



## Listening strategies in the L2 classroom: more practice, less testing

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### Abstract

This paper looks at the history of listening strategies development from the first studies on strategies used by L2 learners to the most current studies specific to L2 listening, and how this theory can be incorporated into classroom teaching that fosters practice, not testing. This paper also examines the type of needs analysis and diagnostic tools teachers can use in the listening classroom to raise students' strategic awareness and how the process of listening from a cognitive perspective can also assist teachers in designing strategic-based lessons that encourage learners' autonomy.

Key words: cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, socio-affective strategies, bottom-up, top-down, schema, perceptual processing, parsing, utilisation, orchestration, strategic-based approach, metastrategic awareness, one-way communication, two-way communication, autonomy.

### Theoretical Perspective

Second language (L2) teaching practices have, until recently, focused mainly on reading, writing, and speaking as the skills necessary in language acquisition (Vandergrift, 2003, p. 464). This is because before the 1970's, listening was only seen as a receptive skill in language learning (Johnson, 2008, p. 299) where "students ... listened to repeat and develop a better pronunciation" (Vandergrift, 2011). At the time it was believed students could acquire their listening skill by "osmosis" (Mendelsohn, 1984, as cited in Mendelsohn 1995). This method of language acquisition, known as the audio-lingual method, was popular after World War II, and was born out of the need to teach US soldiers the language spoken in the countries they were "deployed" in (Johnson, 2008, p. 163). The importance of listening as a skill, in language learning was not recognized until "the early 70's, [when] work by Asher, Postovsky, Winitz, and later Krashen, brought attention to the role of listening as a ... key factor in facilitating language learning" (Vandergrift, 2011). These studies, however, were based on the audiolingual method, and looked at listening as a passive, receptive skill (Johnson, 2008; Mendelsohn 1995; Vandergrift, 2011).

Even though listening is now recognized as an active mental process, it is still "difficult to describe" (Vandergrift, 2011). However, what researchers have been able to determine is that for aural information to be understood, it requires effective use of strategies on the part of the listener. This is of particular significance in second language learning because without effective strategies, students' listening comprehension becomes challenging, problematic, and ineffective (Mendelsohn, 2006). Therefore, since the early 1980's, researchers have been studying the learning strategies used by effective learners and recommending to teachers that

one of the main goal in the designing of listening lessons should be to "instruct students how to go about listening, i.e. how to handle information that is not 100% comprehensible" (Mendelsohn, 1994, p. 134). This method calls for a strategy based approach, and empowers students to become autonomous learners by teaching them how to become aware of the strategies that work for them (Mendelsohn, 1994; Chamot, 1985). In this context, "strategies are specific actions, behavio[u]rs, steps, or techniques students use - often consciously - to improve their progress in apprehending, internalizing, and using the L2 (Oxford, 1990, as cited in Oxford 1994).

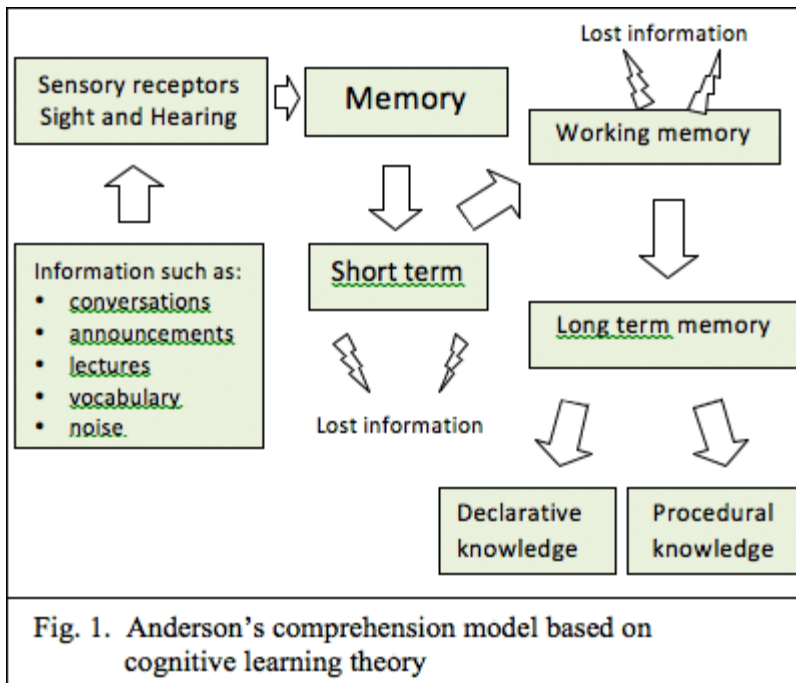
Rubin (1975) was the first researcher in the field of second language acquisition who saw a direct relationship between good language learners and learning strategies. Rubin's (1975) study paved the way to a strategy based approach of L2 teaching and learning. Rubin (1975) concluded that good language strategies produce good language learners. Other studies after Rubin, such as Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern and Todesco (1978), further concluded that good learning strategies were related to effective listening acquisition skills (Chamot, 1995, p. 14). However, at the time, it was observed that strategies that learners use in their first language did not necessarily work the same way when learners adopted them when learning a second language. Mendelsohn (1984, 1994, as cited in Chamot 1995) explains this phenomenon by pointing out that what works in L1 might not necessarily work in L2 (p. 17). Mendelsohn's observation is relevant to teaching pedagogy because in order for teachers to help their students learn a second language, L2 teachers need to know how to teach effective strategies and provide practical exercises to help L2 learners acquire a second language. There is no doubt that teaching listening is even more challenging than teaching reading, writing, or speaking.

