Language Skills Assignment 3: Listening
Cambridge DELTA Course at International House Bangkok (Centre No. OO001)

Bottom-up listening skills for Upper Intermediate Learners

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1.0 Introduction

Listening involves top-down processing where the listener predicts content before actually listening based on her his background knowledge of the situation, thetopic, thespeaker(s) and the discourse pattern. Listening also involves bottom up processing which, unlike top-down, takes place once the actual listening starts and involves utilising the small bits of what one hears to comprehend the broader meaning. (Harmer,2001; Nunan,2002; Richards,1990). It is this second type of processing which I will focus this essay on.

Bottom up processing requires the listener to utilise a range of signals such as discourse markers and phonological, semantic and syntactic cues (Anderson and Lynch,1988:13). Utilising bottom up processing is particularly important for higher level learners as their listening comprehension is expected to more detailed, beyond simply understanding the context and the main ideas (Richards,1990). This coincides with CEFR's(CouncilofEurope,2001:66) distinction between B1 and B2 level listening proficiency descriptors. For B1, it states, "Can understand the main points.." and "straightforward factual information…" whereas the B2 level listener is expected to understand "*linguistically complex speech …"* and be able to follow *"complex lines of argument"* (Ibid).

Despite its importance, bottom-up processing skills for listening are often neglected in many teaching contexts and materials (Morley, No Date; Nemtchinova,2015:15). My experience of teaching IELTS listening to upper-intermediate learners also show that despite their comprehension of the topic, they struggle to follow connected speech, often failing to recognise words andkey ideas. These deficiencies in bottom-up processing skills can ultimately affect the overall motivation and language acquisition of the learners(Harmer,2001; Ridgway,2000).

2.0 Analysis

2.1 Recognising phonological irregularities:

One of the essentialskills needed to comprehend natural fast connected speech to recognisethe phonological changes taking place within and across the words(Ur,1984:41). Upper intermediate learners, like adult native listeners, need to constantly "use their knowledge of phonological irregularities" (Anderson and Lynch,1988: 23) to deduce meaning from the raw speech (Richards,1990:51)

The following are some of the common phonological changesone comes across while listening to native speaking (Field,2008: 283):

2.1.1 Assimilation

Assimilation takes place when a phoneme takes some or all of the qualities of its preceding or following phoneme. (Underhill,2008; Brown,2016).

Fat girl (/t/ → /k/)
Mind you (d/ + /j/ → /ʤ/

2.1.2 Liaison

Liaison takes place when two words are joined in connected speech by inserting an additional /w/ /j/ or /r/ between them. (Richards and Schmidt,2010)

You **a**lmost /juːˈʷ ɔːl.məʊst/
They almost / ðeɪˈjɔːl.məʊst/
law and order /lɔːˈrənˈɔː.də/

2.1.3 Elision

Elision is the omission of a sound in rapid connected speech which might otherwise be present in careful pronunciation (Yule,2010). The most common examples are the elision of /t/ and /d/ at the end of words (Roach,1991: 127; Kelly,2000:110-111)

nex(t) spring→ /nek_sprɪŋ/
blin(d) man→ /blaɪnmæn/

2.1.4 Weak forms

While lexical words (i.e. nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs) generally retain their vowels even in connected speech, functional words (i.e. pronouns, prepositions, auxiliary-verbs, conjunctions and articles) often take weak forms. (Cruttenden,2014: 273).

Examples:

Type	Word	weak form
Pronoun	him	/ɪm/
Preposition	to	/tə/
Auxiliary verbs	was	/wəz/
article	a	/ə/
conjunction	because	/kəz/

Some functional words have the same weak form in connected speech, and recognising them is often critical to listening comprehension(Field,2008: 283):

a, are, of	/ə/
of, have	/əv/
an, and	/ən/
as, has	/əz/
you, your	/jə/

2.1.5 Contractions

These are reductions in syllables occurring from two words being pronouced as one. "Common instances of contraction are personal pronoun + auxiliary verb such as and auxiliary verb + not" For example: I'm, He'd, wouldn't. Contractions are expressed in writing. (Underhill,2008:65)

2.1.6 Stress patterns

Sentence-stress usually follows a rhythmic pattern of a strong syllable followed by a weak one or two weak ones (SW or SWW) (Field,2008: 144). This causes certain syllables within words to be unstressed and noticing these syllablesis crucial to understanding what is being said (Ur,1984:43).

Examples: *took his hat off* → ***took****his****hat****off***

tʊk hɪz hæt ɒf → *'**tʊ**kɪz '**hæt**ɒf*

2.2 Utilising non-phonological cues:

2.2.1 Using semantic and syntactic knowledge:

Research studies have established the importance of semantic knowledge in listening comprehension. Matthews and Cheng (2015) found a strong association between recognition of high frequency words and listening comprehension. Conrad (1985) also showed that the utilisation of semantic clues in bottom up processing is characteristic of native and successful higher level listeners.

