as negotiating meaning, or expressing incomprehension, and they are not processes which occur during listening. A good example of such a ‘listening strategy’ is the phrase ‘I beg your pardon?’

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## Notes

1 '...strategies will be used to refer to language learning behaviours which contribute directly to learning—what learners do to control and/or transform incoming knowledge about the language (e.g. guessing from context, outlining a reading); to retrieve and use this knowledge (e.g. practice strategies); and to regulate learning (noting if one understands, deciding to pay attention to one's pronunciation). It will also refer to language learning behaviours that contribute indirectly to learning—how learners use their limited linguistic repertoire to communicate (e.g. describing or circumlocuting when they do not know a word, using gestures) and what they do to create opportunities to learn and use the language (going to movies, making friends). [Italics are Wenden's]

2 Interestingly, the Romans didn't do this, making the decipherment of Roman inscriptions far more difficult than the Latin with which most of us are familiar, in which the words have been considerably separated for us—a practice begun by early medieval Irish scribes.

3 The other two involve background knowledge.

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