

WOT, no teacher?**the informal listening development of international students**

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Slide 1: Title**Preamble**

Writing my book last year reminded me that I have been a language learner for a lot longer than I've been a language teacher, and that my teaching draws on my experiences in misunderstanding what people have said. Analysing our own misunderstandings can tell us a lot.

They may stem from mishearing what the speaker said, or from not being able to interpret what they said, because of lack of shared schematic knowledge, or from not knowing the words being used.

I am constantly amazed by the pictures in my head as I try to understand what I've heard. Let me give you an example from the language I'm learning at the moment – Spanish.

Slides 2, 3 and 4: jabalina

So what we think we know can make us deaf to what we are actually hearing

Slide 5: Outline of the talk

Introduction

Listening is a key element in L2 learning. You can't get very far into an SLA article these days before you find references to *input*, *interaction*, *output* and *feedback*, and listening is crucial to all of them.

Slide 6

- in their encounters with spoken *input*, learners have to perceive and interpret what they hear;
- during *interaction*, they have to provide appropriate listener responses to initiate the negotiation of meaning when necessary;
- as they produce *output*, they have to listen to their own speech, checking it against what they meant to say;
- and effective use of *feedback* requires learners to listen out for potentially helpful clues from their partner that will help them identify and resolve any problems in what they have said.

Given the obvious importance of the listening to all these aspects of L2 learning, it is surprising that listening has such a low profile in the literature on second language acquisition.

Slide 7

Here is a brief selection of leading publications on spoken language and conversational interaction that either don't feature listening at all, or pay it minimal attention.

The books by Thornbury and Slade (2006) and Mackey (2007) do not include 'listening' in the index. Teresa Pica's state-of-the-art review of SLA interaction

research (Pica 2008) contains just one mention each of the verb 'listen' and the noun 'listening'.

I assume this is not because these researchers believe that listening plays little or no part in language learning, but because listening is somehow taken for granted.

Listening oriented approaches

With one or two notable exceptions (such as Michael Rost) the current lack of discussion of the role of listening in L2 learning is in sharp contrast with past decades, when three important movements highlighted the potential of listening,

Slide 8: CA, IH and COH

either in one-way or non-reciprocal settings (the Comprehension Approach and the Input Hypothesis) or in two-way conversation (the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis).

The Comprehension Approach

Slide 9

The best-known proponent of CA, James Asher, believed that the key to L2 learning was to reduce the pressure on learners to produce the target language too early, by imitating the *silent period* of first language learning, in which babies listen but do not have to speak.

The CA literature contains a variety of metaphors for the unseen processes during this silent period: for example, *the ear loosening the tongue* (Gauthier 1963) and *the release of talk* (Asher 1981).

One particularly striking metaphor is *nucleation* (Belasco 1965, 1981) imported from chemistry. It refers to the process of crystallization, in which atoms and molecules initially cluster together very slowly, but once a certain threshold of structuring has been reached, the crystals nucleate and grow much more rapidly.

Belasco drew parallels between crystallization and the way that language 'chunks' grow in the learner's mind during the silent period.

The Input Hypothesis

Slide 10

It was against this background of interest in CA in the late 1970s and early 80s that Krashen developed his Input Hypothesis, which has been influential - and controversial - ever since.

Krashen claimed that it was the process of understanding meaningful messages that drives our acquisition of a second language:

Slide 11

'we acquire by *understanding* language that is "a little beyond" our current level of competence. This is done with the aid of extra-linguistic context and our knowledge of the world' (Krashen 1981: 102-103).

Slide 12

Comprehensible input, or $i+1$, is conventionally associated with L2 learning. But I'm going to show how we all use context and world knowledge to learn new meanings

even in our first language. Some years ago my radio came on as usual at 7.25, and I heard part of an interview, which went like this:

Interviewer how do you rate Bob?

Expert oh he's got to be the greatest six-bender ever

Interviewer and where do you see him going from here?

