

## DO COURSEBOOK WRITERS AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS PERCEIVE LISTENING DIFFICULTIES THE SAME WAY?

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Although listening comprehension may be considered one of the most important skills for communication, since a person cannot respond to a speaker unless he/she understands what he/she has heard, in the field of Second Language Acquisition, until recently it attracted little attention of theorists and language teachers. It was believed that listening and reading were passive skills which could be improved naturally with practice and by merely exposing students to foreign language texts and to the spoken language of native speakers.

Gradually, and especially with the advent of the Communicative Approach, attention to listening comprehension has increased dramatically. It has come to be of primary importance in language teaching, as it became evident that students need skill in understanding spoken English in order to be able to communicate with speakers of English as well as to derive pleasure from the language through movies, television, music, among other activities.

In a Portuguese-speaking country like ours, where students have scarcely any opportunity to meet native speakers of English, foreign language teachers should offer these students a wide variety of listening texts and tasks in many different registers and speed (UNDERWOOD, 1993, p.21). However, for the practice to be effective, according to Anderson and Lynch (1991, p.44), it must be regular and frequent; it must also be stimulating, challenging and interesting, and finally, it must be progressive or graded according to the level of difficulty of the materials or the activities selected.

Research studies on listening comprehension have focused mainly on the factors that may influence how learners interact with oral input, with special attention to the types of strategies that may improve comprehension and how best to teach these strategies in the English as a foreign language (EFL)

classroom. Considering that it is mainly through coursebooks that Brazilian students are involved in listening comprehension practice in the classroom, I believe that the effectiveness of the listening comprehension tasks proposed in those books is also worth investigating.

The purpose of this article is to present the results of a qualitative study (conducted as part of my Post-Graduation course), which aimed to exam and try out some listening comprehension activities for evidence of grading criteria. My main goal was to investigate whether coursebook writers and L2 students perceive listening difficulties the same way, as suggested by Anderson and Lynch (op.cit, p.133).

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Listening in a foreign/second language (L2) is in many ways an undervalued skill. Perhaps this is because in our native language it is so pervasive in our daily activities that it is often taken for granted by language teachers.

Generally referred to as a passive skill or the ability to perceive sounds from the environment, listening is, in fact, much more than that. Although perception of sound is fundamental, listening requires comprehension of meaning. Therefore, listening in a foreign/second (L2) language is an extremely complex process which involves not only receptive, but also constructive, and interpretative aspects of cognition (ROST, 2005 p. 503).

Traditionally, listening was not taught in language classes. During the 50's, the emphasis on teaching was mainly on reading and writing. In the 60's, attention turned to the sounds that make up the words, and word stress and intonation. Listening exercises consisted of a list of two or three words pronounced by the teacher for the student to identify which one sounded different from the others, for example. This view of listening comprehension practice, typical of the Audiolingual Approach derived from behaviorist tradition, according to which language learning is believed to occur when associations are formed between stimuli and responses. Language methodology consisted of a set of pattern drills, dialogues and sentences which were repeated and

memorized by students in the belief that “practice makes perfection”. The more you repeat a word or sentence, the more likely you are to learn it, was the motto of the approach. According to this view, as Nord (1981, p.69) has pointed out, listening was relegated to “listening for speaking rather than listening for understanding.”

Influenced by Krashen’s (1985) Input Hypothesis which sees language input as fundamental to language learning, the status of listening gradually began to change. It was then advocated that students should not be exposed to words or sentences pronounced in isolation, but they should receive as much *comprehensible input* (i.e. input which contains language structures that are beyond students current stage of interlanguage development –  $i+1$ ) as possible in order to acquire the target language. Thus, EFL learners began to be exposed to extensive recorded texts, and later required to complete comprehension questions precisely the same type as they performed in their reading comprehension class. Because videos also became popular in language classrooms, listening, which was previously explored in isolation (a task that even native speakers have difficulties to perform) was then introduced in a more real context.

Krashen’s (1987) five hypotheses were very influential in the field of second language acquisition, and provided the basis for the Communicative Approach, which dominated the EFL scenario since the mid-70’s, and is still influential today.

With the advent of the Communicative Approach, then, the goal of foreign language teaching and learning shifted to achieving communicative competence (CANALE & SWAIN, 1980), in other words, to perform successfully in real-life situations. Because it is well known that in these contexts, L2 listeners are exposed to different accents, spontaneous and informal language, and especially to a wide variety of “Englishes” around the world, (CRYSTAL, 2003) it is crucial that language teachers help students become effective listeners. This means offering them the opportunity to develop appropriate listening strategies and to practice these strategies in authentic situations.

