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Developing an Oral Communication Course
Listening: an essential component

Patricia Hilson and Jennifer Whittle

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Although in recent years, listening comprehension has been recognized as an important component in language learning, listening continues to be undervalued in many language programs. A large number of English oral communication courses still do not contain a listening component. This may be due to the misconception on the part of some educators that listening work is not essential for oral proficiency. It is our intention to explain why listening work is a necessary part of an oral program.

Large Quantities of Comprehensible Input are Necessary

There is no question that large quantities of input are necessary to acquire a first language. All instances of successful first and second language acquisition are characterized by the availability of comprehensible input. Cases of children who have been deprived of language input by abusive caretakers and 'wild children' who have had little or no human contact are unable to produce language (Curtiss, 1977; Rymer, 1992; Pinker, 1994). However, the quality of the input is as important as the existence of that input. A mere soundtrack will not aid in the acquisition of a language. The language must be at a level appropriate for the learner. At one time, deaf parents of hearing children were advised to have their children watch lots of television.

These children did not, however, learn to speak nor understand English (Sachs, Bard, & Johnson, 1981).

This finding holds true in the case of second language acquisition. If the input is not at the appropriate level, learning will not occur. The best evidence of this is the fact that children or adults who are not provided with level-appropriate input but only with native speaker to native speaker models, either do not acquire the language at all or acquire only a stock of lexical items and formulaic utterances. Dutch children, for example, do not learn German by watching large amounts of German tv (Snow, van Eedan & Muysken, 1981). This generalization holds across studies of first and second language acquisition by children and adults in normal and abnormal populations (see Long, 1981; 1983). The amount of input in these and other cases is unlimited but is incomprehensible because it has not been adjusted to the learners' level. These findings should serve as a warning to any teachers who think they can throw on a video and their students will learn.

In the 1980's, Krashen formulated his Comprehensible Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1981) which asserts that learners acquire a second language by receiving input that they can comprehend but which contains some elements (lexis, syntax, morphology, etc.) which are unknown. These new elements are then, if the learner is ready for them, acquired. Krashen believes that comprehension is necessary in order for input to become intake, i.e., linguistic items taken in or assimilated by the learner which move the learner along the interlanguage continuum.

To this point, the studies which claim to show that large amounts of comprehensible input do lead to acquisition are generally correlational in nature. However, the suggestion that comprehensible input does aid acquisition is compelling. For example, there is the anecdotal evidence that many children who are late in speaking their first language begin speaking more or less full sentences without having gone through a 'babytalk' stage. It seems they have been going through

a period where they were acquiring the language without producing it. Karin Stromswold tested one such four-year-old. Though the child could not speak his understanding of the intricacies and subtleties of grammar was impressive. He could, for example, discriminate between pictures which showed "The dog was bitten by the cat" and "The cat was bitten by the dog" and between ones which showed "The dogs chase the rabbit" and "The dog chases the rabbits" (Stromswold, K.J., 1994, as reported in Pinker, 1994). This silent period has also been noted in many children learning a second language who do not produce but who nevertheless learn the second language.

Another example of the effects of input on first language acquisition is the rapid rate of lexical acquisition and the acquisition of irregular verbs. Children form rules about the grammar of their first language. One such rule is the addition of the suffix *ed* to the ends of verbs to make them past tense. Children go through a stage where they apply this rule to all verbs, even irregular ones until, with enough input (hearing lots of people say *built* instead of *builded*) the child stops applying the rule to these particular verbs. It must be stressed that this change in the inter-language of children is due to input and not error correction by adults (Pinker, 1994). And input, whether from reading or listening (and most of the input must be from listening as that is what children do most, especially from watching tv) can only account for the unbelievably rapid rate of vocabulary acquisition that occurs from the age of about one and a half until adolescence. New vocabulary is acquired at the rate of a new word every two hours (Pinker, 1994 p. 267).

In second language learning the relationship between input and acquisition is more complicated but nevertheless striking. Butoyi (1978, as reported in Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1994) found a significant positive correlation between the relative frequencies of different noun phrase complement structures in the input and the rank order in

which they were accurately produced in the learners' output. Lightbown (1980) found a correlation between the relative frequencies of certain French question forms in speech addressed to children learning French as a second language and the order in which those forms were produced in the learners' speech. Larsen-Freeman (1976) found a positive correlation between adult morpheme accuracy order for learners of English and the frequency of occurrence in the input. In a study by Long (1981) it was found that input frequency for nine grammatical morphemes was more important that practice opportunities. The findings reviewed here are consistent with the input frequency/accuracy order relationship as put forth by Hatch (1974; 1978) and Larsen-Freeman (1976).

