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Teaching Listening Strategies to Low-level Learners

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Listening strategies instruction is crucial for students to develop good listening skills but is rarely given much attention in low-level university classes. Low-skill students entering university usually have little or no previous experience with strategies development and most low-level textbooks focus on listening practice and testing and lack skills-building strategies instruction. In this article, the author presents a brief overview of the importance of listening-strategies instruction, followed by activities to build learners' listening skills which can be used in a low-level, four-skills class.

聴解ストラテジー教育は学生にとって、聴解能力を伸ばすためには欠く事のできないものであるが、大学の低いレベルの授業では、めったに考慮されていない。低い能力の学生達は、たいてい大学入学時において、ほとんど、または、全くストラテジー発達の経験が事前にはない。多くの低いレベルの教科書は、聴解練習やテストをすることに焦点をあて、ストラテジー教育を形成するわざに欠けている。この論説では、著者が聴解ストラテジー教育の重要性について短く概観を述べ、学習者の聴解能力を伸ばすための、低いレベル、技術統合した授業で使用可能な活動を示す。

Introduction

Learning Strategies are “the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information” (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990, p. 1). In the teaching of listening, this means teaching learners *how* to listen, an approach that is largely absent in textbooks designed for low-level learners. However, these learners both need and are able to benefit from listening strategies instruction. In this article, the author describes a variety of activities for listening strategies instruction that use both bottom-up and top-down processing, and can be used in classes in which instructors are required to teach all four skills and cannot make listening the sole focus of instruction.

The importance of listening-strategies instruction

The value of listening-strategies instruction is that it helps learners improve their listening skills. One way in which listening-strategies can achieve this is by helping learners avoid “information overload” (Willing, as cited in

Mendelsohn, 1995, p. 135). Low-level learners in particular have a difficult time coping with the flood of information comprising a listening text, and strategies that help learners manage this flood reduce part of their listening burden. Additionally, research has suggested that listening should begin as a conscious process (Mendelsohn, 1995; Rost, 1990). However, many low-level learners have never thought about how they listen and strategies instruction can help them begin to do this. Another important reason for teaching strategies is that many textbooks provide listening practice but focus primarily on the outcomes of listening and neither teach listening skills nor the strategies that help develop them (Field, 1998). Of course, extensive listening practice is important for developing better aural skills, but asking learners to listen for gist or key words is useless if they can't do so. Strategies instruction can give learners the tools they need to do this. Finally, listening strategies instruction can make learners better listeners by helping them overcome the tendency to listen for total comprehension, to try to understand every single word they hear, which is an inefficient and ineffective way to listen (Mendelsohn, 1994). The following activity shows how one can begin to change learner's conceptions about how to listen.

Changing learners' misperceptions about listening

In real-life listening, people listen for general meaning--not for every word. However, many learners believe they need to understand every word, which can inhibit effective listening. Low-level learners in particular often give up listening entirely when they get stuck on a word they do not understand, feeling that they have failed to understand the

speaker's message. The following is a simple, consciousness-raising activity that provides tangible proof that it is not necessary to understand every word of a listening passage.

Activity: Getting the meaning with half the words missing

Preparation

This activity requires a short listening passage suitable for your learners, and a written transcript of that passage, both of which will be modified. You can use a pre-recorded listening from your textbook or you can record one yourself. The method for preparing the recording and the written transcript for use in this activity is similar to that used for preparing a cloze activity in that it uses "the systematic deletion of words from text" (Alderson, 1979, p. 219). In this case, the words that are deleted are only the structure words, the words which signal grammatical relationships, i.e. determiners, prepositions, pronouns, auxiliary verbs. Removing the structure words leaves the content words, the nouns, verbs, adverbs, and adjectives. The reason that only structure words are omitted is that the meaning of an utterance resides in its content words, and the purpose of this activity is to demonstrate to learners that they are able to understand a great deal of a message hearing only those content words, i.e. they don't need to listen to and understand every word to get the meaning of an utterance.

Edit the recording to remove the structure words. This results in approximately half of the words being removed from the passage. After the recording has been edited, prepare a transcript which has blanks in the place of the omitted structure words.

Procedure

Step 1: Ask learners to try to get the important ideas in the passage you will play.

Step 2: Play the listening passage.

Step 3: Ask the learners what the important ideas are in the passage. Note how much they could understand even though around half of the words were missing.

