Reflection

1. Think of your experience studying languages. Which of the ideas mentioned in the methods above seem to have influenced your teachers?
2. Which of the ideas do you believe in? Why?

3. Principles for teaching listening

1. **Expose students to different ways of processing information: bottom-up vs. top-down.**

   To understand how people make sense of the stream of sound we all hear, it is helpful to think about how we process the input. A useful metaphor often used to explain reading but equally applicable to listening is “**bottom-up vs. top-down processing**,” proposed by Rumelhart and Ortony (1977) and expanded upon by Chaudron and Richards (1986), Richards (1990), and others. The distinction is based on the way learners attempt to understand what they read or hear. With bottom-up processing, students start with the component parts: words, grammar, and the like. Top-down processing is the opposite. Learners start from their background knowledge, either content **schema** (general information based on previous learning and life experience) or textual schema (awareness of the kinds of information used in a given situation) (See Long, 1989).
The idea shown in Figure 1 is, perhaps, better understood by a metaphor. Imagine a brick wall. If you are standing at the bottom studying the wall brick by brick, you can easily see the details. It is difficult, however, to get an overall view of the wall. If, on the other hand, you’re sitting on the top of the wall, you can easily see the landscape. However, because of distance, you will miss some details. And, of course, the view is very different.

Many students—especially those with years of “school English”—have learned via methods that stress the “parts” of English: vocabulary and grammatical structures. It is not surprising, therefore, that these learners try to process English from the bottom up.

It can be difficult to experience what beginning-level learners go through. It is especially challenging to understand what they experience when listening to an article which you are reading. However, a reading task can be used to understand the nature of bottom-up processing. From there you can imagine the initial challenge of trying to make meaning out of aural input. Try reading the following from right to left.

Figure 1 Bottom-up and top-down processing

you as, time a at word one, slowly English process you When individual each of meaning the catch to easy is it, now doing are the of meaning overall the understand to difficult very is it, however, word passage
You understood the paragraph: When you process English slowly, one word at a time, as you are doing now, it is easy to catch the meaning of each individual word. However, it is very difficult to understand the overall meaning of the passage.

While reading, however, it is likely you felt the frustration of “bottom-up” processing; you had to get each individual part before you could make sense of it. This is similar to what our students experience—and they’re having to wrestle with the meaning in a foreign language. Their previous training in language learning—this bottom-up processing habit—gets in the way of effective listening.

The opposite type of processing, “top-down,” begins with the listener’s life knowledge. Brown (2000) gives this example from a personal experience of buying postcards at an Austrian museum:

I speak no German, but walked up to the counter after having calculated that the postcards would cost sixteen schillings. I gave the clerk a twenty-schilling note, she opened the till, looked in it, and said something in German. As a reflex, I dug in my pocket and produced a one-schilling coin and gave it to her. She smiled and handed me “a five.” I managed the transaction based on my prior knowledge of how one deals with change at a store. In some sense, I didn’t need German. I just needed my life experience.

He had no “bottom-up” resources (vocabulary, grammar) in German, but by making use of previous knowledge, he was able to work out the likely meaning. Schema are abstract notions we possess based on experiences.

It is not possible to replace bottom-up with top-down, and it wouldn’t be desirable to do so even if we could. We need to help learners integrate the two. The following is my own real life example of how top-down and bottom-up processing can integrate: Visiting Rome, I was in the courtyard in front of St. Peter’s Basilica. A woman came up and asked me something in Italian, a language I don’t know. I looked at her with a puzzled expression. She asked a question again, this time simplifying it to one word: “Cappella?” I didn’t know what it meant but repeated, “Cappella?” She asked again, “Sistine Cappella?” Then I understood that she wanted to know if the big church in front of us was the Sistine Chapel. I replied, “No, San Pietro.” (I did know the Italian name of St. Peter’s.) I pointed to a building on the right side of the courtyard and said, “Sistine.” She said, “Grazie,” and walked off toward the Sistine Chapel.

