POINT AND COUNTERPOINT

Comprehending misunderstanding

Jonathan Newton

Michael Swan and Catherine Walter take issue with the current emphasis in the teaching of listening and reading on higher-order skills-and-strategies training. They argue that L2 learners typically already possess the relevant skills and strategies necessary for listening and reading in L2, and, by implication, can and do deploy them. Further, they claim that research evidence provides little support for skills-and-strategies training. In this Counterpoint article, I subject these claims to closer scrutiny and find them wanting. I also argue that even if the need for 'training' is questionable, skills-and-strategies instruction nevertheless offers rich and varied language learning opportunities through the ways it directs learners to engage with text.

Introduction

Michael Swan and Catherine Walter (2017) challenge the prevailing orthodoxy of using top-down skills-and-strategies training to develop reading and listening comprehension. They argue that such training assumes a need which for most learners does not exist, which is therefore unlikely to be effective and for which, furthermore, there is little evidence of positive effects on learning and skills development. In response to these issues, Swan and Walter argue that instead of '(b)lanket training in skills and strategies' (p. 8), instruction should be focused on remedying precise problems identified through diagnostic assessment. They claim that, in most cases, careful diagnosis of learner needs will reveal a need for much more instruction focused on bottom-up text processing skills such as those involved in parsing complex noun phrases and identifying the function of discourse markers (p. 6), and, for listening, ear-training exercises focused on phoneme-, syllable-, and word-level processing.

There is much to agree with here. Who would argue with a plea for instruction that takes account of learner needs? Or that answering comprehension questions comprehensively fails to provide adequate guidance for learning to read in a second language, an insight captured some decades ago in the title of Paul Nation's (1979) article, 'The curse of the comprehension question' (which was a formative article in my own teacher education). And like most classroom teaching educator-researchers, I am also wholly in favour of targeted and informed skills-based teaching focused on bottom-up text processing challenges (by 'text', I refer to written and aural texts).

A well-established body of scholarship highlights the need for precisely this teaching focus. In reading, we know that a lack of automatic word recognition skills greatly hinders the reading process. As Grabe and Stoller (2011: 13) point out, 'reading is fundamentally a linguistic process ... though this aspect of reading is often downplayed'. Skilled L2 readers draw on highly automatized bottom-up text processing skills, such as those involved in rapid word recognition, to make sense of text. It follows that for learners seeking to improve reading skills, instruction that provides guidance and extensive practice focused on developing automaticity (i.e. fluency) in word recognition is necessary. As learners develop these bottom-up processing skills, cognitive resources are freed up to serve higher-level comprehension goals including the inferencing and interpretive processes that readers draw on to read 'between' and 'beyond' the lines.

Similarly, for listening, Cauldwell (2013) argues that direct and deliberate teaching of perceptual processing skills is essential, but that teachers need to better understand the phonology of fast speech in order to carry it out. Swan and Walter make the same point with reference to John Field's cogent argument for listening-skill training focused on perceptual processes (Field 2008). Wilson (2003) offers a practical application of these ideas. He explains how a modified version of the Dictogloss technique can be used to help learners develop greater awareness of the perceptual miscues that lead them to miscomprehension of aural text. Wilson's modification involves a 'discovery' phase after learners work individually and then in groups to reconstruct in writing a text they have listened to. This phase involves first comparing the reconstructed text with the original, then classifying and ranking the seriousness of mistakes made, and, finally, listening again without reading. Wilson shows how a group of Japanese learners working with this technique discovered the particular problems causing their miscomprehension, including problems such as failing to recognize common word combinations and the sound of familiar words in a speech stream.

In sum, scholarship clearly supports the call by Swan and Walter for receptive skills instruction focused on helping learners develop and automatize bottom-up text processing skills. However, I take issue with three claims made in this article which, I believe, misrepresent the case for skills-and-strategies instruction. These are:

1 that L2 learners typically already possess a more or less adequate suite of skills and strategies;
2 that they can and do deploy them in L2 text processing; and
3 that evidence from research does not support the current advocacy for skills-and-strategies training in teacher education and teaching materials. I address each of these claims below.

Strategic competence: a given?

First, Swan and Walter claim that most foreign-language learners already possess the top-down skills and strategies needed to process written and aural texts in their first language(s). As examples of such widely acquired skills, they cite scanning a text for specific information, listening for gist, and using pre-reading/listening prediction to activate background knowledge. But can we really claim that *most* learners possess to a well-developed degree, let alone are able to deploy these skills in L2

without guidance and instruction? Let me identify four groups of learners who may not fall into this category of 'most learners':

1 English-language learners who have limited literacy and schooling in a home language;
2 young learners in primary and secondary school EFL classes who are still in the process of developing effective and strategic ways of engaging with cognitively demanding texts across the range of genre they will meet over the span of their compulsory schooling;
3 learners who have experienced schooling in education systems in which interactive and active reading and listening skills are not typically fostered; and
4 EAP learners who are seeking to develop academic literacies as a precursor to tertiary study in English.