Expert well actually he's already got one girlfriend lined up for tomorrow and another one for Friday

Did you have any difficulty with any vocabulary in what you heard?

Slide 13: vocab

Here are the versions of the word that native listeners most often report having difficulties with...

Slide 14: Ballyregan Rob

Bob being referred to was in fact Ballregan Bob, a greyhound, and this was in the sport section of the *Today* programme. In fact, the word was 'six-bender', as I heard it, and that refers to a dog that specializes in races over three laps (i.e. six bends) of a greyhound track.

Comprehensible Output

Slide 15

Krashen's IH was limited. Merrill Swain argued that it could only partly explain how we learn another language (Swain 1985). Swain had observed the performance in French of English-speaking pupils in immersion programmes in Canadian secondary schools. They studied all their subjects through French for seven years. Yet even

after that amount of exposure to comprehensible input, they achieved relatively poor results in production tests (writing and grammar), compared with their French-speaking counterparts.

Swain argued that their competence was limited not by any lack of input, but by the absence of any need to *produce* French more accurately. They were able to communicate in class with fellow English-speaking pupils and teachers in French that did not need to be formally accurate, provided it was adequate for the purposes of communication.

The outcome of this research was the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis – the idea that...

Slide 16

'producing the target language may be the trigger that forces the learner to pay attention to the means of expression needed in order to successfully convey his or her own intended meaning' (Swain 1985: 249).

So the CO Hypothesis gave pride of place to two-way listening and the negotiation of meaning: 'in those interactions where there has been a communicative breakdown - where the learner has received some negative input - and the learner is pushed to use alternate means to get across his or her message' (Swain 1985: 248).

Slides 17 and 18: Yuko and Isabel

This extract illustrates how a learner can achieve progressively more native-like forms. It comes from a speaking activity in which Yuko is telling the story of Carmen to Isabel and Khalid.

There we see negative feedback from Isabel ('falls? + + in law?').

That leads Yuko to make clearer her pronunciation of 'love her'.

Three turns later, Isabel responds to Yuko's 'falls in love her' by correcting it to 'falls in love with her yes'.

Yuko notices the gap between what she said and what Isabel said, and in the final highlighted expression produces the correct form 'falls in love with the man'.

Notice that we can't know whether Isabel's initial problem was not *hearing* or not *understanding* what Yuko had said, but that doesn't matter. The effect was that it eventually pushed Yuko to produce the correct form.

So listener feedback can help focus the speaker's attention on language form, and that may help the speaker to get it right on later occasions. Mention of 'focus' and 'attention' brings us to the concept of *noticing*.

Slide 19

Listening and noticing

My theme today is progress through informal listening, and I think it's important to remember that the current notion of *noticing* in SLA originated in a study of informal listening, by Schmidt and Frota (1986).

It arose from Schmidt's five-month stay in Rio de Janeiro. After attending an initial 50-hour Portuguese course, Schmidt's sole contact with the language was through

informal conversation. He kept a detailed learning diary of thoughts and comments on his progress, and also audio-taped some of his conversations.

By analysing these audio-recordings Schmidt and Frota were able to compare Schmidt's own perceptions and diary notes with the language forms used in his and others' speech, providing useful insights into a learner's encounters with a second language.

Their study found a clear correspondence between Schmidt's diary comments on what he had noticed in conversation with Brazilian friends and colleagues and the spoken L2 forms that he then used himself.

At this point I'm going to try a little noticing experiment...

Slides 20 and 21

Different people will have noticed different things from the listening experience of hearing *A rã rainha arranhou un inhame*: some may not have recognized the language but will notice that it is heavily nasalized; others may have noticed that word-initial 'r' and double 'rr' are both pronounced as /h/; others will have noticed that *rã* is similar to the words for 'frog' in Italian and Spanish.

What the Schmidt and Frota study underlines is the key role that listening and speaking can play in an individual's L2 progress in informal contexts, and this is an area that I've become interested in, in my EAP work at Edinburgh.

