Listener Functions in Second Language Listening

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In discussions of oral proficiency, the concept of speaker function (or purpose) has been acknowledged as a primary component, but less has been said on listener function. Lund (1990) indicates that listener function has often been assumed to be a natural reflection of speaker function: Basically, the listener’s purpose is to comprehend the speaker’s intended meaning. The problem with this view, according to Lund (1990) is that it fails to take into account other types of listening that are not straightforward, face-to-face communication (like overhearing a conversation or listening to a radio ad). Listeners may not always need to focus on the comprehension of every aspect of a message. A speaker-centered approach to a listener’s purpose tends to neglect the view of listening as an activity in its own right, reducing the picture of listening to that of a "one-directional, stimulus-response experience" (Lund, 1990, p. 106).

In planning instructional tasks for second language learning, the question of listener function becomes particularly important. Lund (1990) defines listener function as “the aspects of the message the listener attempts to process” (p. 107). Or, even more simply, it can be thought of as “what the listener is listening for” and “how the listener is approaching the text” (Lund, 1990, p. 107). Three elements seem to be related to listener function: 1) the listener’s choice, 2) independence from the speaker function (which may be different from the listener’s); and 3) reference to the text (Lund, 1990). When planning tasks, consideration of listener function (apart from the listening skills necessary to carry out the purpose) is an important part of the design and should relate to the learner’s ultimate needs.

Lund (1990) identifies six listener functions that guide the approach to the listening text. All functions are available for selection, regardless of the text, but certain functions are more closely related to some texts than others. Statements of listening lesson objectives often reflect some targeted listener functions along with the specific listening skills that are being worked on and the way that learners will respond to the listening. In Lund’s (1990) taxonomy, listener functions are considered alongside different types of listener responses in planning tasks.

Listener functions taxonomy (Lund, 1990, pp. 107-109)

1. **Identification**: focus on some aspect of linguistic code (instead of content). Includes the terms recognition and discrimination. Useful if the focus is on form rather than content and is often a stage in pronunciation and vocabulary lessons. Appears most at the novice level, but can be useful at all levels. Examples: recognizing familiar vocab, identifying word categories, discriminating between minimal pairs or intonation patterns, etc.
2. **Orientation**: This involves bringing *schemata* to bear on a text, by working out essential information about it. This can involve determining features that are external to the core content, but that may play an important role in it. These can include identifying participants, roles, the context, general topics, emotional tone, genre and intuitions of speaker function. This can be an important part of building toward a more detailed processing of the message—what Lund (1990) calls "tuning in" (p. 108).

3. **Main idea comprehension**: This is really the first stage of actual comprehension of the message itself. Lund (1990) notes that it leans heavily on comprehension of vocabulary and therefore may be difficult for the beginner (intermediates are more capable of this function). In listening that involves some visual support (like video), the visual context may contribute to success at this function. Of course, that *schemata* that has been called up by the listener will help with this. Examples could include: 1) determining from a travelogue what countries someone visited; 2) identifying a caller's problem and a host's solution on a talk show; 3) understanding the main points or basic outline of a lecture.

4. **Detail comprehension**: Here the focus is on pulling out specific information. Lund (1990) notes that "this function may be performed independently of the main idea function...when one knows in advance what information one is looking for; or the facts can be details in support of main ideas" (p. 108). Typically a more advanced function. Examples: 1) understanding a series of precise instructions; 2) getting specific information on departures and arrivals from airport announcements.

5. **Full comprehension**: The goal of comprehending the whole message—global meaning and specific details. It is the ultimate goal of instruction in listening. Even though the ability to do this is the mark of a high level of proficiency, lower-level learners can reach this point with certain texts, if the tasks are designed to lead to this goal. Examples: 1) understanding interview questions to the extent that appropriate, relevant answers can be given; 2) understanding main idea and details of a lecture so that detailed notes can be made (even many native speakers may find this difficult).

6. **Replication**: Here the goal is to preserve or transfer the form of the message itself. Attention is focused on accuracy of replication—not necessarily on the content of the message. This is not necessarily a higher level function than comprehension—novice learners can often do this. Examples: 1) dictation; 2) taking an exact message; 3) transcribing.

**References**