Teaching listening: the knowledge source

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Listening is a process of receiving an input and interpreting the input to achieve purposes such as to obtain information, act on the input, and/or respond to and interact with the input (e.g. a speaker). Listeners activate knowledge sources in the listening process. Research on listening (Rost, 2002; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012) reveals some knowledge sources for listening: prior knowledge, linguistic knowledge, pragmatic knowledge, and discourse knowledge. Listeners make use of all these sources in real times as they perceive the aural input (e.g. verbal symbols of audio, video, and spoken language of a speaker during communication/interaction), making listening complex and challenging to the listeners. It is even more challenging for second language listeners because they may not be exposed to a rich second language environment in which they can obtain rich knowledge sources for listening. This article explores some ways for second language learners to enrich their knowledge sources for listening.

Prior knowledge is the first knowledge source for listening. Listeners understand what they hear (the linguistic input) with what they know about how things work in the world, which is called prior knowledge of the context and situation in the aural input. The prior knowledge source (also known as world, background knowledge) plays a crucial role in one's listening process for comprehension. Prior knowledge is organized in schemata: abstract and generalized mental representations of our experiences that are available to help us understand new experiences (Brown, 2006) built on previous experiences which are archived in the memory of a person. Prior knowledge helps a person to comprehend the input by calling on similar scenarios, related language use and even decisions. For example, when a primary school boy is working at a listening task on a Christmas party, the student may recall his experiences in going to birthday parties, together with the vocabulary and scenarios of the party. Similarly, when a woman is listening to a lecture on marine and natures, she may recall an experience in diving in Great Barrier Reef in Australia.

A large scale review by Macaro, et al (2005) reveal that the best listeners are those who are willing to verify any prediction based on prior knowledge even though 'the content of the incoming text does not match the existing or the developing

schema.'(2005, p.47) However, it is not a sufficient condition for a listener just to wish to use prior knowledge to tackle unfamiliar content of the input. The research group identified a range of factors which may influence students' ability to use prior knowledge when processing text. The factors include: listening proficiency, overall language proficiency, the detail of their prior knowledge of the topic, the match between the type of prior knowledge that is activated (global knowledge, specific event knowledge or personal knowledge) and the topic information of the text.

Another knowledge source for listening is linguistic knowledge. There are at least three components of linguistic knowledge: sounds, vocabulary and grammar. I will discuss the three components one by one. First, **sounds:** learners may readily point out that sounds refer to the human sound system which is composed of single sounds, syllables, ellipses, linking, stress, pitch, tone and intonation. They are crucial in listening comprehension and interactive listening, e.g. the confusing minimal pairs to listeners, e.g. Jackson vs Johnson; sheep vs ship. However, sounds may include other types which come into our ears as input of listening. Collins & Kapralos (2014) assigned students to have a sound walk at a selected location, outside or indoors, and collect sounds after a specified time. They identified three types of sounds received aurally by listeners: Sounds of causality: e.g. dog barking, sounds in perceptual descriptors, e.g. "loud" sounds, "rough" sounds and those in onomatopoetic descriptions such as "beep". Chion (1994: 28). Both human sound systems and the sounds of the environment and living things form another source of knowledge a person should possess for effective listening.

Second, **vocabulary**: words and phrases, including topical vocabulary, signposting markers such as connectives for cohesion and coherence of texts. In my personal communication with some English language teachers and students, they all find that that linguistic knowledge is a great barrier to second language listening comprehension. Unfamiliar vocabulary hinders a listener's comprehension of the input. If a student identifies very few words in the listening script or input, their prior knowledge about the context may not be sufficient to help grasp the messages. In the classroom, students are found to give up the rest of the listening process once they are stuck at an early part with vocabulary problem. This situation happens in some bottom-up listening tasks.

As a listener has to use linguistic knowledge in real time, catch the drift of the speaker (in face-to- face situation, or in audio/video input), knowing a word in its written form does not necessarily mean that the listener will recognize that same word

in the speech of a fast speaker. Thus, a second language learner finds it difficult to rapidly parse out sentences and words from a stream of sounds. In this case, a useful way to activate one's knowledge of connectives is to pick up the markers of sequence (e.g. first, then, what is more, finally). The listener may follow the flow of speech and keep up the messages in the listening process.

Third, **grammar:** syntactic structures including those which are more crucial in listening comprehension and interactive listening e.g. Subject-Verb-Object, Tenses, aspects, modal verbs, active/ passive voice of verbs. Grammar is a source of linguistic knowledge to help a listener tackle comprehension. For example, in English, a noun at the initial position may not always inform the recipient of the verb in a sentence till you hear the voice of the verb. A careful listener will finish listening to the whole sentence/clause before answering the question: Who was running for his life? (The tape script: Peter was being chased by John and eventually he jumped into the river....). To get the correct answer, the listener needs to activate grammar knowledge of passive voice verb form and the accompanied 'by'.