Step 4: Distribute the transcript and re-play the passage, pausing while learners fill in the clozed words.

Learners are always amazed at how much they can understand despite the missing words. For somewhat higher-level learners, you might call attention to the content/structure words dichotomy. For Japanese learners, it can be useful to draw a parallel between content words and Kanji characters and between structure words and the kana that are attached to Kanji characters (Gilbert, 1984, p. 26). For very low-level learners, you can distribute the transcript even before they hear the passage.

Figure 1. Example of a transcript with structure words replaced by blanks

Original transcript:

I live in the country in Thailand. My town is near Chiang Mai, in the north part of the country. I love my town and I love my job. I take people on elephant rides. Some people are afraid of elephants, but they shouldn't be. Elephants are a lot like people. Elephant parents take care of their children for 20 years. Did you know that? Or that elephants cry when they are hurt? Actually, I think some of my elephants are nicer than some of the people I know.

Transcript with structure words replaced by blanks:

_ live _ _ country _ Thailand. _ town _ near Chiang Mai, _ _ north part _ _ country. _ love _ town _ _ love _ job. _ take people _ elephant rides. _ _ people _ afraid _ elephants, _ _ _ shouldn't _ . Elephants _ _ lot like people. Elephant parents take care _ _ children _ 20 years. _ _ know that? _ _ elephants cry when _ _ hurt? Actually, _ think _ _ _ elephants _ nicer than _ _ _ people _ know.

(89 Words: 45 Content words, 44 Structure words)

Teaching listening strategies 1: Familiarizing learners with features of English speech that are critical for successful communication

One of the most basic features of spoken English is the way intonational cues are used to communicate important information. For example, stress patterns help listeners identify words. While word and sentence stress are typically taught in the context of pronunciation work, when learners become aware of stress features and use this awareness to recognize important information, they are using a listening strategy.

Strategies for recognizing features such as stress require learners to use bottom-up processing to make sense of the stream of speech they are hearing. This means that their comprehension of the incoming aural data requires that they successfully decode that data; they must “[use] phonological cues to identify the information focus” of what they are hearing (Richards, 1990, p. 51). This decoding is demanding, and low-level learners need to start with the basics: syllables, stressed and unstressed syllables, and long and short vowels. I find that many Japanese English learners have had little classroom exposure to these features. Learners need to recognize that in words with more than one syllable, one syllable receives stress, the vowel in that syllable is longer and full, and the vowels in unstressed syllables are reduced. Discerning stressed and unstressed syllables is particularly important for recognizing word stress. Gilbert (2001, p. T-35) notes that “the short, obscure vowel--or schwa--at the center of a weak English syllable is perhaps the greatest barrier to learners’ listening comprehension.” Extensive practice with individual words taken from one’s textbook (see Gilbert 2001, p. T-36 for an example) can help learners come to grips with this feature.

Activity one: Using the textbook as source material for word stress practice

After learners have had sufficient practice with single words, they can apply their ability to discriminate stressed and de-stressed syllables in pieces of discourse. I use the conversations from our textbook as source materials: after the learners have heard the conversation once or twice I play the conversation again, pausing after each sentence or thought group to allow the learners to mark the stressed and unstressed syllables. Afterwards I go over the conversation with the learners so they can see if their results match mine and to review problematic words.

Figure 2. Panel from textbook conversation marked for stressed and de-stressed syllables



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Activity two: The basic emphasis pattern and sentence focus

Once learners are able to discriminate word stress in stretches of discourse, you can introduce this more challenging activity. The basic emphasis pattern (BEP) refers to how, in general, content words receive stress while structure words are de-stressed (Gilbert, 1995). Sentence focus refers to the way that a speaker signals the important new information in an utterance by making

one word in a sentence or thought group more prominent through a longer vowel, higher pitch and stronger sound relative to the other words. Note that this is a simplified account of these features and I suggest using even more simplified explanations with low-level learners. For example, I do not discuss the BEP as such, but explain that “the most important words get stress” and for sentence focus I use “most important idea.”

Figure 3. Transcript excerpts showing marking for BEP and sentence focus

Transcript before any marking:

I can remember lots of stuff. Maybe that's because we use Chinese characters for our language. We have to remember thousands of characters when we're young. I'm a little different from most people though. I like to compete in memory contests.

