

An International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies
(LALIGENS), Ethiopia
Vol. 4 (1), Serial No 9, January, 2015:74-87
ISSN: 2225-8604(Print) ISSN 2227-5460 (Online)
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/laligens.v4i1.6>

Advocating Orchestration amongst RSUST Freshmen

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Abstract

One of the most neglect language skills in the university system in Nigerian is listening; everybody assumes that this skill is innate and therefore every new-intake knows how to listen. My experience in the Nigerian classroom indicates otherwise. The new and even the returning students have no clue on how to listen and the micro-skills that enable one to listen properly. Here, I plan to explain systematically what is listening? Secondly, I follow this up with the unique features of listening, after which I outline and discuss the various models of listening. Thirdly, I examine types of listening and the processes of listening. A number of listening skills have been proffered in most learned journals of the world; I examine these skills and see how applicable they are to the Nigerian classroom situation. And finally I concentrate on listening strategies. I hope the treatment adopted here will help improve the quality of lecture delivery and understanding on the part of the undergraduate and graduate students alike.

Exordium

The word *orchestration* as used in the topic screams for explanation. It is a technical term used in the field of listening. It is used to define the process of listening of skilful listeners when they use combination of strategies such as cognitive, meta-cognitive and social/affective, varying their use according to the needs of the specific situation (Vandergrift 2003, Vandergrift, Goh, Mareshal and Tafaghod Fari 2006.).

Another term in the topic that seeks attention is RSUST; this is simply an abbreviation for Rivers State University of Science and Technology, located in Nkpolu the heart of Port Harcourt. In America, a freshman is a student who is in his or her first year at university. It is these students and those saddled with the responsibility of teaching them The Use of English that this paper addresses.

What is Listening?

Listening involves making sense of spoken language using visual input, relevant prior knowledge and the context in which we are listening (Tony Lynch and David Mendelsohn, 2014, p. 180). These experts suggest that listening is better conceived as a series of related processes, which involves recognition of sounds uttered by the speaker, perception of intonation patterns indicating information focus, interpretation of the relevance of what is said to the current topic, etc. (180). It is suggested that listening is hindered by such condition as poor acoustic or an unfamiliar accent. Another main obstacle put forward is that 'all listeners face the fact that they have only one chance to process the linguistic input in a very short time', although, in some circumstances, the listener might have the rear privilege of requesting the speaker to repeat or rephrase but this chance is often few and far in between.

Rubin (1994), Brown (1995a), Lynch (1998) and Buck (2001, p. 149-151) identified two main areas of difficulty in listening, which they designate as *input characteristics* and *task characteristics*. The input characteristics include such major areas as language, which encompasses speech rate, unfamiliar accent, number of speakers, similarity of voices, use of less frequent vocabulary, grammatical complexity, embedded ideas units and complex pronoun reference. The second key area is that of explicitness, which include implicit ideas and lack of redundancy. The third chief area is one of organization, which include events narrated out of natural time order, examples preceding the point they illustrate. The fourth area is content, which include unfamiliar topics, number of things and people referred to, unclear indication of the relative importance of protagonists in the text, shifting relationships between protagonists and abstract content. The fifth is context; this involves lack of visual or other supports. The task tend to be more difficult when they require processing more details, integration of information from different parts of the text, recall of gist (for example, writing a summary) rather than exact content, separation of fact from opinion, recall of non-central or irrelevant details and a delayed response, rather than an immediate one.

In the past listening is conceived as a passive process but more recently listening is viewed as an active process. Good listeners are therefore as active as good speakers. Lynch and Mendelsohn (2014) posit that active listening is an interpretive process, exact decoding of the message. If this is true, the inherent variation in listener's

comprehension of what they hear, and of the importance of context and non-linguistic variables in this interpretation become vital.