The results of certain studies that have not found a positive correlation may be due to a fixed order of acquisition for those morphemes (Pienemann, 1985). Pienemann's theory states that for certain grammatical structures there may be a fixed order in which those items are acquired and if the learner is at the right developmental stage for the item it will be acquired. An item may also be acquired if the item is not affected by a developmental sequence. The fact that positive correlations between input frequency and production were found with certain grammatical items suggests that input is a necessary component of language acquisition and hence of oral competency.

There are also comparative method studies which show that methods that supply plenty of comprehensible input are more successful than methods that supply little. In an experimental "just listen" study by Lightbown and Halter French speaking students (age approximately eight years old) in Canada who were learning English only listened and read during their daily 30-minute ESL period. There was no oral practice or interaction in English at all. However, the results were that learners in the comprehension-based program learned English as well as (and in some cases better than) learners in the regular

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aural-oral program (Lightbown, 1992). Similar results have been found for the input effects of level adjusted reading material (Elley & Mangubhai, 1981). To this point these comprehension-based studies have been conducted on beginner-level learners making it difficult to generalize the effect of this approach to language teaching on learners of all levels.

The success of immersion and bilingual programs is related to the large quantities of comprehensible input which is supplied. These programs provide the learner with enormous amounts of comprehensible input by using the L2, appropriately adjusted, to teach subject matter to linguistically homogeneous groups of non-native speakers. They have consistently produced such good results in Canada (for a review, see Swain, 1981; Genessee, 1983) that their students are typically compared against peers of the same age who are native speakers of the immersion language.

Allwright (1980) discusses the case of Igor, an extroverted language learner who spoke in class much more often than his classmates. Interestingly, Igor did not experience the rapid progress that one might have expected. In fact, he did not make as rapid progress in learning the target language as some of the other students, leading Allwright to speculate that "Igor's communicative attempts with the teacher were perhaps more productive for the student 'audience' than for Igor himself" (p. 185).

Of course, students receive a great deal of comprehensible input from student-student interactions so one needs to ask why is listening in an oral program necessary? One of the most important reasons may be that the input that learners receive from each other is deviant and insufficient.

It seems reasonable to expect that a second language learner exposed predominantly to ungrammatical input from other learners "will acquire at best a marked, substandard variety of the target language, and there is some suggestive evidence that this is the case"

(Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1994, p. 129). Again, the evidence is correlational, not causal but second language learning environments where ungrammatical input is a dominant feature are the environments in which a 'pidginized' form of the second language is most likely to be found (Schumann, 1978). Deviant input from other language learners in immersion programs has been suggested as a possible cause of persistent output errors by students even after many years in the immersion program (Harley & Swain, 1978). It is Lightbown's view (1992) that in student-student interaction, learners are exposed to input that is not a sample of the authentic target language. Instead, they are exposed to other learner's inter-language. This problem is especially severe in classes where students all share the same L1. The errors students hear in each others' inter-language, often the result of transfer from their first language, reinforce their own misanalysis of the target language and make it very difficult for them to discover exactly how their inter-language and the target language differ. As a result, a kind of classroom pidgin may develop.

Of course, pidginization could also be a result of insufficient language input. The need for target language input is also necessary from the point of view of producing learners who are communicatively competent. An important aspect of communicative competence is appropriateness. Experiencing a range of discourse types ensures that learners have the opportunity to meet a good sampling of the full range of the language forms with a variety of communicative purposes (Biber, 1989). Students in French immersion programs in Canada inaccurately use the 'tu' and 'vous' forms of 'you' in spite of many years in the program. They also have difficulty knowing when to use the conditional form. Harley and Swain (1984) believe this is due to insufficiently varied input to learners. The types of input in a classroom do not often reflect the language environment in the outside world and so teachers must be sure to supply this input. One way to do this is through listening work.

Regardless as to whether it is primarily deviant input or insufficient input that accounts for pidginization, it is important to provide large amounts of comprehensible input through listening in the foreign language classroom where students have access to even less well-formed input than students in immersion classes.

Nation (1994) states that there are two types of classroom activities that can lead to language learning: those that focus on the form of the language by explicitly drawing attention to sounds, word parts, words, grammar, or discourse (form-focused instruction) and those that focus on the meaning or message conveyed by the language being used (meaning-focused activities). A listening component meets both these requirements by providing large quantities of meaning-focused input and an opportunity to focus on form.

Meaning-focused activities are essential for language learning. Meaning-focused comprehension occurs when the learners' main interest is in understanding and/or acting on the messages they receive (this could be as simple as answering comprehension questions about something the learners have listened to). This type of activity supplies input for the learners to process. Ellis (1991) suggests that learning though meaning-focused input may occur if the learners understand the input, notice new features in the input and compare them with their output. If learners are able to retrieve the information from their memory and consequently modify their output, the learning will be more integrated into their language system. Although the particular way in which processed input becomes implicit knowledge is still being debated, (Schmidt, 1990; Sharwood Smith, 1991) most would agree that processed input does indeed become implicit knowledge, and thus acquired. Controlled practice does not seem to have this effect. The justification for meaning-focused input is that it provides conditions that are most suited to the acquisition of implicit knowledge of the language which is essential for fluent language use.

