Listening Challenges

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In designing lessons that address listening skills, instructors should keep in mind the unique challenges that decoding oral communication can present for learners. Writers on listening discuss a number of areas in which comprehension of oral messages can be more complicated than comprehension of written ones. The following list of complicating features of spoken language comes from Brown (2007, pp. 304-307). Richards's (1983) list of listening micro-skills addresses each of these challenge areas in some form.

"Chunking" or Clustering

Written language uses the sentence as the basic organizational unit, but because of memory limitations, spoken language tends to be processed in smaller chunks or clusters. Clauses and individual phrases are more easily processed in listening. Learners may try to "hold on" to units that are too large (even multiple sentences) and teachers should help them to focus on more discrete groupings if they sense that students are doing this.

Redundancy

Repetition, rephrasing, elaboration and stalling insertions are common features of oral discourse and can be confusing to the learner who is overly focused on unraveling every single utterance. Lower proficiency learners, heavily reliant on bottom-up processing, may be particularly susceptible to this. However, they can be trained to recognize redundancy and to use it constructively in the same ways that more skilled listeners do. Since not every utterance in spoken dialogue contains new information, recognizing redundancy can allow for additional processing time for the most important parts of the message.

Reduced Forms

Spoken language often contains phonological, morphological, syntactic reductions (called ellipsis) and pragmatic reductions. Many language learners have only encountered the full forms of the words and phrases and will be confused by the reduced ones.

- phonological reduction: "Um gonna go" for "I'm going to go..."
- morphological: "I'll..." for "I will..." (contraction)
- syntactic (ellipsis): "Want to come by?" for "Do you want to come by?"
- pragmatic (requiring inference of illocutionary act and intended meaning): "Sorry... exhausted." (A runner who has just finished a race and is trying to talk and catch his breath. Full form: I'm sorry I can't talk yet. I'm exhausted.)
Performance variables

All those features of spoken language which might be categorized as performance 'slips.' For learners, these can be distracting, but expert listeners can disregard them and weed out the content and meaning. These features include: hesitations, false starts, unexpected pauses, backtracking, and asides. Native speaker speech can often become formally ungrammatical in the act of performance (more than learners might think!), but expert listeners can parse these performance 'mistakes' and get to the meaning. An example of this is the ability of the speakers of two different English dialects to understand each other, even when neither can themselves produce the unique features of the other's dialect.

Colloquial language

Classroom learners of second languages are often exposed to the standard varieties and more formal registers. Idioms, slang, common reductions and background cultural knowledge are used to send and interpret messages in real dialogues between native speakers. Depending on students' needs for the second language, instruction may need to focus on introducing learners to aspects of colloquial speech.

Rate of delivery

Unlike with reading, listening tends to afford participants less time for decoding the message. A common complaint of learners is that native and expert speakers are speaking too fast for them to understand. Listening instruction should give learners a chance to work with texts that feature different rates of delivery, since real life listening often DOES require getting the message from fast speakers who use few pauses.

Prosodic features

Familiarity with the stress, rhythm and intonation patterns of English are essential for expert comprehension. Since English is stress-timed, many syllables may occur between stressed ones and these can be difficult for learners to hear. Also, familiarity with intonation patterns (pitch patterns) becomes necessary in interpreting the information structure of a sentence. Effects like irony or uncertainty are often transmitted using intonation.

Interaction

In conversational dialogue, strategic competence comes into play. To keep "hitting the ball back and forth" (to use a tennis metaphor), listeners must be able to negotiate for meaning, especially when they need to appropriately convey what they haven't understood. Brown (2007) lists "negotiation, clarification, attending signals, turn-taking, topic nomination, maintenance and
termination as key conversational features that learners must learn to recognize if they are to successfully participate in the give and take of dialogue.

References