The Unique Features of Listening

There are four features that are idiosyncratic to listening; the first is that listening ‘is usually *ephemeral*, one-shot nature’. The second is ‘the presence of *rich prosodic features* such as stress, intonation, rhythm, loudness and duration, which are absent from the written language.’ The third is ‘the presence of characteristics of *natural fast speech*, such as assimilation, which makes it markedly different from written language’, for instance: [gəmm̩t] instead of /gʌvən̩m̩nt/. Fourthly, ‘the frequent *need to process and respond* almost immediately.’

Model of Listening

Research in this area has produced theories or models of comprehension, reflecting contemporary knowledge in the field (Lynch and Mendelsohn (2014, p. 181). There are four models of listening currently in vogue.

1. Communication theory of listening

This theory was propounded by Shannon and Weaver (1949) and called ‘the mathematical theory of communication.’ The goal is to make telecommunication system more efficient, it really does not implicit findings for listening and comprehension, but it is from this theory that such terms like ‘transmission’, ‘signal’, ‘reception’ and ‘noise’ that are vital to the listening and comprehension processes are derived.

The second concern of this theory is with ‘intelligibility’ and ‘perception’ and the result is used to evaluate ‘equipment’ and ‘listeners’ (Licklider and Miller, 1951, p. 1040). Even if the original goal is not to enhance human listening and comprehension, the theory has stimulated thinking about the ways in which comprehension could *not* be characterized in terms of straightforward reception of a message (Lynch and Mendelsohn 2014, p. 181).

2. Information processing model

This theory focuses on comprehension model, and it is influenced by ‘research in computing and artificial intelligence’ (Lynch and Mendelsohn, 2014). The following concepts are vital to this theory: the concept of input, processing and output, with humans seen as limited processors in the sense that they can only pay attention to one task at a time. In Anderson’s (1985) words information processing uses words such as ‘perception’, ‘parsing’ and ‘utilization’, while Brown (1995a) uses the words ‘identity’, ‘search’ and ‘file and use’. What is obvious from these experts is that they both imply *stages* of understanding. It is presently recognized that listeners achieve

real-time processing by using parallel distributed processing. This, according to Lynch and Mendelsohn (2014), entails integrating information from various sources simultaneously, and working ‘bottom up’ (looking for clues in linguistic input) and ‘top-down’ (activating background knowledge and exploiting context)

3. Social/Contextual model

This theory of listening recognises human and comprehension as key factors in processing information. Comprehension is seen as ‘a cognitive process...that unites the social and the individual’ (Ohta, 2000, p. 54). In comparison to the already discussed two models, this theory sees human as participants in and creators of meaning and meaning is achieved through interactional space between us and not just inside our individual heads (Sperber and Wilson 1995, p. 61). Context is assigned a primary role by writers adopting the social-constructive view of language (van Lier, 1996, 2000). Lier argues against the use of such computing metaphors as ‘input’ and ‘output’ on the grounds that they undermined the active participation of the successful listener in interaction.

4. Situated action model

Barsalou (1999), an evolutionary psychologist, argues that humans spend time trying to understand in order to do things (situated action) rather than to achieve information in memory. He claims that language evolved from the need to control the actions of others in activities such as hunting, gathering and simple industry. ‘The foundational properties of human language today reflect those evolutionary pressures then. Formal education and science have occurred much too recently to have had such impact (Barsalou, 1999, p. 66). Proponents of this model do not rule out the need for comprehension, but place emphasis on interactions.

Linguists agree that these four comprehension models are complementary rather than mutually exclusive. As we investigate the full range of listening tasks, we find that the different elements required for successful listening are best explained by a combination of the comprehension models available.

Types of Listening

Lynch and Mendelsohn (2014) identify two ways of listening: one-way listening and two-way listening (‘reciprocal’ or ‘interactional’) listening. They argue further that these two types intersect with two principal functions of language: ‘transactional’ and ‘interactional’ (Brown and Yule 1983). Transaction as they conceived it focuses on ‘the transfer of information’, while the sole function of interaction is the maintenance of social relations. This writer suggests four other types of listening, using two combined factors to determine these types of listening. The purpose of listening determines the degree of attention, and both purpose and degree of attention

determine types of listening – attitudinal listening, informational listening, appreciative listening and critical/analytical listening.