There is no doubt that, since the emergence of the Communicative Approach, together with the skills of speaking, reading and writing, listening

turned out to be of great relevance not only for language pedagogy, but also for second language acquisition research. However, we agree with Morley (2001, p.69) that “much work remains to be done both in theory and practice”.

### 3. THE STUDY

This qualitative study was conducted in the State of Espírito Santo, Brazil, involving a group of nine (private) advanced English students who intended to take the Cambridge proficiency examination at the end of that year. It is important to mention that although these learners aimed to take this specific type of test, they all spoke American English, and four of them had lived in the USA. Only one had travelled to Europe more than once. The others had never been abroad, but learned English in an American-English language private institute. This means that most of these students were not very much familiar with the British accent.

In order to help these learners to acquire and develop the skills needed to succeed in the test, *Progress to Proficiency*, by Leo Jones (1995) was the material chosen. The students responded to it very positively, because, as the author states in the Introduction,

as you work through the units, you'll be building your proficiency in English PROGRESSIVELY. You'll notice a gradual change in the nature and style of the exercises and activities as you progress through the book. At the beginning, they help you to improve your English by giving you guidance, encouraging you to enjoy learning and giving you opportunities to use English creatively; towards the end, you'll be concentrating more on acquiring and refining the special skills needed for the examination (JONES, 1995, p.1).

When presenting, in the teacher's book, the topic of each unit, the author also makes the grading criterion explicit:

Listening:

(...) There is a progression unit by unit: from: recordings that are relatively easy to understand, with straightforward questions on the content, or questions for discussion; to: recordings that are more difficult to understand, with more demanding exam-style questions that may catch out unwary student (JONES, 1994, p.14).

The following research questions were considered:

- Do coursebook writers and foreign language students perceive listening difficulties the same way? (Alderson and Lynch, 1991, p.133)
- Which factors influence the ability to listen and understand texts in English?
- Which factors may facilitate the process of listening comprehension in English?

### 3.1 Data collection

The basic cycle of data collection covered a period of 2-day classes (2h each), consisting of :

Day 1: two listening comprehension tasks (each consisting of pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activities) based on Alderson and Lynch (id. ibid)

Day 2: written evaluation report and panel discussion about students' experience of participating in the study.

The task:

#### TASK 104

Aim: To compare learners' and course writers' perceptions of listening difficulty.

Resources: Two listening activities of a similar type, if possible from a course that makes its grading explicit (...). The two activities selected should come from early and late in the course sequence; that is, they should be relatively easy and relatively difficult, according to the course writer(s).

Procedure: Complete the two listening activities according to the teacher's notes. Play the more difficult text first, but do not tell your students that you are changing the intended order.

Evaluation:

1. Ask the students to say which exercise they found easier and why. Make a careful note of the factors they perceived as different in the two activities (if possible, record the post-listening discussion).
2. Analyse their perception of complexity and compare them with those that feature in the course writer's grading description.

(ANDERSON & LYNCH, id. ibid)

Following Anderson and Lynch's suggestion for the task, as presented above, the two listening comprehension exercises selected for the study were from Unit 11 (an interview with a novelist) presented first to the students, and from Unit 4 (a discussion about accents) presented later in the class. I decided to type both activities instead of using the book, so that the students could not notice that the intended order of the activities had been changed. As these students also needed to develop their writing skills, I asked them to write an evaluation report about their experiences as listeners and their perceptions of listening difficulties, rather than presenting a post-listening oral discussion only.

### 3.2 Data analysis

To find answers to the questions posed, students' responses to the listening comprehension exercises were compared and analyzed. Results indicated that:

Text 1 (from Unit 11 – considered by the author to be more challenging):

- Type of Task: 13 “true or false” statements
- Right Answers: 25%
- Wrong Answers: 45%
- Blank Answers: 30%

Text 2 (from Unit 4 – considered by the author to be less demanding):

- Type of task: 12 “True or false” statements
- Right Answers: 50%
- Wrong Answers: 34%
- Blank Answers: 16%

Data also showed that, according to students' written evaluation, the main factors which influenced their listening comprehension were the following:

Text 1:

1. British accent
2. Lack of background knowledge about the topic discussed

3. lack of more intensive pre-listening practice;
4. length of the interview;
5. “True or false” statements difficult to predict;
6. lack of interest in the topic
7. lack of visual support

Text 2:

1. Number of speakers
2. Speed/clarity of speech
3. processing load (less time available to process information)
4. lack of visual support

Results finally revealed that according to students’ feedback, the following factors may facilitate listening comprehension in English:

1. well-developed listening strategies;
2. background knowledge;
3. interest in the topic
4. pre-listening activities;
5. visual support;
6. good quality of equipment (if used)

#### **4. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS**

The experience of evaluating two-listening comprehension classroom activities for evidence of grading criterion proved to be very useful and profitable both for me as a teacher and for my students as well. It provided us with an awareness of an urgent need for in-class practice to improve EFL learners’ understanding of spoken English. It also revealed students’ reactions in relation to the texts and tasks presented. The practice also made us aware of the main problems students face concerning listening comprehension.

