

Listening in the language classroom

Dr Jonathan Newton explains opportunity standards for effective listening pedagogy.

It has been claimed that over 50 percent of the time that students spend functioning in a foreign language will be devoted to listening (Nunan, 1998). Input, the theoretical corollary of listening, is no less important in the field of second language acquisition. As Susan Gass explains, “no model of second language acquisition does not avail itself of input in trying to explain how learners create second language grammars” (Gass, 1997: 1; see also Vandergrift, 2006; van Patten, 2004). Despite this, we often take the importance of listening for granted, and it is arguably the least understood and most overlooked of the four skills (L, S, R & W) in the language classroom. In response to this issue, this paper attempts to articulate a pedagogy for listening by offering answers to three questions:

- 1 Why listening?
- 2 How do we listen?
- 3 What does it mean to *teach* listening?

1 Why listening?

Listening is the natural precursor to speaking; the early stages of language development in a person’s first language (and in naturalistic acquisition of other languages) are dependent on listening. Indeed, Gillian Brown and others (see, for example, Brown 1978, Brown, Anderson, Shillcock and Yule, 1984) showed that both oracy and literacy development needed ongoing attention in first language education. Prior to this, it was taken for granted that first language speakers needed instruction in how to read and write, but not how to listen and speak because these skills

were automatically acquired by native speakers.

Similarly, in second language learning, several writers and researchers in the early 1980s suggested that listening had a very important role (Winitz, 1981). This emphasis on listening was related to a corresponding drop in the importance given to speaking in the early stages of learning, with several writers saying that speaking early in a course should be actively discouraged.

One of the strongest arguments for emphasizing listening and delaying speaking is based on a particular view of what it means to learn a language. Some approaches to language teaching have given a lot of importance to speaking. In the very first lesson learners did speaking drills involving repetition and substitution. The lessons involved almost as much speaking as listening, because listening was seen as a way to present models that learners immediately copied. The aim of learning a language was to speak, and language was viewed as a type of behaviour.

In contrast, approaches that gave more importance to listening were based on the view that language learning is a process of building a map of meaning in the mind rather than just learning to talk (Nord 1980:17). According to this view, meaningful listening practice rather than speaking practice in the form of repetition and drills was seen as the best way to build up this ‘cognitive’ map in the mind. In other words, listening is a way of learning the language. It gives the learner information from which to build up the knowledge necessary for using the language. When this knowledge is built up, the learner can begin to speak. The listening-only period is a time of observation and learning which provides the basis for the other language skills.

By and large, contemporary approaches to language teaching and learning dispense with such dichotomies and emphasize the value of meaningful language use involving both listening and speaking.

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Christopher Brumfit expressed this view eloquently:

Developments in second language acquisition research make it difficult to see the learning even of foreign languages as distinct from the process of language use: learning is using and using is learning. (...) . Of course, there are also formal activities associated with the learning – people learn vocabulary lists off by heart more than is commonly acknowledged – but these activities are preliminary to the language learning process itself, for only when the language items are fused into active meaning systems by the process of use, is the language system developing for the learner's own purposes. We may learn the grammar and vocabulary of the language formally, but we learn the system by using it through [listening] reading or writing, or conversing (Brumfit 2001: 12).

2 How do we listen?

This might seem like a rather strange question, and one that has little bearing on second language teaching. And yet, an understanding of the listening process is fundamental to the teacher's job of helping learners to develop second language listening skills and expand their language resources through listening.

The first point to make about listening is that, like the skills of reading, writing and speaking it involves a bundle of sub-processes. One set of these micro-processes involves the listener assembling a message piece-by-piece from the speech stream, going from the parts to the whole, from perception to parsing, and from form to meaning. Field (2003: 326) identifies the following sequence of micro-processes: auditory-phonetic, phonemic, syllabic, lexical, and syntactic and semantic. These are commonly referred to as **bottom-up** processes.

Listening also involves **top-down processes** by which the listener draws on what they know of the context of communication (prior knowledge and content and rhetorical schemata, for

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example) to assist in constructing a coherent message from the speech stream. Through these top-down processes the listener interprets the propositional and pragmatic values inherent or implicit in the input.

