Learning to listen: Improving listening skills in Modern Languages and beyond

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Introduction

Picture the scene in the average Modern Languages classroom, unchanged over many decades: Monsieur, Madame, Señor or Professoressa, poised with their finger on the 'Play' button; the diligent students, ears craning towards the loudspeaker; the less diligent perfecting a doodle in their margin. The tape begins. The classroom jolts to a start, and by the end of the audio some are dusting off their hands in satisfied glee whilst others ask: 'Why are they speaking so fast, Miss?'.

Traditional listening activities in Modern Languages still form an essential part of both classroom practice and examination assessment. Indeed, from as recently as 2018, the IB decided to instate a listening component in their Language B examinations, which had previously been tested 'implicitly' under the auspices of other skills.

The importance of listening is therefore impossible to ignore, yet ostensibly remains one of the hardest skills for all students to acquire. The perceived stress and time-boundedness of classroom listening practice so often seems to replicate an exam, which Vandergrift (2007) describes as an undue weight 'on the product of listening: the correct answer'. Anecdotally (from what we might call the 'groan-o-meter') our department has seen that students often dread this skill and have historically performed less well here in exams. As a result of in-house training, we have implemented strategies to improve students' listening whilst also reducing anxiety around this essential skill. The approaches outlined below would of course have applications beyond the Modern Languages classroom.

Why do students find listening so hard?

Research into why students seemingly find listening difficult abounds, particularly in the Modern Languages context. This research has attempted to take account of the way listening is taught, as the key to understanding how teachers can improve our delivery of this skill .

Perhaps the most useful explanation of this comes from languages teacher-researchers such as Conti and Smith (2019), who have argued that listening was, for too long, taught with majority emphasis on students' 'top-down' processing. Here, students apply their existing knowledge of a given scenario (e.g. buying a ticket at a train station) and match their expectations to what they hear on the audio tape. Conti and Smith assert instead that 'bottom-up' processing must be given more weight. That is, students must be 'built up' to listening through activities such as: increasing their phonological awareness; word recognition tasks; metalinguistic preparation; and pre-listening activities. By joining these top-down and bottom-up approaches, students stand not only a better chance of ascertaining what information to isolate to answer a given question, but crucially are taught to learn to listen.

Bloomfield et al (2010) indicate that 'ability to understand the phonology of the non-native language' in addition to 'background knowledge about the topic' and the 'mental state of listeners' all together influence listening skill. They advise that 'working memory is likely to impact L2 listening comprehension, and that [negative] effects will be particularly strong in conditions that impose additional demands on working memory'. In agreement with Conti and Smith, Bloomfield et al suggest that teaching strategies to support students' working memory will ultimately lead to higher listening ability and reduces the anxiety which 'can have a profound effect on listening performance'.

Learning to listen – approaches and activities

Given the insights above, and as a result of in-house training in our department, I have implemented teaching strategies to better balance top-down and bottom-up processing when embarking upon listening activities with students across the key stages. These often involved a degree of metacognitive reflection such that the idea of learning to listen has become more embedded in the classroom.

Firstly, frequent pre-listening activities have become essential for priming students for what is to come. This can take several forms, ranging from: whole-class or pair-work open discussion questions on a given topic; brainstorming likely vocabulary required for a topic, sorted into word classes; or a series of true or false statements in the target language to discuss in advance. No matter the type of activity, students benefit greatly from the chance to ease themselves into a listening text, whilst also implementing Krashen's hypothesis of simultaneous acquisition and learning (1983) where 'using language' and '"knowing about" language' align.

Secondly, I have had success using a mix of listening activities that do not follow the usual 'text-oriented instruction' model that both Brown (1987) and Vandergrift (2012) suggest has dominated the classroom due to the hegemony of outdated reading and writing pedagogy. Moving away from finding the 'correct answer' and increasing students' ability to listen for gist is essential here. For instance, activities such as teacher or peer dictation focus on the pure skill of listening and transferral rather than decryption; adding an enforced delay of 10 seconds increases their skill in retaining aural input. Pair games such as trapdoor exercises (see Figure 1) force students to listen carefully to their teacher or peer whilst also isolating precise 'chunks' of language, aiding 'perceptual processing' (Wilson, 2003). In all, these approaches reduce the anxiety of the 'correct answer' whilst allowing for quality listening practice, often without students realising they are 'doing a listening' at all.

Lastly, a greater emphasis on phonological awareness has allowed our department to build up listening skills from the earliest key stages. Beyond a renewed focus on phonetics integrated into our plans for the youngest year groups, we continue to expose students to a variety of accents and intonation patterns from around the French-speaking world. This has increased students' awareness of linguistic diaspora and allowed them to appreciate language in evolution globally. Therefore, a clearly signposted discussion priming students for a Québecois accent can readily evolve into a metacognitive process where students learn how to listen for phonological variation, dovetailing the activity such that it has greater applications beyond simply answering questions according to aural input. This aligns with Schmidt's observation (1990) that 'intake is what learners consciously notice'; by drawing attention to phonological differences, we can encourage students consciously to take notice of what they hear.

J'habite dans	une maison un appartment un immeuble un château	dans	une ville un village un quartier une région	près	de la mer d'une rivière d'une grande ville de la frontière
avec	ma famille mes parents mes grandsparents	J'aime y habiter parce qu'il y a beaucoup de choses à faire.			
il y a	un centre sportif des magasins un parc un théâtre	mais malheureusement il n'y a pas de			patinoire gare stade cathédral

Figure 1: trapdoor exercise where one student plots a path through a text, then listens to a peer speaking aloud to hear if their partner selects the correct option.

[ND: It would be good to have some non-Roman ones too, such as Russian, Arabic, Greek etc. Then scatter them all in this space.]

Bonjour!
Gutentag!
Hello!
Hola!
Hallo!
Dobrý den!
Hej!
Ciao!
Hei!
Witam!

Conclusions: for Modern Languages and beyond

Results from combining the 'bottom-up' as well as 'top-down' processing model have, anecdotally, been successful. From the teacher's perspective, taking this approach lends more variety to the task of teaching listening skills and avoids the temptation to simply rehearse examination-type exercises ad infinitum. It has helped to see the students' progression over the course of a teaching sequence, a term, an academic year and beyond as a continuum in which listening skills should be constantly reinforced from the bottom, with the aim being to support students to learn to listen rather than expecting them to be able to jump too high, too soon.

It has also increased, by proxy, the degree of 'comprehensible input' used in teaching, which Conti and Smith (2019) (building on Krashen's essential paradigm) argue is central for cementing and stretching students' vocabulary and understanding. By aiming for a high level of comprehensible input – Smith advocates for 95-98% - students can feel more sure-footed when faced with an audio recording, whilst being stretched to infer and incorporate the remaining 3-5% of new information. Repeated on a regular basis, listening activities which aim for this model not only reduce students' anxiety around the task, but can also challenge their working memory and perceptual processing such that eventual examination tasks appear less daunting.

Beyond the Modern Languages classroom, reframing these approaches to listening skills could have positive effects, in particular the metacognitive benefits a teacher could glean. By clearly signposting to students that a given activity is part of 'learning to listen', students can be supported to direct their attention onto an aspect of a given task where the outcome is not always the 'right answer' but the experience of listening itself. One could imagine using this in the English or Music classroom, but also in seemingly less likely areas such as Games or the sciences, where the importance of students listening accurately to their teammates or laboratory partner may be vital. Indeed, it seems self-evident that in all classrooms - where communicative exchange is paramount – the skill of listening must take centre stage. From the Modern Languages classroom to beyond, supporting students to learn to listen is therefore essential to our role as teachers.