Understanding Listening - From Theory to Practice

Introduction: The Importance of Listening

Good morning, everyone. Today, we are going to explore the fascinating and often underappreciated skill of listening. While speaking and writing are typically seen as active forms of communication, listening is equally, if not more, crucial for effective communication. It is the foundation upon which we build our understanding of the world and our interactions with others.

Listening is not a passive process; it is an active, complex, and dynamic skill that involves multiple cognitive processes. In this lecture, we will delve into the theories that explain how we listen, the different types of listening, the skills and strategies involved, and how we can apply this knowledge to improve listening comprehension, particularly in second language (L2) learning.

1. Models of Listening Comprehension

To understand how we make sense of spoken language, we need to explore the various models that have been developed over the years. These models provide frameworks for understanding the complex processes involved in listening.

1. Communication Theory Model:

Originated from telecommunications, this model emphasizes the transmission of messages and the role of noise in interfering with communication.

It highlights that comprehension is not merely about receiving a message but involves interpreting it amidst potential interference.

2. Information Processing Model:

Influenced by computing and artificial intelligence, this model views the human mind as a limited processor managing input, processing, and output.

It introduces the concept of parallel distributed processing, where listeners integrate information from multiple sources simultaneously, using both bottom-up (linguistic input) and top-down (background knowledge and context) processing.

3. Social/Contextual Model:

This model emphasizes the social and interactive nature of comprehension.

It views listeners as active participants in creating meaning, with meanings arising from the interactional space between individuals rather than solely within their minds.

Context plays a crucial role in this model, challenging the use of computing metaphors like "input" and "output."

4. Situated Action Model:

Based on evolutionary psychology, this model suggests that humans primarily engage in understanding to perform actions ("situated action") rather than to store information.

It emphasizes that language evolved to facilitate collaborative activities and that comprehension is often oriented towards future actions.

These models are complementary, with each offering valuable insights into different aspects of listening comprehension.

2. Types of Listening

Listening can be broadly categorized into two main modes, each serving different purposes and involving distinct processes:

1. One-Way Listening:

Definition: Listening without direct interaction or feedback from the speaker.

Transactional Focus: Primarily serves the purpose of transferring information.

Common Scenarios:

Academic Settings: Lectures and school lessons, often termed "listening in order to learn."

Media Consumption: Watching films, television, or listening to the radio, where the language varies from formal to informal.

2. Two-Way (Reciprocal or Interactional) Listening:

Definition: Listening that involves interaction and dialogue, often referred to as "listening-and-speaking."

Interactional Focus: Aims to maintain social relations and facilitate communication.

Key Features:

Listener Involvement: The listener may also be a speaker, which introduces both costs and benefits:

Costs: Requirement to respond appropriately, time pressure in processing, and risk of misinterpretation.

Benefits: Opportunity to get doubts cleared up straight away and problems resolved.

Listener Roles: According to Bell's (1984) framework, listener roles can vary:

Participant: Actively engaged in the conversation with equal speaking rights.

Addressee: Being spoken to but with limited speaking rights.

Auditor: Being spoken to but not expected to respond.

Overhearer: Not directly involved in the conversation and without the right to speak.

3. Listening Skills and Strategies

Effective listening involves a combination of skills and strategies that can be developed and refined over time.

1. Micro-skills:

Richards' Analysis (1983): Identified 33 micro-skills for conversational listening (CL) and 18 for academic listening (AL).

CL Micro-skills: Include recognizing verbal and non-verbal cues, understanding implicit meanings, managing turn-taking, and identifying topics.

AL Micro-skills: Include understanding lecture structures, recognizing technical vocabulary, and taking effective notes.

Rost's Clusters (1990): Emphasizes the interconnectedness of skills and the importance of integrated practice.

2. Strategies:

Learning Strategies: Techniques and deliberate actions that learners employ to enhance comprehension.

Meta-cognitive Strategies: Planning, monitoring, and evaluating the listening process (e.g., comprehension monitoring, directed attention).

Cognitive Strategies: Directly involve manipulating the language to aid comprehension (e.g., predicting, elaborating, contextualizing, summarizing).

Social/Affective Strategies: Involve interacting with others or managing emotions (e.g., questioning, cooperation, anxiety reduction).

4. Methods for Investigating Listening

Understanding how listeners comprehend spoken language is challenging because comprehension is largely unobservable. However, several methods can be used to investigate listening:

1. Observation:

Involves observing listeners' behavior and responses during listening tasks.

Can range from informal noticing of misunderstandings to controlled experiments that create ambiguities and referential conflicts.

2. Introspection:

Involves gathering information from listeners' thoughts and reflections during or immediately after listening.

Also known as the "think-aloud protocol."

Provides insights into the mental processes involved in listening but can interfere with normal comprehension.

3. Retrospection:

Involves asking listeners to recall their comprehension process after a delay, often with the aid of memory supports like recordings.

Allows for reflection but may be influenced by memory reconstruction.

5. Teaching L2 Listening

Teaching listening in a second language (L2) presents unique challenges and requires a strategic approach:

1. Difficulty Factors:

Input Characteristics: Speech rate, accent, vocabulary, grammatical complexity, and lack of visual support.

Task Characteristics: Processing details, integrating information, recalling gist, separating fact from opinion, and responding promptly.

2. Authenticity:

Text Authenticity: The debate over using authentic materials versus realistic texts.

Task Authenticity: The challenge of making tasks as realistic as possible while ensuring learners are not overwhelmed.

3. Strategy Instruction:

Involves teaching learners how to approach a listening text by identifying clues to meaning.

Requires thorough preparation, extended practice, and should not be seen as a panacea.

4. Skills Training:

Developing foundational linguistic skills, such as discriminating between similar sounds, processing fast speech, and understanding discourse markers.

Should be assessed and taught early in a listening course.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, listening is a complex and multifaceted skill that is crucial for effective communication. By understanding the theories that explain how we listen, the different types of listening, and the skills and strategies involved, we can develop targeted approaches to improve listening comprehension, particularly in L2 learning.

The key takeaway is that listening is an active process that requires the integration of multiple skills and strategies. By applying the insights from the models and methods discussed, educators and learners can enhance their listening abilities and achieve more meaningful and effective communication.

Thank you for your attention, and I hope this lecture has provided you with a deeper understanding of the importance of listening and the tools to improve your listening skills.