Transcript after Step 2: Marking for BEP:

I can remember lots of stuff. Maybe that's because we use Chinese characters for our language. We have to remember thousands of characters when we're young. I'm a little different from most people though. I like to compete in memory contests.

Transcript after Step 3: Marking for Sentence Focus:

I can remember lots of stuff. Maybe that's because we use Chinese characters for our language. We have to remember thousands of characters when we're young. I'm a little different from most people though. I like to compete in memory contests.

Preparation

Select a short listening passage; for low-level learners, a 30-45 second passage is probably all they can handle comfortably. I use the listening passages from my textbook. Prepare a transcript of the passage for your learners, spaced at 1.5 lines to facilitate marking on it and with a large font size to facilitate reading (I use 14 pt.). You will also want, for your own reference, a copy of the transcript on which you have marked the BEP and sentence focus. An overhead projector and a transparency of the transcript are optional but useful for going over the transcript with learners after the listening portion is complete.

Procedure

Step 1: Play the listening passage. Learners should listen for the stressed words (i.e. the BEP).

Step 2: Distribute the transcript and play the passage again. As they listen to the passage, learners mark the BEP in each sentence by placing a dot above stressed words or the stressed syllable in a multi-syllabic word. Pause after each sentence (or clause/thought group if these are very long) to allow the learners time to mark their transcript.

Step 3: Their method of marking these words should be different from the marking of stressed words done during step 2, such as underlining the focus words.

Step 4: Go over the transcript with the learners, indicating where the stressed and focus words are. The overhead projector is useful here as it enables you to use your marked transcript as a reference for the learners. I recommend playing the passage again during this step, pausing after each sentence.

Teaching listening strategies 2: Developing learners' active listening

In daily life, listeners are constantly making predictions about what they will hear next and revising those predictions as they go along. Making predictions is also an important strategy in L2 listening (Mendelsohn, 1994; Rost, 2002). In contrast with the bottom-up strategies presented above, here students are primarily using top-down processing, in that they are using existing schemata, or background knowledge, to aid in their comprehension of the listening material (Richards, 1990).

Many university-age learners in Japan are coming from learning environments in which guessing was neither encouraged nor rewarded. Accordingly, making predictions can be a novel and perhaps even threatening concept. Therefore, it is very important to have established a positive classroom environment in which learners feel comfortable taking risks. Additionally, learners can feel more comfortable making predictions if they understand these two points:

1. Learners are not doing “blind guessing” but rather are making predictions based on their background knowledge or information they already have acquired.
2. Learners are not predicting exact words but rather are predicting the ideas that are going to be presented (I have found that many learners are particularly uncertain about this point).

Activities: Making predictions

One very simple way to encourage low-level learners to guess is to give them sentences to complete. When introducing the concept, start with written sentences which have discourse markers or sufficient context to give learners a good chance for success.

Figure 4. Examples of sentences for completion

1. Two people are shopping together. One person says:
I'm hungry. Do you want to _____?
2. I want to go to the movie with you but I have a lot of homework. I'm sorry, I_____.

After learners are comfortable with the general idea, start using similar sentences recorded on MD, CD, or cassettes so that learners can begin to practice this kind of predicting in listening as well.

Another simple activity suitable for low-level learners is using one's textbook listening exercises to encourage prediction. Many integrated skills textbooks have listening exercises that are linked to the themes for their respective units and often have an accompanying illustration. Learners can use both of these features, along with their background knowledge, to make predictions about what they will hear. For example, the textbook I use has a unit on "fashion." The listening is a mock fashion show commentary and is illustrated with a drawing of models on a runway. I ask learners to write down three or four things they think they will hear, emphasizing, as mentioned above, that they are not predicting exact words, but general ideas. Typically, they come up with clothing items, colors, and patterns. This may seem extremely simple, but bear in mind that you are laying the groundwork for future, more advanced and demanding work in predicting.

Conclusion

Two complementary approaches to listening-strategies instruction were presented in this article: familiarizing learners with features of speech that signal important information, and encouraging active listening behaviors such as prediction. A variety of activities that require using both bottom-up and top-down processing will give learners opportunities to combine strategies that they initially practice individually. Importantly, listening-strategies instruction needs to be ongoing; it is not possible to do strategy building tasks once or twice and expect them to have any lasting effect. Learners need repeated exposure to and practice with these and related tasks so that they will eventually, it is hoped, automatically apply the strategies in their listening.

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