In particular, I've concentrated on ways in which we can encourage international students to go beyond the classroom to improve their listening.

At this point I'd like you to look at your **handout**

Handout: Figure 1

Figure 1 differentiates between students' experience of English in the real world (WOT) and at the university; between their use of English on their university courses and at the EAP unit; and, within the EAP unit, between activity in the EAP classroom and the self-access centre. All are valuable; but they are different. My interest is in students' encounters with English outside the EAP box.

Moving beyond the classroom: WOT

Slide 22

As an EAP teacher in Britain, the key questions for me are:

Can we identify practical ways in which international students are likely to improve their listening most?

What are the most effective ways of putting across that information?

I think it's worth stressing that, although here I am talking to people working in an ESL context, the fact is that the spread of digital technology is eroding the conventional distinction between 'foreign language' and 'second language' settings. As John Field has put it...

Slide 23

'The world has changed considerably in the past twenty-five years, one of the consequences being a vast proliferation of visible and audible samples of English, even in remote areas' (Field, 2007: 36).

I'm going to talk briefly about a project set up to encourage learners to venture outside the classroom into what I call 'the world out there' (WOT), in order to access and exploit real-life listening resources. I had intended to talk about three projects, but will keep to the one I know best – *PROFILE*.

WOT project – Example

Slide 24

In 1994 Kenneth Anderson and I started work on what we called **learner education** materials, designed to help learners bridge the gap between the classroom 'box' and real life (Anderson and Lynch, 1996; 2007). The project goes under the name *PROFILE*.

The units have a three-part structure: key principles from applied linguistic research; a description of practical resources that the learners might use; thirdly, suggestions offered by past students, sharing their first-hand experience

In the case of Listening, we wanted to encourage newly arrived students to take a positive approach to managing their problems with understanding spoken English. We also wanted to make them aware that the best place to encounter realistic learning materials is their daily WOT contact with English in their lives as university students, rather than in the second language classroom. To do that, we pass on *all* the options recommended by previous students. We offer them as techniques that our readers should try out for themselves, without being filtered through the value judgments of a teacher.

On page 2 of the handout you have an extract from the Options section on Listening, showing our students' recommendations for helpful actions, gathered in 1994.

What I'd like to do now is to move on to talk about an ongoing study in which I have been following up the PROFILE project.

The SILI study

SLIDE 25

Students' Informal Listening Inputs project

By 2005, *PROFILE* needed updating. Apart from the normal ageing process of materials, there had been a major change in the technological environment in the decade since our 1994 survey, namely, the spread of MP3 players, computer technology and access to the Internet. So I was keen to explore the extent to which today's students might be making novel use of such media to engage in different types of listening practice from those of their predecessors in the 1990s.

When I looked at the research literature, I found that most of the case studies on university students' coping strategies in another language were based in foreign language settings (e.g. Freed, 1995), or used language specialists as students (Gan, Humphreys and Hamp-Lyons, 2004).

The study whose context most closely matched mine was one by George Blue (1991), a well-known former member of BALEAP. He investigated non-native students' informal language learning at the University of Southampton.

His survey was undertaken at about the same time as our *PROFILE* work, so both reflect the academic environment of the early 1990s. One key element is the ethnic and age profile of the

international student community then in Britain. Most of Blue's 90-odd informants were European and Latin American students below 25 years of age. By contrast, his East and South-East Asian informants (24 individuals, only eight of them from China and Taiwan) were generally in their thirties and accompanied by their families.

Of course, the demographic of today's international student population in Britain is very different. The 'typical' international postgraduate is younger than 15 years ago, is more likely to have Chinese as her first language, and is less likely to be married. For example, at Edinburgh two-thirds of the postgraduates whose English we tested in September are Chinese speakers; the majority are 25 years old or younger, and have recently completed a first degree.

These demographic changes in the university population, and the wider range of listening technology now available, drove my interest in exploring the informal listening inputs of today's students, which might inform the advice on listening we give their contemporaries and immediate successors in *PROFILE*.

