Listening is the same as reading.

In the Real World . . .

I took my first foreign language class, Spanish, in seventh grade. It was the 1960s in California and, though I certainly didn’t know it then, audiolingualism was the methodology of choice. I remember memorizing dialogues; for years, I could remember isolated snatches of them. I remember reading about culture and seeing Mexican textiles on the walls. What I don’t remember is any listening exercises beyond repeating sentences played on reel-to-reel tape.

After exhausting all the Spanish classes at Sunset High, I went on to the University of California at Santa Cruz. My high school Spanish satisfied whatever language requirement was in place at the time, and Spanish classes were at 8 AM on top of a hill, so sloth won out over what really was a fondness for studying languages. Incidentally, despite its current bad reputation, audiolingualism was strong enough to last for years; I can get by in Spanish-speaking countries to this day, as long as I’m asking for the restroom and not trying to discuss philosophy.

At the beginning of the 1980s, I found myself teaching English in Japan. This was the era of the Communicative Revolution—or so we
thought. One of the things in the air at the time was the absolute necessity of teaching listening skills. Real skills, real teaching—meaning an exclusive focus in the lesson on how to listen. This may seem obvious now, but it was anything but then. The local TESOL affiliate JALT, the Japan Association for Language Teaching, sponsored numerous presentations on how to teach listening. A major factor generating interest in listening was the fact that so many of our Japanese students were so bad at it. The Japanese educational system was then very focused on teaching students to read English, by which was meant, translate English into Japanese. In order to read English, students were also taught to analyze English grammar. Little oral work was done and virtually no listening tasks; indeed, many classes were predominately in Japanese. As a result, students left high school or university without much knowledge of spoken English and thus had a difficult time understanding what was said to them in English.

So, let’s teach them to listen, we thought. The research base, or even the teacher lore, that would tell us how to do this was still slim, but beginning to grow. The University of Michigan Press had published the first American textbook devoted to listening comprehension in 1972 (Morley, 1972). Jack Richards had written what came to be a seminal article on listening in *TESOL Quarterly* (Richards, 1983). By 1985, a survey in the *TESOL Newsletter* reported 76 different listening textbooks being used in North American English language intensive programs (Works, 1985), but that number includes test-preparation materials, course books with some listening, and songbooks, and it reflects a rapid growth of titles in the early 1980s. One of the first listening-oriented JALT presentations I attended was by Dale Griffee, who was working on incorporating listening with English through drama (Griffee, 1982).

There were still plenty of materials that basically had the teacher read a passage and then ask comprehension questions, but some practitioners began to adopt a format of pre-listening, listening, and post-listening.

In either case, basically what we were doing was replicating reading lessons.
What the Research Says . . .

Some Preliminary Definitions

We have long been teaching listening just as we teach reading. That makes a certain amount of sense, since both are more like each other than they are similar to speaking and writing, the other classic language skills. Both reading and listening used to be thought of as passive skills, while speaking and writing were active. That view was abandoned in the 1980s as people began to see, through research, just how active the processes of reading and listening are. At that time, the terms active/passive got replaced with the notions of productive/receptive. I’m not sure that “receptive” does justice to how we listen to other people, though. It may be true that learners are only receiving meaning when they listen to pre-recorded audio, but does “receptive” really characterize the joint meaning-making that goes on during a conversation? Listening to the radio or a lecture is non-reciprocal listening. Participating in conversations and discussion requires reciprocal listening. We can also call reciprocal listening “interactive” or “interactional” listening. Richards (1983) contrasted interactional listening, by which people maintain social contact, with transactional listening, by which people accomplish goals such as buying a train ticket, with relatively little personal connection between speakers.

Differences Between Listening and Reading

As I’ve said, we have taught listening as if it were reading. But are listening and reading the same? At some level, the answer to this question is no. There are several differences between listening and reading. For instance, students can skim a text quickly to get a good idea what it’s about, but listeners can’t skim. The language comes rushing at them. Listening must be done in real time; there is no second chance, unless, of course, the listener specifically asks for repetition. When students read, cognates (words that are similar in two languages) help understanding, but while cognates may look alike on the page, their sounds may be quite different and they may be less useful while listening.
Listening also involves understanding all sorts of reductions of sounds and blending of words (Whaddayuwannaeat?). There are false starts (I, I, uh . . .) and hesitations (Um, like . . .) to be dealt with. Listeners give back-channel cues (Uh-huh, Really?) to show they are listening and understanding. Spoken language in general is “looser” than written language; we use a lot of pronouns (it, that), string together clauses with conjunctions (and, but, so) rather than use subordinate clauses (while, because), and rely partly on gestures and body language to get our points across. Rather than define listening negatively against reading, however, let’s define it in its own terms, as given in Tables 1 and 2.

