Introduction

The word is half his that speaks and half his that hears it.
Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592), French essayist

Why teach listening?

Why teach listening? seems an odd question. It is standard practice nowadays for language teachers to provide sessions that focus on this particular skill. There is a wide choice of listening materials available with accompanying CDs, and DVD or video is used in many classrooms.

Nevertheless, there is still plenty of evidence that listening is undervalued. When there is pressure on contact hours, it is often the listening session that is cut. Students are rarely assessed on their listening skills, and the problems of many weak listeners pass undiagnosed. The methodology of the listening lesson has been little discussed, researched or challenged; and there is a tendency for teachers to work through well-worn routines without entire conviction. Alternatively, a faddish commitment to an 'integrated skills' approach may result in listening being relegated to a hasty topic-driven session wedged between reading and writing, which tend to be regarded as more manageable skills.

Listening on the back burner

The reasons for this lack of priority are partly historical. There was a time when listening in the language classroom was almost entirely subordinated to the presentation of new items of language. Short dialogues on tape provided examples of structures to be learned (see, for example, Alexander, 1967), and this was the only type of listening practice that most learners received. It was not until the late 1960s that enlightened teachers began to practise listening as a skill in its own right – and even then the idea persisted for a while that an important function of the listening lesson was to reinforce recently taught grammar by exemplifying it in use.

Another reason for downgrading listening is, frankly, the difficulty of teaching it. It is widely seen as a 'passive' skill, one that takes place in the hidden reaches of the learner's mind. It is not tangible in the way that speaking and writing are, and a listening text is not easily manipulated like a reading one. Demonstrable results are difficult to

achieve. Even after extensive practice, there may be little evidence of any improvement in performance. If teachers want to demonstrate a class's progress in knowledge of the target language, how much better to focus on grammar, vocabulary, speaking and writing. At best, this lack of measurable benefits makes teachers chary of spending too much time on the listening skill. At worst, it leads to a complacent (and perhaps defensive) claim that listening can be 'picked up' simply by exposure to the target language in a way that other skills cannot. Once the learner's ears have adjusted to the phonology of the target language (the argument goes), listening skills from the first language (L1) will transfer themselves to the second (L2) by some process of osmosis.

To this, a quasi-psychological justification is sometimes added. The process of listening to our native language demands little effort. As infants, we acquire listening skills without being conscious of any cognitive demands being made upon us. Surely, then, listening to a foreign language is something that learners will achieve sooner or later for themselves, without too much intervention by the teacher?

Given these received ideas, it is worth giving some thought to the role that listening plays in second language learning.

A rationale for teaching listening

A two-way traffic

Why bother about listening? If we asked the same question about speaking, the response would be one of incredulity. It has been taken as axiomatic for many years that the development of spoken fluency is one of the most important goals (if not *the* most important goal) of the language teacher. The view goes back to the assertion by Harold Palmer (1922) and others that speech is 'primary' because it antedates writing, or even further back to 1878 and Berlitz's claim that languages are best learnt by 'direct' methods involving the spoken word. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, instructors placed great emphasis upon speaking, on the grounds that possession of this skill constituted the most important long-term need of the majority of language learners.

But there has perhaps been some rather muddled thinking here. The long-term needs of the learner do not, in fact, reside in speaking as such but in *interacting orally with other speakers of the target language*. Communication requires a two-way traffic, and unless the non-native speaker has a listening competence as developed as his/her command of speech, then it will simply not be possible to sustain a conversation. This may seem a blindingly obvious point. But the briefest review of listening proficiency in a language class will identify more than a few learners

whose ability to interpret what is said to them lags well behind the level of language that they are capable of producing.

Fluency forms one side of the coin in developing speaking skills; the other being accuracy. But how often do teachers make a concerted effort to develop the equivalent competencies in listening? These might be regarded as (for fluency) the acquisition of patterns of listening which approximate to those of a native listener and (for accuracy) the possession of an ability to decode pieces of connected speech, word by word. The prevailing tendency in the teaching of listening is to provide practice and more practice without clearly defined goals. How comfortable would we feel about an approach to speaking which told learners simply to 'get on with the task' and provided no pronunciation teaching, no modelling, no controlled practice, no pragmatic input and little feedback?

