



DEVELOPING L2 LISTENING COMPREHENSION:
CONSTRAINTS AND STRATEGY-BASED
FACILITATION (LITERATURE REVIEW)

Khikmatova Malika Bakhtiyorovna

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ABSTRACT

Listening comprehension matters a great deal in learning a second language (L2), yet it often gets less attention than reading and speaking. This review asks two questions. What makes L2 listening hard to develop? And what helps it grow? The review draws on theory and on studies of listening strategies. It argues that listening comprehension is the work of building meaning from sound, using what we know about language and the world. Learners struggle mostly because speech comes fast and cannot be controlled. In the studies reviewed here, the clearest help comes from teaching learners to plan, monitor and reflect on their listening, and from doing this inside real listening tasks. Most of this evidence comes from a few groups of learners. The review ends with ideas for further research.

Introduction

Listening is how many second language learners first meet the language. It matters beyond listening, too. Hogan, Adlof, and Alonzo (2014) review evidence that listening comprehension becomes the main influence on reading comprehension as early as the elementary grades. They also point out that a growing number of children struggle with reading mainly because their listening comprehension is weak. Vandergrift (1999) warned teachers against putting speaking ahead of listening.

Still, listening is hard to observe, hard to teach and hard to test. Speech disappears as soon as it is spoken, and listeners cannot slow it down. Researchers have asked what makes listening



hard and what teachers can do about it. But their findings are scattered across reading research, speech-language pathology and L2 teaching. They are rarely read side by side.

This review puts them side by side. It asks two questions:

1. What does the literature identify as the main constraints on L2 listening comprehension?
2. Which approaches to facilitating its development are supported, and how strong is the support?

The review is narrative and selective, not systematic. It starts with definitions, then looks at what limits listening, then at strategy-based teaching. It ends with implications and limits.

2. Defining listening comprehension

Listening comprehension means making sense of speech as it happens. Writers define it more narrowly or more broadly. Hogan et al. (2014) use the simple view of reading. In that view, listening comprehension is the ability to understand a text read aloud. This helps when we study how listening supports reading. But it is too narrow for L2 learners. They also face unfamiliar sounds, unplanned speech and unfamiliar topics.

Other writers go further than word recognition. Kim and Pilcher (2016) say listening comprehension includes recognizing speech sounds, knowing what single words mean and understanding the syntax of the sentences they sit in. Buck (2001) names two kinds of knowledge that listeners use. One is linguistic knowledge. It includes phonology, vocabulary, syntax, semantics and discourse structure. The other is non-linguistic knowledge, which means knowing the context and the world.

Put together, these views give a working definition. Listening comprehension is a process in which listeners join what they hear with what they know about language, context and the world, and build meaning as speech unfolds. This matters for the rest of the review. It means that problems, and fixes, can sit at different levels, from hearing sounds to using background knowledge.

3. Constraints on L2 listening comprehension

The main limit is time. Speech is gone as soon as it is spoken, and in most everyday and classroom situations the listener cannot replay it (Buck, 2001). Listeners have to decode, interpret and remember at the speaker's speed. Goh (2000) studied learners' diaries and found problems at three levels: perception, parsing and utilization. Learners failed to recognize words they knew. They also forgot what they had just heard. Goh adds that one early failure can disturb how the next stretch of speech is processed.

These problems are not only about language. A small vocabulary or an unfamiliar topic can break comprehension. The type of text matters too. Rahimirad and Moini (2015) studied the challenges that English for academic purposes (EAP) learners face with academic lectures. Lectures ask a lot of non-native listeners over a long stretch of time.



Weak listening can also affect other skills. Hogan et al. (2014) show that listening comprehension increasingly shapes reading comprehension. So lasting weakness in listening may hold back reading development. We should be careful here, though. Their evidence is mainly about children learning to read. It should not be applied to adult L2 learners without care.