In fact, Swan and Walter concede that, for the latter group, skills training is likely to be beneficial. However, in contrasting these academically oriented learners to 'the general run of learners' (p. 8), they undersell the skills-and-strategies development needs of many other learners. In sum, the assumption that most learners possess the skills and strategies scrutinized by Swan and Walter fails by a fairly substantial margin to account for the needs of a substantial number of students.

The deployment of skills and strategies: does this happen?

The second of Swan and Walter's claims I wish to challenge concerns the deployment of skills. Even for learners who possess well-developed literacy skills in their first language, how confident can we be that they can and do access these skills for L2 text processing? Goh (2000) provides examples of tertiary EFL students in China who, under the online pressure of processing aural text in real time, failed to mobilize top-down strategies such as constructing and utilizing a mental model of a text as they listen. Admittedly, while the students in Goh's study reported a preponderance of low-level comprehension problems such as not recognizing words they know and not being able to recognize word and chunk boundaries in the speech stream, Goh nevertheless suggests that being better able to activate relevant prior knowledge could help with these problems. For example, a particular weakness she identified was with learners getting too fixated on parsing difficulties, a problem that, it seems to me, teachers can address not only through practice focused on the specific parsing difficulties encountered, but also through practising top-down processing strategies such as focusing on key words which can break the habit of attempting to deliberately process every word in the speech stream.

Further evidence of failure to deploy L1 strategic competence can be found in Yeldham and Gruba's (2014) study into the L2 listening development of six Taiwanese EFL learners through their participation in a course focused on bottom-up listening skills, such as identifying words in connected speech and identifying the function of various intonation cues. The study found that the learners displayed a surprisingly wide range of approaches to listening, with some learners firmly classified as bottom-up listeners and others as top-down listeners. The study also showed how each of the learners followed a different and complex pattern of development over the duration of the course of instruction. For instance, one of the bottom-up

listeners continued to have great difficulty developing and maintaining mental representations of text meaning despite attempts by the teacher to direct her attention towards more strategic approaches to text processing. While for this particular student it appeared that strategy training was not effective, the main point of relevance here is that the deployment of L1 text processing skills in L2 was clearly not a given for all six of these learners. The authors conclude with a call for more research into the effectiveness of an interactive approach to listening-based instruction, one that combines work on bottom-up and top-down skills and strategies. Swan and Walter would no doubt concur on this point, and on the other clear implication of this study, namely, that skills-and-strategies work should be needs based.

Research on strategy training: what does the evidence tell us?

The third of Swan and Walter's claims I take issue with is that there is little evidence from research to support the need for skills-and-strategies training. This is a serious misrepresentation of the available research evidence. Because of space constraints, I will restrict my response to discussing research into the role of strategy instruction in listening-skill development, although there is plenty of evidence for the benefits of skills-and-strategies training from reading as well (for example Grabe and Stoller 2011).

While the bottom-up processing skills involved in successfully segmenting the speech stream are clearly essential for making sense of aural text, skilled listening involves much more than parsing the speech stream. As Vandergrift (2007: 193) points out, effective L2 listening requires 'a skilful orchestration of metacognitive and cognitive strategies'. It follows, then, that teaching can profitably focus on raising learners' metacognitive awareness of how they listen and how they can effectively manage the listening process. Let me briefly outline three recent studies that provide evidence for the effectiveness of metacognitive skills training in the area of listening-skill development.

In the first, Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari (2010) show how tertiary French as a second language students who were given metacognitive listening strategy training outperformed their peers in subsequent listening comprehension tests. The training led the learners through the metacognitive processes characteristic of successful L2 listening, including predicting, monitoring, evaluating, and problem-solving. The authors conclude that listening performance improves when 'listening practice includes opportunities to explain or reflect on the decisions required during the listening task' (ibid.: 488).

In a second study, Cross (2014) describes the case of a Japanese learner, Naoko, and how she developed more sophisticated and informed metatextual skills through metacognitive instruction on how to autonomously use podcasts for listening practice beyond the classroom. Cross (ibid.: 24) concludes that Naoko 'was able to enhance her metacognitive capacity and impose sequence and structure on her listening outside the classroom, broaden her view of what listening comprehension in an L2 entails, and show some signs of performance improvements'.