The skewed priorities of educators

To make matters worse, the plight of the weak listener often goes unrecognised. This is partly because of the inaccessible nature of listening, which can only be tested indirectly, often by means of cumbersome comprehension questions. But it is also a reflection of the priorities adopted by language teaching professionals. Let us take a typical language school in the UK, USA, Australia, Canada or New Zealand. The school is very professionally run and has a sophisticated entry test for those who come from overseas to study there. The test consists of a battery of grammar exercises followed by a short composition and perhaps a hasty oral interview. Mainly on the basis of their knowledge of grammar, students are graded and allocated to a class at the appropriate level.

In syllabus design terms, the procedure appears to work well: the learner is slotted in to the system at the point where much of the grammatical information being presented will be new. But we should not lose sight of the fact that the incoming learner will now be required to learn entirely through the medium of the target language. Some of the information will be presented visually through coursebooks and on the whiteboard; but most will be presented through the voice of the teacher. A critical factor in the success or failure of the learners, and in how much they benefit from their course, is thus the ability to understand speech. This consideration should surely outweigh what the learners do or do not know of grammar. Yet listening ability is rarely taken into account during entry tests and, if it is, is accorded only minor importance. On my many visits to language schools as a listening researcher and as an inspector, I have come across disturbingly large numbers of learners who

have been graded as (say) 'intermediate' on the basis of a grammar test, yet whose listening skills are minimal. They sit in class day after day, comprehending little and often blaming themselves. But the fault lies with a system that does not accord sufficient attention to the skill that, above all others, is crucial to their learning.

Lest anyone should feel that I have unfairly singled out language schools for criticism, I should add that the same situation prevails in state systems where the teaching of modern foreign languages is carried out mainly through the medium of the target language. The policy of using L2 as widely as possible is a commendable one but is only valid if it is accompanied by adequate assistance in understanding L2 speech.

Learner concerns

In setting priorities for skills teaching, we also need to take account of learners' perceptions of their needs. Many of them, if asked to rate the relative difficulty of the four language skills, cite listening as the area about which they feel most insecure.[1] There are several possible explanations for this concern. One is the lack of tangible evidence that they are making progress in acquiring the skill. Another is the fact that listening takes place in real time. If a stretch of speech is not understood at the moment it is heard, it is extremely hard to relive it in memory. Failure at a basic level (matching speech to words under the pressure of time) often leads to a loss of confidence, and to the belief that listening is too difficult or that L2 speakers speak too fast. If teachers omit to address these and similar concerns, they create insecurity which may seriously affect learners' motivation for acquiring the second language.

Language learning for life

There is another, and equally compelling, argument for paying greater attention to listening as part of language learning. One of the central goals of the language teacher must be to provide for life after the classroom. Much has been written about the concept of autonomous learning, which is usually taken to refer to the sort of learner training (Ellis and Sinclair, 1989) that enables students to operate more effectively within the classroom and within a learning centre. However, there is another type of learner training which has not yet received the attention it deserves.

[1] See Graham, 2006, for evidence to this effect, drawn from British learners of French.

It involves preparing learners so that they can take full advantage of the sources of linguistic information that the real world provides. It offers a more exciting form of independence than autonomy within the learning environment: namely, the ability to continue learning when the course is over and the teacher is no longer there. Surely this, rather than successful mastery of the Third Conditional or the vocabulary of shopping, should be the stuff of language teaching. The reason is that it constitutes, to use a currently fashionable term, a transferable skill.

Once the classroom has been left behind, two channels of information enable learners to extend their knowledge of the target language. The first is exposure to the written word through reading. The second is exposure to the spoken word through listening – listening to videos, radio broadcasts, podcasts, talks and announcements, or to an interlocutor. Of the two, it is listening which is arguably the more important since it is listening which enriches the learner's *spoken* competence with new syntactic, lexical, phonological and pragmatic information. But this wealth of material is available only to those who are able to crack the code of speech with a fair degree of confidence. A strong case can therefore be made (Field, 2007) for training learners in listening, with a view to equipping them for independent learning in the outside world.