(a) One-way listening

Listening was formerly linked with the transactional function of language, and this informed while listening practice was taught almost exclusively using monologue. One-way transactional listening is crucial especially in academic environment such as lectures – ‘it is listening in order to learn.’ This is because pedagogic discourse has certain well-defined characteristics such as ‘density of cognitive content’; ‘a tendency towards de-contextualization’; and ‘the need to do something with what has been heard, such as take notes on the content’.

Another area where one-way listening is paramount is in watching a film or television or listening to the radio. These media exposes the listener to varieties of styles; from the more formal and prepared (such as a newsreader’s script) to the more informal and spontaneous (such as a sports commentary).

(b) Two-way listening

In spite of the fact that most of our everyday listening occurs in two-way interactions, research studies and pedagogic publications advocate one-way, non-reciprocal listening. (Brown and Yule 1983, Brown 1995b, Lynch 1995, 1997 and Yule 1997) Two-way listening is called ‘listening and speaking’ (Oprandy, 1994) because it involves dialogue or discussion, where different features come into play. Lynch and Mendelsohn (2014, p. 183) posit:

The listener involvement, or potential involvement, in a speaking role brings costs as well as benefits: the costs include the requirement to respond appropriately, the time pressure in processing what is being said, and the risk of misinterpreting the interlocutor; the communicative benefits include the opportunity to get doubts cleared up straight away and problems resolved.

Bell (1984) proposes four listeners’ roles in his framework. Of course, these roles are culture sensitive, and represent norms rather than rules.

- (a) Participant Someone who is being spoken to and has the same speaking rights as others present.
- (b) Addressee Someone who is being spoken to but has limited rights to speak.
- (c) Auditor Someone who is being spoken to but is not expected to respond.

- (d) Over hearer someone who is not being spoken to and has no right to speak.

(c) Attitudinal listening

Our attitude and environment affects the way we listen. The environment is the place where listening is taking place, is it noisy or quiet, comfortable or uncomfortable, these will affect the level of efficiency in listening. The individual is even more important than the environment, the listener must be aware of the importance of paying attention while listening, he must know why he is listening and must discriminate between hearing and understanding. The listener has to process what he has heard in order to make meaning out of it. The listener must respond using nods, smiles, and other gestures to indicate that understanding is taking place. The listener should know that inattention cannot be concealed as it manifests in frequent body movement, rustling of paper, etc. A biased listener often runs blank, and this calls for open-mindedness in listening, all these are attitudinal problems that generate attitudinal listening.

(d) Informational listening

What we do on a daily basis is to listen for information, whether it is coming from a lecture in the classroom, the announcement made at the departure or arrival halls of an airport, the message of the town crier or a sermon from the priest or imam. We listen for a message, for instruction about how to do certain things: how to install an LCD television, students listen to lectures and take note of the essential points. It is the duty of the listener to sort out the relevant points from the irrelevant points; to recognize main ideas and take note of them; to recognize pertinent developing details; to note the cause of an event; and to note the sequence of the information we are given.

(e) Appreciative listening

This type of listening is pertinent when listening to a poem, a song, a story, a statement or an argument. The listener appreciates the suitability of images and the effect of rhyme, rhythm, alliteration and assonance.

(f) Critical/analytical listening

Critical listening is also called elaborative listening. A critical listening calls for careful listening, analysis of what is heard and weighing all the facts for credibility. It involves listening to explicitly stated points and using those points, the context and other discourse situations to arrive at points not explicitly stated. Such covert meanings could be the speaker's bias, personal opinion and propaganda. Another way of ascertaining ability to listen analytically is by trying to predict what the speaker is likely to say next, or provide a conclusion for non-concluded speech event.

Processes of Listening

Listeners are engaged in 'bottom up' and 'top-down' processing of information (Lynch and Mendelsohn 2014, p. 183). Good listeners use both of these to achieve good comprehension; an important factor in successful listening is the individual's ability to integrate information gathered via the two. Research studies appear to be balanced on issues of context and background knowledge (top-down); and issues of 'bottom' level in the understanding of spoken language.