We constantly draw on top-down inferencing processes to make sense of messages whether listening in a casual conversation or in a formal lecture. Listening is more like interpreting than decoding; it's an active, inferencing process which in itself contributes to message construction.

Let me give you an example. On a flight to Singapore a few years ago I was deeply engrossed in a forensic detective novel. As we began descent into Singapore my attention to the novel was suddenly diverted by the following announcement over the intercom:

“Please ensure that your body parts are placed inside your passports”

That was the message I heard. Of course that wasn't the message that was spoken, which was, as you have probably already guessed:

“Please ensure that your boarding passes are placed inside your passports”.

What happened here? My mind was cued by the rhetorical schema

of forensic fiction (i.e. top-down processing) in such a way that it influenced lexical parsing (i.e. bottom-up processing) with the result that the message was shaped to fit with the world of forensic science rather than with that of airline travel.

Note that in this example top-down and bottom-up processes are not either/or alternatives. Rather, they interact. Bottom-up perceptual processes provide data from which the listener constructs a message drawing on top-down inferencing processes. Both sets of processes are integral to effective communication. Rely too heavily on either one and miscues and communication breakdown are likely.

Bottom-up processes were foregrounded in traditional models of listening comprehension which drew on information processing models of data flow. These models treat the message as fixed – as intact chunks of information transferred from speaker to listener (see Figure 1 below).

In contrast, contemporary social constructivist models of listening treat the message as much more fluid. Meaning is not fixed or situated solely in the input, it is constructed and reconstructed in an interactional space¹ between participants (see Figure 2 below). A message is shaped