A third study, by Zeng (2014), investigated the impact of participation in a metacognitive training course on subsequent listening performance by a group of Chinese undergraduate students enrolled in an engineering

Jonathan Newton

degree programme at a Chinese university. Participating students were placed in either an experimental group which received intensive metacognitive strategy training or a comparison group which followed a traditional comprehension approach to listening instruction without strategy training. Drawing on self-report and listening test data, Zeng (ibid.) found that students who participated in the metacognitive training increased both in metacognitive awareness and confidence and significantly outperformed the comparison group on the listening test.

However, not all studies on listening strategy instruction have produced such unambiguous findings. Cross (2009) investigated the effect of metacognitive training on the listening comprehension of a group of advanced proficiency adult Japanese EFL learners. The learners received 12 hours of listening strategy instruction which involved practising a raft of strategies including inferencing, note-taking, self-evaluation, and cooperation strategies. While the listening comprehension of the learners significantly improved on a pre-post-test measure, a comparison group of learners who did the same listening tasks but did not receive strategy instruction made similar gains on the pre-test. Cross (ibid.) identified a number of mitigating factors in the research design which he argues undermined the performance of the strategies group and boosted the performance of the comparison group. Nevertheless, on the face of it, this study failed to find a clear benefit from strategy instruction.

A further limitation of the research I have referred to here is that none of these studies compared metacognitive instruction with instruction focused on the kind of bottom-up processing skills that Swan and Walter argue need greater prominence in skills-focused teaching. Overall though, while, as Swan and Walter argue, mere comprehension approaches are not enough, on balance, the evidence shows that teaching focused on skills training can lead to more successful learning and L2 language practices.

One final point on the question of evidence deserves attention. Swan and Walter cite the strategy of guessing the meaning of unknown words as an example of a strategy which is widely advocated in teaching materials but for which there is not only little evidential support but actually evidence suggesting that this strategy is counterproductive. The one study (Bensoussan and Laufer 1984) they cite in support of this view does indeed present a negative view of the value of training in this specific strategy. However, Nation (2013), who Swan and Walter cite in support of their own position, actually devotes a chapter to learning words from context, a good deal of which discusses the guessing strategy. He points out that Bensoussan and Laufer's (ibid.) study and others similar to it fail to take into account the learners' vocabulary size and density of unknown words in surrounding text, and thereby set up conditions that make successful guessing unlikely. Further, Nation (ibid.: 352) makes the point that, '(i)t may be that training in guessing helps vocabulary learning simply because it encourages learners to give deliberate thoughtful attention to vocabulary items'. So yes, if you want durable knowledge from one guessing attempt at a word regardless of text difficulty and a learner's vocabulary size, then guessing is not well supported by research. If, however, you more reasonably give credit for partial knowledge as

well and consider vocabulary learning to be a cumulative process, then guessing—and by inference, training in guessing words in context—is well supported by research. Training is a particularly viable option with respect to the guessing strategy because this strategy consists of a carefully sequenced set of steps which requires structured practice and guidance. The steps include: first, identifying the part of speech of the unknown word; second, asking 'What does what?' in the sentence (i.e. what is the subject of the sentence, what does the subject do, and to what/whom does it do it); next, looking for wider context and textual cues (for example referential chains, conjunctions); then, making a guess; and, finally, checking the guess with reference to the meaning of word parts.

This is by no means an exhaustive account of research evidence showing benefits for skills-and-strategies instruction. It is sufficient, though, to make the point that dismissing such instruction as an 'evidence-poor zone' (p. 4) does a disservice to the growing body of research providing just such evidence.

Is 'training' all that strategies are good for?

Let me turn to one final issue. This concerns the term 'training' frequently referred to by Swan and Walter. As discussed earlier, one of their main themes is that skills-and-strategies *training* is generally not necessary because learners already possess the necessary strategic competence to engage with text. But perhaps we can put the goal of training to one side and instead replace it with a goal of *engaging* learners with text. By reframing the issue in this way, I would argue that the top-down strategies discussed and critiqued by Swan and Walter offer teachers varied and interesting ways to *engage* learners with text, even if the intention is not to *train* learners. This is because when learners practise top-down text attack strategies, they have to interact with text, to read or listen actively, thereby bringing their own meanings and understandings to the text and subjecting both the text and their perspectives to critical scrutiny. In addition, practising comprehension skills is often the springboard for class discussion and other collaborative classroom activity. For example, priming and prediction activities in the pre-reading/listening stage of a lesson offer rich opportunities for learners to think and talk about prior knowledge of the topic and to encounter and rehearse language items they will meet in the target text.