(a) Bottom-up processing

Anderson and Lynch (1988, p. 9) view bottom-up processing as involving piecing together the parts of what is being heard in a linear fashion, one by one, in sequence. This simply presents the listener as a tape recorder. It has been argued that top-down processing is vital, bottom-up processing is indispensable; listeners always have to do some bottom-up processing of what they hear at the acoustic level (Byrnes, 1984; Brown 1990) in order to facilitate subsequent top-down processing.

Field (2004, p. 373) reports that listeners vary in terms of how they integrate cues at bottom and top levels. Some listeners focus on the lexical items while others concentrate on the phonological items, both potentially overrule contextual information and emphasize perceptual.

(b) Top-down processing

This is the opposite of bottom-up: holistic, going from whole to the part, and focused on interpretation of meaning rather than recognition of sounds, words, and sentences (Anderson and Lynch, 1998, p. 11). In this process, listeners rely on what they already know to help make sense of what they are hearing. The term 'schema' (plural 'schemata') is used to refer to the prior knowledge and experience that we have in memory and can call on in the process of comprehension. Schemata are said to be of two types: 'content schemata' and 'rhetorical schemata'.

Experts define content schemata as networks of knowledge on different topics and comprise knowledge gained from personal and second-hand experience. Comprehension becomes easy if the topic under discussion is linked to existing schemata in our minds. The next is rhetorical schemata often called 'formal or textual schemata' is predicated on our knowledge of the structure and organisation of discourse genres. For instance, if we are aware of the genre we are listening to it makes it easier to engage in top-down processing strategies, such as predicting and inferencing.

Scholars in the field defined predicting as guessing at the rest of a message based on only part of the information – the information might be only partial because either only part of the discourse has been heard so far, or only part has been comprehended

(Lynch and Mendelsohn 2014). On the other hand, inferencing operates at a higher level: ‘everything is comprehensible, but there is meaning to the discourse that exceeds the understanding of each of the utterances or part of it. Adding these together, only by inferencing, will the whole be comprehended.’ (105) Inferencing is often referred to as ‘listening between the lines’.

Listening Skills

Richards (1983) posits 33 micro-skills for conversational listening and a further 18 micro-skills for academic listening especially listening to lectures. His arguments has generated lots of questions, *first*, what is the relationship between conversational and academic micro-skills? The answer he proffered is simply *incremental*, all conversational listening micro-skills are required for academic listening, but that there are certain more specialized academic listening micro-skills such as ‘copying with different styles of lecturing’ are required in the lecture hall – making a possible academic listening total of 51 micro-skills. Some of these skills include: ‘identifying and reconstructing topic’, which means identifying the lecture topic, and following its development. *Secondly*, how do we internally order micro-skills? Richards response by offering such terms as taxonomies of listening skills, which implied that the relationship within each set was hierarchical. This means the successful use of one micro-skill depends on prior success in using others. Richards’s micro-skill taxonomies has been reshaped and further developed by Rost (1990), who identifies ‘clusters’ of listening micro-skills. He also distinguished between ‘*enabling skills*’ – those used in order to perceive what the speaker is saying and to interpret what they intend to mean. This is followed by ‘*enacting skills*’ – those used to respond appropriately to the message. Rost further divided listening into perception, interpretation, and response. Rost’s micro-skills clusters are reproduced here to help us categorize areas of success and failure in an individual L2 learner’s understanding of a listening text.

A. Micro-skill clusters in listening comprehension

ENABLING SKILLS

Perception

1. Recognizing prominence within utterances, including
 - Discriminating the meaning of unfamiliar words
 - Discriminating strong and weak forms, phonetic change at word boundaries
 - Identifying use of stress and pitch (information units, emphasis, etc.)