As stated before, the first studies on learning strategies were based on Krashen's theory of second language acquisition, where "second language learning occurred through implicit, unconscious processes activated by appropriate input" (Chamot, 1995, p. 15). During that period, Mendelsohn (1995) explains that "teachers of listening [were] merely Krashen's (1983) providers of comprehensible input," only requiring their students to answer a set of questions after listening to a prescribed passage (p.132). Krashen's input theory, however, was quickly questioned and rebutted as researchers began to observe that L2 learners actively sought ways to improve their language learning experience. As a result, SLA studies shifted to looking at language learning from the cognitive learning theory perspective. Looking at listening from the cognitive theory perspective, therefore, empowers the learner because it teaches the learner how to actively seek ways to learn how to differentiate between sounds, identify words and sentence structures, "interpret stress and intention, retain and interpret this within the immediate as well as the larger socio-cultural context of the utterance" (Wipf, 1984, as cited in Vandergrift 2011). It also gives L2 teachers the tools to design and implement listening lessons that foster practice instead of testing (Mendelsohn, 1995; 2006).

Chamot (1995) explains that "the classification system that ... best capture[s] the nature of learners' strategies [and the process associated with listening as an active skill is] based on the distinction in cognitive psychology between metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, and

social/affective strategies" (Chamot, 1995, p. 14). This tripartite classification lists the "strategies that researchers have identified in L2 contexts" (Lynch, Mendelsohn, 2009). The first team of researchers to use this strategy classification was O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Küpper, and Russo (1985), and were later further validated by Barnard (1992), Chamot and Küpper (1989), Omari (1992), Absy (1992), Lott-Lage (1993; Nagano (1991), and Vandergrift (1992). Metacognitive strategies deal with monitoring of learning, and assessing learning. Cognitive strategies include the activation of schema, classifying, inferring, and note-taking. Social affective strategies include asking for clarification, positive self-talking, and confidence building (Chamot, 1995, p. 14).

Chamot (1995) further explains the concept of listening as a cognitive process in terms of stages where information, in the form of sound, reaches the listener's auditory and/or visual receptors, and is then filtered through the listener's short-term memory, working memory, and long term memory (p. 16). The listener, therefore, selects and interprets information in order to understand it (Vandergrift, 2011). This process, known as Anderson's model of comprehension, intricately describes what happens to information the moment the listener receives it by way of audio or audio-visual means (see fig. 1, p.5). The stages, three in all, are also known as perceptual processing, parsing, and utilization (Goh, 2002, p. 5). The received information is first temporarily stored in short term memory (perception), where only the information associated to the listener's prior knowledge or schema is selected and moved to working memory, "the mind's blackboard" (parsing). This first and second stage are significant to second language teaching and learning because at this stage the listener needs to be aware of strategies in order to handle the information; otherwise, it will be lost forever. Therefore, teachers need to help learners recognize what is relevant from what is not because the goal is for meaningful information to reach long-term memory (Chamot 1995; Rubin, as cited in Mendelsohn & Rubin 1995). Once information reaches the listener's long term memory, it becomes part of either declarative knowledge or procedural knowledge (utilization). Declarative knowledge "includes concepts, vocabulary, and images... [while] procedural knowledge ... includes both physical and cognitive skills and strategies" (Chamot, 1995, p. 16).



