PART 1. Reflections on listening

In the area of second language teaching, listening has often been described as the most neglected language skill in terms of research and investigation. Somehow we take listening for granted; yet it may be said that it is the most universal of the skills since its presence is crucial in communicative experience. It permeates our experience, in fact, but so often goes unnoticed, remaining in the background in comparison with the other more obvious language skills. This is odd since, in reality, most of the time that we dedicate to everyday communication is spent on listening---much more than speaking, and considerably more than reading and writing. According to one estimation,

Listening---compared with speaking, reading or writing is used far more than any other single language skill in our daily lives. We listen twice as much as we speak, four times as much as we read, and five times as much as we write. Yet most of us take listening for granted and have little awareness of our “performance” as listeners. (Morley, 1999)

Listening is often considered to be an essentially passive skill that lacks the more high-profile characteristics of speaking and writing, especially, and of reading, which have been the principal focuses of interest and investigation on the part of researchers in the fields of ESL and SLA, as the sizeable number of volumes related to these skills on library shelves reveal. Fortunately, this situation has changed in recent decades. As pointed out by Lindsay Miller, there has been a growing interest in the theory and practice of listening skills, which has resulted in valuable research and a significant number of books dedicated to understanding the nature of listening and to developing effective listening skills and materials. It may be said that listening comprehension is coming into its own as an essential skill central to the process of developing second language competence because of its potential to take an active and integral part in the development of second language acquisition. This, of course, is listening understood in a new dimension, much brighter than the lackluster passivity of “listening comprehension” as understood until recent times.

General principles and current thinking on listening

In current thinking, the new attitude towards listening rejects the typical dichotomy of so-called active and passive language skills that relegated listening to secondary status of passivity. On the contrary,
listening is now highlighted as “active participatory experiences.”

In her article, “Current perspectives on improving aural comprehension”, Morley (1999) underscores two well-established principles that are currently accepted by researchers in the field.

- Proficiency in listening comprehension makes a central contribution to the learner’s overall development of competency in the second/foreign language.
- The systematic development of listening comprehension is of critical importance not only as input for learning to speak the language, but also as a premier skill in its own right.

In addition, she affirms that according to a current language teaching philosophy, ESL should focus not only on the teaching of language, but also on “self-help strategies for learning language”. The learning role of students may be framed in a three-way listening-communication context that Morley describes as follows. The first is one-way communication, consisting of “reactive communication” on the part of the listener to a host of uni-directional experiences, such as the media, films, public address announcements, recorded messages, lectures, classroom situations, and so on. Two-way communication (bi- or multidirectional) involves interactive communication in classroom and beyond-classroom activities and experiences in which the learner engages in speaking as well as listening. The last and, perhaps, most interesting context is self-dialogue (intra-active communication). Here Morley reminds us that all of us internalize language in some way or other. We talk to ourselves in many ways as we internalize our thoughts throughout the day. She believes that learners should be made conscious of this commonplace experience and encouraged to talk to and listen to themselves as a strategy to further implement language learning. According to the author, “...this conscious attention to self-talk and thinking in the second language can be as real and purposeful a goal as any other learning goals.” Developing strategies and activities related to listening comprehension according to the needs of students remains a challenging task for language teachers. It is clear then that Morley attributes a heightened role to listening, one that exceeds the limits of passive comprehension and leads to language development and competency.

Contributing added interest and updated views on the importance of listening, Jack C. Richards has written two recent articles, “Materials development and research: Making the connection” (2005), and “Second thoughts on teaching listening” (2005 a). Richards, a well known linguist and author of classroom texts, has synthesized current thought on the nature of the listening skill in addition to expounding his own insights on the subject. Richards directs readers to new insights on the listening skill, always adhering to general principles based on the relationship between the nature of language and language teaching mapped out earlier in his research career and still important because of their fundamental relevance to materials development. Fundamental to his thought is the principle that “All language-teaching methods operate explicitly from a theory of language and beliefs or theories about how language is learned.” (1985) “Two ...factors play a crucial role in determining what the materials will look like and how they will work. One is
the theory of language and language use reflected in the materials, and the other is the theory of language learning on which the materials are based.” (2005) This premise runs throughout the work of Richards, a highly experienced and successful developer of second language instructional materials. These principles become relevant in the discussion at hand since they apply to an expanded notion of the nature or theory of listening, which, in turn, will define the type of materials that are to be developed.

In the articles mentioned above, Richards focuses on the expanded notion of the nature of listening in terms of language acquisition. That is, listening needs no longer to be limited to comprehension, associated with seemingly passive qualities, but has found added relevance for the essential role it can play in second language acquisition and active learning.