As they were advanced adult students of English, I believe these learners were really able to evaluate their own performances as listeners, accurately.

Therefore, their feedback provided a reliable source for analysis of their weaknesses and strengths. Some of them also provided solutions to their own problems.

So, why did students find text 2 (from Unit 4) easier to understand, thus confirming the author's expectations in relation to his grading criterion?

First of all, it was clearly noted that students felt more at ease when the second listening text was presented. It seems to suggest that the more exposed students are to language input, the better their later performance will be. As Anderson & Lynch (1991, p. 68) point out, "the more practice they get, the more skilled they become".

Another important point to consider is that the failure experienced in achieving reasonable comprehension in text 1, stimulated learners to succeed in text 2. They became much more concentrated on the task.

An amazing fact worth mentioning here is that considering types of input, text 1, which was an interview with only two speakers, and consequently a more organized type of discourse, should have been expected to be more easily understood. However, it was much longer and had much more complex sentences. On the other hand, although text 2 presented a normal-speed conversation between three people from different English-speaking countries, and therefore a less organized flow of speech with natural pauses and hesitations, students considered it less demanding. A possible answer to this question poses on students' interest in the topic of the conversation, their own background knowledge on the subject, and the structure of the spoken language used. Accents and dialects had been very much discussed in class, as we had always emphasized the role of English as an international language since the beginning of the course. As Underwood (1993, p.19) states, "if the students find the topic interesting, they will find concentration easier".

With reference to vocabulary, students reacted positively in both passages. Some of them had been abroad and were familiar with the words and expressions used in informal language.

As for the activities, both units presented the same task format: "true or false" questions, and required learners to work individually as simply eavesdroppers or observers. They were only required to show how much they



had understood of the speakers' point of view. According to Anderson & Lynch (op.cit., p.79), it was "a 'listen and do' task".

Reading the sentences and discussing before listening to the tape was a good way of preparing the students for the coming listening tasks, and making the listening more purposeful and meaningful. However, it was evident that students became more enthusiastic about the second topic. The brainstorming session preceding text 2 made it possible for all students to share common background knowledge and even talk about their own experiences abroad before listening.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The study demonstrated that foreign language students perceived listening difficulties the same way the author of the coursebook used for the task did. This finding is very significant for the context of EFL teaching/learning especially because it is well known that many teachers decide by themselves not to follow the sequence of the units presented in the textbook they are using in their classrooms. Obviously, it is accepted and even expected that the experienced and informed teacher try some new procedures with their students. However, it is also true that coursebook writers are well-qualified and experienced professionals whose responsibility is to provide teachers and learners with useful and trustworthy material which has been researched and tested thoroughly before being published. (CUNNINGSWORTH, 1984). An important point to make, however, is that in order to meet the needs of the students, certainly the coursebook has to be carefully chosen.

The study also confirmed the view that for the listening comprehension work to be fair and confidence-building, the texts and tasks should be chosen and graded according to the students' different stages of learning. However, establishing the level of difficulty experienced by our students in understanding a text and the factors which might influence their comprehension is not simple. Each student brings to class his/her own listening strategies, experiences, expectations and purposes for learning English. Furthermore, students' ability to draw inferences and construct meaning in situations in their native language will

affect their facility in performing these same operations in a new language. Consequently, comprehension is not totally dependent on what foreign-language material they have learned. Students gain in their listening abilities/achievements when they are given opportunities to be successful in the listening task they do. Considering that, as O'Malley, Chamot and Küpper (1989, p.428) point out, "when ineffective listeners encounter an unknown word or phrase in a listening text, they usually just stop listening or fail to be aware of their inattention", it is the teacher's job to provide his/her students with suitable material and class work, to involve them in a warm atmosphere and to give them feedback on their tasks in order to help them develop their own listening comprehension strategies, thus becoming more confident and independent listeners. Without comprehension there is no communication!

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