The third knowledge source for listening is pragmatic knowledge. Pragmatic knowledge is understood as part of communicative competence, and is the ability to use language to accomplish acts. For instance, the listener needs to understand that a speaker is saying something (speech act) as well as giving inference in utterances, e.g. promising something in 'You can collect the laundry on Monday', ordering and warning somebody (the listener) in 'It is ten o'clock, son.'(a parent reminds the boy to go to bed), or humiliating somebody (listener) in 'You are disgusting!'

Pragmatic knowledge covers ways of how to perform politeness, and associates with cultural conventions. As such, second language listeners need to interpret and draw inference when some speech acts (e.g. concerning politeness, requests) are presented with figurative language and culture bound content. For example, in the sentence 'Could you join me for lunch?' Some English language learners are not sure if this is a request for the speaker's company, or the speaker's offer to host and foot their bill. There was a case when an English language learner did not take the pragmatic note in a question 'Do you mind opening the window on your side?' The listener just replied with a smile, 'No, I don't mind' but did not act on the request.

Thomas (1995) refers to a model of pragmatic ability, and characterizes pragmatic comprehension as comprehension of speech acts and conversational implicatures. However, pragmatic comprehension is focused on the perspective of the listener. But

pragmatic knowledge can be possessed by both the listener and the speaker, which actually addresses the dual role of a language user. Language users do not listen for and comprehend the literal meaning and non-literal meaning of aural input expressed as speech acts but they also have to produce speech acts as to act or make other act in a loop of interaction. So listeners use pragmatic knowledge of speech acts and conversational implicatures when they process information that goes beyond literal meaning of a word, message, or text to interpret a speaker's intended meaning during comprehension process.

Compared with prior knowledge and linguistic knowledge, pragmatic knowledge seems to be more complicated and difficult for a second language learner to develop and activate during listening. This is especially so if the learners are not staying in the host country where the target language is used. In real life situations, listeners will not be catered for when they face comprehension problems and their knowledge was not sufficient for tackling the input. But in second language learning, teachers may choose or adapt materials to help students get more exposure to examples of second language speech acts.

The last knowledge source for listening is discourse knowledge. The discourse of a genre (e.g. comedy) or subgenre (e.g. Joke) has its patterned use of language to operationalize the functional context. A listener is ready to anticipate the punchline and probably pun of words in a concise text, all of which belong to discourse knowledge of jokes.   Radio broadcast is a typical category through which people get information via the mode of listening. And radio news is a genre which has standard discourse structure (i.e. Start with the headings, then the details of the news, and end up with a summary). In listening, if a listener knows the genre of the aural input before listening, then the listener can retrieve discourse structure of the genre. The knowledge activated can help the listener follow the flow of the content. Therefore it is advisable for second language users to learn about a wide range of genres so that they can anticipate and activate discourse knowledge and listen for information effectively.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

To strengthen students' listening skills, teachers may include activities which require use of some or all of the knowledge types in the practice. Some types of knowledge may be more easily included as a part of the listening practice than the other

types. For example, teachers may have students activate their prior knowledge in pre listening activities.

If students practise listening in order to hone the skills of activating the knowledge sources, then teachers may arrange skills practice which help building the type of knowledge in the students. Some types of knowledge for listening can be enriched through explicit teaching and instruction. For example, phonics skills can be practised in its own right. With a mastery of sound system and knowing how the sounds are clustered and pronounced with some rules, a student will be able to decode the sounds in the aural input and the words. This processing helps the listener to comprehend the text easily. Alternatively, making use of letter-sound relationship to tackle unfamiliar words in the listening input is another strategy. A listener may tackle unfamiliar words by reading the words aloud using phonics knowledge. When hearing the words, the listener may call to mind the words if he or she heard in previous situations. The suprasegmental features of a language are a part of the linguistic knowledge second language learners should try to master for effective listening. For example, second language listeners should distinguish question tags used to invite agreement or to ask for information in the speech to avoid embarrassment. For pragmatic comprehension ability practice, researchers (Garcia, 2004) suggest the use of naturally-occurring language samples from authentic contexts

Below are some examples of learning objectives for listening practice, which are achievable with an activation of different knowledge sources:

Prior knowledge
● To anticipate the content of food topics in a TV cooking programme with personal experiences and knowledge of the world
● To guess the topic and the likely development of the plot when listening to a story with personal experiences and knowledge of the world

Linguistic knowledge
● To identify the correct words in confusing pairs of words in a pronunciation exercise with phonics skills
● To recognize language patterns and vocabulary items when listening to a conversation
● To recognize pronoun references in a narrative (e.g.'The animals are in the wood. *They* are eating happily') with previously learned grammar items