He points out that since the teaching of listening has typically been understood in terms of comprehension, the goal of traditional listening materials has revolved around discerning meaning from oral texts—“the meaning of the message”. Meaning rather than form—words and concepts, syntax, and expressions of the message—has been the classic objective of listening exercises. The formal aspects of the listening experience have served only as vehicles of meaning in the general approach to materials. Learners are taught to use both top-down (prior knowledge and experience) and bottom-up (linguistic knowledge) processes. Another given of “the current orthodoxy of listening as comprehension” is the well-accepted three-part approach to the listening text: pre-listening, listening, and post-listening. It should be pointed out that these stages vary greatly in style and substance, depending on the specific purposes of the activity and particular teaching style of the developer or teacher.

In keeping with the principles cited above, the proposition that listening may be taught not only as comprehension, but also as acquisition, this belief implies the need to conceptualize a modified approach to materials previously based only on meaning and comprehension strategies. The primary source that Richards draws on to support the expanded notion of listening comprehension is R. Schmidt. In “Second Thoughts on teaching listening” (2005 a), Richards ponders the relationship between listening and language acquisition and describes salient ideas of the former regarding the issue of this relationship.

An answer to this question has been posed by Schmidt (1990), who has drawn attention to the role of consciousness in language learning, and in particular to the role of noticing in learning. His argument is that we won’t learn anything from input we hear and understand unless we notice something about the input. Consciousness of features of the input can serve as a trigger which activates the first stage in the process of incorporating new linguistic features into ones [sic] language competence.

In addition to noticing activities, Richards adds restructuring activities that also promote language awareness through oral or written tasks relating to formal aspects of language production. Regarding the matter of listening as acquisition, Richards does not hesitate to point out that a great deal more needs
to be understood about noticing and restructuring to understand their relation to language development. Finally, he concludes that specific learning goals should determine the relevance of teaching listening as comprehension or as acquisition, or the combination of both as the basic approach to listening.

In conclusion, there is still a great deal of investigation to be done regarding the theory of listening, the nature of acquisition and competency, the relation of listening to acquisition, and the consequent development of appropriate listening materials. The following is one of various frameworks for a listening activity that combines and reflects learned principles of comprehension and acquisition in relation to the listening skill.

**Framework for listening activity.** Situation: Intermediate level ESL students in university degree program in English (teaching / translation).

Play tape of a recent daily news radio program produced in English (Mexico City).

Pre-listening Activity: In English, learners will have read, discussed, or searched the Internet for topics to be dealt with in the newscast.
(Main news items are immigration issues and the Atenco incident).

Does anyone have relatives or friends working in the States? Describe some of their experiences regarding documentation, economic success, future plans.

What happened in Atenco? Why do you think so many violent acts occurred?

Try to distinguish facts, opinions, and interpretations (if any) in the news report.

While-listening Activity: It’s not necessary to write anything down. If you do, make a minimum of notes. Just sit back, listen, and try to remember the basics.
(The second time around, students will analyze listening text in terms of noticing and restructuring; will note salient facts versus opinions, value judgments and interpretations (if any) by the reporter.

Post-listening Activity: In groups of twos / threes, students will choose and discuss a topic from a given list of related issues and themes.

Why have so many chosen to leave their homes in Mexico to live and work in the U.S.? Explain why you would / would not venture north?

Compare and contrast various ways that immigration affects Mexico and the U.S.

Analyze possible solutions and remedies to the problem.

Describe salient facts regarding the Atenco incident.

What is your opinion of what happened there?

What can you say of Human Rights issues of those involved---local residents, foreign reporters?

Was the reporter basically objective or not? Did facts, opinions, or interpretation dominate the newscast?

Students will prepare a researched oral / written report based on themes suggested by the news report.
Part II. What is reading?

Merriam Webster’s Tenth Collegiate Dictionary (1993:972) offers several definitions of the verb to read. One definition is to attribute a meaning or interpretation to (something read); and another definition of read between the lines is to understand more than is directly stated. The key terms in these definitions such as: understand, and to attribute an interpretation capture the essence of the act of reading. That is, when a person takes written information in and understands it, this describes the reading process.

Successful reading of any passage depends upon the combination of the following: 1) linguistic knowledge, 2) cognitive skill, and 3) general experiences and knowledge of the world.