Listening as a process, therefore, requires the listener's conscious use of strategies and should involve the parallel interaction between 'bottom-up' and 'top down' processing. This interactive process known as parallel processing requires the learner to use background knowledge (top-down) to interpret meaning and linguistic knowledge (bottom-up) in order to discriminate between familiar sounds. The goal is for the language listener to use parallel processing in order to perceive, interpret, and respond to the information being heard (Lynch & Mendelsohn, 2009, p. 185).

Understanding the process of listening comprehension is important because it gives clues as to what language learners do when they are faced with deciphering aural information. Thus, the need to zero in on what differentiates effective listeners from less effective ones is crucial in the language classroom. There are two questionnaires that are used in helping language learners and their teachers determine the type of learning strategies learners use. These are: 1. The 'Strategy Inventory for Language Learners' —SILL—developed by Rebecca Oxford (1989); and 2. The 'Meta-cognitive Awareness Listening Comprehension Questionnaire'—MALQ—developed by Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal and Tafaghodtari (2006). These two questionnaires are useful because they help students identify their own weaknesses and strengths and help teachers design strategy lessons that are relevant to their students' needs at any particular time. "The SILL questionnaire [for example] measures the frequency with which a student uses memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social language learning strategies" (Oxford, 1990, as cited in Bull & Ma, 2001, p. 172). MALQ as explained in Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal and Tafaghodtari (2006), on the other hand, looks at the metacognitive strategies L2 learners used during listening comprehension. For example, studies incorporating MALQ such as Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari (2010) found "an important difference between more skilled and less skilled listeners [that is] related to metacognition" (p.489). Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari's (2010) study concluded that with the right strategy training, less effective learners can improve their listening skills and achieve parity with the more skilful peers. MALQ is useful in determining the type of strategies effective learners use at different

proficiency levels of language acquisition. Pedagogically, questionnaires such as SILL and MALQ can help teachers achieve students' homogeneity in the language classroom.

### Pedagogical applications

Mendelsohn (1995) calls for a strategic based approach to teaching listening and advises teachers to focus on teaching language listeners how to develop "metastrategic awareness" in order to help students become autonomous learners (p. 134). Mendelsohn's (1995) view of strategy training captures a very concise and explicit L2 listening pedagogy paradigm because his technique focuses on process instead of product. Thus, the focus of language listening in the classroom should not be testing; it should be on practicing listening comprehension through a variety of sources that takes into consideration the proficiency level of each listener, and offers ample opportunities for learning (Mendelsohn, 2001, p. 35). Learning listening, therefore, requires the interactive "orchestration" between metacognitive, cognitive, and socioaffective strategies to facilitate comprehension and to make ... learning more effective (Vandergrift, 2011).

For teachers of L2 listening, it is important to keep in mind specific metastrategic facts, such as the following six suggestions as per Mendelsohn's (1994) strategy-based approach and Rubin and Thompson's (1994) guide to second language teachers (as cited in Chamot, 1995):

Teachers should:

1. Find out what strategies students are using. Ask and record responses;
2. Select one or two strategies found to be missing and identify them by name. Then explicitly explain to students why and when these strategies could be used during the listening process;
3. Model how to use each strategy by incorporating 'think aloud' protocols;
4. Ask students to describe what they heard/observed;
5. Give opportunities for students to practice their listening strategies, and ask them to assess how well they used them by engaging them in discussions.
6. Encourage students to practice their strategies on a variety of tasks on a continuous basis (Chamot, 1995).

1. Find out what strategies students are using. Ask and record responses.

At the beginning, and mid-way in the term, teachers can ask students to complete a strategy analysis. The MALQ or SILL could be used for this purpose. At the beginning these types of questionnaires are useful because it raises students' awareness as to the type of strategies they use.

"Awareness raising" helps students develop autonomy, which should be the objective of a strategy based approach model (Mendelsohn, 1995, Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2009).

2. Select one or two strategies found to be missing and

identify them by name. Then explicitly explain to students why and when these strategies could be used during the listening process.

This suggestion has to take into consideration the type of listening skill students are practicing: perception, parsing, or utilisation. If it is related to perception, for example, not recognizing the words they hear, the problem might be related to lack of prosodic identification. If this is the case, then the listening language teacher would need to plan for authentic listening activities that require students to hear words in chunks instead of trying to identify one word at a time. If the problem is related to parsing, it could mean that students are focusing on the information not understood during the perception phase, and is not able to identify meaning by context. If the problem is related to utilisation, then it might be because the intended message (pragmatics) is not understood even though the individual words make sense (Goh, 2002, p. 9).