What happened in this short interaction was a combination of bottom-up and top-down processing. Recognizing the single word Sistine told me that cappella must mean chapel. We were standing in front of buildings. She was asking a question about a place. My top-down knowledge of what people might talk about—especially to strangers—said that she must be asking for directions. With a friend, you might comment on the size of the buildings or their beauty or something else, but with a stranger asking for directions or asking someone to
take a picture seemed the only likely topics. Using both bottom-up data (the word, “Sistine”) and the top-down data (likely language function), I was able to understand what she wanted.

In my case, this top-down/bottom-up integration happened by accident. In the classroom, prelistening activities are a good way to make sure it happens. Before listening, learners can, for example, brainstorm vocabulary related to a topic or invent a short dialogue relevant to functions such as giving directions or shopping. In the process, they base their information on their knowledge of life (top-down information) as they generate vocabulary and sentences (bottom-up data). The result is a more integrated attempt at processing. The learners are activating their previous knowledge. This use of the combination of top-down and bottom-up data is also called interactive processing (Peterson, 2001).

As useful and important as prelistening activities are, Buck (1995) criticizes books that “provide twenty minutes of prelistening activities for about three minutes of listening practice. This is unbalanced. We need prelistening activities to do two things: provide a context for interpretation and activate the background knowledge which will help interpretation. Give them enough to do that, and then let them listen.”

A second word of caution is suggested by Tsui and Fullilove (1998). Learners need to make use of their top-down knowledge but keep reevaluating information. If they lock into an interpretation too early, they may miss information that contradicts it.

Using an example of a news story in which firefighters were aided in saving a housing estate by the direction a wind was blowing, they used a passage that started, “Firemen had to work fast …” Learners needed to answer the following comprehension question: What saved the estate from burning down?

Although the wind was the key to what saved the estate, many learners relied on their top-down schema (Firefighters put out fires.) and the fact that...
the story started with the mention of firemen working fast. They incorrectly identified the firefighters as the answer. Tsui and Fullilove suggest that learners need specific work on bottom-up processing to become less reliant on guessing from context.

Reflection

Go back to the list you wrote on page 24. Choose one example of something you listened to.

1. What types of background information (both top-down and bottom-up data) helped you make sense of the information?

2. Would a person just learning your language have been able to understand the things you heard? If you had been using a recording of those listening items in a language class, what kind of prelistening task could your students have done to activate their top-down and bottom-up schema?

3. Think about the examples of buying postcards in Austria and giving directions in Italy. Have you had a similar experience, either in a foreign language or in an unfamiliar situation in your own country?

2. Expose students to different types of listening.

There’s an adage in teaching listening that says: It’s not just what they are listening to. It’s what they are listening for. Listeners need to consider their purpose. They also need to experience listening for different reasons.

Any discussion of listening tasks has to include a consideration of types of listening. We will consider tasks as well as texts. When discussing listening, text refers to whatever the students are listening to, often a recording. For the purpose of this discussion, consider the following text:

Example 1

A: Let’s go outside. We could go for a walk. Maybe play tennis.

B: Look out the window. It’s raining.

A: Raining. Oh, no.

(Helgesen & Brown, 1994)

This is a simple conversation. Even near beginners would probably understand the meaning. What they understand, however, depends on what they need to know and do.

The most common type of listening exercise in many textbooks is listen-
ing for specific information. This usually involves catching concrete information including names, time, specific language forms, etc. In our “Let’s go outside” example, asking the students to report on the type of weather is a simple “listening for specific information task.”

At other times, students try to understand in a more general way. This is global or gist listening. In the classroom, this often involves tasks such as identifying main ideas, noting a sequence of events and the like. In our example, it could involve a very general question such as, “What’s the main topic?” or, if more task support is needed, giving the learners a few choices (friends, sports, the weather) and having them choose the main topic.

Listening for specific information and listening for gist are two important types of listening, but, of course, they don’t exist in isolation. We move between the two. For example, many students have been subjected to long, less than exciting lectures. They listen globally to follow what the speaker is talking about. Then they hear something that seems important (“This sounds like it will be on the test!”) and focus in to get the specific information.

