Motivation to listen and listening confidence

Introduction

Listening comprehension is currently riding a wave of popularity in English language teaching. This is the result of a combination of factors; namely, the widespread acceptance of the communicative approach, a renewed interest in and emphasis on all four skills and their integration and, less directly, KRASHEN's input hypothesis, which stresses the important role of listening in language acquisition (KRASHEN, 1982).

Innovations in listening comprehension methodology of the early eighties have come as the result of thinking that went on in the seventies. Thinking and observation by many people led to the realization that listeners have reasons for listening and listen in different ways depending on these reasons. The inappropriateness of asking a great number of questions about the cognitive content of a recorded text, and the importance of preparing students adequately for listening were two ideas put forward by BROWN (1978) as a result of her investigations into the nature of spoken language. Computer models of speech comprehension revealed that anticipation, prediction and attention-shift were just as important as perceiving phonemes (RUMELHART, 1977).

Task listening exercises, with related pre-listening activities, have been developed to take account of most of these findings. An extremely important, yet apparently overlooked effect of redesigning listening exercises as tasks is an improvement in listener motivation and confidence. In this article we examine the ways in which listening tasks and pre-listening activities provide support, motivation and confirmation of success, thus building up students' confidence in their ability to understand speech. In a second part, we consider text authenticity and the ways in which it relates to listener motivation and communicative authenticity.

Listening tasks

When we observe people listening to speech in real life, we notice that they listen in ways which are determined by their needs of the moment, by their past experience and by the nature of the spoken text. We can generally assign a purpose to any real-life listening activity; indeed this is one of the things a speaker has to do in order to shape his message for the listener. A listening purpose might be something like «listening to the weather forecast for the northeast because you are going there tomorrow and are wondering

whether to take the train or drive» or «listening to your neighbour because you are interested in the background to a local scandal». These purposes – usually based on needs or wishes – determine to a great extent how people listen and whether they feel any satisfaction after listening. Imagine an American cyclist lost in Scotland, looking for a particular village where he hopes to spend the night. Imagine his satisfaction when, upon asking a local farmer for directions, he manages to extract «about five miles beyond the next right fork» from eighty seconds of otherwise (to the cyclist) unintelligible speech. His purpose in listening, based on his needs, determines to a greater degree than any other whether he can call the communication successful or not.

In the language classroom, however, the listener (i.e. the learner) is not always the sole judge of whether his listening has been successful. It is perhaps natural for a teacher to want to know how much of a particular listening text a student has understood; a great deal of teacher activity is aimed at separating what is known from what is unknown, thereby determining what still has to be taught, explained or learnt. Outside the classroom, however, people rarely ask themselves, «How much of that did I actually understand?» They listen because they want or need or expect information (which may be attitudinal, social or factual) and they subconsciously attune their listening to satisfy these desires and expectations. Rather than «How much did I understand», they ask themselves (again subconsciously), «Did I understand enough?» If the answer is no, they will «listen harder» or ask for a clarification if the situation permits.

More recently published EFL listening materials stress the importance of understanding adequately for a particular listening purpose rather than testing recognition of particular words and structures. (There is arguably a place for the latter as well, but not in an activity called listening comprehension.)The term *task listening* is often used for activities in which listening for specific purposes predominates, and in which completion of a task indicates listening success, i.e. whether the sudent has understood the message enough to act upon it in some way. Tasks may require writing, drawing, speaking or other physical activity on the part of the listener. Typical tasks in commercially-produced materials are incomplete maps, official forms or diagrams to be filled in or corrected, or lists and pictures to be marked or rearranged according to what the listener has understood.[1] Thus the stu-

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1 The visual element in real-life listening is often neglected in listening activities. While listening tasks (unless they involve video) cannot replace such real-life clues as the speaker's facial expression and gestures, they can in many cases fill in some information as to what the speaker is talking about. In this way they can *help* the listener to understand by providing an alternative form of visual support.

dent has something to do while he is listening and something to show for it afterwards. But listening tasks are more than a means of structuring listening time and indicating listening success: because the task provides a certain amount of information about the listening text, it can be adjusted to shape or support the type of listening felt to be appropriate for a particular text.

