

Introduction

Reading through the listening research, I was struck time and again by the complaints that listening was under-researched. Of course, researchers often say that sort of thing to boost the importance of their own contribution. However, the fact that listening is under-researched is partially true in the sense that listening research, and practice, has tended to get stuck in grooves, in which hot topics like schema and strategies get extensively discussed and even get transmitted into the classroom as dogma, while topics like bottom-up listening and the role of vocabulary, because they are perceived as unimportant, get ignored. So, the time for a book that questions listening myths has come.

One of the possible reasons that listening has been under-researched is that it fits uneasily into the mainstream second language research paradigm. Listening was for a time seen as the driver of second language acquisition, when comprehension approaches like Krashen's (1982) held sway. And yet even then the focus was on acquisition, not the process of listening itself. Every theory of language acquisition has a place for input, whether listened to or read. However, the actual psycholinguistic process of listening and its development tends to be assumed, except by those who study it professionally. Researchers and classroom teachers tend to assume that listening will develop as proficiency increases. Even programs that have classes dedicated to listening often see listening as lecture listening and the class as a place to teach note-taking. The role of listening in interactive speaking activities like pair work might be addressed, if at all, by teaching clarification language like, *Could you repeat that, please?*

My view is that listening is a skill to be developed, just like any other skill. I think those who say it's enough to teach strategies see only part of the puzzle. Strategies are a piece of the puzzle, but it's a big-kid's

puzzle. While many tend to treat listening as something that will emerge from practice activities, others seem to regard listening practice as time-killing. Skills take practice! If the claim for the ineffectiveness of practice is that teachers turn on the audio, ask some questions, and call it teaching listening, well, yes, that's not very effective. It's also not what I would call practice. Perhaps I'm being naïve, and the good practices of years of good colleagues have blinded me to what is really going on. In any event, I hope this book points the way to a principled approach to teaching listening informed by both research and experience.

The Contents lists the eight myths of listening around which this book is based. While I started with the myths, I've tried to write this book as a response to current research and I've let that research drive the internal organization of the chapters. I think the result is a fairly comprehensive look at listening, though because this is a book for a wide audience and because research goes in cycles, there are doubtless areas that are not covered as fully as some would like. A sort of alternative contents that points out some of the themes is given here.

- Listening is a meaning-making activity. (*Myth 1*)
- Listening is an active process that makes use of background knowledge (previous experience, knowledge of topic, situation, and context), as well as knowledge of language forms (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, etc.). (*Myth 2*)
- Listening also makes use of bottom-up processes, including phonological and word recognition processes. (*Myth 3*)
- Listening is difficult for many interesting reasons. (*Myth 4*)
- Listening takes many forms. (*Myth 5*)
- Listening is social as well as individual. (*Myth 6*)
- Listening can be taught in many ways in the classroom. (*Myths 7 and 8*)

This book follows the format of other *Myths* books published by the University of Michigan Press. Each chapter begins with **In the Real World**, an anecdote to ground the chapter in teaching and learning. The second part of the chapter looks at **What the Research Says**.

Finally, **What We Can Do** suggests practical activities that logically follow from the research.

The purpose of this book, like its sister volumes in the *Myths* series, is to have a conversation with the reader about applications of research to language teaching. The tone is consciously conversational and informal, meant to replicate that of a teacher's room. So, perhaps an introduction is in order to contextualize the real world anecdotes in each chapter. Feel free to move on to Myth 1 if you're not interested in my background and prejudices.

Cherryland, the unincorporated area of Alameda County, California, where I grew up, was part of the second-largest Portuguese-American enclave in the United States (the largest being in Massachusetts). My mother's family was Portuguese-American, and my great-grandmother spoke with the accent of one who had learned English as an adult. She was a proud American, though, and admonished those who spoke Portuguese on buses, "You in America now. Speak the English!" My family followed the classic American pattern of losing the language in three generations, so my sister and I speak no Portuguese. My father's family was here in colonial times and worked its way across the South until my father moved to California as a teenager. His grandfather spoke French, though whether as an immigrant or a Cajun is unclear.

I got into TESOL by student-teaching an American Studies class at City College of San Francisco that was popular with immigrants as a bridge class between ESL and the required English classes. Soon after, I got a job in a conversation program at the University of California–Berkeley Extension; most of the students were Japanese. Why not come to Japan to teach, they said. Why not, I thought—for a year or two. I went to Japan and stayed ten years. Before leaving, I tried listening to records (records!) and teaching myself Japanese. I succeeded to some extent with a few words and useful phrases. People always ask if I knew Japanese before I moved there. But not knowing Japanese never struck me as an impediment. I thought I'd pick it up. And somehow I did. I left Japan reasonably good at spoken Japanese. I could tell taxi drivers shortcuts to my apartment (this is something Japanese cabbies actually like to talk about) and talk to my dry cleaner about sumo, but my literacy was closest to that of a Japanese fourth grader.

For the first five years in Japan, I taught mostly speaking, as did most foreign teachers at that time. I taught some listening, but the schools mostly saw the teachers' role as giving the students as much speaking practice as possible. For the second five years, while at the University of Pittsburgh English Language Japan Program in Tokyo, I taught the full range of skills: grammar, reading, writing, speaking, pronunciation, and listening. When the program closed and I moved to Pittsburgh to work on my Ph.D., I taught a similarly broad range of classes, though for my time there, I was the supervisor for speaking classes. Now, I teach mostly graduate classes in TESOL, but every semester I also teach a small EAP composition class.

While in Japan, I became interested in materials development. Marc Helgesen invited me onto a textbook project, *English Firsthand*, and we've been working on the project, with editor Michael Rost, as the various editions have continued, for more than 25 years. We've been joined along the way by Thomas Mandeville, Robin Jordan, Ruth Venning, and (currently) John Wiltshier. Marc, Dorolyn Smith, and I also wrote the first edition of *Active Listening*, and Dorolyn and I recently completed a second edition. Marc and I have also written *Practical English Teaching: Listening* in a series of introductions to language teaching edited by David Nunan (Helgesen & Brown, 2007). All of this is to say that I come at listening both as a teacher and as a textbook writer who has written, revised, and thrown out more listening tasks and scripts than I care to count. Yet the whole process continues to fascinate me. I've changed my mind a lot over the years, and some of what I've written in this book probably contradicts what I've produced, and more than likely is at odds with what some of my colleagues believe.

I've studied several languages over the years and will fully agree with anyone who says that listening is hard. I believe that language teachers should constantly strive to understand their students' experiences by learning themselves. I studied Spanish in junior high and high school, Japanese in Japan, and Mandarin Chinese while on a faculty exchange for five months in Taiwan. In between, I took a class in Korean in graduate school and studied a comprehension-based program for learning French. As I write this, I'm back to working on French.