**TABLE 1: Differences between Listening and Reading**

- speed of input
- use of cognates
- reductions and blending of sounds
- false starts and hesitations
- presence of back-channel cues

**TABLE 2: Speech vs. Writing Related to Listening**

- Speech units tend to be shorter than written units.
- Speech uses more pronouns and generally vaguer language.
- Speech makes use of conjunctions (and, but, so) while writing uses subordination, in which dependent clauses are linked to independent clauses with words like that, which, when, or while.
- Speech is less fluent and filled with redundancies, fillers, and self-corrections.
- Speech uses less standard grammar than writing and more colloquial language, including slang.
- Speech uses gestures and body language to transmit meaning.
A FEW MORE DEFINITIONS

Listening, most basically, is making sense of what you hear. *Hear* is a term with some problems inherent in it, however. Think of the difference between the everyday meanings of *listen* and *hear*. A few years ago, one of my local radio stations ran a series of testimonials from its listeners; one listener said, “I hear you guys everywhere, even when I don’t listen.” If you listen to something, it implies some degree of focus on your part. In this case, the listener was hearing the radio station in stores and from the windows of others. Her radio was not on; in her mind, she was not listening. You may listen to the radio, but you hear a noise outside. You may hear the birds outside your window, listen for a few seconds, and then stop listening as something else catches your attention.

So perhaps it’s better to say that listening is making sense of aural input. What does *make sense* mean? It means that, again, listening is something that takes effort. We use our knowledge of individual pieces of language like sounds, words, and grammatical patterns in concert with our knowledge of the topic, situation, and context to arrive at an understanding of what is being transmitted to us. Because all we know is not necessarily relevant to a given piece of speech, this knowledge implies the selection and sorting of information. Finally, then, listening is a very active process. (See O’Malley, Chamot & Küpper, 1989, pp. 419–422, for a classic definition of listening.)

And yet, if, in the paragraph above, I replaced *listening* with *reading*, *aural* with *written*, and *speech* with *text*, I’d have a pretty decent definition of reading. So maybe the question of the difference between listening and reading lies elsewhere.

But before we go further, perhaps I’d better state the obvious. This entire discussion is in the realm of additional, L2, language learning. If you are reading this from the perspective of a teacher of L1 English speakers, you will see the relationship between oral language and written language differently. You may accept the consensus that Sticht and James (2002/1984, p. 294) enumerate in this way:
oral language skills develop to a fairly high level prior to the development of written language, (2) oral and written language share essentially the same lexicon (vocabulary) and syntax (grammar), and (3) beginning readers draw upon their knowledge of oral language in learning to read.

Sticht and James are clearly talking about young children learning to read in their native language. In an L2 context, particularly in an EFL environment, learning to read English may come before learning to speak it. Many English for Academic Purposes (EAP) students, those attending American universities for example, may be able to handle sophisticated specialized vocabulary and syntax in their academic field, but struggle to understand teenaged servers. Thus, the role of oral abilities and written abilities in language learning, and the connection between them, is not so straightforward in L2 research.

Listening, Reading, and Language Proficiency

Since Alderson raised the issue (1984), researchers have been interested in the role our L1 abilities play in our second language. Alderson located the issue in terms of reading research. Do good readers in L1 have a leg up in L2 reading, or must some threshold of general proficiency in the language be crossed before that native language ability can be taken advantage of? Vandergrift (2006) examined the roles of language proficiency and first language listening ability in a group of English-speaking eighth graders studying French. Vandergrift reviewed past studies of reading and came down on the side of those who believe that L1 reading abilities (e.g., efficient skimming, scanning, guessing from context) can’t be transferred to L2 when proficiency is low; once learners progress and understand more of the L2, then they are able to make use of L1 abilities (p. 8). In his own study of listening, Vandergrift (2006) concluded that L2 listening comprehension ability is a combination of L1 listening ability and L2 proficiency, but that L2 proficiency contributes more. Furthermore, there were different kinds of questions in the tests that the students were given, and Vandergrift
sees L2 proficiency, particularly vocabulary knowledge, as being important for answering “literal” (specific information) questions (p. 13). Vandergrift reminds us that just knowing a word is not enough, that students must also be able to recognize that word when it is spoken, to match their knowledge with the input. To that end, it helps to have some idea of what is possible in that particular slot, and teaching strategies such as using context is therefore necessary. I will have more to say about strategies in Myth 8.