The survey

Slide 26

I used two instruments to gather information: a questionnaire and a structured interview.

In the questionnaire I asked...

Slide 27

I emailed the questionnaire to international students who had taken TEAM two months earlier. A sub-group had attended an in-session Listening course, at the end of which they had retaken the TEAM Listening test. So this meant I had pre- and post-course scores for these students, providing some measure of their improvement over a limited period.

Slide 28

On the basis of their retest scores, I talked to eight students in a follow-up interview – representing low, average and high bands of TEAM score improvement.

Slide 29: blank/placeholder showing a food market*Findings***Handout: Table 1** page 4

As far as **overall progress** is concerned, roughly half the students reported less improvement in listening than they had expected, and most of the others said they had made about as much as they had expected. Only two of the 58 students felt they had made more progress than they thought they would.

Now, as a teacher, one might find these figures rather depressing, at first glance. But the fact that almost half the students felt they had made less improvement than they had anticipated might reflect excessive optimism before their arrival in Scotland, rather than disappointment with their progress since.

The very small number who said they had made more progress than expected is harder to explain; One might have hoped that students' eyes (and ears) would have been opened to the many opportunities that we see for effective practice in listening in an ESL setting.

Handout: Table 2

For *one-way listening*, music and songs were the most popular forms of practice.

The internet, perhaps surprisingly, was used by fewer than half the students who completed the questionnaire.

When it comes to *two-way listening* (Talking), all but four respondents reported some interaction in English with fellow students. The exceptions were all PhD students in Humanities, whose life presumably revolves around library research.

Techniques reported by SILI informants

As I mentioned earlier, a principal purpose of SILI was to update our knowledge of the listening habits and identify use of electronic media that have emerged since the *PROFILE* data was collected in 1994.

Handout page 3

On your **handout**, you have a summary of the categories of practice mentioned by SILI informants in 2005 that did not feature in the self-reports for *PROFILE* :

Interacting with others

New media

English as an 'incidental' activity

Compared with what their predecessors told us in 1994, the main changes to emerge are students' use of the new electronic media - e.g. DVD films and podcasts for background listening - and a wider range of two-way conversational practice, such as

volunteer work and paid jobs. None of our original PROFILE respondents reported having part-time jobs – a sign, perhaps, of the economic times.

The interviews

One thing that came through from the interviews was the range and strength of their beliefs about what helps their listening, and the extent to which those beliefs may run counter to the views of listening researchers and teachers.

My final interview question was: “If a friend from your home country were coming to study in Edinburgh next academic year, what advice would you give them on ways of improving their listening?” On your **handout page 4-5** you have the advice offered by the 8 students.

Question: Who do you think made most progress in listening?

In fact, the three students in the Low improvement band were C, F and H. And of those it was Student H, who expressed the greatest confidence in her overall learning ‘philosophy’ and listening proficiency, who actually made the least progress. Of course, this is a tiny sample, but it provides some evidence of an association between a narrower view of listening and the amount of listening improvement.

Incidentally, I’d be very interested in sharing my SILI questionnaire with other BALEAP institutions, so if you would like me to send you a copy, do email me: A.J.Lynch@ed.ac.uk

Handout: Table 3 page 5

If we look at Table 3, we have the daily input figures, broken down into the self-reported listening improvement bands. You can see that the Overall daily times suggest a difference of approximately 30 minutes between Group A, on one hand, and groups B and C.

But the figures in the *Talking* column point to something of potential importance: group B said they were spending around half-an-hour more per day speaking English than group A, and group C were, in turn, spending half an hour more a day talking than group B.

Statistically, the correlation between *Talking* and self-reported progress in listening falls just short of the 5% significance level (Pearson .241, $p = .069$). So I intend to gather data from more students this year, to see whether the figures can be firmed up. Of course, if there is a firm correlation, it will be an association between more self-perceived progress in listening and more interaction, and not necessarily a causal relationship.