Another critical type of listening is inference. This is “listening between the lines”—that is, listening for meaning that is implied but not stated directly. In our “Let’s go outside” example, we can ask, “Do the speakers go outside or not?” Of course they don’t. It’s raining. The text doesn’t say that directly. It doesn’t need to. Learners can infer the information. Inference is different from gist and specific information listening in that it often occurs at the same time as some other types of listening. The learners’ main task might well be to catch specifics or to understand a text generally when they come across information that isn’t stated directly. Because inference requires somewhat abstract thinking, it is a higher level skill. However, it is a mistake to put off working on inference until learners are at an intermediate level or above. Indeed, it is often at the beginning level when students lack much vocabulary, grammar, and functional routines that students tend to infer the most.

3. Teach a variety of tasks.

If learners need experience with different types of listening texts, they also need to work with a variety of tasks. Since learners do the tasks as they listen, it is important that the task itself doesn’t demand too much production of the learner. If, for example, a beginning level learner hears a story and is asked to write a summary in English, it could well be that the learner understood the story but is not yet at the level to be able to write the summary. Tasks that require too much production can’t be done or can’t be done in real time—and if students get the answer wrong, you don’t know if they really didn’t understand, or if they did understand but didn’t know how to respond, or if they understood at the time but forgot by the time they got to the exercise.
In this example of a summary task based on a story, it may be better to have a task such as choosing the correct summary from two or three choices. Alternatively, the learner could number pictures or events in the order they occurred or identify pictures that match the text.

Another reason for short, focused tasks is that listening weighs on a person’s working memory. According to Just and Carpenter’s capacity hypothesis (1992), when people are listening in a second or foreign language, they are having to process not only the meaning of what they are listening to but also the language itself. This can lead to an overload. You may have seen the well-known Far Side cartoon that shows a schoolboy raising his hand and asking the teacher, “May I be excused? My brain is full.” What he is experiencing is running out of memory capacity. If the task itself makes the listening even more complex, the learners are simply unable to understand, remember, and do what they need to do. (See Lynch, 1998.)

All of this doesn’t mean, however, that we need to limit ourselves and our students to only a few receptive “check the box” and “number the pictures” exercise types. As mentioned before, half of the time people are speaking is spent listening. At times, students need experience with production tasks. Our students need exposure to a wide range of tasks in order for them to deal with different types of texts and respond in different ways. Incorporating different tasks also increases the students’ interest. If listening work in class follows too narrow a pattern, it is easy for the learners—and the teacher—to lose interest.

Go back to the things you listed on page 24.

1. What types of listening were you doing? (specific information, gist, inference)
2. What was your task for each item? What did you need to do? How did you need to respond?

4. Consider text, difficulty, and authenticity.

In addition to the task, the text itself determines how easy or difficult something is to understand. Spoken language is very different from written language. It is more redundant, full of false starts, rephrasing, and elaborations. Incomplete sentences, pauses, and overlaps are common. Learners need exposure to and practice with natural sounding language.

When learners talk about text difficulty, the first thing many mention is speed. Indeed, that can be a problem. But the solution is usually not to give them unnaturally slow, clear recordings. Those can actually distort the way
the language sounds. A more useful technique is to simply put pauses between phrases or sentences. As Rost (2002, p. 145) points out, “By pausing the spoken input (the tape or the teacher) and allowing some quick intervention and response, we in effect slow down the listening process to allow the listeners to monitor their listening more closely.”

Speed, of course, is not the only variable. Brown (1995) talks about “cognitive load” and describes six factors that increase or decrease the ease of understanding:

- The number of individuals or objects in a text (e.g., More voices increase difficulty.)
- How clearly the individuals or objects are distinct from one another (e.g., A recording with a male voice and a female voice is easier than one with two similar male voices or two similar female voices.)
- Simple, specific spatial relationships are easier to understand than complex ones. (e.g., In a recording giving directions, information like *turn right at the bank* is easier to understand than *go a little way on that street.*)
- The order of events (e.g., It is easier when the information given follows the order it happened in, as opposed to a story that includes a flashback about events that happened earlier.)
- The number of inferences needed (e.g., Fewer are easier than more.)
- The information is consistent with what the listener already knows (e.g., Hearing someone talk about a film you have seen is easier to understand than hearing the same type of conversation about one you haven’t seen.)