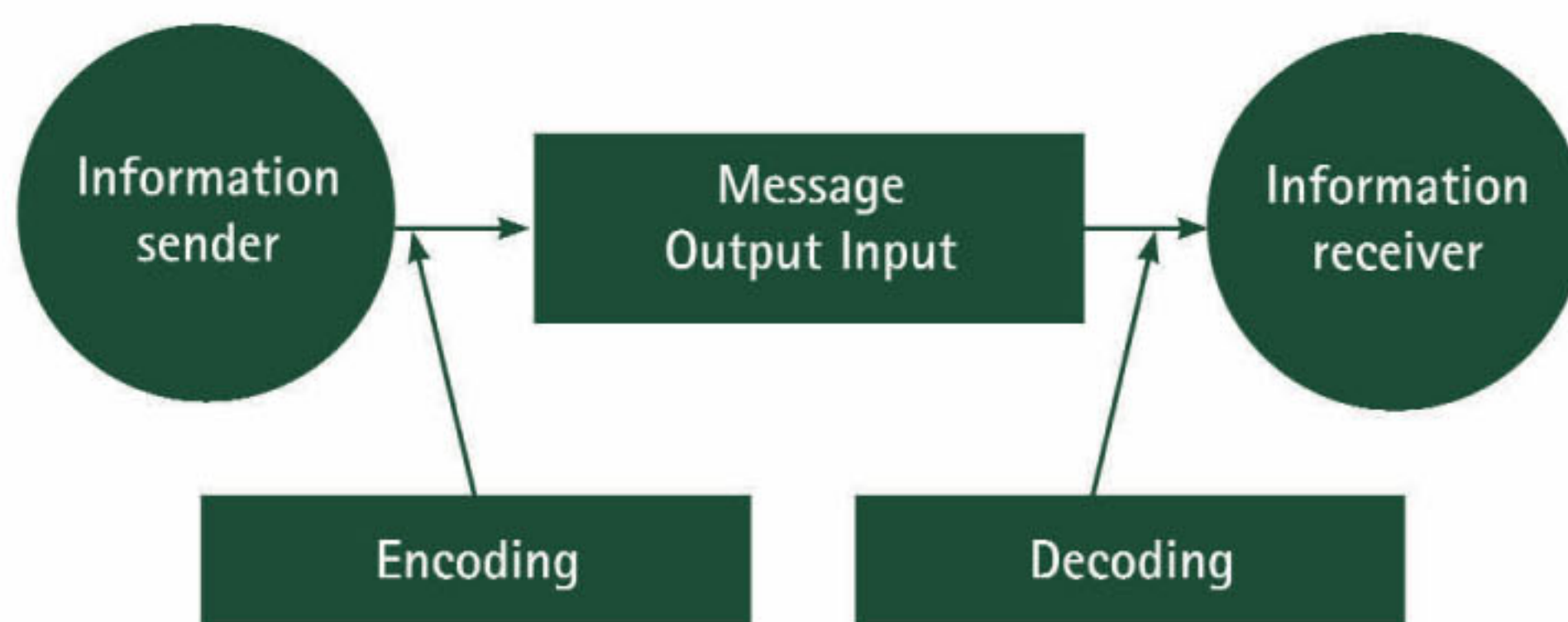


Figure 1: Information Processing Model

¹ What Sperber and Wilson (1995: 61) refer to as a mutual cognitive environment



Figure 2: Social/Contextual Model

by who is speaking to whom and in what setting, and by the interpretive frames that participants bring to the communicative act.

In summary, the question of ‘How do we listen?’ can be answered by describing listening as a multifaceted active process of meaning-making. Understanding these essential features of listening is an important step towards developing a pedagogy of listening. Most importantly, this understanding can encourage teachers to rethink reliance on classroom listening comprehension activities that treat listening as an essentially passive decoding process. Such activities clearly fail to tap into the richly engaging interpretative processes that are so important in authentic listening.

3 What does it mean to teach listening?

Many listening comprehension activities such as those that involve learners listening to a text and answering a set of questions might be more accurately described as *testing* rather than *teaching* listening (Field, 2003). That is to say, these activities focus on the *product* of listening – on comprehension – rather than on the *processes* by which comprehension is achieved.

To address this bias, and to help learners with listening processes I prefer to shift the focus off teaching and onto learning. This shift requires us to consider the kinds of **learning opportunities** that need to be in place for listening development (Crabbe, 2003). Learning opportunities can be described as a set of statements which identify the **standards** that a programme should meet in relation to specific curriculum outcomes. So in relation to listening we can ask what **opportunity standards for listening** are available to our learners. Identifying

these opportunity standards is a starting point for curriculum development and lesson planning, and provides a set of criteria against which the adequacy of the programme is judged.

To reflect this shift in perspective, we need to change our question from “*What does it mean to teach listening?*” to “**What opportunity standards for listening should be present in a language programme?**” In answer to this question, I propose the following five kinds of opportunities that represent a minimum set of standards for listening:

Opportunity standards for listening

1. Extensive meaning-focused listening
2. Guided diagnosis of miscomprehension problems
3. Listening skills training and practice
4. Listening strategy training
5. Links to listening beyond the classroom

Although presented as discrete items here, these opportunity standards are better seen as integrated steps that build on one another. Experiences with meaning-focused listening (Opportunity Standard 1) provide a fundamental platform for second language development and content learning (Nation and Newton, 2008). The miscomprehension errors that are thrown up by these experiences provide a starting point for diagnosing weaknesses in particular listening sub-skills and processes which need attention (Opportunity Standard 2). Diagnosis of weaknesses is followed up with listening skills training (Opportunity Standard 3) and listening strategy training (Opportunity Standard 4). This training directs learners’

attention to perceptual processing and parsing skills, and to strategies for listening effectively in different genres. This skill and strategy training is then applied to further meaning-focused listening opportunities both in and beyond the classroom, and the cycle continues. Below I discuss each of these opportunity standards in more detail.

Opportunity Standard 1. Extensive meaning-focused listening

When planning for listening skill development, teachers need to find an appropriate balance between extensive meaning-focused listening on the one hand, and dedicated listening sub-skills practice on the other. By meaning-focused, I refer to times when the learners’ primary focus is on making sense of messages that are relevant and of interest to them. Nation and Newton (2008) argue that in a balanced language programme, learners should probably spend about 25% of the time in meaningful reading and listening. As Brumfit noted in the quote above, “only when the language items are fused into active meaning systems by the *process of use*, is the language system developing for the learner’s own purposes” (Brumfit 2001: 12). Time spent on these opportunities provides the wide exposure to language needed to ‘tune’ perceptual systems to regularities in the language (Nick Ellis, 2001). Access to the internet, to readily downloadable digital recording/s and to a multitude of portable listening/viewing devices have expanded the opportunities for this kind of extensive listening in exciting new ways (see for example, Carrier (2006) and Cross (2009)).

