

Active Listening: A View of Canadian Culture through Travel Conversations

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Abstract

Ideas concerning the role of listening in SLA have evolved considerably in the last thirty years. In the 1960's most researchers were convinced that listening was a passive skill of minor importance. However, listening is now considered a critical aspect of daily life and thus deserves primary consideration in SLA teaching and research.

This article considers the role of listening in developing SL proficiency and offers an example of listening activities based on travel conversations. It is suggested that repeating brief dialogues in a series of related tasks will increase student motivation and thus enhance language acquisition. In addition, students will gain insight into a foreign culture by considering situations faced by travelers in Canada.

Travel conversations provide a window into foreign cultures and can lead to a recognition of both pragmatic language use and sociolinguistic features in context. Furthermore, students can empathize with characters as they experience and discuss various aspects of travel. These types of conversations provide an insight into the attitudes and manners of people who travel and thus develop students' awareness of appropriate behavior as potential travelers.

This article considers the role of listening in developing SL proficiency and offers an example of listening activities based on travel conversations. It is suggested that repeating brief dialogues in a series of related tasks will increase student motivation and thus enhance language acquisition. In addition, students may gain insight into a foreign culture by considering situations faced by travelers in Canada.

Introduction

In the 1960's most researchers were convinced that listening was a passive skill of minor importance (Celce-Murcia, 1991, pp.81-3). This was perhaps due to lack of knowledge concerning the mechanics of listening. In fact, the development of aural skills entails "an active process of selecting and interpreting information from auditory and visual clues" (Van Duzer, 1997). Furthermore, adults spend 45 percent of their time listening (Rankin, cited in Hadley, 2001, p.178) and it is used almost twice as much as speaking (Rivers, cited in Van Duzer, 1997). Hadley even asserts that this figure (45%) has increased due to the widespread use of

electronic devices such as the cellular phone and television. In any event, listening is now considered a critical aspect of daily life and thus deserves primary consideration in SLA teaching and research.

Ideas concerning the role of listening in SLA have evolved considerably in the last thirty years. This is primarily due to several factors (Hadley, 2001, p.178): (1) the influence of Krashen's hypothesis and its emphasis on *comprehensible input*; (2) the continuing trend towards communicative approaches; and (3) the development of computer-based resources, such as multimedia software and audio-visual internet websites. These synergistic effects have inspired researchers to examine and delineate the processes involved in listening and thus create more effective techniques to enhance aural skills.

Processes in listening comprehension

Richards (1987) synthesizes several strands of FLA research to arrive at the following conclusions regarding the mechanics of listening comprehension: (1) the listener hears the interlocutor's words and stores them in short-term memory; (2) the listener attempts to organize and identify parts of sentences as information; (3) these elements are used to create meaningful propositions; and (4) the propositions are organized to reconstruct a meaningful message which is stored in long-term memory while the original form of the words is discarded.

However, this view of listening is based exclusively on semantics and does not reflect a pragmatic perspective. An utterance may signify a completely different message depending on its function in social interaction, i.e. the purpose of the proposition affects its ultimate meaning (Richards, 1987, p.163). Thus speech act, script, and schema theory, as well as discourse analysis are required to describe the roles of participants and background information, in order to arrive at a meaningful interpretation of conversational interaction. Furthermore, the proposition's meaning may be supported or contradicted by simultaneously communicated visual aspects. Consequently, not every message is stored correctly (or even saved at all) in long-term memory since the information may be misinterpreted, partially understood, or considered irrelevant.

Richards (1987, p.164) final model of listening processes includes pragmatic elements to show that the listener tries to deduce the speaker's intentions while decoding the semantic meaning of an utterance, i.e. the type of speech event, the relevant background scripts, the goals of the speaker, and the propositional and illocutionary meanings of the message are interpreted or inferred through reference to the situation and relationships involved. Richards also

explains that listeners must be able to recognize and deal with colloquial language (reduced and ungrammatical forms), performance variables (pausing and speech errors), various rates of delivery, rhythm, and stress, cohesive and coherent devices, and non-verbal signals. In addition, since conversation is interactive, interlocutors may negotiate meaning while attending to signals for turn-taking and topic changes. Rephrasing, repeating, and elaborating are common features of speech since redundancy helps clarify meaning.