Any discussion of listening text probably needs to deal with the issue of *authentic texts*. Virtually no one would disagree that texts students work with should be realistic. However, some suggest that everything that students work with should be authentic. Day and Bamford (1998, p. 53) go so far as to refer to this as “the cult of authenticity.” However, the issue of authenticity isn’t as simple as it sounds. Most of the recordings that accompany textbooks are made in recording studios. And recordings not made in the studio are often not of a usable quality.

You could ask what is authentic and natural anyway? We have already touched on the issue of speed. What is natural speed? Some people speak quickly, some more slowly. The average for native speakers of English seems to be 165-180 words per minute (wpm), but sometimes it jumps to 275 wpm. Even native speakers can get lost at that speed (Rubin, 1994).

With children learning their first language, we simplify (*motherese*). The advocates of “authentic only” would seem to deny this comprehensible input to foreign language learners, who, in many cases, lack that comprehension/acquisition rich environment that L1 learners enjoy.

When people think about authenticity in listening materials, they are usu-
ally considering the input. Brown and Menasche (1993) suggest looking at two aspects of authenticity: the task and the input.

They suggest this breakdown:

1. **Task authenticity**
   - **simulated**: modeled after a real-life; nonacademic task such as filling in a form
   - **minimal/incidental**: checks understanding, but in a way that isn’t usually done outside of the classroom; numbering pictures to show a sequence of events or identifying the way something is said are examples

2. **Input authenticity**
   - **genuine**: created only for the realm of real life, not for classroom, but used in language teaching
   - **altered**: no meaning change, but the original is no longer as it was (glossing, visual resetting, pictures or colors adapted)
   - **adapted**: created for real life (words and grammatical structures changed to simplify the text)
   - **simulated**: written by the author as if the material is genuine; many genuine characteristics
   - **minimal/incidental**: created for the classroom; no attempt to make the material seem genuine

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**Reflection**

1. In your experience as a language learner, what kinds of listening have you found easy? What has made it easy?
2. What has been difficult? Why?
3. What listening have you done that was authentic? What wasn’t?
4. What listening activities have been authentic? Which ones haven’t been?
5. Children read kids’ books. They are “authentic” children’s literature but very different from what adults read. Does this idea apply to listening materials in a foreign language? What is authentic? For whom?
5. Teach listening strategies.

Learning strategies are covered elsewhere in this book. However, in considering listening, it is useful to note the items Rost (2002, p. 155) identifies as strategies that are used by successful listeners.

- **Predicting:** Effective listeners think about what they will hear. This fits into the ideas about prelistening mentioned earlier.
- **Inferring:** It is useful for learners to “listen between the lines.”
- **Monitoring:** Good listeners notice what they do and don’t understand.
- **Clarifying:** Efficient learners ask questions (What does ___ mean? You mean ___ ?) and give feedback (I don’t understand yet.) to the speaker.
- **Responding:** Learners react to what they hear.
- **Evaluating:** They check on how well they have understood.

1. Go back to your list on page 24. Choose one example of something you listened to. Imagine that you were using a recording of that in a classroom listening lesson. Give five ways that learners could include the ideas on Rost’s list of strategies of successful listeners.

2. Think of your own experience as a language learner. What listening strategies have you used? List them. Which have been effective? Which haven’t?

4. Classroom techniques and tasks

In this section, we will consider classroom activities and a variety of textbook exercises that make use of the above principles. We will also look at ways to modify textbook activities that don’t already include the ideas.

**Dictation with a difference** For many teachers, listening for specific information means dictation. Dictation as it is usually done presents some problems because it is almost completely bottom-up—students need to catch every word. In our native language we don’t process every word. So dictation is often asking students to do something in a foreign language that is unnatural and very difficult even in the first language. A related problem is that, since dictation is a “word level” exercise, the learners don’t need to think about overall meaning.