In sum, I argue that the skills and strategies listed by Swan and Walter on pages 2 and 3, and discussed somewhat dismissively, have a valuable role to play in language learning whether or not we assume that in implementing them, we are *training* the learners in their use. Furthermore, these strategies, when implemented, require learners to move back and forth between bottom-up and top-down processing of text and so can encompass the kind of attention to detailed text processing that Swan and Walter suggest they replace. Take the skills (or are they strategies?) of inferencing and identifying the main points in a text. In practising these skills, learners' attention is naturally drawn to the textual cues a writer uses to take a position or emphasize a main point. As Yeldham and Gruba (op.cit.) argue, bottom-up and top-down text processing strategies are not an either/or proposition, as I am sure Swan and Walter would agree.

Perhaps a fundamental problem is with the catch-all term 'strategies' which, as Swan and Walter acknowledge, encompasses diverse practices, so diverse as to arguably make the term vacuous. In this regard, it is worth noting that much of the research I have cited above deals specifically with metacognitive strategies which involve regulation of cognitive and learning processes. Swan and Walter might respond by pointing out that the target of their criticism was specifically *comprehension* strategy training, and the title of their article points in this direction. However, by the end of the article, the net seems to have been spread wider to encompass all skills-and-strategies training, as when they refer to 'the whole massive and time-consuming apparatus of training in skills and strategies' (p. 8). At the risk of mixing metaphors, here, the target appears to have been overshot.

Conclusion

For learners to develop automatized, fast, and flexible text comprehension, they need extensive opportunities to practise mobilizing and fine-tuning a whole suite of strategies, both separately and in concert (Grabe and Stoller op.cit.). Problems arise when comprehension strategies are practised for their own sake, without adequate consideration of learning needs and acquisition goals. In such cases, the purpose of comprehension really has been misunderstood, and the 'time-consuming' business of comprehension strategy practice risks being time-wasting. On this point, my view converges with Swan and Walter.

Ultimately, however, the goal of instructional text comprehension activities, whether they involve attention to linguistic components, perceptual processes, or broader interpretive skills, is not comprehension itself but the acquisition of language and skills for putting language to use beyond the reading of, or listening to, a given text. To this end, dismissing comprehension-based skills-and-strategies training runs counter to evidence for the benefits of such training as I have discussed above with reference to research on the value of metacognitive training for developing listening skills. It also underplays how important it is for many learners to have opportunities to deliberately practise mobilizing comprehension strategies either because such strategies may not be well established in the learners' L1 or because their deployment for L2 text comprehension is not a given. Swan and Walter offer an important and timely corrective to the widespread overuse of classroom time on ill-defined comprehension strategy training. But in so doing they are too dismissive of skills-and-strategies training. Balance might be overrated, but it is what is called for here.

Final version received October 2016

References

Bensoussan, M. and **B. Laufer.** 1984. 'Lexical guessing in context in EFL reading comprehension'. *Journal of Research in Reading* 7/1: 15–32.
Cauldwell, R. 2013. *Phonology for Listening.* Birmingham: Speech in Action.

Cross, J. 2009. 'Effects of listening strategy instruction on news videotext comprehension'. *Language Teaching Research* 13/2: 151–76.
Cross, J. 2014. 'Promoting autonomous listening to podcasts: a case study'. *Language Teaching Research* 18/1: 8–32.

Field, J. 2008. *Listening in the Language Classroom.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Goh, C. 2000. 'A cognitive perspective on language learners' listening comprehension problems'. *System* 28/1: 55–75.

Grabe, W. and **F. Stoller.** 2011. *Teaching and Researching Reading* (second edition). New York, NY: Pearson Longman.

Nation, I. S. P. 1979. 'The curse of the comprehension question: some alternatives'. *Guidelines* 2: 85–103.

Nation, I. S. P. 2013. *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language* (second edition). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Swan, M. and **C. Walter.** 2017. 'Misunderstanding comprehension'. *ELT Journal* 71/2: 1–9.

Vandergrift, L. 2007. 'Recent developments in second and foreign language listening comprehension research'. *Language Teaching* 40/3: 191–210.

Vandergrift, L. and **M. Tafaghodtari.** 2010. 'Teaching L2 learners how to listen does make a difference: an empirical study'. *Language Learning* 60/2: 470–97.

Wilson, M. 2003. 'Discovery listening—improving perceptual processing'. *ELT Journal* 57/4: 335–43.

Yeldham, M. and **P. Gruba.** 2014. 'Toward an instructional approach to developing interactive second language listening'. *Language Teaching Research* 18/1: 33–53.

Zeng, Y. 2014. 'Investigating the effects of metacognitive instruction on Chinese ELF learners listening performance'. *International Journal of Innovation in English Language Teaching* 3/2: 139–57.

The author

Jonathan Newton is an Associate Professor in the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. His scholarship encompasses language teacher education, teacher cognition, task-based language teaching, intercultural perspectives on language education, and communication training for the multicultural workplace.
Email: jonathan.newton@vuw.ac.nz