**Comparing Listening and Reading in Research**

An early study that compared reading and listening was done by Lund (1991). Lund tested beginning and intermediate university students of German as a foreign language in the United States using a written text (a text is a piece of discourse, written or spoken) with oral features and an interview. One group of students read the text while the other group heard the same text, as if it were a radio feature story. Each student then wrote as many of the main ideas and details as possible in five minutes, then heard or read the text, and recalled it again. The ideas in the text were scored according to a scale of their importance to the text (main ideas were rated higher than small details). Readers overall recalled more ideas than listeners did, but there was a difference in the kinds of ideas recalled. Listeners recalled a higher proportion of the higher-order, main ideas, than the readers did, while the readers recalled more details. Also, it seemed that listeners, while understanding a lot of the main ideas, had to fill in the gaps in their understanding by guessing at context, and this led to more erroneous answers. Lund pointed out that the gaps were often at the word level. Cognates are not as available for use in listening as they are in reading, because though they look alike on paper, they sound different when pronounced. Furthermore, when listeners encounter a word they don’t know, they frequently respond by focusing on that word and thus stop listening to the rest of the text. Lund saw the recall task, in which learners stop between listenings/ readings to write down what they remember, as being potentially a useful classroom activity, at least for
intermediate students, because it allows them to develop an overall meaning for the text and provides an opportunity to work out what they don’t know, thereby preparing them for the next listening. Lund also suggests combining reading and listening by using transcripts of the spoken text (sparingly) to increase comprehension. Some teachers also show movies or television shows with subtitles at lunchtime. We will talk more about listening-while-reading later (see pages 11–16).

Park (2004) also compared two groups reading and listening to the same text, in this case through a study of Korean university learners of English. Park reported that listeners performed better on global comprehension questions—those that required inference and synthesizing. Readers did better on factual, local questions. In other words, he confirmed Lund’s findings. Park began the study by assessing students’ knowledge of the topics and their linguistic knowledge (defined as vocabulary and grammar). Linguistic knowledge was a factor in both groups; those with more knowledge of English, perhaps not surprisingly, performed better on the comprehension questions. Background knowledge had only a moderate effect on reading comprehension, but played a much larger role in listening comprehension, perhaps because the listeners did better on main idea questions and background knowledge helps with those questions. Still, linguistic and background knowledge together only accounted for 14 percent of the variance for the listeners and 20 percent for the readers, which means that something else, we don’t know what, explained more than 80 percent of the results.

A comparison of online listening and reading tasks was undertaken by Absalom and Rizzi (2008). Six stories, each less than five minutes long, were recorded from Italian radio. The audio was transcribed to form written texts. Fourteen students volunteered to study one text a week in two groups, listeners and readers. There were a number of interesting results. First, listeners went deeper into the material in the sense that they went beyond the text to look up topics on the internet and look up words in a dictionary. They seemed to want to understand the material more fully than any of the readers did; none of the readers used outside sources, even though they wound up giving incorrect
answers. Absalom and Rizzi characterize this as a “deep” approach and contrast it with the surface approach of the readers, who seemed to want to just finish the task. They say that perhaps the readers were comfortable with their understanding and had strategies for reading text, while the listeners were anxious about listening. Even though the listeners either chose or needed to work harder, they also stayed more motivated than the readers did throughout the study and, ultimately, remembered more information than the readers.

In a study in which the same learners both read and listened to the same passage, within a two-week period, advanced university students of Spanish recalled the same amount of information in either modality, while intermediate students recalled significantly more main ideas when they read, but not significantly more details (Mecartty 2001). Readers recalled more information from the beginning and middle of the text, while listeners recalled more information overall (and more main ideas) from the end, perhaps suggesting further research.

In a study that was primarily concerned with acquisition of Spanish verb morphology, Lesser (2004) found that readers recalled more ideas than listeners.

Thus, classroom studies show that listeners and readers have different experiences with the same material. Research used in developing a placement test at the University of California at Los Angeles (Song, 2008) suggests that listening and reading share some processes but differ slightly in others. Song used a structural equation modeling approach, which tried to build a model using hypothesized factors, to investigate whether listening and reading consist of subskills and, if so, the same subskills. This is knowledge that helps test-makers construct tests that really measure what students know.

Basically, it was found that both listening and reading are made of subskills, but the pies are cut differently. Listening can be divided into Topic, Details, and Inference; that is, a person with high scores in those three subskills would be a good listener. Reading divides into what Song calls Explicit and Implicit factors. Explicit factors are Topic and Details, and Implicit is another name for Inference. This is to say that the study could not cleanly separate the roles of Topic and Details...
among readers. Song (2008) is reluctant to make a definitive statement on the difference between listening and reading but suggests that both can be fundamentally defined as “comprehension plus decoding.” Both have comprehension processes in common but different decoding processes. That is, the path to comprehension is different.