Morley (cited in Celce-Murcia, 1991, pp.88-90) points out that listening includes an affective dimension. She differentiates between linguistic (textual arrangement), paralinguistic (vocal), and extralinguistic (body language) messages. Thus, vocal emphasis can significantly alter the meaning of a textual message. To further complicate matters, Ur (1984, p.9) provides the following example-after rapid speech a speaker may slow down to make a point or stress a vital phrase, and pause for effect. Thus listeners need to develop a critical awareness of the speaker's intentions to understand affective factors.

Finally, Brown (2001, p.251) points out that conversation also has a dual function, i.e. to support social relationships (interpersonal) or communicate propositional information (transactional). Conversations between acquaintances may contain hidden assumptions and implications that are based on the familiarity and shared experiences of the interlocutors and which are thus difficult to interpret by outsiders.

Principles for selecting appropriate listening techniques

Brown (2001, pp.258-260) suggests that teachers need to take into account their students' needs and abilities in order to design effective listening techniques. Selecting topics that interest students and are relevant to their goals and experience will increase students' intrinsic motivation. Schemata are a critical element in supporting students' ability to comprehend situations and recall key vocabulary that may be required in the listening task. However, since students' cultural background may interfere with their understanding, preparing appropriate schemata requires careful consideration.

Brown (2001) also recommends using authentic language to engage students and help them recognize that their language learning effort has value outside the classroom in a real-world context. Furthermore, students need to be taught listening strategies to overcome inevitable communication difficulties and maximize their potential comprehension. Strategies, such as predicting, seeking clarification, and guessing at meanings, are valuable interpreting tools which offer students the opportunity to negotiate conversational meaning.

In addition, Brown (2001) advises teachers to use both bottom-up and top-down techniques. Bottom-up activities help students practice with the basic elements of speech, i.e. sounds, words, and pronunciation (stress, rhythm, and intonation), as well as grammatical structures. This analytical approach enables students to develop accuracy and confidence in their ability to reproduce language precisely. On the other hand, top-down activities make use of background information and global knowledge to obtain a general understanding of the message. Pre-listening tasks activate listeners' schemata in order to grasp the gist of the message. Whereas post-listening tasks help learners hone their analytical skills while increasing their grammatical knowledge and refining their ability to decode L2 sounds.

Designing and evaluating listening activities

Richards (1987) describes the following procedure to implement a listening curriculum: (1) assess the learner's needs; (2) identify a range of appropriate listening skills; (3) diagnose proficiency and then determine specific micro-skills required; and (4) formulate instructional objectives to develop the micro-skills. In particular, Richards provides a taxonomy of listening micro-skills that can be used to select listening objectives. He also proposes the following criteria for evaluating activities: (1) content validity; (2) listening comprehension or memory; (3) purposefulness and transferability; (4) testing or teaching; and (5) authenticity.

Lund (cited in Hadley, 2001, pp.185-188) recommends an alternative methodology to assess listening tasks. He uses the following list of student responses, i.e. *doing, choosing, transferring, answering, condensing, extending, duplicating, modeling, and conversing*, and six functions, i.e. *identification, orientation, main idea comprehension, detail comprehension, full comprehension, and replication*, to create a function-response matrix framework for checking students' comprehension. He maintains that developing listening proficiency involves a cyclical progression through these functions, using "multiple opportunities to listen for a variety of different purposes" (Hadley, 2001, p.185). Thus after students orient themselves to a listening text, comprehend main ideas, and deduce details, they may benefit from a more in-depth review, perhaps considering cultural assumptions that differ from their own.

Using authentic materials

Hadley (2001, pp.184-5, 188) states that lower level students require listening materials with familiar and easily predictable content relevant to students' interests. Therefore she suggests

using video to provide non-linguistic contextual support. On the other hand, she cautions against the use of unedited authentic material since this may prove frustrating for beginners, especially if the discourse is well beyond their capacity for comprehension. Therefore she advocates relatively short texts that are made comprehensible by advance organizers and orientation activities which activate schemata.