Interpretation

2. Formulating content sense of an utterance, including
 - Deducing the meaning of unfamiliar words
 - Inferring implicit information
 - Inferring links between propositions
3. Formulating a conceptual framework linking utterances, including
 - Recognizing discourse markers (clarifying, contrasting)
 - Constructing a theme over a stretch of discourse
 - Predicting content
 - Identifying elements that help you to form an overall schema
 - Maintaining and updating the context
4. Interpreting (possible) speaker intentions, including
 - Identifying an ‘interpersonal frame’ speaker-to-hearer
 - Monitoring changes in prosody and establishing (in) consistencies
 - Noting contradictions, inadequate information, ambiguities
 - Differentiating between fact and opinion

ENACTING SKILLS

1. Making an appropriate response (based on 1 – 4 above), including
 - Selecting key points for the current task
 - Transcoding information into written form (for example, notes)
 - Integrating information with that from other sources
 - Providing appropriate feedback to the speaker

(Adapted from Rost, 1990, p. 152-3)

Listening Strategies

While literature on learning strategies abounds, there is paucity of literature on listening strategies. The few available literature are Rubin (1975), Wenden and Rubin (1987), O’Malley and Chamot (1990) and Oxford (1990) but it is O’Malley and Chamot (1987, p. 71) who provided a basic definition of learning strategies as

‘techniques, approaches, or deliberate actions that students take in order to facilitate the learning and recall of both linguistic and content area information.’ Mendelsohn (1994) drawing inspiration from ‘strategy-based approach’ developed strategies for listening comprehension. This pioneering work inspired O’Malley, Chamot, Stewer-Manzanares, Kupper and Russo (1985) to develop tripartite listening strategies. These listening strategies are classified into cognitive, meta-cognitive and social/affective.

1. Cognitive

This strategy involves predicting/inferencing from the text, from the voice, from the body language and between discourse parts. It also includes elaboration from personal experience, from world knowledge, from academic learning and from imagination. It comprises contextualization, imagery and summarization from mental and physical notes. Translation, repetition, transfer from other languages, deduction are all part of the cognitive strategy. Fixation, which includes stopping to think about spelling, stopping to think about meaning and stopping to memorize are also cognitive listening processes (Goh 2002, Vandergrift 2003, and Kondo and Yang 2004).

2. Meta-cognitive

This strategy involves planning, which comprises of advance organization and self-management. It also includes comprehension monitoring through confirming comprehension and identifying words not understood (Goh 2002, Vandergrift 2003, and Kondo and Yang 2004). The meta-cognitive listening strategy equally includes directed attention, which makes for concentrating and persevering despite problems. It also includes selective attention, listening for familiar words, listening for the overall message, noticing the information structure, noticing repetition and reformulation and listening to specific parts. Finally, it incorporates evaluation, checking interpretation against predictions, checking interpretation against knowledge and checking interpretation against context.

3. Social/affective

An integral aspect of the social/affective listening strategy is asking questions (two-way tasks): asking for clarification, asking for repetition and using comprehension check. It includes cooperation, working with other learners; this aids the reduction of anxiety, encouraging yourself, comparing yourself with others and focusing on success. Finally, it encourages relaxation, using physical techniques and using visualization. ‘Skilful listeners use these strategies in combination, varying their use according to the needs of the specific situation’ – a process called ‘orchestration’ (Vandergrift 2003, Vandergrift, Goh, Mareshal and Tafaghod Fari 2006.)

Conclusion

A careful survey of the processes outlined above would suggest that listening processes are complex, and listening comprehension is difficult especially in an L₂ or FL situations. In the Nigerian school system, whether it be the primary, secondary or tertiary, teachers do not teach listening at all and the few who attempt teach it ineffectively. Recent studies such as Geddes and White (1979), Potter and Roberts (1981), Widdowson (1979), Kings (1986), Field (1998), Mendelsohn (2001) and Richards (2007) have led to substantial progress in our understanding of listening, and how we should go about teaching the relevant skills and strategies. In the words of Lynch and Mendelsohn (2004), 'it now remains for the materials writers and teachers not only to endorse the importance of a strategic approach to L₂ listening instruction, but also to strike a balance between practice-focused listening skills work and practice in the use of strategies that will enhance their comprehension of the target language.

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