One way for teachers to manage the quality of learning through meaning-focused listening is to ensure that relevant learning conditions are met. These conditions include: (1) input that is meaningful and activities that are message-focused (2) engagement of learner interest (3) opportunities for new learning, (4) learner understanding of the input, and (5) appropriate management of learner affect (i.e. stress and anxiety). The following questions provide a checklist that teachers can use to help them put these learning conditions in place in their classrooms:

Conditions	Questions the teacher should ask:
Meaningful	(1) Are the learners listening to a text that is intrinsically relevant and meaningful?
	(2) Do activities associated with listening encourage learners to focus on the message/information in the text?
Interesting	(3) Is the information/message in the text one that will be of intrinsic interest or value to the learners?
	(4) How do activities associated with listening engage the learners' interest and motivate them to understand the message of the text?
New learning	(5) What new language, ideas, skills or text types will the learners meet in the text?
	(6) How is learners' attention to this new material being supported?
	(7) How are new language items being made comprehensible?
	(8) How is skill development being scaffolded?
Understanding	(9) How is comprehension being achieved?
	(10) How is the learning burden (e.g. text difficulty, unfamiliar language or text content, rapid speech rate) being controlled?
Stress-free	(11) How are anxiety and negative affect being managed?
	(12) How is positive affect being encouraged?
The acronym MINUS (Meaningful, Interesting, New learning, Understanding and Stress-free) provides a useful way to remember these five conditions.	

Opportunity Standard 2. Guided diagnosis of miscomprehension problems

The value of meaningful listening is enhanced when learners can identify sources of miscomprehensions. Are learners encountering difficulty with specific parsing skills? Are they inferencing effectively? Do they have sufficient metacognitive knowledge about the way in which stress and intonation carry vital information in English in order to interpret propositions correctly? Christine Goh (2000) used student' self-reports to answer questions such as these and to identify the typical listening problems faced by pre-university EFL students in Honk Kong. The results are seen in

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the Table below. The value of this kind of diagnostic information is that once learners and teachers have identified specific listening sub-skills that are causing difficulty, these problems then guide subsequent listening skills and strategy instruction and practice.

Marcus Wilson (2003) proposes a way to incorporate diagnosis into a specific activity, in this case the Dictogloss activity. In this activity, learners first listen to a short text being read aloud at normal speed with a focus on meaning. They then listen again, this time making

Table: Problems related to different phases of listening comprehension (Goh 2000: 59)

Problems related to different phases of listening comprehension		
Perception	Parsing	Utilisation
Do not recognise words they know	Quickly forget what is heard	Understand words but not the intended message
Neglect the next part when thinking about meaning	Unable to form a mental representation from words heard	Confused about the key ideas in the message
Cannot chunk streams of speech	Do not understand subsequent parts of input because of earlier problems	
Miss the beginning of texts		
Concentrate too hard or unable to concentrate		

notes of key words. Next they work in pairs or small groups to reconstruct a version of the text using their notes. Finally, group versions are compared across the class with the teacher guiding discussion of points of language use that emerge from comparison of texts with the original text. Wilson proposes that a further ‘discovery’ step be added in which the learners seek to discover causes of lower level ‘bottom-up’ processing problems that are revealed by comparison of their texts with the original. As the learners make comparisons, they classify their errors using the following list:

What problems did you have:

- a. I couldn’t hear which sound it was.
- b. I couldn’t separate the sounds into words.
- c. I heard the words but couldn’t remember their meaning quickly enough.
- d. This word was new to me.
- e. I heard and understood the words but not the meaning of that part of the sentence.
- f. Other problems...