Geddes and White (cited in Hadley, 2001, p.190) describe simulated authentic discourse as language designed for teaching purposes but which appears to be authentic. They point out that students often feel anxiety and give up when listening to authentic material because they cannot focus their attention successfully on everything heard. Guided controlled activities allow learners to face difficulties in a predictable sequence and thus minimize apprehension and fear of failure. *Teacher talk* (Hadley, 2001) is an example of appropriate pedagogical listening material which sounds authentic because it is usually spontaneous. Moreover, Peterson (cited in Celce-Murcia, 1991, p.107) suggests that minimizing teacher talk in order to increase student talk does not by itself guarantee more learning.

An example of a travel conversation

A brief conversation (see Appendix B) was created to illustrate a simple but critical problem faced by most travelers at some point, i.e. dealing with an emergency and negotiating a solution under (budget) constraints. In the example, a couple, Ted and Karen, have arrived at their destination, Vancouver airport, and have to change their plans about where to stay the night. They finally choose a hostel, despite their intention of minimizing expenses by staying with a friend, who is unexpectedly unavailable. Students are shown several photos (see Appendix A) of possible choices of where to sleep and make their selection after listening to the conversation. Students may not be familiar with some of the options, such as camping, sleeping on a sofa at the airport, or staying in a backpacker lodge, but can likely empathize with the frustrations of plans gone awry and the need to keep expenses as low as possible.

Follow-up comprehension questions are designed to clarify the situation, activate students' critical thinking skills, and develop their awareness of the pragmatic aspects of language. For example, reductions are a common feature of everyday language that are often confusing for students trying to listen to key elements of conversational input. In the tasks provided, attention is first focused on their meaning and practical usage. Next, students listen to the conversation again and fill in missing words which mostly consist of the same reduced form words. Thus the brief conversation, first introduced as a picture selection activity, is required in three subse-

quent listening tasks. In the last task students can look at the precise words used in the conversation and clarify any remaining questions they may still have concerning their meaning or usage.

The example's approach is based on Lund's (cited in Hadley, 2001, pp.185-188) model as well as Hadley's (2001, pp.184-5, 188) recommendations, both mentioned earlier. The repeated use of short texts in a cyclical progression is designed to enhance comprehension and thus stimulate motivation, which, according to Rost (2004, p.45), is the key to language learning—"motivation seems to actually increase a student's ability".

This approach has the following benefits: (1) students are not over-whelmed by a long listening task which taxes memory and ultimately frustrates all but the best listeners; (2) students are more likely to pay attention if they have understood key elements answered along the way; (3) students' motivation will likely increase if they recognize that the conversation has a practical application to their life; students will probably find the topic engaging since many express an interest in travel and Vancouver, Canada is a popular destination, and (4) students may be interested in analyzing the conversation since it has a clear problem and solution — also, this particular topic may be relevant to their own travel experience.

Although the overall task is focused on listening, the last two activities are designed to extend the topic's application to both writing and speaking. First, students are shown their homework, which is a conversation between Ted and a youth hostel staff employee, with some of the sentences removed and placed in a separate area for selection. This conversation is a follow-up to the one students have listened to several times and is designed to be a template for a role-play. The role-play is based on a similar phone call conversation between a client and a staff person at a hotel. Thus these tasks are related and build on each other; they offer students sufficient support and repetition and thus enhance motivation.

Conclusion

Listening is an elusive behavioral characteristic since it is not visible or audible. The listener need only respond minimally with a body gesture to indicate comprehension and yet may not be paying full attention to the interlocutor's discourse. Second language learners may be too shy to interrupt the speaker and seek clarification. Teachers can encourage students to be more active participants by explaining listening strategies. Also, by using teacher talk and designing appropriate listening activities with pre-listening and post-listening components, teachers can help students develop their listening proficiency and thus their confidence to interact in real-

world situations.