Pragmatic knowledge

- To identify and understand a speaker's use strategies to express speech acts and attitudes or inferences in conversational implicatures for effective oral communication (e.g. self-correcting, agreeing and disagreeing, making suggestions, using non-verbal cues, attempting to sustain conversations or to interest/engage audiences)

Discourse knowledge

- To recognize repeated expressions in simple spoken texts on familiar literary & imaginary topics
- To identify the gist or main ideas in short stories with knowledge of story structures

Teachers may consider the following activities to activate the various types of knowledge of students at pre-, while- or post-listening stages. To activate prior knowledge of students before listening, teachers may try brainstorming methods with the help of semantic maps. Students may call upon the prior experience and knowledge of students in similar themes or topics to the target topics. For example, if the text is about a person's unforgettable birthday party, then teacher may ask students to suggest how they prepared for a party and what they did in a party. The ideas gathered from different students in the class will form a pool of ideas. Students will listen well with the schema and the context opened at the brainstorming stage.

The next method is KWL (Know–Want to Know–Learned), a strategy developed by Donna Ogle in 1986. Teacher organizes students' prior knowledge of a topic and set the direction to listen for specific information using a concept table. See the following table for students about listening to a description of elephants.

Pre listening stage: Know	Pre-listening stage: Want to Know	Post-listening stage: Learned
K	W	L
What do you know about elephants?	What do you want to listen and learn about elephants?	What have you learned?
Guiding questions: What do they look like? where do you find them? What do they eat?	The questions will help students focus attention to any new content points in the listening	At the end of the lesson, students will write down what they remember they have learned about elephants. This is a way for students to organize their

		prior and new knowledge and helps consolidate the long term memory of the content points.

Another example is 'Listen–Draw–Pair–Share' activity. Students will listen to an input and draw what they visualize in their mind during listening, supported by their prior knowledge of the object. Then students can share and compare their drawing among each other.

To activate linguistic knowledge of students for their effective processing in listening, teachers may try four ways. They can arrange phonics and pronunciation skills workshop for students. Dictation, a conventional type of listening activities, is useful to train the ear of second language learners. Besides, teachers may help students identify the differences in the grammar of the target language and the first language of students and draw students' attention to possible confusion they may have when they listen to any aural input containing some grammatical constructions, e.g. passivization. Furthermore, teachers may analyze the mistakes made by students in listening tests and tasks and choose those grammar points which, if understood wrongly, will hinder listening comprehension. For example, English articles (viz. a, an, the). If students mix up 'a boy' and 'the boy' in the narrative, they will lose control of the cross reference in the content of the story. After confirming a list of listening specific grammar points, teachers may devise consolidation exercises for the students.

To activate pragmatic knowledge of students for their effective processing in listening, teachers may try the following ways. Schools may increase students' social interaction with native speakers of the target language in daily life situations. To be more specific, they may organize study tours to target language speaking organizations and institutions, e.g. international schools and commercial firms. Schools may invite native speaking guests to provide interesting activities, e.g. dramas, panel discussion. Teachers may analyse and share the pragmatic conventions in explicit instruction. They can provide students with self-access learning materials, e.g. films, books, TV programs, selected websites in target language from which students may learn the conversational rules, culture specific interaction routines, idioms and figurative language in the discourse. Furthermore, teachers may discuss with students the speech acts, conversational implicatures in aural input, including those affecting the meaning of utterances in comprehension activities.

To activate discourse knowledge of students for effective processing in listening, the following ways may be considered. Discourse knowledge will help students tackle reading as well as listening task. To help students enrich their discourse knowledge, teachers may choose genres and text types more commonly used in listening skills tasks, e.g. radio news, online interviews. They can teach the discourse of the text types to the students in a series of discourse awareness lessons.

Practice tasks may include completing a graphic organizer or a template with an analysis of the text form of a genre (the form, structure and patterns) in practical task. For example, movies (genre)- movie reviews/blogs (text types), speech (genre)- script (text type). Before each listening comprehension task, teachers may inform the students of the text type/ input. Then teachers ask the students to think about who, what, why etc. may be found in the input. An example is 'What could be listened in a recount by a person who survived after an earthquake in a radio interview?' The host will likely thank the guest and say what the guest encountered very concisely, then the host will ask the guest about what happened and the guest will recall the events chronologically and the highlights may be how he survived in the disaster. Listeners will follow these checkpoints in the discourse during listening.

The four different types of knowledge sources, viz. prior, linguistic, pragmatic and discourse knowledge, for listening are crucial for effective listening. As knowledge is ever expanding, it is hard to set any 'saturation' ceiling of mastering these types of knowledge. Thus teachers may make full use of existing resources to facilitate listening skills of students. They may also adopt an integrated approach, i.e. align listening with other language skills and systematic enrichment of the students' prior, linguistic, pragmatic and discourse knowledge. Finally, schools should make sure that students are exposed to an authentic learning environment conducive to developing listening skills.

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