(Wilson, 2003: 340)

Let’s look at an example of learners doing this from Wilson (2003: 339). Learners heard the following segment,

“I suppose all these construction projects help to reduce unemployment”

and here is what one learner said as his/her group attempted to reconstruct the text:

“... reduce the employment... I’m not sure about this. I can’t understand the meaning”.

This appears to be related to problem (e): *I heard and understood the words but not the meaning of that part of the sentence*. According to Wilson, this learner could be encouraged to address this problem by drawing more on top-down inferencing. For instance, in this case they could ask what effect lots of construction projects are likely to have

on employment. Overall, Wilson (2003: 340) argues that by comparing their text reconstruction with the original text, learners became aware of four learning points:

1. Failure to recognize common word combinations.
2. Discovering how known words actually sound in context and in unfamiliar collocations.
3. Becoming more familiar with certain grammatical points and words.
4. Discovering how top-down inferencing might have helped resolve specific problems.

One of the strengths of this approach is that learners are actively involved in reflecting on how they listen. This is an important step in developing learner autonomy.

Opportunity Standard 3. Skills training and practice

I noted earlier that under natural language learning conditions, massive amounts of exposure to input are needed to ‘tune’ perceptual systems to regularities in the language. However, many EFL learners do not have time or access to the quantity of exposure required and so need to find faster ways to tune in their perceptual systems in order to develop rapid word recognition capacity. One way to do this is to identify particular speech phenomena in English that commonly cause breakdowns in comprehension, to raise learners’ awareness of these phenomena, and to practise processing them intensively and in isolated chunks of input before making sense of them in more extended speech.

John Field (2003) has argued persuasively for just such an approach. He argues that teachers need to devote more attention to bottom-up listening skills, to the **process** of listening and not just the **product**. Field (2003) presents detailed proposals for assisting learners with lexical segmentation, that is with parsing the speech stream so as to distinguish word boundaries which are far from obvious in spoken language. He suggests a focus on three speech phenomena:

(a) Reduced forms (contractions, weak forms and chunks)

Contractions

e.g. *‘I’ve lived in Wellington for 10 years.’*

A learner who has difficulty picking up the ‘have’ verb would deduce that the speaker no longer lives there.

Weak forms

51 high frequency function words in English contain weak forms

e.g. *been* → [bɪn]

his → [z]

and → [ənd] [n] (Field, 2003: 334)

Chunks

e.g. *‘How are you going?’* [haʊjəgəʊn]

(b) Assimilation and elision

e.g. [g] or a glottal stop before [k] [g]

e.g. *good cause* → [gʊg] *cause* (ibid: 331)

(c) Resyllabification

(i.e. establishing incorrect syllable boundaries)

e.g. *went in* → *when tin*

made out → *may doubt*

(*can’t*) *help it* → *hell/tell pit* (ibid: 332)

For learners of English, problems with these three speech phenomena are likely to produce mismatches between the aural form of words in connected speech and the words as they appear in the learner’s mental lexicon (Vandergrift, 2006: 15). As a consequence, comprehension is likely to break down quickly when learners encounter any but the most basic, simplified aural English.

While Field focuses in on very specific speech phenomena, broader features of spoken English also warrant attention. Lynch and Mendelsohn (2002: 207) suggest the following targets for practice:

- Discriminating between similar sounds
- Coping with and processing fast speech
- Processing stress and intonation differences
- Processing the meaning of different discourse markers
- Understanding communicative functions and the non-one-to-one

equivalence between form and function (e.g. the form of “It’s cold in here” is a declarative, but its function in certain contexts will be an interrogative – a request for the window to be closed or the heater to be turned on).

Opportunity Standard 4. Strategy training

Learners can benefit from training in listening strategies. Two types of useful listening strategies are:

(i) Comprehension strategies

Research suggests that L1 inferencing skills do not transfer (Vandergrift, 2006). EFL students therefore will need lots of inferencing practice in English in order to become accustomed to drawing on world knowledge to compensate for gaps in understanding. Inferencing can be practised in the classroom through simple procedures such as encouraging learners to make predictions before listening, to listen selectively to authentic texts, to tolerate partial understanding and to piece together messages based on partially comprehended input. The aim is to develop in the learners a flexible and adaptive approach to listening that overrides the tendency of lower proficiency learners to fixate on unfamiliar stretches of speech.