The listening tasks provided illustrate mechanisms that can support students' understanding and thus enhance motivation and acquisition. Travel conversations provide a window into foreign cultures and can lead to a recognition of both pragmatic language use and sociolinguistic features in context. Furthermore, students can empathize with characters as they experience and discuss various aspects of travel. These types of conversations provide an insight into the attitudes and manners of people who travel and thus develop students' awareness of appropriate behavior as potential travelers.

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Where shall we stay?

Before listening

- 1a. *You arrive at Tokyo station and call your friend but nobody is home. Where will you stay tonight? Ask your partner.*
- 1b. *Practice the following conversation with your partner:*
- A: How about getting this Rolex watch? (HDTV, Mercedes-Benz, fur coat)
- B: We can't. We don't have enough money.

Listening

- 2a. Ted and Karen have just arrived at Vancouver airport.
Listen to the conversation. Where will they stay?
Circle the correct picture.

Vancouver Youth Hostel



Vancouver Hotel



Camping



Airport



Room in Backpacker Lodge

2b. Listen again and say if these statements are True (T) or False (F).

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|-------|
| (1) Ted doesn't like hotels | T / F |
| (2) Karen thinks hotels are expensive | T / F |
| (3) Karen likes camping | T / F |
| (4) Ted is very tired | T / F |

2c. Listen again and answer the questions with your own ideas.

- (1) Karen says she doesn't know. What does she mean?

- (2) Why does Ted say "Or sleep here on a sofa"?

Circle one or more answers.

- (a) Ted likes to sleep on the sofa
- (b) Karen likes to sleep on the sofa
- (c) Ted's angry with Karen
- (d) Ted is joking with Karen
- (e) Ted doesn't want to camp

Check your partner's answers. Are they the same as yours?

After listening

3a. What do the following words mean? Write your answers.

can't = _____ *that's* = _____ *we're* = _____

don't = _____ *I'm* = _____ *gonna* = _____

3b. Practice the following conversation with your partner.



A: I *can't* do this. I'm *gonna* stop.

B: *Don't* give up! *We're* nearly there.

A: I guess *that's* true.

- 3c. Make 3 sentences using the same words as in 3a.

Culture note:

Most Canadians speak directly but some say “I don’t know” to be polite. Sometimes being direct may make the other person feel bad.

How did you do?

- 4a. Listen again and fill in the missing words.

Ted: I _____ reach our friends. Maybe we _____ just go to a hotel.
Karen: But _____ so expensive! I mean, uh, I _____ know ... _____ on a budget and just _____ our trip. How _____ a youth hostel or backpacker lodge? We _____ even camp out at Jericho Beach.
Ted: Or _____ here on a sofa! Hey, I _____ mind staying somewhere _____ but _____ too tired to set up a tent and I need a good rest. I’m _____ call the hostel.

- 4b. *Gimme a break* means I want you to be nicer to me. Where would you put this expression in the conversation?



gimme = give me

- 4c. Work in pairs and role play the following situation.

Student A

You are a staff person working at the Vancouver Hotel.

Student B

You are calling from Japan to reserve a room for next Monday.

Now change roles and repeat the role play.

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Homework - Calling a youth hostel

Ted calls the youth hostel to get a room. The staff person's words are not written. Place the sentences below (1-17) in the correct place in the conversation. The first one has been done as an example.

Ted: *Hi. Is this the Vancouver Youth Hostel?*

Staff: *Yes. (1)*

Ted: *I'm calling to reserve a room for tonight. Do you have anything available?*

Staff: *Yes. ()*

Ted: *Just me and my girlfriend.*

Staff: *() ()*

Ted: *Oh, I see ... Well umm, we don't mind sharing if that's all that's available.*

Staff: *()*

Ted: *How much is it per night?*

Staff: *()*

Ted: *That's great! And what about your hours?*

Staff: *() ()*

Ted: *Gee, I didn't realize it was so early ... We were planning to go listen to music in town. Is that ok?*