Closer examination of a task may make the characteristics (and advantages) of task-based listening clearer. Let us take a typical listening activity[2] which involves listening to a telephone conversation between someone who wants to find out more about a flat he has seen advertized and the owner of the flat. The following is a partial transcript of the recording:

Rod: Hello. Is that Oxford 40414?
Mary: Yes it is.
Rod: Erm... I'm enquiring about the flat which was advertized in the local
        paper.
Mary: Oh yes?
Rod: ... Wonder if you could tell me how much is the rent a month please?
Mary: It's £ 112.
Rod: I see. Is it fairly near the city centre?
Mary: Yes, it's only about a kilometre away.
Rod: I see. Is it quite handy for the shops?
Mary: Yes – within a minute or two on foot.
Rod: Good. What about a garden?
Mary: Well, you have the use of the garden.
Rod: I see. And central heating, is there?
Mary: Yes, yes. Gas central heating.
...

The listening comprehension activity associated with the flat-hunting text is planned in this way: before playing the recording the teacher must be relatively certain that students will know a) what sort of conversation they are going to hear (i.e., have expectations about the speakers and the topic) and b) what «point of view» they will be listening from (their listening role). This is part of what is often called «pre-listening activity» and will be handled in a more general way in the section that follows. To engage the students' interest the teacher might write something like

Flat to let: OXFORD;
Reasonable. Tel.: 40414

2 From L. BLUNDELL and J. STOKES, *Task Listening,* (1981): Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

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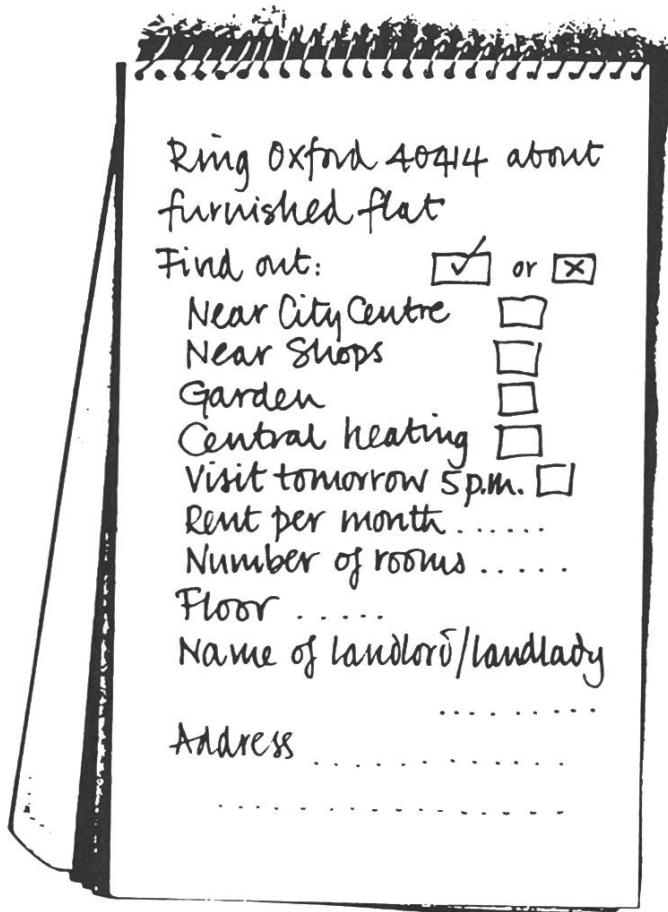
Fig. 1

on the board and ask students what they think it means. They can then be encouraged to imagine what they would ask if they were interested in the flat. In this way the class establishes its own list of «skeletal» questions (e.g., rent? address? number of rooms?) such as a person might naturally make before an information-seeking telephone call.