Rethinking our approach

In this introduction, several reasons have been cited for giving more prominence to second language listening than we currently do. We need to recognise that successful L2 communication demands listening in equal measure with speaking. We need to ensure that the words of teachers do not fall on stony ground because they have taken the comprehension of learners for granted. We need to address a major cause of anxiety among learners – especially those confronting oral exams. And we need to open up a rich source of new linguistic material for those who leave the classroom behind and enter the L2 environment.

But any change of priorities is pointless unless we also recognise the limitations of the methods that we currently use in the listening lesson. Part of the neglect of second language listening must be attributable to the rather sterile methodology that teachers have to rely upon. For many years, teachers have based their teaching and testing upon an approach which measures achievement in terms of the ability to provide answers to comprehension questions. No matter that those answers might be derived by a variety of means, including intelligent guesswork. No matter that they tend to be supplied by the more able listeners, while those who most need help simulate an understanding they have not achieved. The format

is a well-established one and, though it may not lead demonstrably to better listening, it is easy to apply. Teachers and teacher trainers tend not to ask why this particular approach has become attached to the teaching of second language listening or to question whether it is the most effective way of developing the skill in learners.

A further indication that we have not given listening the attention it deserves can be found in the dearth of reliable background information about the skill. In order to teach listening effectively, it is important for teachers to have a clear picture of the end behaviour they are aiming to achieve in their learners. Yet teachers' manuals tend to be vague or sometimes inaccurate about the processes that make up listening, about the problems it poses for those acquiring a second language and about the precise nature of the input which novice listeners have to learn to handle. If teachers are to raise the profile of listening in the language classroom, they need to know considerably more about the skill and about how it operates. The information will help them to define their goals more clearly and to identify more closely with the challenges that learners face.

Here, then, are the concerns of the present book. It aims first and foremost to challenge the present orthodoxy so far as pedagogy is concerned. In doing so, it suggests ways in which our current methodology can be adapted to make it more viable. It also proposes some quite radical alternatives that enhance the support we give to learners. Secondly, it aims to provide the reader with a clear understanding of what second language listening entails: examining both the raw material which the listener has to make sense of and the processes which an expert listener brings to bear.

About this book

The book falls into six parts.

- *Background*. The first two chapters cover current approaches to the teaching of listening. Chapter 1 contains a brief history of the methodology of the listening lesson. It outlines how present-day instructors tend to design their lessons and considers the thinking that lies behind the procedures they adopt. In Chapter 2, there is a critical look at current practice. One problem is that our thinking about how to teach listening has been largely shaped by previously established methods for the teaching of second language reading. Another is that a routine based on asking learners questions about a series of recorded texts

is not the most constructive way of improving L2 listening performance. Answers to comprehension tasks provide few, if any, insights into where learners' listening problems lie.

- *Rethinking the comprehension approach*. In the next part, I examine ways in which the current approach to teaching second language listening might be adapted so as to make it both more effective and more learner-friendly. The focus of Chapter 3 is upon practical innovations to change the dynamics of the listening classroom. I consider how the roles of both teacher and learner can be modified to ensure greater engagement. I then go on to examine how teachers can ensure more intensive listening practice by promoting listener autonomy. In Chapter 4, the view is expressed that current pedagogy limits the forms of listening that are practised in the classroom. Ideas are put forward for expanding the range of listening types and tasks that are featured, with a view to aligning them more closely with the listening experiences that a learner might have in the real world.

- *Process, not product*. The third part of the book presents two alternatives to current methodology. One, described in Chapter 5, entails treating the listening lesson as a diagnostic exercise, in which the teacher makes use of learner responses in order to detect areas of difficulty. The teacher can then devise small-scale tasks that provide remedial practice in the specific problems that have been identified. The other approach is prognostic, attempting to anticipate the problems that a second language listener is likely to encounter. It entails dividing listening into a set of components that can be practised intensively and individually. Proposals for a sub-skills approach similar to the one adopted in second language reading are discussed in Chapter 6. An alternative framework for deciding what is to be practised is then put forward in Chapter 7: a framework based not upon the intuitions of commentators but upon psychological models of how expert listeners actually perform. This is referred to as a process approach.