### 3. Model how to use each strategy by incorporating 'think aloud'

Modeling is a technique that allows teachers to explicitly show students how a behaviour or activity should be completed. This does not mean students are given the answers, but instead it opens opportunities for teachers to formulate, for example, pre-listening activities that "facilitate the perception and parsing phases of comprehension" (Goh, 2002, p. 28). Hence, during a listening activity, the teacher may play an audio-tape, and 'think aloud' the type of information that facilitates comprehension. Mendelsohn (1994) outlines a set of six questions that "facilitate comprehension: where, when, who, how, what, and why" (p. 81). These questions are meant to help L2 learners identify the SIMT: setting, interpersonal relationships between speakers, mood, and topic of a particular listening task. This strategy is useful because it "greatly enhances the chances of successful predicting, hypothesis formation, and inferencing" (Mendelsohn, 1994, p. 81). So, for example, if the students hear an audio tape where there are sounds of children laughing and children's music playing in the background, they might begin to visualize the setting, the topic, and the mood. They would then be able to narrow down their focus on interpersonal relationships – what the participants are saying. The teacher, of course, would model this activity first before giving students opportunities to practice. This strategy is also useful when students are presented with lexical items familiar to them.

### 4. Ask students to describe what they heard/observed

What L2 students hear and understand might depend on whether the type of utterance was accompanied by specific linguistic, paralinguistic, and/or extralinguistic signals. Linguistics signals might include descriptors such as "syntax, lexis, morphology, phonology" (Mendelsohn, 1994, p. 82), and include the type of register used in the speech (formal, informal). Paralinguistic signals could range from gestures, body language, pauses, rate of speech, and other variables that can add clues as to the SIMT of the utterance. Extralinguistic signals, on the other hand, include "background noise, [and visual signals such as] where something is taking place, and choice of clothes being worn" (Mendelsohn, 1994, p. 83).

### 5. Give opportunities for students to practice their listening strategies, and ask them to assess how well they used them

by engaging them in discussions

Practice is important in a strategy based approach to teaching listening (Mendelsohn, 1994); therefore, teachers cannot rely on only one type of listening task or on assessing listening through traditional test questions as a way of validating comprehension. Some activities to consider are thoroughly described by Goh (2002). These activities incorporate one-way and two-way listening. A one-way listening activity, for example, might be for learners to listen to a story while ordering pictures to create a story board while a two-way activity may require students to listen to a newscast and answer questions in groups related to the story they just heard. However, when designing a listening activity, teachers need to consider the proficiency level of the students as well as the type of pre-listening activities that best facilitates the perceptual processing, parsing, and utilization before, during, and after the listening task (Goh 2002). Ur (1996) explains that listening activities can be categorized by "the types of response they elicit" (p. 25, as cited in Goh, 2002). The type of response, therefore, could be matched to the proficiency level of the learner. Beginner students could work on strategies while matching pictures to audio; intermediate students could follow directions by tracing a route in a map as they listen to instructions; more advanced students could listen to a conversation or speech and pick up from what they hear last and continue the story by using inference. These activities, however, are of no value if teachers do not engage students in discussion since strategy awareness needs to be a continuous process.

6. Encourage students to practice their strategies on a variety of tasks on a continuous basis

Ultimately, students need to be able to become autonomous learners. Therefore, teachers do need to motivate students to use the strategies they have learned, and to recognize the ones that work from the ones that do not work. Strategy awareness tools such as Mendelsohn's (1994) SIMT classification or Lynch's (2009) six descriptors 'macrostrategies' checklist of "Predicting, Monitoring, Responding, Clarifying, Inferencing, and Evaluating" (p. 88) are useful because they foster strategy awareness that support learners autonomy. However, it is important for language teachers to keep in mind that some of the strategies needed for one-way listening tasks are not necessarily the same as in two-way listening. For example, one way listening does not lend itself for strategies that allow interruptions among interlocutors, or to the type of compensation strategies listeners can utilize while waiting to speak. Strategies to determine the main meaning of an utterance, on the other hand, are useful for both one-way and two-way listening tasks. Hence, understanding discourse markers, the stress/unstress system of English, and strategies to activate schemata are needed to understand all types of utterances (Mendelsohn, 1994).

## Conclusion

Studies in learning strategies that focus specifically on L2 listening as a skill are essential to understanding the process of listening. Language teachers, therefore, need to understand that they cannot take a *laissez faire* stand, hoping students will somehow pick up this skills by "osmosis" – any more than any other L2 skill (Mendelsohn, 1984, as cited in Mendelsohn 1994). With planning and continuous practice, language teachers can help their students acquire strategic skills that enhance listening comprehension and develop autonomy.

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