Research (see Doughty, 1998 for a review) also suggests that a

language course should provide some form-focused instruction. This involves focusing on a particular feature or property of the second language and making the learner aware of the correct form and its use. In form-focused instruction the attention to the item as part of the system is likely to be teacher directed, either though explanation or activity design. The justification for a focus on form is that it can speed up and encourage further progress in the acquisition of the L2 by making learners aware of forms that they may otherwise not have paid attention to. These may include particular sounds, vocabulary and structure that the learner is ready to learn.

Listening comprehension needs to be taught

The necessity to prepare learners, from the beginning to understand speakers of English, conversing at a normal rate, in a normal manner, is now one of the major goals of EFL instruction. Listening, the language skill used most in life, needs to be given a primary focus, all day, everyday, limited only by the availability of the foreign language, in the school. (Morley, 1991)

Previously, it was believed that students would naturally acquire listening comprehension while learning a foreign language. It was thought that they would somehow learn to understand as they learned to speak. Listening was taken for granted by much of the language teaching field and learners themselves were seldom consciously aware of their listening performance. Students do not however, seem to 'naturally' pick up listening comprehension. Brown and Yule (1991) list several possible reasons for this. First, students are taught to speak slowly and clearly and their teacher generally talks to them in a slow and clear manner even though native speakers don't usually speak slowly or very clearly. Second, students are often only exposed to the English accent of their teacher. Third, the normal patterns of simplification which occur when speaking naturally may be lost when the teacher speaks slowly and artificially. This means students get

accustomed to a model of speech where every segment is clearly articulated. Foreign learners, Brown and Yule conclude, will not likely acquire a comfortable ability to listen and understand the second language, as spoken by native speakers, if they only listen to their teacher and classmates, and to feedback from their own spoken production. Simply increasing the amount of talking students do in class will not ensure more learning. Rather, an increase in the "right kinds of listening activities" is needed (Peterson, 1991).

In addition, an effective program to develop listening skills has to introduce a wide range of listening experiences and provide a wide range of listening situations and tasks. Relying on only one element, such as practice in casual conversational listening, leaves a large hole in the program (Anderson and Lynch, 1995). Speakers need to be prepared for both two-way communication, or interactive listening, and one-way communication. That is, listening to speakers but not interacting with them. Auditory input comes from a variety of sources: conversations overheard, announcements, recorded messages, the media, instructional situations such as lectures. This implies that foreign language learners need to have instructional opportunities in both two-way and one-way communicative modes. (Morley, 1991)

As previously mentioned, Biber's research (1989) illustrates the need for students to experience a wide range of discourse types. Input should not be restricted to a few kinds of discourse. Rather, learners need exposure to a good sampling of the full range of language forms with a variety of communicative purposes because different discourse samples, including student-to-student interaction, contain different linguistic elements (lexis, syntax, morphology, etc.). Face-to-face interaction, for example, typically contains time and place adverbials, first and second-person pronouns, the present tense, verbs such as 'know' and 'think', and 'be' as the principle verb. Exposing students to imaginative narrative will most likely give them contact with past tense verbs, third person pronouns, verbs such as 'said',

and present participle clauses. As well as meeting new language items, learners should also have to listen to input that stretches their skill and comprehension which speaking with other nonnative speakers may not provide (Nation, 1994). Learners need exposure to unfamiliar input that causes them the same sorts of challenges that unfamiliar types of handwriting pose when learners have only been trained to read printed texts in the foreign language (Brown and Yule, 1991).

Listening instruction also needs to provide learners with support exercises and be graded according to the learners level (Anderson and Lynch, 1995). Studies suggest that simply exposing students to spoken language texts and testing their understanding is less effective than using a teaching approach. As Mary Underwood (1979, p. 4) states:

> It is important that the exercises should not be treated as test items. They are designed as aids to aural comprehension practice, directing the students' attention to 'focal points' on the tape so they will learn to listen more effectively.

As illustrated above, research suggests that listening plays an essential role in the learning of a second language (Winitz, 1981). Listening comprehension is now felt by many to be a necessary prerequisite to oral proficiency, as well as an important skill own right. Listening is the way to learn a second language because listening provides the learner with the necessary foundation from which to construct a knowledge of the language. Nord (1980, p. 17) expresses this view succinctly:

> Some people now believe that learning a language is not just learning to talk but rather that learning a language is building a map of meaning in the mind. These people believe that talking may indicate that a language was learned but they do not believe that practice in talking is the best way to build up this 'cognitive' map in the mind. To do this, they feel, the best method is to practice meaningful listening.

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