“Comprehension plus decoding” is actually a good way to characterize listening. Decoding is the process of breaking up the speech stream into recognizable words, which are then held in working memory and tied to what Anderson and Lynch (1988, p. 13) call “information sources in comprehension.” These sources are schematic knowledge (background knowledge and procedural knowledge of how language is used in discourse); context (knowledge of situation and co-text, what has been said before and will be said); and systemic knowledge (knowledge of the language system, semantic, syntactic and phonological). More on all of this in Myths 2 and 3.

Finally, though listening and reading share many comprehension processes, they shouldn’t unthinkingly be treated as the same in terms of research and pedagogy, as we have done at certain times. There are differences between listening and reading in the way that input is taken in for processing, partly attributable to the differences in speech and writing. Readers can remember more, and remember more details, because the text is fixed. Readers can go back to it. Listeners have to construct the text as they listen. They have to make use of knowledge from other sources and may come away with more of the gist. Table 3 summarizes the comparisons.
TABLE 3: Listening and Reading Compared

| Listeners remember more ideas.    | Absalom & Rizzi (2008)     |
| Listeners recall more main ideas or do better at main idea questions, while readers recall more details or did better at detail questions. | Lund (1991), Park (2004) |
| Listeners display deeper learning and more motivation. | Absalom & Rizzi (2008) |
| Listening and reading share comprehension processes but differ in decoding. | Song (2008) |

Listening while Reading

What happens when we combine listening and reading? Reading while listening—for example, following along while the teacher reads aloud—is probably something we have all experienced in elementary school. Brown, Waring, and Donkaewbua (2008) tested the efficacy of listening while reading as an L2 vocabulary acquisition tool versus reading only and listening only. Though the Japanese university students liked listening-while-reading best as a method, none of the methods led to significant vocabulary gains.

The Taiwanese university students who participated in Chang’s study (2009) also liked the listening-while-reading condition, compared to listening only. They thought it was easier, and they claimed they paid more attention. Gains in comprehension for the listening-while-reading condition over the listening-only condition were very modest, however, as they were in Woodall (2010). Woodall compared a group that read a children’s novel (Charlotte’s Web) to one that listened to a professional recording of the book while reading. Students had control of the audio. There were weekly comprehension quizzes, and the listening-while-reading group outscored the reading-only group in four of the eight quizzes.

Perhaps the best use of reading-while-listening to stories (and all of these studies focused on stories) is to model for students how words
chunk together. Non-proficient readers tend to read word-by-word and essentially lose the overall meaning. If they can listen to texts read by fluent readers, they may, over time, shape their own reading into larger chunks. See Table 4.

One study that was actually done to test the role of advance organizers (pre-reading/listening activities) also gave information about listening while reading. Chung (1999) found that there was no statistical difference between a group of Chinese-speaking technical school students who viewed a video with English language captions and a group that viewed with captions and also listened to a summary of the video before viewing. There was a significant difference between both of these groups and a group that received the summary only, with the summary being less effective at aiding comprehension. The captions seemed to make the difference. This in fact supports listening while reading. We will look at the effectiveness of captions more in Myth 5.

### TABLE 4: Studies on Listening while Reading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learners enjoyed the activity.</th>
<th>Chung (1999), Brown et al. (2008), Chang (2009)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There were gains in comprehension.</td>
<td>Chung (1999), Woodall (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There were no significant gains in vocabulary acquisition.</td>
<td>Brown et al. (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There were no significant gains in comprehension.</td>
<td>Chang (2009)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Some other interesting classroom activities that link listening and readings are explored next.
So, what does this mean for the listening classroom (and when I say that, it’s shorthand for “all the classrooms in which listening is taught” and doesn’t refer just to listening classes). If comprehension is a process shared by listening and reading, then perhaps one reinforces the other pedagogically. This is the rationale behind the common use of reading aloud in L1 elementary schools. While the research on listening while reading in L2 is mixed, we do know that listeners and readers understand different parts of the input differently, for example, main ideas and details. Thus, I believe we’re led to a prescription to combine listening and reading in the classroom through the use of transcripts and dialogues.

1. **Exploit the reading-listening connection through use of transcripts.**

Using transcripts (written versions of the listening material) is controversial for many teachers. In the past, I would have encouraged you to hide the transcripts, maybe even burn them. I would have said that they encouraged bad listening habits, that students will not learn to listen as long as they can read what is said. I would have pointed out that no one gives us the transcript of a conversation, that we must tough it out and get what we can. As we listen more, we get better at it and develop strategies for coping with what we don’t know.