Listeners who are knowledgeable in the language systems of English are able to "compensate" for the momentary gaps in listening caused by phonological variations (Rubin,1994). When listeners hear a word or group of words which are **homophonous** to others, it is not possible to discern what the speaker intends without using non-phonological cues. This is when the listener's semantic and syntactic knowledge contributes to bottom-up processing (Anderson and Lynch,1988:4)

For example, when one hears /aɪ 'red ɪt /, both "*I read it"* and "*I red it"* seem phonologically plausible interpretations, but only the first option makes sense syntactically and semantically. The same happens in case of a redistribution of syllables in connected speech, or resyllabification (Field,2008: 350), where phonological cues might suggest two different wordings. For example:"*The firm made out well in their crisis last year"* can be heard as"*The firm may doubt…….."*Again, the listener will need to employ the knowledge of tensesto resolve this phonological dilemma and deduce the intended message.

The following are some of the semantic and syntactic skills and competencies, particularly relevant for understanding connected speech:

- Recognising formulaic chunks, collocations and multiword verbs (Richards,1990:51)
- Indentifying familiar lexis and (Richards,1990:50-51)
- Becoming familiar with authentic colloquial speech. (Latham-Koenig et al.,2014:9)
- Using morphological cues to deal with unknown words(Field,2008:115)

2.2.2 Listening for discourse markers

Research studies, such as Jung (2003)'s and Zhang (2012)'s, have also confirmed that utilising discourse markers as bottom-up processing cues significantly improves listening comprehension.

Discourse markers are words or phrases like *anyway, right, okay, as I say, to begin with.*Some of these, also called *marco-markers* (Chaudron and Richards,1986) help the listener identify the topic boundaries in a speech and hence follow the organisation of the speaker's ideas (Carter, Hughes and McCarthy,2000:181). For instance, the marker "What I'm going to talk about today is " will alert the listener to the topic. Similarly, the marker *"Right, let's move on to…."* would help the listener understand the speaker is changing the topic. Other markers, termed as micro markers show the listener how the ideas within a topic are linked (Chaudron and Richards,1986).

Listening for these markers is not only crucial to following a speaker's ideas, but can only help the listener perceive the purpose and the tone of the speaker (Carter et al.,2011), which might otherwise not be stated explicitly. For example, in a phone conversation, the marker *"Right! Okay!"* might indicate that the speaker now wishes to end the conversation. The marker *"actually"* can signal the listener that the speaker is showing a contrast to what is being said earlier. While listening to conversations, the tone and purpose of those responding can also be inferred from the markers they use. For instance, a response of "Really?" might show surprise, while a simple "right!" or "yeah" with a rising intonation indicates interest in what the speaker is saying. (Cambridge University Press,2016).

3.0 Issues and Teaching Suggestions:

In each of the suggested procedures below, T=The Teacher; Ss= The Students

3.1 Learners not recognising weak forms

Refer to 2.1.4 for the relevant analysis.

Upper level learners often struggle to recognise "the contractions or even disappearance" of weak forms in fast connected speech (Ur,1984:41; Morley, n.d.). This was also evident in a small listening test I carried out on two B2+ (IELTS Listening band 6.5) learners from Bangladesh and Phillipines. When asked to transcribe 4 short clips of connected speech, each being less than 10 seconds, both of them missed some of the function words which were in weak forms.

3.1.1 Teaching Suggestion:

Suggested procedure:

(i) T reads out sentences containing weak forms of function words such as those shown in Ur (1984:43) (See 5.1) Sample sentences can also be seen in the first half of ELT-Training.com'syoutube video (2015).
(ii) After each sentence, Ss write down what they have heard
(iii) Ss compare and check with each other
(iv) T gives a gapped transcript with the function words removed
(v) T tells Ss that they've done well even if they coudn't get the gaps. Often these are not heard.
(vi) Ss try to fill in the gaps using their linguistic resources
(vii) T reads out the sentences again. After each, Ss check with each other
(viii) T gives the final transcript
(ix) Ss work in groups to list the word classes of words in weak form.
(x) Each group shares their list with each other
(xi) T elicits that function words (pronouns, prepositions, articles, auxiliaries and conjuctions) are usually in weak form

This activity firstmakes learners aware of their gaps, which makes learning more memorable (Anderson and Lynch,1988:35). It raises the learners' awareness of which words come in weak forms. Step (vi) also teaches them the importance of using one's linguistic resources in listening.