The students are then told that they are going to hear a conversation between a man who is interested in the flat and the flat owner. The caller's list of things to ask about, provided in the student's material, Figure 1, is then read through and compared with the one suggested by the class. By the end of the preparatory period the students should have a clear idea of what they are going to be listening to (at least from the point of view of one of the speakers) and should know what they want to listen for in particular. They may even have some expectations as to what this will sound like in English. Once they have started listening they are carried along and supported by the task – in this case, marking the caller's list according to what they understand.

Motivation and confidence

A well-prepared task provides the listener with two extremely important assets: motivation to listen and confidence that he will understand a text adequately. At least three factors contribute to motivation:

1) The puzzle-like nature of tasks maintains listener attention by providing a slightly challenging (partly physical) activity which runs parallel to the act of listening.

2) The listener is assured of immediate feedback on his listening success (without the intervention of the teacher) simply by seeing whether he can complete the task.

3) The listening situation is made plausible; the task ensures that the student will be given background information about the speaker(s) and the nature of the communication. In other words, he is given a point of view from which to listen and therefore plays the role of a participant rather than an observer.

We have seen that a listening task gives students a text-appropriate and plausible reason for listening, and that this reason is accompanied by expectations as to what will actually be said. Expectations and a reason for listening motivate a student to listen, but they do something else as well: they help a student to understand and interpret what is said by focussing his attention on significant message-carrying elements in the text – the same elements a real-life listener would pay attention to. Thus the student can complete the task. Completion of the task (rightly) makes the student feel successful at understanding discourse and therefore more confident of his listening comprehension abilities. A build-up of listener confidence from task to task is perhaps the most important result of task-based listening. Confidence cannot be overestimated as a factor in language learning performance in general and in listening in particular; a confident learner is a good learner and a confident listener is a good listener.

In our discussion of what tasks are, we should perhaps mention what tasks are not. They are not typical «listening comprehension questions», which, for the sake of example, might be questions such as:

1. What is the telephone number of the landlady?
2. Where was the flat advertized?
3. Does the man ask if the flat is quite
   a) happy   b) handy
   for the shops?

Questions of this type may indicate the words and structures students know and recognize, but they often involve an abnormal and unhelpful

amount of written language and tend to treat all the information in the text equally instead of focussing on the message. Such questions are very often orientation questions – who is talking to whom, where – which means that students have to listen for context clues instead of the main information one speaker is transmitting to another. Contextual information is usually given to students *before* they start to listen in task-based activities, as it is information that would not have to be gleaned from the text in real life. Instead of asking themselves who is speaking (except, perhaps, on the telephone) real-life listeners spend a great deal of time anticipating what the speaker is going to say next. They are thus able to process new information which is relevant to the speaker's message with greater efficiency, instead of wasting time processing information that merely repeats what both speaker and hearer already know. Ensuring that students listen with the same type of anticipation is the main aim of the pre-listening activity.

The pre-listening activity

Generally speaking, pre-listening activities help students to bridge the gap between being a student in a language class and being a participant in a particular FL communication situation. In some cases this «tuning in» process is accomplished by telling students *who* they are going to hear, *where* the speakers are, *why* they are talking and *what* they are talking about. Providing background information does not «give away too much» (as some might fear), but rather provides learners with the same information a real-life listener normally has. Such information raises listeners' expectations, in fact, so that they can listen with interest or even empathy and arrive at a better understanding of the real message. It also allows listeners to make predictions about what the message is likely to be. This is one of the most important factors in comprehension.