All that is true to some extent. It just doesn’t have to be shouted from the rooftops or be seen as dogmatically. What has become increasingly clear to me is that the classroom is not the real world, nor should it be. It is a place for growth.

I have also come to believe in the power of repetition, not in the mindless listen-and-repeat of behaviorism and audiolingualism, but careful, principled practice. As we have noted, one of the characteristics of speech is its fleeting nature. We can deal with the transient nature of the listening experience through playing the audio file over and over,
but the unprepared students are really not very likely to get more out of the sixth listening than they are of the second. To be sure, there are some things that can be heard better on a second or third listening, but learners top out pretty quickly. (Though I note that to this day, largely because of better audio, I sometimes suddenly understand words of a song I have never understood despite having listened to it for 40 years.) But there are other ways to repeat the input besides playing the audio again and again, and transcripts are one way.

Transcripts are for me what Vygotksy and his followers call “psychological tools” (Kozulin, 1998). A shovel is a physical tool that helps you dig a hole to plant a tree (to use some jargon, it mediates between you and your task). A string around your figure to remember to take out the garbage is a psychological tool. Potentially, a transcript is a tool that can help learners work on repetitive tasks like multiple listenings—and, I would argue, improve the experience of those tasks.

I would definitely not provide the transcript for every listening task, mostly because it encourages the students to think that they need to understand everything. They don’t, as we will see. But if you have students who want to do repeated listening or want to practice speaking, occasionally providing a script is probably a good idea.

WAYS TO USE SCRIPTS

Here are some ways you can use or adapt listening scripts (this assumes, by the way, the publisher provides permission to copy the scripts).

- One obvious use of scripts is for pronunciation work. Learners can mark the stressed words they hear. More advanced learners can predict the stressed words and listen to the audio to check.
- Scripts can be used for do-it-yourself pairwork. One member of the pair (A) can delete words and hand the blacked-out script to a partner (B), who has to listen and write the missing words as A reads the script, or as both listen to the audio.
• Some learners find it useful to try to match the speed and intonation of the audio as they read the script.

• If the focus of your class is on language forms, grammatical or other, learners can highlight the forms in the script. This doesn’t have to be a grammar exercise; they can listen to the audio and highlight occurrences of whichever sound you choose or sounds you want them to contrast. They can then put away the script and listen again, raising their hand or tapping their desk when they hear the target form.

• Finally, because so many listening scripts are dialogues, they offer interactive speaking practice.

2. Focus on interactive listening by using dialogues.

Students reading dialogues to each other is another example of the connection between reading and listening. As I will say in greater detail later (see Myth 5), we limit our students’ experiences with listening when all we offer them are dialogues. On the other hand, as I will also say in more detail later, much of our social action is dialogic, and students need interactive listening as much or more than they need to listen to recorded audio (see Myth 6).

Dialogues from listening scripts offer us a great deal of extra practice material. It seems a waste not to exploit them. Here are ten options for varying dialogues. Some of them are more focused on listening while others are focused on speaking or even reading. It is up to you to use the versions that best address your class goals.

WAYS TO VARY DIALOGUES IN PAIRS

Note that all these assume students will have heard the audio at least once. They are now practicing.

• Use “read and look up.” Learners can only speak when they are looking at their partner. They can look at the
dialogue as often as necessary, but when they are speaking, they must be looking up.

- One partner makes mistakes on purpose, which the other partner must catch. This can be done while both partners are reading or from memory as a listening task, as one reads and the other listens (after hearing the original).
- Hand out the dialogue in pieces, with each turn on a different slip of paper. Assign pairs to reconstruct the dialogue. This can be done with each partner having half of the slips. They cannot see each other’s slips but instead must listen.
- Partners extend the story. What happens next? They can perform their endings for the class.
- Personalize the dialogue. Learners substitute their names and personal information (likes, etc.) for the textbook’s characters.
- Read the original, and then put it aside and perform a role play based on what is remembered.
- One student changes the dialogue, and the other must follow, making adjustments.
- Use voice variations: loud/soft, high/low, etc.
- Vary the physical aspects: sit back to back; stand and step back after each line; stand in lines and change partners to repeat the dialogue.
- In two pairs, A1 whispers the lines to A2, who does the speaking. B1 and B2 do the same.

**TABLE 5: Review of Listening-Reading Connections in the Classroom**

- Teacher reads the transcript; students follow along.
- One student reads the transcript; others follow along.
- Transcript used for work on sentence stress.
- Blank-filling with transcripts.
- Find the form in the transcript.
- Students read/listen to dialogues in various ways.