But here we have at least the possibility that concentrating on one-way listening may help students less than also seeking opportunities for conversation.

Implications

Slide 30

The evidence I've gathered so far suggests that maximising two-way listening practice in particular may be beneficial. That in itself is not new. In fact, it takes us back to what Evelyn Hatch argued in the 1970s: that conversation is the best site for L2 learning. It also echoes what Merrill Swain wrote in 1985 about the value of comprehensible output.

So the practical question arises: How can we help EAP students become more effective listeners from their daily encounters with spoken English?

One classroom technique is use recordings of conversations to model an effective approach to interaction. Just as we can gain insights, as language teachers, by analysing conversational recordings, so our students can benefit from seeing examples of successful (and unsuccessful) negotiation of meaning and form, of the sort they are likely to engage in, outside the EAP box.

A study by one of my research students (Moriyama 2007) has shown the benefits of videotaped modelling of collaborative interaction, to show EFL learners how to interact effectively in conversation. That was carried out in Japan. Arguably, in an ESL setting like ours, there is an even stronger case for the value of modeling effective interactive behaviour, because our students will have potential access to daily conversation in the L2 outside the classroom.

Such modelling should include conversations in which both partners are non-native users of English, in order to reflect the reality - even in ESL settings – that many international students, on the evidence of this project and others (Blue 1991, Myles and Cheng 2003), have relatively little social contact with native English speakers.

Teachers can use such recordings to illustrate the ins and outs of conversation in a shared L2, focusing on the ways in which comprehension problems are signalled, on the points where the speakers had to negotiate meaning and form, and so on, as well as on the outcome of the interaction.

A second implication of my study is the need to encourage students to look out, in their everyday experience of spoken English, for potential learning points, to help them achieve a pay-off for the time they invest in L2 conversation.

For example, as homework I often ask students to monitor their conversations during the seven days between our lessons and to identify points where their interlocutors showed signs of difficulty in understanding them. Last year a Chinese student said she had been talking to a

male German flatmate about a book she was reading and she realized he was finding it hard to understand her when she said the book was “*a bottle of*”

Slide 31

(this is how I heard what she said in her American-influenced accent).

When I then asked her “*a bottle of what?*”, she laughed and said “*That’s what my flatmate asked me when I said it to him. It’s not a book that’s a bottle of something, it’s just a bottle of*”.

Still unable to understand what the student meant, I adopted my usual tactic of last resort and asked her to spell “*a bottle of*”. The answer was “*A-B-O-U-T L-O-V-E*”.

I think this illustrates how an everyday conversation can provide a platform for learners’ noticing and analysis – in this case, the Chinese student’s need to practise clearer distinctions between /au/, /o/ and /ʌ/ - which I believe can help them to take an observer’s perspective on their own conversational exchanges.

I think the more we encourage our students to gather their own data on how negotiation works in general and how it broke down in particular cases, the greater our chances will be of helping them to develop their listening and speaking skills in particular, and their learning in general.

Conclusion

Slide 32

I have argued that we should be helping international students to become aware of as many types of informal listening input as possible, so that they can try them out for themselves and make informed decisions as to which ones suit them best.

In particular, we should look for ways of persuading them that informal conversation practice is more than “just talking”, and that it can be harnessed to improve their listening as well as their speaking.

In various places, John Field and I have acknowledged the debt we both owe to our teacher Gillian Brown, and I’m going to end by quoting from something she wrote:

Slide 33

“the single most important goal in the teaching of listening comprehension must be to give learners the experience of success”
(Brown 1995: 71).

It seems to me that if, through learner education courses and materials like *PROFILE*, we show students examples of good listening practice techniques from the real lives of their predecessors beyond the EAP box - techniques that have *actually* worked for those individuals - that could well be more persuasive than our simply telling them that we *believe* a technique works. In this sense, I think L2 learners can learn more from each other than they can from their teachers.