Across these sources, the limits fall into three groups. The first is perception: hearing words in a stream of speech. The second is thinking: holding and joining meaning under time pressure. The third is context: the topic, the type of text and the task. This grouping was made for this review. The sources do not share one system.

4. Facilitating development: strategy-based instruction

Research on strategies gives the fullest picture of how L2 listening can improve. Vandergrift (1997) studied how learners of French as a second language listen. He sorted their strategies into three groups. Metacognitive strategies plan, monitor and check listening. Cognitive strategies work directly on the input. They include guessing from clues, adding detail from what you already know and using another language you know. Socio-affective strategies help with talking to others and managing feelings. Later, Vandergrift (2003) compared skilled and less skilled listeners. Skilled listeners used metacognitive strategies more often. He also proposed that strategies work best when they are used together, like players in an orchestra.

So listening practice alone is not enough. Vandergrift (1999) argued that teachers can do more than give learners comprehensible input. They can pair strategy teaching with listening tasks. Two later studies tested this idea with control groups. Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari (2010) taught a metacognitive cycle to university learners of French. The course ran for 13 weekly sessions. The taught group improved more than the control group, and the less skilled listeners gained the most. Rahimirad and Moini (2015) gave Iranian EAP learners 16 hours of metacognitive strategy teaching based on Vandergrift's models. A control group listened to academic lectures with no explicit strategy teaching. The researchers measured listening with IELTS academic listening tests. They also interviewed the learners about how they saw the training.

The pedagogical cycle builds on the familiar pre-, while- and post-listening routine. Vandergrift and Goh (2012) describe it in stages. Learners first predict what they will hear. Then they listen more than once, check what they understood and talk it over. At the end they reflect on how they listened. That last step is what makes the cycle different. Attention moves from the text to the learner's own process.

Four studies sit at the center of this research. Vandergrift (1997) described how learners of French listen and sorted their strategies into three groups. Vandergrift (2003) compared skilled and less skilled listeners. Skilled listeners used more metacognitive strategies, and he built a model of how strategies work together. Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari (2010) ran a 13-week course with a control group. Metacognitive teaching improved listening, most of all for less



skilled listeners. Rahimirad and Moini (2015) took Vandergrift's models into an EAP workshop in Iran. They taught 16 hours of strategies and compared the results with a control group.

5. Synthesis, implications and limitations

Two things stand out. First, most limits on L2 listening come from processing speech under time pressure. That gives teaching that helps learners monitor and manage their listening a sensible reason to work. Second, the steadiest evidence supports explicit metacognitive strategy teaching, especially for less skilled listeners (Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010). So the old question of whether cognitive or metacognitive strategies matter more may be the wrong one. A better question is how strategies work together (Vandergrift, 2003). Metacognitive monitoring plausibly helps to coordinate the rest.

For teaching, the evidence points to three practices. The last one is an inference, not a tested practice:

- Pair listening tasks with explicit strategy teaching, instead of relying on practice alone (Vandergrift, 1999).
- End listening lessons by asking how learners listened, not only what they understood (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012).
- Let learners compare strategies and notice which ones work for them. This follows from the evidence on orchestration, but none of the studies reviewed tested it directly.

The review has limits. It is narrative and selective, and its set of sources is small. The studies mostly involve learners of French and EAP learners in a few settings. We do not know how far the findings carry to other languages, ages and places. The sources do not say how long the gains from strategy teaching last. Hogan et al. (2014) study children's reading, not L2 learning. Finally, there is little work from after 2016 here. A full review would need a systematic search to bring the literature up to date.

6. Conclusion

Listening comprehension in a second language is the work of building meaning in real time. It draws on knowledge of language and of the world. Learners find it hard mostly because speech moves fast and cannot be paused. In the studies reviewed, the clearest help comes from explicit metacognitive strategy teaching built into listening tasks. Future studies should test this with more languages, ages and settings. They should also ask how long the gains last.

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