

LISTENING COMPREHENSION INSTRUCTIONAL MODELS:

MATCHING THEORY AND PRACTICE



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Our field has come a long way in the last quarter century, and we have learned much about the cognitive and communicative processes of language learning. In particular, research has demonstrated the pivotal role played by learner participation in the interactive, input-output, listening-speaking communication "chain." It is now well documented that two language learning features establish the importance of well-instructed attention to aural comprehension:

1. "Proficiency in listening comprehension makes a central contribution to the learner's overall development of competency in the foreign language.

2. The systematic development of listening comprehension is of critical importance not only as input for learning to speak the language, but also as a premier skill in its own right." (Morley, 1999)

Clearly, over the last quarter century the importance of listening instruction in foreign language theory and practice has moved from a minimal status of 'passive' skill and incidental and peripheral attention, to an evolving position of significant, indeed central, concern. Many more instructional materials are now available, but more importantly, many teachers today are creating their own materials, based on their students' age, level of language competence, and specific listening needs.

In this paper four listening comprehension instructional models are outlined. Each represents the pedagogical realization of a different theoretical perspective on aural comprehension in foreign language learning. The four models are:

Model # 1

- Pattern Matching

Model # 2

- Processing Discrete-Point Information

Model # 3

- Task Listening and Processing Information

Model # 4

- Interactive Communicative Listening

Each model is discussed in terms of

- (1) learner goals
- (2) instructional materials
- (3) procedures
- (4) values
- (5) general comments

All four models are useful in aural comprehension instruction in foreign language teaching. However, it is important to choose a specific model for a particular class, one which will serve an appropriate and pedagogically defensible purpose as part of the overall instructional rationale. (See Morley, in Mendelsohn and Rubin,

1995, for more information.)

Model #1.

PATTERN MATCHING:

LISTENING AND REPEATING

LEARNER GOALS

Learners are asked to imitate/repeat what they hear, within a listening and pattern-matching lesson framework. The focus is on mimicry and memorization.

INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

This model features audio-lingual style grammar and pronunciation drills and situational dialogue-memorization exercises. Listening is involved, of course, but the primary focus is on using listening 'as a means to another end' (learning to speak the language) not on developing proficiency in meaningful listening 'as a skill in its own right'. It is based on a hearing-and-pattern-matching behavioral model.

PROCEDURES

Students are asked (1) to listen to a word, phrase, or sentence pattern, (2) to repeat/imitate it, and (3) (sometimes) to memorize it.

VALUES

This kind of course work enables students to do pattern drills, to repeat dialogues, and to memorize prefabricated pattern routines. It provides them with extensive – and valuable – opportunities to imitate and stress intonation patterns. Higher level cognitive processing and use of propositional language are not usually an intentional focus. This mode may or may not focus significantly on meaning and while it involves the learner and an ‘input’ source, either human or recorded, it is not a truly communicative experience.

GENERAL COMMENTS

This is an old and familiar instructional framework. Although listening-and-repeating drills were widely used in teaching methodologies developed in earlier times, today they tend to be viewed by many teachers as outmoded, being short on qualities of meaningful intent and communicative function. Nonetheless, these kinds of exercises are alive and well in many programs around the world – where they continue to be employed in teaching foreign languages, especially to beginners. Perhaps one of the chief values of this model is the role it plays in focused exposure to pronunciation – both sound patterns and phrase/sentence stress, rhythm, and intonation patterns.

Model # 2.

PROCESSING DISCRETE-POINT INFORMATION:

LISTENING AND ANSWERING COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

LEARNER GOALS

Learners focus on listening and processing discrete-point information in order to answer comprehension questions.

INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

These lessons feature a student response pattern based on a cognitive listening-and-question-answering model with occasional innovative variations on this theme.

PROCEDURES

Students are asked (1) to listen to an oral text (along a continuum from sentence length to lecture length) and (2) to answer (primarily) factual questions. Exercises utilize familiar types of questions adapted from traditional reading comprehension exercises (true/false, multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank). This mode is sometimes called a ‘quiz-show’ format of teaching.

VALUES

Aural comprehension work of this kind gives students experiences in manipulating discrete pieces of information, hopefully with increasing speed and accuracy of recall. It can increase students’ stock of vocabulary units and grammar constructions. Exercises in this format do not require student to use the information for any real communicative purpose beyond answering the questions. Learners engage in meaningful one-way reactive communication but not interactive two-way communication.

GENERAL COMMENTS

Instruction in this mode does, indeed, focus on the development of L2 listening as a skill in its own right. However, beyond a kind of manipulation of discrete pieces of factoid information, in fact students are not asked to ‘use’ the information in any meaningful or functional way – except to answer aural comprehension test questions, which Mendelsohn (1994) has called “...testing camouflaged as teaching ...”. Although this type of instructional material enjoys widespread use, the caution here is that such listening programs are NOT sufficient to the task of developing communicative functionally competent listening

skills. It is probably of most use in automating low-level listening-and-responding behavior, at a discrete-point ‘bottom up’ level of cognitive processing. It is important to note that this is only one aspect of aural comprehension processing, and one with a very narrow focus.

Model # 3.

TASK LISTENING AND PROCESSING INFORMATION:

LANGUAGE USE AND LANGUAGE ANALYSIS

LEARNER GOALS

Students are engaged in processing spoken discourse for functional purposes. Their practice experience is focused on listening and carrying out real tasks using the information received.

INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

Lesson activities feature a student response pattern based on a cognitive ‘listening-and-using’ communicative model. Students listen, then do something immediately with the information received. They experience a variety of tasks in which they are asked to use the information in activities such as: following directions, completing a task, solving a problem, transmitting the gist of the information to someone in speech (i.e., taking and relaying a message) or in writing (i.e., writing a message), listening and taking lecture notes.

PROCEDURES

Students are asked (1) to listen, process, and retain information and (2) to use the auditorily transmitted language input immediately to complete a task which is mediated through language. The context is completion of a communicative task where success or failure is judged in terms of whether or not the task is performed. (See Johnson, 1979.)

VALUES.

Lessons based on this model focus on engaging learners in 'using' the content presented in the spoken discourse, not just answering questions about it. Instruction is task-oriented, not question-oriented. One task type is LANGUAGE USE TASKS which ask students to listen and get meaning from the input in order to make functional use of it, immediately. A second is LANGUAGE ANALYSIS TASKS where the purpose is consciousness-raising and engaging students in active intellectual involvement in their own learning. Tasks are provided which help students attend to selected aspects of language which will increase their speed and accuracy in aural comprehension, especially discourse structure and function, and the use of prosodic cues in meaning interpretation. Learners are guided in developing cognitive, metacognitive, and compensatory learning strategies.

GENERAL COMMENTS

In this model the perspective shifts beyond listening and answering test questions to one of listening and using the language input in more intellectual applications. The aim is to provide learners with tasks which ask them to use the information in the aural text, rather than asking them to 'prove' their understanding by answering factoid kinds of questions, and tasks for language analysis. Listening instruction in this mode developed in line with emerging task-based communicative language teaching. Here, as noted by Candlin and Murphy (1987), "The central process we are concerned with is language learning, and tasks present this in the form of problem-solving negotiation between knowledge that the learner holds, and new knowledge received. This activity is conducted through language use, which may itself be seen as a negotiation of meaning."

Model # 4.

INTERACTIVE COMMUNICATIVE LISTENING: CRITICAL LISTENING, CRITICAL THINKING, EFFECTIVE SPEAKING

LEARNER GOALS

Students participate in coursework which is designed to increase speed and accuracy of aural comprehension in order to complete real communication tasks which are situated in appropriate academic contexts. Activities involve real-time participation in a three-part cognitive pattern: instant decoding, critical thinking, formulating an instant spoken or written response.

INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

Instruction features the real-time/real-life give-and-take of carefully constructed classroom oral communication activities which are focused on enhancing the students' listening and speaking skills. The theoretical base is one of an interactive cognitive model. Lessons provide a variety of student presentation and discussion activities, both individual and small-group, with follow-up audience participation and question/answer and commentary sessions as an integral part of the activities, including 'formal' panel reports and leading and participating in discussions on real issues. (See Morley, 1992, *Extempore Speaking Practice*, for activities and tasks.)

PROCEDURES

Students are asked to prepare presentations and to participate in a range of in-class oral activities which demand rapid and accurate use of their oral communication skills – both listening and speaking. Activities engage students in development of all three phases of the speech chain: (1) continuous on-line decoding of

spoken discourse, (2) simultaneous cognitive analysis and synthesis of input, (3) instant formulation and encoding of a personal propositional language response appropriate to the communicative episode.

VALUES

This model features instruction which is communicative-competence oriented and deals with real-time real-world communication tasks in which proficient aural comprehension is a prime ingredient. Work is focused on guiding learners in the development of communicative skills in the four competency areas: linguistic competence, discourse competence, socio-linguistic competence, and strategic competence. (See Canale and Swain, 1980.)

GENERAL COMMENTS.

Much of real-world listening is not done in a one-way listening mode – and it is essential that the aural comprehension curriculum provide opportunities for students to improve their skills in a variety of two-way listening contexts. Classroom experiences which mirror real-life contexts need to be provided. And while the need for two-way listening expertise is not unique to any one group of L2 learners (*vis-à-vis* age, situation, level of proficiency) it is a particularly high-priority focus – and a stress-producing concern – for students in foreign language education. High school and college students express worries not only about the uni-directional listening skills needed for lecture comprehension and note taking, but also about the even more threatening listening situations where they must participate in bi-directional (and multi-directional) contexts both in and out of classes in all manner of academic interactions.

CONCLUSION

Today, the importance of listening skill-building is well-recognized in the field of English as a Foreign Language. Moreover, learners of all ages (children, teenagers, adults) and in all stages of their learning, need careful attention to improving their aural comprehension skills. Listening skills are essential in establishing a foundation for the development of spoken language — in the reciprocal 'speech chain' of listening and speaking. In the overall picture of language learning it is important to underscore the fact that there are

multiple benefits to learners in addition to the obvious improvements in their listening skills.

Aural comprehension lessons are an excellent way to introduce and/or review vocabulary items and grammatical structures, as they can be contextualized in a sentence, in a paragraph, and in longer segments of spoken discourse.

Finally, listening is the language skill we use most every

day in our native languages and in the foreign language setting it needs to be a focus—every day. It is essential to emphasize the fact that improving learners' listening comprehension is not something that can be done in one or two special lessons a week. In today's world, helping students build their skills in listening comprehension must be an integral part of any class in English as a Foreign Language.

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