A Guide for the Teaching of Second Language Listening

David J. Mendelsohn and Joan Rubin (eds.) (1995)
San Diego, CA: Dominie Press
Pp. 236
ISBN 1-56270-404-6 (paper)
US $17.95

Listening has come to be recognized as an active rather than a passive skill and its importance acknowledged in the acquisition of language. With the emergence of video and multimedia as teaching tools, it is being given renewed attention.

This book is a collection of essays by Canadian, British and American applied linguists, some of them well-known in the field of second and foreign language teaching and learning. It is mostly directed at teachers in training and therefore aims at providing the necessary background to help them become more effective teachers of listening. It reflects the growing need to include the skill of listening as one of the fundamental components of any language course. As Joan Rubin points out in the introduction, listening presents the peculiarity of making "heavy online processing demands" on foreign and second language learners because they "must store information in short-term memory at the same time as they are working to understand the information" (p. 8). In other words, the difficulty of listening lies in the necessity to process input quickly as, contrary to reading, there is not always a "second chance" to get the message right. Rubin distinguishes between background knowledge and procedural knowledge in listening and this distinction is used in the plan of the book.

The first part is devoted to descriptions of the listening process. In the first article, Anna Uhl Chamot reviews the metacognitive, cognitive, social and affective strategies used by learners for listening. She then describes and discusses some experimental studies on the effectiveness of these strategies, ending with a number of practical classroom recommendations for becoming aware of the strategies used and introducing new ones.

The second article, by Irene Thompson, deals with assessment of listening comprehension, a "somewhat neglected area" in the context of designing tests. She lists and discusses factors to be considered: aim of the test, scales of ability, predictive validity, differences between reading and listening tests, and various aspects of listening to be taken into account, such as orality, vocabulary, sentence structure, elaborations and redundancies, and speech rate pauses. She goes on to discuss the part played by memory and mental operations such as inferencing, as well as the possible types of responses. This is a good, basic, comprehensive article on the subject.

The third article draws attention to some of the parameters that make listening comprehension difficult. Addressing these difficulties should be a priority for a teacher to make listening successful. Gillian Brown’s exposition of the question is remarkable for its clarity and its original way of tackling a problem. She makes common sense remarks in an appealingly orderly fashion.

Academic listening is given rather a lot of space in this collection, with three articles on the topic. Craig Chaudron ends the first part by describing the various styles in academic listening, its components (rate of speech, non-verbal factors, cultural/background content), and learner behavior when faced with the specific difficulties inherent to this type of listening.

The second part of the book contains recommendations, suggestions, and guidelines for better listening and teaching. Judy Gilbert sees comprehension as related to pronunciation training. She presents "various aspects of pronunciation which have serious consequences for listening comprehension" (p. 97), with an emphasis on rhythm and melody at the word, thought and sentence levels, and suggests techniques to address these points. "Pronunciation work should concentrate on the way English uses certain sound distinctions, rhythm and pitch to alert listeners to significant grammar and discourse features that are used to keep listeners on track with speakers. Practice with these aspects of pronunciation can help listening as well as intelligibility" (p. 109).

Gary Buck’s article focuses on how to become a good listening teacher. This succinct, clear overview would have been better placed at the beginning of the book, as an introduction to the subject. Buck starts with the nature of spoken language, and follows this with common-sense practical advice, a catalogue of general ideas. It is sometimes condescending, as when the author advises us to choose interesting texts or claims that the teacher is the best source of listening material.

David Mendelsohn defines a strategy-based approach to listening comprehension in the context of designing a course. He indicates a number of such strategies, including raising students’ and teachers’ awareness of the use of those strategies.

Arguing that the use of video leads to improved listening comprehension, Joan Rubin examines video’s contribution to the development of competence in listening skills. She analyzes the components of a video document and suggests activities to facilitate comprehension.

The last two articles concentrate on academic listening. Tony Lynch deals with second language in seminars and the demands they make on listeners, which may hinder communication. He suggests that students should be encouraged to voice their difficulties so as to re-orient the discourse. Joan Morley tackles the question of the growing demand for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) on American campuses and the ways the problem has been addressed in the University of Michigan program.
All the articles end with extensive bibliographies and study questions that will help beginning teachers make sense of and use what they have read. The comprehensive index should also prove useful for teachers who want to see if the particular questions they are interested in are dealt with or not.

There are many redundancies in the book (academic listening, the components of spoken language, the differences between reading and listening), as is the case with most collections of articles when authors write without knowing what the others are doing. There are also some startling omissions. The conditions for listening (language labs, multimedia, tape-recorder or video for the whole class) are never discussed, nor is the development of self-access centers, which are particularly well-suited for listening because of the individualization of the tasks. Many of the articles draw on already established findings; few break new ground or present new research. The seasoned teacher will hardly find new ideas in these pages.

These reservations notwithstanding, this is a book in which budding teachers will find more than enough information to get properly started on their "listening course."

Nicole Decure
Toulouse III University, France
decure@cict.fr