Some examples of pre-listening activities which provide background information, encourage prediction and make students more emotionally receptive to a particular listening text are:

a) *A picture or photograph* of the listening situation context (or of a similar situation). For elementary students this can provide much of the listening preparation in a non-linguistic form. The picture may, however, be transformed into language if desirable. For more advanced students, a picture may merely suggest a situation or mood and thus act as a stimulus for pooling past experiences (and associated lexis) and raising listening expectations.

b) *A word or group of words,* written on cards or on the board, can be used to
   - evoke students' experiences on a particular topic in the same way as a picture (see above);
   - stimulate a vocabulary brainstorming session on a particular topic;
   - suggest a story or conversation to be invented by students, which is similar to the one they are about to hear.
c) *A series of questions* or a «what-should-be-done problem» posed by the teacher to stimulate students to talk about knowledge or experiences which will subsequently help them to understand a particular listening text.
d) *Playing a short extract* from the listening text to get students used to the speakers' voices and asking them to predict what will be said next.

It is up to the teacher to choose a pre-listening activity which is appropriate to the level and preferences of the class and to the nature of the listening text, although the task, i.e. the precise reason for listening, will also play a part in that choice. It should be remembered that the aim of the pre-listening phase is to give student listeners the advantages of the real-life listener by reconstituting the original listening situation as far as possible, and by strengthening the motivation and confidence with which students listen. In addition to activities of the type described above, it is possible to prepare the student for listening by making him aware of his ability to focus on certain sounds and filter out others. This may be an important realization for students who balk at listening to authentic or semi-authentic texts which have a high proportion of «noise».

Two examples of pre-listening activities which are used to make learners aware of their ability to focus their ears on certain sounds in the environment are:

a) *«The Silence Game»,* in which students are asked to relax, close their eyes and listen to sounds around them. The teacher directs their attention to sounds outside the classroom, inside the classroom and even inside their own bodies. Students may then talk about what they experienced (in their mother tongue), but this is not essential.
b) *Identifying Sounds.* Students listen to a series of sounds, again with eyes closed. These sounds (e.g., tapping a pen on the table, head—scratching, turning pages) may be produced by the teacher or by one of the students. The class is then asked to recall and identify the sounds. Of course a tape of sound effects may also be used.[3]

3 Two good sources are MALEY & DUFF, *Sounds Interesting,* (1977) and *Sounds Intriguing,* (1979): Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

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Once a student is aware that he can listen selectively, picking out only what is relevant from a multitude of environmental sounds, he will be less easily discouraged by telephone recordings, background noise, simultaneous utterances and normally occurring hesitation phenomena. He will have won further listening confidence.

Problems of authenticity

In describing the ways in which pre-listening activities and listening tasks promote motivation and confidence to listen, we have said little about the listening text itself. In theory, the source of the text can be a person in the classroom (teacher, student, visitor) or a recording (normally a tape, sometimes a video). In practice, it is most likely to be a tape simply because listening to real people in the classroom (although it makes up the great bulk of students' communicative listening) is not normally regarded as listening comprehension practice but as, e.g., «teacher explanation» or «student discussion». Awareness that this is also listening practice which could be more fully exploited is growing, however.

Because tape recordings play such a major role in listening comprehension activities, it is important to think about the sort of texts that should be recorded. Some teachers and EFL authors argue that recordings should be specially made with the limitations of the learner/listener in mind, i.e. clear, in a socially-preferred accent of the standard dialect, controlled as far as structure and lexis are concerned – in other words, scripted. Others feel just as strongly that since students will eventually have to understand language as it occurs outside the classroom (non-standard varieties, irregularities of spoken utterances, constant additions to lexis and structure), they might as well start learning to understand it in class. Proponents of the first type of listening material see it as providing a model for the students' spoken language; they also warn against frustrating students by exposing them to language that is in many ways different from the language they are being taught to produce. Proponents of totally authentic listening materials counter that it is preferable to overcome a threshold of frustration in the classroom and thus be better prepared for communication in real life. They argue that it is important for students to develop strategies for dealing with authentic language, and that «pre-digested» listening texts will deprive students of this.