Staff: *That's fine. ()*

Ted: *Oh, cool. So as long as we don't disturb anyone it's no problem.*

Staff: *Yes, that's right. ()*

Ted: *My name? Uh, Ted Dunston.*

Staff: *()*

Ted: *Oh, it's D-U-N-S-T-O-N.*

Staff: *() ()*

Ted: *Uh, do you have cooking facilities?*

Staff: *() ()*

Ted: *Awesome! We always do our own cooking because we're on a budget*

Staff: *() ()*

Ted: *Alright! We'll be there in a couple of hours!*

- (1) Can I help you? (2) How do you spell that?
(3) Just be very quiet when you get back. (4) Thank you, Mr. Dunston.
(5) Please make sure you read and follow the rules
(6) For how many people? (7) Is there anything else you need?
(8) It's \$15 per person. (9) We have a large kitchen and dining hall
(10) You'll have to share a room with four beds. (11) Lights close at 10 pm
(12) and I'm sure you'll enjoy your stay here. (13) next to the reception desk.
(14) Those rooms are very popular. (15) May I have your name please?
(16) and everyone must check out by 11 am.
(17) Sorry, we don't have any rooms left for two people.

Homework Answer

Calling a youth hostel

Ted calls the youth hostel to get a room. The staff person's words are not written. Parts of sentences are written below. Place them in the correct place in the conversation.

- Ted:** Hi. Is this the Vancouver Youth Hostel?
Staff: Yes. Can I help you?
Ted: I'm calling to reserve a room for tonight. Do you have anything available?
Staff: Yes. For how many people?
Ted: Just me and my girlfriend.
Staff: Sorry, we don't have any rooms left for two people. You'll have to share a room with four beds.
Ted: Oh, I see ... Well umm, we don't mind sharing if that's all that's available.
Staff: Those rooms are very popular.
Ted: How much is it per night?
Staff: It's \$15 per person.
Ted: That's great! And what about your hours?
Staff: Lights close at 10 pm and everyone must check out by 11 am.
Ted: Gee, I didn't realize it was so early ... We were planning to go listen to music in town. Is that ok?
Staff: That's fine. Just be very quiet when you get back.

- Ted:** Oh, cool. So as long as we don't disturb anyone it's no problem.
- Staff:** Yes, that's right. May I have your name please?
- Ted:** My name? Uh, Ted Dunston.
- Staff:** How do you spell that?
- Ted:** Oh, it's D-U-N-S-T-O-N.
- Staff:** Thank you, Mr. Dunston. Is there anything else you need?
- Ted:** Uh, do you have cooking facilities?
- Staff:** We have a large kitchen and dining hall next to the reception desk.
- Ted:** Awesome! We always do our own cooking because we're on a budget
- Staff:** Please make sure you read and follow the rules and I'm sure you'll enjoy your stay here.
- Ted:** Alright! We'll be there in a couple of hours!
-

Listening Conversation

- Ted:** I can't reach our friends. Maybe we should just go to a hotel.
- Karen:** But that's so expensive! I mean, uh, I don't know ... we're on a budget and just starting our trip. How about a youth hostel or backpacker lodge? We could even camp out at Jericho Beach.
- Ted:** Or sleep here on a sofa! Hey, I don't mind staying somewhere cheap but I'm too tired to set up a tent and I need a good rest. I'm gonna call the hostel.

アクティブ・リスニング： 旅行会話を通して学ぶカナダ文化の概観

ピアセツキ・リオン

要 旨

SLA（第2言語習得）のリスニングの役割に関する考えがこの30年間にずい分変わってきた。1960年代にたいていの研究者達はリスニングはさほど重要でない受動的な技能だと思っていた。ところが今ではリスニングは日常生活の重要な側面と考えられ、SLA教育および研究の基本的な問題になっている。

本稿はSL熟達を伸ばす際のリスニングの役割を考察し、旅行会話に基づくリスニング活動の例を示している。一連の役目による簡単な対話の反復は学生の動機づけを増し、言語習得を高めるものである。また学生は旅行者がカナダで直面する状況を考えることで外国文化を見る力を付けるであろう。

旅行会話は外国文化をのぞく窓となり、実際の言語使用と背景にある社会言語的な特徴を認識させてくれる。さらに学生は旅行のさまざまな面を経験、議論しながらいろんな登場人物にも共感し得る。こうした談話は旅行者の態度や作法を知る眼を養い、可能な旅行者としての適切な行動意識を高めることになる。