- *A process view of listening*. If, as advocated here, instructors are to base their programmes upon the behaviour of expert listeners, then it is clearly important for them to have a better understanding of (a) the nature of the signal that reaches the listener's ear and (b) the processes that the listener employs when making sense of it. The aim of the next part of the book is to provide a detailed account of these areas. Though the treatment is partly theoretical, implications are drawn for the practising teacher, and extensive examples are given of exercise types that enable the relevant processes to be practised.

Chapter 8 provides an introduction to the listening skill which distinguishes between two principal operations. One (known as **decoding**) broadly consists of the listener matching the signal to words, while the other consists of the listener constructing larger-scale meaning. We consider the ways in which these operations interact and which might be the more important to success in L2 listening.

The next two chapters focus upon decoding. Chapter 9 contains a detailed look at the many ways in which the speech signal deviates from standard forms and at the problems that this variation causes for the non-native listener. Chapter 10 describes how expert listeners succeed in identifying sounds, syllables, words and phrases in what they hear, despite its inconsistencies.

We then move on in Chapter 11 to consider the part played by larger units in the form of grammar and intonation. Each is examined first in terms of its role in decoding and then in terms of the contribution it makes to meaning.

Chapters 12 and 13 are concerned with meaning building. We consider how a listener enriches the bare meaning conveyed by a speaker's words. We then take note of the subsequent decisions that the listener has to make about the relevance and logic of the information that has been obtained. Suggestions are once again made for exercises which enable a learner to practise these processes in a second language context.

- *The challenge of the real world*. The types of listening practice illustrated so far have been developmental and likely to extend over a period of time. But while learners are in the process of acquiring listening competence, the teacher also needs to ensure that they are capable of coping with the everyday demands of real-world listening. In Chapter 14, I consider the use of authentic materials in the classroom, with an emphasis on their importance to the early stages of listening instruction. Chapter 15 concerns the compensatory strategies that learners use in order to extract meaning from partially understood pieces of everyday speech. In Chapter 16, I consider how effective it is to train learners to use these strategies.

- *Conclusion*. A final chapter brings together the various themes of the book and summarises the proposals that have been made.

English is used throughout the book as the language of exemplification, but the general comments made apply to the teaching of all foreign or second languages. Examples are sometimes cited from languages other than English and allowance is made for differences in pronunciation systems.

Certain chapters of the book (particularly Chapter 9) make use of phoneme characters to represent the sounds of English. For those who do not have a background in this area, Appendix 3 briefly explains the sound system of the language and how to interpret the non-alphabetic characters. Also to assist the reader, there is a glossary of listening-related terms at the end of the book, and there are suggestions for further reading after each chapter.

Anyone writing about human communication encounters a thorny problem in determining the gender of the two or more participants. An early draft of this book attempted even-handedness by making the listener male and female in alternate chapters. This created some confusion, and I have therefore settled for a consistently female listener – except, of course, where the text refers to a specific individual – and a male speaker. Lest this decision be misconstrued, I hasten to add that listening (the point is made many times in the book) is *not* by any means a passive skill.

Finally, a note on terminology. In discussions of second language listening, certain terms such as 'skill', 'process' and 'strategy' tend to be employed rather loosely. Attempts have been made here to use them with some degree of consistency, though I apologise in advance for any oversights. I have used the word 'skill' when referring to the four 'language skills' and to the 'listening skill'. The latter is represented as being divisible into 'sub-skills' or (in the approach preferred here) into a set of 'processes'. Throughout, the book attempts to sustain a distinction between 'processes' which are part of the expertise that we all need in order to listen and 'strategies' which are ways in which listeners (particularly L2 listeners) compensate for gaps in their understanding. All of this will, I hope, become plainer as the book proceeds.