It seems to us that both sides in the authenticity controversy have contributions to make. It is important – perhaps supremely important – to motivate (rather than frustrate) the listener. We have already described how pre-listening and task-based activities play an important role in enhancing stu-

dent motivation to listen. The listening text also plays a crucial role in motivation: it should engage the interest of student listeners.

Unfortunately, an authentic recording (recorded surreptitiously or not originally for language teaching purposes) is not necessarily an interesting one. Indeed, the higher the authenticity of a recording, the lower the likelihood of its interest value, and conversely, the more a tape is tailored to match student interests and tastes, the less authentic it will be. We have attempted to show the relationship of authenticity to interest (called interest potential) in Figure 2.
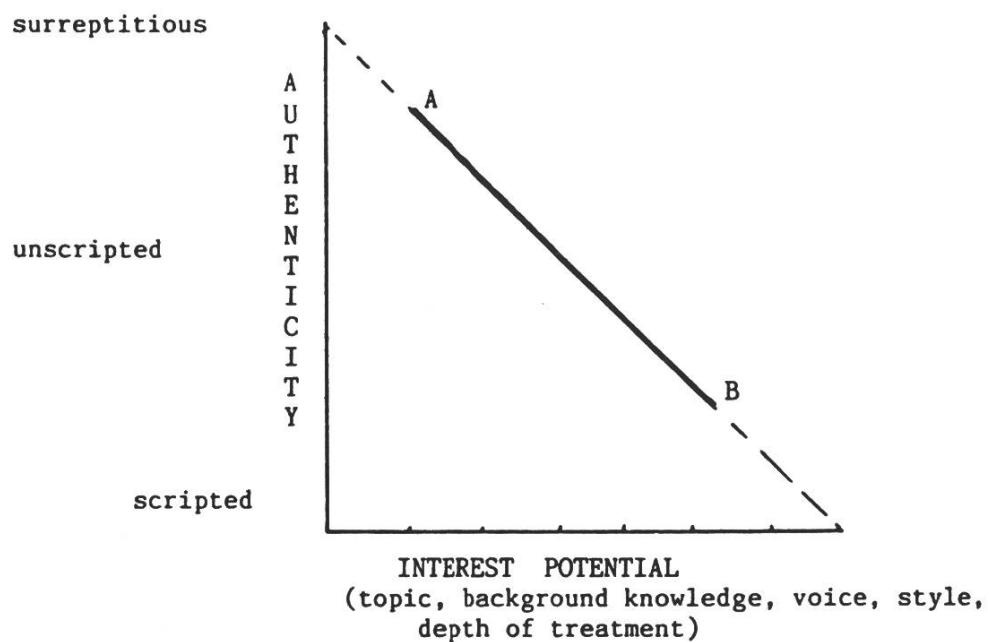

Fig. 2

It is difficult and perhaps not very meaningful to talk about an authenticity percentage or an interest quotient. For the purposes of exposition we have instead ordered the main ways of making listening practice recordings in terms of authenticity of speaking situation. Interest potential has been broken down into its chief components, which, it should be noted, have a cumulative effect. In other words, an appropriate topic is not enough to interest student listeners; the voice and personal style of the speaker(s), the degree to which the speakers' knowledge of the world matches that of the listener and the level of treatment all contribute to (or detract from) interest potential.

One might assume that student motivation to listen is related only to interest potential, but this is not so. A further factor in student motivation is the perceived relevance of any particular activity to final target behaviour. In the case of listening, understanding real-life discourse is closer to what

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most students eventually hope to be able to do than understanding simplified classroom language. Thus, authentic texts *can* contribute to student motivation.

We have therefore come to the conclusion that listening materials which are optimal in terms of student motivation are neither totally authentic nor totally scripted. They tend to be *planned* in terms of interest potential, yet *unplanned* as to actual language used (unscripted).[4] This is the range of materials shown as AB in Figure 2.