3.2 Learners not recognising word boundaries

Refer to 2.1.1 and 2.2.1 for the relevant analysis

Upper level learners often do not comprehend connected speech, even though the words being used are known to them (Morley, n.d.). One of the main reasons for this is not recognising the "ill-defined word divisions", which makes native speaking sound like "blurred utterances" to these learners (Ur,1984: 41-42). In addition to weak forms (see 3.1), liaison (see 2.1.2) and homophonous expressions (see 2.2.1) can also confuse the listener regarding word boundaries.

3.2.1 Teaching Suggestion #1:

Procedure

(i) T reads out an ambiguous phrase several times from those in 5.2 or those shown in the examples 2.2.1 .Ss write down what they hear in large font size. (At this stage, the full sentence will not be given to keep the ambiguity)
(ii) Ss show their card to everyone else (hopefully, injecting some humour in the class)
(iii) T gives the endings which should help the Ss understand the previous phrase
(iv) Ss share the answers and give feedback to each other
(v) T gives the correct answer
(vi) T elicits that the sounds heard were not enough to get the meaning
(vii) T elicits (without using jargon) that syntactic and semantic awareness helped them get the answer
(viii) Next, T repeats the above steps in the same way with a slight variation in step (iii). Instead of providing an ending, T will show a contextual picture which will make the meaning clear. This time, in step vii, T will elicit that contextual cues from important.

Adapted from Field (2008:180) (See 5.2) and ELT-Training.com'syoutube video (2015).

3.2.2 Teaching Suggestion #2:

This can be done an extension of the activity 3.2.1

Procedure

(i) T explains that words are often joined in connected speech with the help of sounds which might not be there in the spelling.
(ii) Ss work in groups and experiment with the sentences they wrote down to see how the words can be joined to sound more fluent
(iii) T reads out each sentence a few more times allowing the Ss to make corrections in groups
(iv) T shows the sentences on the board (using a visualizer or otherwise) and a representative from each group to explain to the whole class how they made the sentences more fluent. During this, T will annotate the sentences with linking sounds suggested by the Ss
(v) T hands out some rules of liaison (see 2.1.2)
(vi) Ss discuss in groups again and make further correction
(vii) A new representative from each group will now come and change previous annotations
(viii) T makes some corrections

(Adapted from Underhill (2008:175), See 5.3 for the original

Both the activities (3.2.1 and 3.2.1) are interactive and learner centred. They follow an inductive learning approach and promote experimentation and self-correction. Activity 3.2.1 raises the learners awareness of the importance of syntactic, semantic and contextual knowledge, in addition to phonological cues. Activity 3.2.2raises the learners' awareness of how liaison blurs word boundaries.

3.3 Learners not utilising discourse markers

Refer to 2.2.2 for the relevant analysis

The CEFR proficiency descriptors state complex arguments, which are well signposted by discourse markers, should be understood by upper intermediate learners (Council of Europe,2001:66).

Many of my upper-intermediate learners on IELTS listening courses struggle in sections 3 and 4 of the test as they fail to recognise the discourse markers. Learners miss the subtle clues given by these markers, such as a shift of topic, disagreement, surprise, exemplification, etc. (See 2.2.2). For instance, one learner failed to notice a disagreement which was indicated in the text with "I'm not too sure about that".

I also noticed the same issue among my upper-intermediate learners in Bangkok. While listening to a debate, they could identify some vocabulary, but failed to understand arguments of each speaker initially.

3.3.1 Teaching Suggestion

(i) T elicits the nature of TV interviews and the roles usually played by the journalists and politicians
(ii) Ss predict which topics might be discusses
(iii) Ss listen to conversation to find out the 4 topics
(iv) Ss work in groups and look at the audio script where certain discourse markers will be missing. SS underline the beginning of each topic
(v) T monitors and gives feedback
(vi) Ss listen to the audio andfill in the discourse markers used to begin a topic
(vii) Ss check with each other
(viii) A representative from each group writes these on the board (in a single column)
(ix) T corrects the markers on the board.
(x) T elicits the discourse markers are useful cues to identify the main ideas
(xi) Ss repeat steps (iv) – (x) to find the markers used to:
- show indirect disagreement/doubt,
- asking for clarification
- acknowledging the other person's views

(xii) T gives a consolidation gap-fill task on discourse markers
(xiii) Ss check their answers with each other
(xiv) T gives feedback

Adapted from (Jakeman and McDowell,2008). See the original audio script in 5.4.

The activity activates the learners' schema (i and ii) so that the lack of contextual clues do not interfere with bottom up processing. Before focusing on discourse markers explicitly (step iv-ix), the learners are given a chance to listen for the markers while identifying the main ideas (step iii). Difficulties faced in this stage will make learners more aware of the importance of discourse markers in step x. The categorisation of the markers (viii-ix) helps the learners to remember them and their function. The consolidation allows learners to use the markers, which in turn will help them notice these markers better in future listening tasks.

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