(ii) Learning strategies

Learning strategies are carefully thought-through and consciously applied ways of learning that maximize the benefits of time on task. Training in learning strategies is particularly important for helping learners develop independent study skills. Even learners who are motivated to learn may not be aware of the best ways to go about learning. For this reason teachers have a role in raising awareness of how to develop listening skills through strategic practice. For example, when learners have access to a recording and a script, an effective listening strategy is to listen with and without the script. Learners can also vary the way they sequence reading and listening over a series of repeated listenings, i.e., reading first and then listening, listening first and then reading, and so on. Other learning strategies related to listening include: learning to shadow another

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speaker (Murphey, 2001); listening with attention to specific aspects of aural language (connected speech, tone units, pitch, stress, etc); learning and practising the skills and phrases for interrupting a speaker and asking for clarification; and learning to utilize a range of sources of aural English such as songs, media sources, and local community sites where English is used.

Opportunity 5. Links to listening beyond the classroom

To this point I have focused on classroom listening. But of course the richest listening opportunities are often found outside of the classroom. Indeed, only when learners are tapping into these opportunities are we likely to see listening skills flourish. For this reason, the fifth opportunity standard focuses on guiding, encouraging and monitoring listening outside the classroom. I believe this aspect of teaching listening is so important that it could well overshadow the others in some teaching settings.

Classroom surveys and questionnaires investigating learners’ current listening practices (and, where appropriate, carried out by the learners as an instructional task) are a valuable starting point for making these links to listening beyond the classroom. On the basis of information gathered, learners can pick up ideas from each other. The teacher can also identify gaps in learners’ knowledge of available sources of listening and use listening problems raised to guide the focus of classroom instruction. Listening contracts negotiated by individual learners and the teacher and listening logs which are shared and discussed in class on a regular basis provide ongoing options

for motivating learners to extend their listening beyond the classroom.

Addendum

These five opportunities all assume that learners are listening for meaning or that they are learning deliberately and consciously. However, exciting new research by Paul Sulzberger (2009) suggests that, at least for the beginning learner, listening to the sound patterns of a second language without comprehension and without deliberate attention offers significant learning benefits. Sulzberger’s experiments involved exposing young monolingual English speaking adults to a range of Russian words which they had never heard before and which varied, among other things, on degree of similarity in sub-lexical components to English words. Sulzberger’s findings confirmed the hypothesis that “the ability to learn novel words of any language is dependent on the acquisition of a knowledge of the statistical distribution of their sub-lexical components” (Sulzberger, 2009b). According to Sulzberger (2009a), this knowledge can be acquired from simple (but frequent) exposure to the speech of the target language (p. 342). He argues that an implication for second language pedagogy is that “the sooner learners are able to acquire an implicit knowledge of the sound patterns of the target language, the more successful they are likely to be in acquiring its lexicon” (ibid p. 341).

Conclusions

A clear pedagogy of listening is often missing from teacher’s toolkits. In this article I have proposed five opportunity standards for listening

that provide starting points for developing a pedagogy for listening. These opportunity standards treat *meaningful* listening experiences as the fundamental basis for listening work in the classroom, out of which emerge opportunities for diagnostic work on listening gaps, and for skill and strategy training. Classroom work on listening then feeds into and draws on listening opportunities beyond the classroom.

Needless to say, despite the way I have isolated listening in this article, it is not an island unto itself. Most everyday listening is a two-way process involving people *interactively* pursuing social or informational goals. Similarly in the classroom, listening is best approached through integrated skills work in which listening, speaking, reading and writing are all used to mutually support language development. We saw this in the Dictogloss activity in which rich listening experiences are linked to writing, discussion, and attention to grammar and vocabulary.

In conclusion I hope that this paper encourages teachers to reflect on the listening opportunities available to their learners, and to ensure that their learners have the experiences and practice in the processes and strategies needed to become better second language listeners and more effective language learners.

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