Highly authentic recordings often prove to be unattractive because of the speakers' voices or their personal speaking styles and because the information content can be extremely diffuse. Moreover, a strictly authentic recording is often difficult to use because it is a recording of messages in and for a very specific situation. Figure 3 is an attempt to illustrate why this is so.


Knowledge of:
- listener
- listener's world
- listener's motive
-
-

M_1

M_2

M_3

- Knowledge of speaker
- Knowledge of speaker's world
- Knowledge of situation
- Reason for listening
-
-
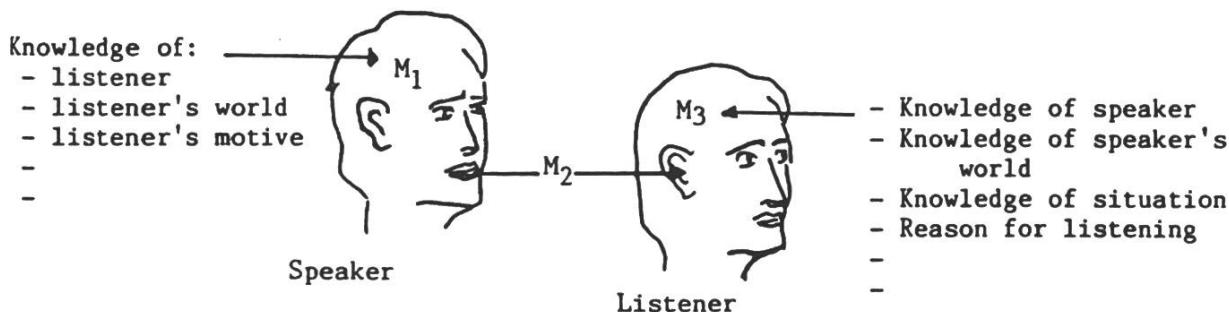
Speaker

Listener

Fig. 3

When the speaker formulates his message (M_2) he, in effect, puts thoughts (M_1) into language that he believes the listener will understand. The listener's interpretation of the message (M_3) may be somewhat different from (M_1) and (M_2). The important point to note is that the speaker uses (among other things) his knowledge of the listener and the listener's world to formulate his message. The listener may be one person or two thousand, well-known to the speaker or a stranger. Whatever the situation, the speaker will try to make his message comprehensible by using everything he knows, can deduce or must guess about the listener. He will revise this knowledge, using any clues available, even while he is speaking. The listener also uses his knowledge of the speaker (or people like the speaker) to understand the message. Indeed, the listener would find it difficult, if not impossible, to arrive at a satisfactory M_3 unless he thought he knew something about the speaker and his world.

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4 This is admittedly difficult to realize in the preparation of highly specialized (ESP) listening materials.

It is possible in certain cases to design listening tasks so that student listeners are given enough information about the speaker and original listener(s) to interpret an authentic recording. This is possible where the relationship between speaker and listener is of a public nature and their knowledge of each other is public domain, e.g. radio and TV programmes, tours, lectures. But it should be clear from the analysis above that it would take a much greater amount of effort to give a student listener the background information necessary to understand either a private conversation or a highly specialized but less private one. One may well ask if such listener preparation is worthwhile in terms of the listening practice it affords; it will certainly not add to listener motivation. And any attempt to exploit an authentic text without taking account of the speaker and original listener's knowledge of each other will compromise (if not destroy) its authenticity anyway (cf. WIDDOWSON, 1978).

In the preceding pages we have concerned ourselves with ways of assuring that listening comprehension activities play the important role they should play in language acquisition. Firstly, we have tried to describe briefly how pre-listening and task listening activities function in the classroom and to establish their value in

a) motivating students to listen, and

b) boosting students' confidence in their ability to understand.

Secondly, we have discussed the complex issues of authentic text and authentic listening situation from the point of view of the listener and his motivation to listen, in an attempt to connect listening comprehension text and methodology.

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