Reading begins with the accurate, swift, and automatic visual recognition of vocabulary, independent of the context in which it occurs (Day 1998: 12). Words that readers are able to recognize automatically are often referred to as sight vocabulary. Automatic recognition of a word allows a reader to have a lexical access. A lexical access is the automatic calling up from memory of the word’s meanings and its phonological representation (Stanovich 1992: 4). The phonological representations of the words in a sentence hold the words in working memory long enough for comprehension to occur (Day 1998: 14). If the reader can’t hold the morpheme, word, phrase, clause, or sentence in working memory long enough to construct meaning, then comprehension is severely disrupted.

Various routes can reach comprehension of the reading passage. Actually, we are often unaware of how individual readers reach certain conclusions, for much of the mental activity of the reading process takes place in a manner that is difficult to observe. No two readers are alike. Their mastery of the linguistic elements and cognitive development may differ greatly. Learning styles also affect second language reading where a certain willingness to take a risk and to guess is expected. Guessing makes a more conservative learner uncomfortable. These types of learners feel more at ease with predictable patterns of grammar or vocabulary learning.

The view that reading is a cognitive process posits that able readers have processors (the brain’s knowledge structures) that act on information in rule-governed ways like a computer program. Information, in Hayes (1989: 188) words the gap, is input in specific ways and the program acts on the information (according to Hayes, the way out). The program consists of processing steps written in the “if... then” format. After the “if then” statements are completed, the text has been read and understood. The theoretical framework for this cognitive approach to reading is known as the information-processing model of human memory (Anderson: 1985:42). Finally, general knowledge of the world influences the reading comprehension process, for the more the reader brings to the text, the more is taken away. Richard R. Day pointed out that comprehension occurs not only because of the reader’s prior knowledge of the world, but of the language, the text types and of the topic. (1998:14).
What is critical thinking?

Critical thinking has undergone a historical evolution from general problem solving skills to a complex of higher order reasoning strategies. Some of the reasoning strategies include the following: inquiry, hypothesizing, synthesizing, examining assumptions, weighing alternatives, interpretations, making thoughtful judgments in an independent and fair-minded manner, evaluating, decision making, drawing conclusions, and self-analysis. This listing, of course, is just a sample of reasoning strategies that a critical thinker may employ.

However, the most distinguishing characteristics of a critical thinker is his/her commitment to the continuous analysis of his/her thinking, having as a goal the continuous improvement of his/her thinking quality. A critical thinker operates under the premise that quality thinking is an indispensable element not only in our professional life, but that it also is of equal importance in our life in general. That is, a critical thinker makes the quality of his/her reasoning as well as the continuous pursuit of its improvement an intrinsic part of his/her being.

However, it is important to note, that a critical thinker doesn't evaluate his/her reasoning and thinking processes in a halfhearted way, he/she assesses the effectiveness of his/her reasoning against established intellectual standards and criteria. In other words, a critical thinker asks himself/herself such questions as are the assumptions or inferences relevant, are the problems or ideas clearly stated, is the information accurate, etc. That is, an effective critical thinker consciously seeks and uses good reason before he/she decides what to believe or do.

What is similar between reading and critical thinking?

What is similar between reading and critical thinking is that it is/they are not passive. For example, readers make substantial and active efforts to make sense of print while at the same time critical thinkers whole-heartedly evaluate their thinking processes. Also reading like critical thinking is a cognitive process. Hayes’ cognitive view of reading, for example, and critical thinking expect the student to show some initiative in determining his/her learning. That is, unlike behaviorist teaching that is solely interested in the external factors that cause learning to occur, such as stimulation or motivation, readers process information in their minds using the abilities, such as, to scan visually, draw conclusions, examine assumptions or reason inductively. In both reading and critical thinking the learner must be an active agent in the learning process. What students think and do with the information presented to them, for example, in a reading will determine what students will learn and how they will learn it. In short, students must pay attention to the information presented to them and process it if learning is to occur.
Carol Numrich in an article titled: Cognitive Strategies for Integrating ESL and Content Area Instruction mentions five strategies to help students prepare themselves for higher-level thinking skills in the subject areas. The five strategies focus on: 1) the skills of predicting based on prior knowledge, 2) anticipating what will be read next, 3) using statements to check comprehension of a text during reading, 4) analyzing text organization by looking for specific patterns, and 5) classifying to facilitate comprehension.

Carol Numrich´s strategies will be used in the readings of this project. The follow-up of the readings will try to encourage students to discuss an issue using authentic reading material. In short, material will be available for teachers to provide an environment for students to develop their higher order thinking skills. The focus of teaching using authentic reading materials will try to center less on the passive transfer of facts and will attempt to apply reasoning in reading.

References

Part I:


Part II:


Para hacer referencia a este texto: