

Listen Up!

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Among the four language skills, the one we, as teachers forget most and cover least in class is listening. Why is this the “forgotten skill”? One of the reasons is that it is not as observable or measurable as the other language skills. Another reason is that the teaching field does not use a taxonomy as widely as it uses descriptions and classifications for the other language skills. And yet another reason is that we are living in a highly “visual” Western culture in which the auditory channel is not used as often as the visual channel for presenting messages.

We actually lack a conceptual framework of listening as a language skill. This is attested to by experts such as Richards and Byrnes, who mention that there is little research and theory looking into this skill, as well as little material on teaching implications. A typical case is to find some kind of “expansion” on theory about reading (as the other “receptive” language skill), or to find an “expansion” of first language listening.

As a second language teacher and teacher trainer, it would be practical to first review some authors who deal with listening in order to share a common theoretical framework, to later suggest some implications into instructional design and procedures. The authors to be presented are Lund, 1990, Richards 1982-1987, Porter and Roberts 1987, Byrnes 1984 and Rivers 1981.

Lund (1990) presents the concepts of *listener function* and *listener response*. Listener function is defined as “the aspects of the message the listener attempts to process”, that is, the listener’s intention or purpose to listen to a piece of information. There are six different functions (what we do with language) that are important to first separate them from techniques, tasks, process skills, etc.

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Lund's six listener functions:

1. Identification
2. Orientation
3. Main idea comprehension
4. Detail comprehension
5. Full comprehension
6. Replication

Let me explain further:

1. Identification: "Listeners focus on one aspect of the language rather than on the content of the message." This function is typically identified with the ACTFL 2² "novice level". Here students may recognize or discriminate vocabulary of grammar items, minimal pairs in pronunciation or categories among others.

Examples: Students...

- a) recognize vocabulary categories and underline with different colors.
- b) check map for a route
- c) distinguish meaning from given minimal pairs.
- d) circle an item that does not belong to a given category of items.
- e) distinguish which phrases are in simple present and which are in simple past.

2. Orientation. Listeners can establish essential facts about a message. In doing so, they can distinguish external factors, such as participants, their roles, the situation or context, the general topic, the feeling or the emotional tone. In this function, the listeners are getting prepared for processing the message.

Examples: Students...

- a) identify the topic of a news program.
- b) determine the place where a situation is taking place.
- c) establish who is upset in a conversation, and in some cases, establish the general reason for that reaction or feeling.

3. Main idea comprehension. This is the first function to involve comprehension of the message, based on recognition of vocabulary or visual cues, among others. (This is the cut-off point between Novice and Intermediate Levels.)

² ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines. Hastings-on-Hudson, New York. ACTFL, 1983 (Revised 1985).

Examples: Students...

- a) get the general idea of the message.
- b) follow/draw directions to get to a place.
- c) understand what product is being advertised.
- d) get the main points of a message.
- e) are able to give a solution to a problem posed in the message.
- f) summarize main points.

4. Detail comprehension. The listener wants to get specific information out of a text. This may be separate from getting the main idea (when you know what specific details you are listening for). The more details students are able to grasp, the more advanced they are considered to be.

Examples: Students...

- a) follow precise instructions (manual type).
- b) get specific information to prepare for a trip.
- c) Decide whether going camping is possible after listening to a weather forecast.
- d) get three selling points for a product.
- e) grasp three points for and three points against a specific controversial topic.

5. Full comprehension. This is when listeners are able to comprehend both the main ideas and the details of a message. Their comprehension involves the whole text, not just parts of it. (This is mentioned to be the goal of Listening Proficiency).

Examples: Students...

- a) take detailed notes of a message (lectures, class, video, etc.)
- b) outline a message.
- c) select the best conclusion for a fully understood incident.
- d) choose the best ad and justify their choice.

6. Replication. Listeners will be involved in repeating the message in the same or a different way. This does not imply a higher level of proficiency, since concentration goes into reproducing a text with accuracy rather than understanding its content.

Examples: Students...

- a) take traditional dictation in class.
- b) participate in a choral repetition of a message.
- c) transcribe a message.
- d) take a message word for word as for a phone call, a recipe, etc.
- e) transcribe a script from an audio or audio-visual message.

As one can infer, a function will define how a listener/learner approaches a message. This will, in turn suggest what we as teachers can derive from it, such as giving a text with a specific learning objective or listening purpose paired with a listening function. When we have this combination, we have a Listening Task (Lund 1990).

Now let us move on to Lund's listener response concept. Listener response is "what the listener does to demonstrate successful listening" (Lund 1990).

Lund's nine listener responses:

- | | |
|-----------------|----------------|
| 1. Doing | 6. Extending |
| 2. Choosing | 7. Conversing |
| 3. Transferring | 8. Duplicating |
| 4. Answering | 9. Modeling |
| 5. Condensing | |

This aspect of responses is very useful in the teaching field. We know that thinking (cognition) is not something overt that we can manage and observe in our ESL/EFL classes. But we also know that the order of things would be thinking-responding. Now, responding is something overt and manageable in class. It can be organized, sequenced, observed, and evaluated. Therefore, our learner's responses are behaviors or products in the teaching-learning process. In such a process we would have to start including not just specific learning objectives, but also specific learner responses for given texts. These, according to Lund, and attested by experiencing the process, can guarantee our listeners' functions, which in turn guarantee their listening performance in tasks from a textbook or material assigned to us (which also would tend to enhance motivation). This can be illustrated with the figure below.

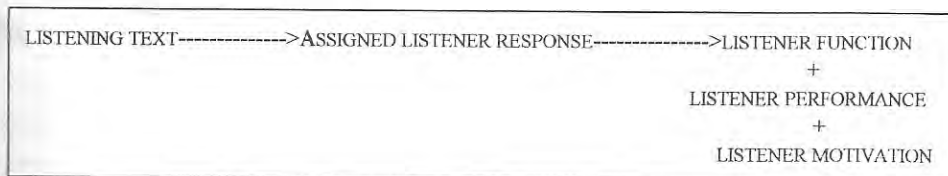


Figure 1

A brief definition and examples of Lund's nine listener responses follows:

1. Doing: Listener responds physically, imitating, following direction or building something (TPR-Total Physical Response-is based on this concept).

Examples: Students...

- a) imitate a game from a video.
- b) learn a computer program from an instructional video.
- c) imitate or follow directions to build a model house.

2. Choosing: Listener chooses from alternatives.

Examples: Students...

- a) pick up objects according to categories.
- b) match pictures with characters in a story.
- c) match graphs with given data.

3. Transferring: Listener transforms a given message into a different type of message.

Examples: Students...

- a) transfer data given to a graph or chart.
- b) trace a rout on a map.
- c) fill in an information chart in which the categories correspond to *what*, *where*, *who* and *what for* questions.

4. Answering: Listener responds to questions or information gaps or requirements in a given situation.

Examples: Students...

- a) give answers to *who*, *what*, *where*, or *why* questions after an incident.
- b) fill in a form that answers the basic identification questions about a character.

5. Condensing: Listener reduces an original message.

Examples: Students...

- a) make an outline of a message.
- b) write a summary of a message.
- c) write an abstract of a text.
- d) prepare a script for a movie preview.

6. Extending. Listener gives additional information using a message as the basis for it.

Examples: Students...

- a) provide a logical ending for an event.
- b) give a solution to a problem.
- c) fill in a story internally.
- d) make predictions based on a text.

7. Duplicating: Listener repeats a message in another modality.

Examples: Students...

- a) take a dictation.
- b) participate in a choral/oral repetition.
- c) transcribe a script.

8. Modeling: Listener takes a message as a model to then imitate it in a similar situation.

Examples: Given a model, students similarly...

- a) order a meal.
- b) ask for directions.
- c) give directions to build something.
- d) give a recipe.

9. Conversing: Listener engages actively in a conversation, controlling the message (not just in a question-answer exchange).

Examples: Students...

- a) participate in an open-ended conversation.

Lund suggests we should, as teachers, learn to make various considerations at different proficiency levels with different groups of students.

FUNCTION (FIRST CONSIDERATION BEFORE MESSAGE)	+	LISTENING TO MESSAGE OR TEXT	+	RESPONSE (AFTER MESSAGE CONSIDERATION)
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Figure 2

In his article "A taxonomy for teaching second language listening" (1990), Lund presents a Function-Response Matrix which is a very helpful tool for ESL/EFL teachers. This matrix is reproduced in Appendix 1.

Other experts also deal with listening. Let us look at Jack C. Richards' contribution in "Listening comprehension: approach, design, procedure" (1982). When he presents the first aspect (approach), Richards has very interesting considerations about some message factors and some medium factors which can further help us in the teaching of English.

Message Factors

Listeners use L2 knowledge plus world knowledge in order to interpret a message. With these, they break utterances into segments (effective chunks come from grammatical competence and plausible, logical chunks come from knowledge of the world). Listeners can better understand a message if the situation and participants as well as their intentions and purposes are clear to them. In addition, listeners use background knowledge and schemata to anticipate, interpret, and infer messages they listen to.

To sum up Richard's theoretical framework, we can consider the following figure:

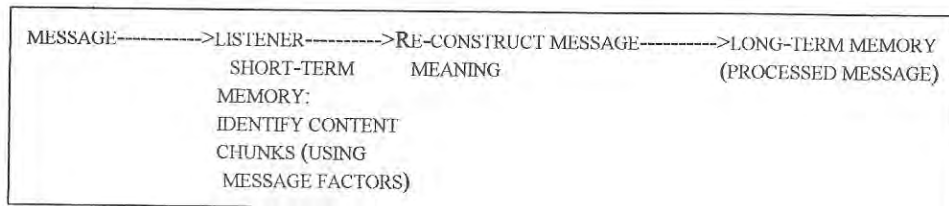


Figure 3

Medium Factors

For Richards there is a binomial which has to be considered and that is

LISTENING <-----> SPEAKING
 (Occurs in different forms: Nine factors occur in this combination)

Each of the nine factors can be described as follows:

1. Clausal basis of speech. The spoken discourse unit is the clause, not the sentence.
2. Reduced forms. Slurring or disregarding unimportant words is a regular phenomenon. The articulation of C - V depends on the position or phonetic environment; assimilation and reduction are very common; there is deletion of understood parts of the message.

3. Ungrammatical forms. These are common when one needs to deliver a message quickly and efficiently.
4. Pausing and speech errors. We know that false starts and hesitations as well as corrections occur in delivering a message. There can be silent pauses or filled pauses (filled with “well, kind of, I mean”, and other similar phrases). Some speakers make long, frequent pauses, others use fewer or shorter ones.
5. Rate of delivery. This has to do with the speed (fast-slow) of delivery. It is also combined with pausing.
6. Rhythm and stress. In this case we have to consider that English has a distinctive rhythm and stress (It is a stress-timed language). Words may occur in stressed, mildly stressed or unstressed forms, whether they are new or familiar words for the listener.
7. Cohesive devices. In order to deliver a cohesive message, there are forms used that are not as strict and “correct” as the ones used in written language.
8. Information content. A message is formed/constructed with both the listener and speaker taking active roles, taking turns, and giving indications of where the topic is heading in a live conversation.
9. Interactive. In the speaker-listener interaction, both verbal and non-verbal information is relevant, as well as the degree of formality or informality they use.

With the previous enumeration of factors, we can easily see that the processes involved in listening-speaking are quite different from the ones involved in the written language.

Richards goes further to explain how this information should be used as the EFL/ESL teacher designs his/her lessons. But simultaneously, Richards gives us a list of micro-skills, which he divides into “conversational” and “academic” skills. Richard’s list of listening skills is included in Appendix 2.

As is typical of Richard’s treatment of design, he helps language teachers plan and “operationalize” instructional objectives and learning experiences to specifically target listening in the teaching of L2 to avoid having a “forgotten skill”. In this process four steps are considered essential, namely:

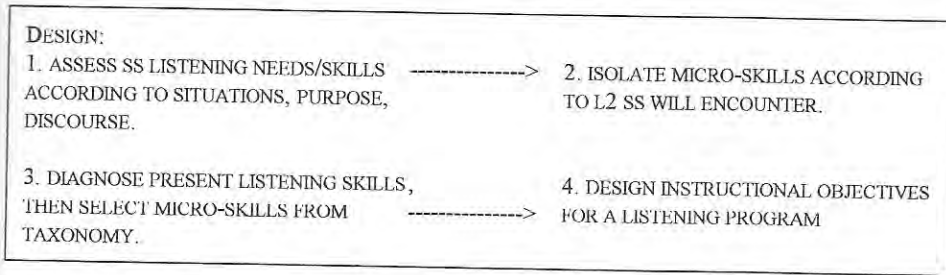


Figure 4

With these suggestions for the design of a listening program, it is apparent that we, as ESL/EFL teachers, should give our students real opportunities to acquire specific listening skills and a listening proficiency, which is quite different from just letting our students be “exposed” to L2.

Now, if we look at Lund’s points of view about designing our teaching to develop proficiency in listening, we can see that underlying his theory is the idea that we learn by doing. Learning occurs as a result of experience, not mere exposure. This is indeed a key idea for the teaching of the “forgotten skill”.

We should also consider other aspects, for example, letting students have a wide range of combinations of listener functions and listener responses based on Lund’s Listening Matrix. An interesting test is to observe students’ progress in these combinations, monitoring their transference, which has a real place if we plan our teaching with Lund’s taxonomy in mind. As students progress they build up their confidence and perform better, and if the tasks help them progress further, then we can actually talk about developing listening proficiency, as opposed to taking listening as a part of the whole, which develops who knows how internally throughout the teaching of L2. With Lund’s and Richard’s taxonomies we, as designers of the teaching-learning process can plan for the transference of familiar function-responses with new messages and topics and/or the transference of new function-responses into old messages and topics.

As with other learning, it is advisable to build “higher level” functions and responses on “lower level” ones when developing specific lessons, while at the syllabus level or between periods, it would be highly beneficial for students to have the whole variety included.

Together with Byrnes (1984), Omaggio (1986) and Richards (1982), it is recommended to verify students' previous experience with both topics and listener functions and micro-skills, combining these with the activation of schemata and background knowledge. This will constitute a real "pre-listening stage". The advantage for us as teachers of functions, responses and micro-skills is that they can be diagnosed, incorporated into specific instructional objectives, taught and evaluated. And most of all, they can be learned.

To sum up, Lund and Richards present us with a "functional-experienced based approach" to the teaching of listening.

Here I would like to include Rivers' idea about the design of listening tasks (1981), which is very logical and clear at this point. Her design includes the following elements:

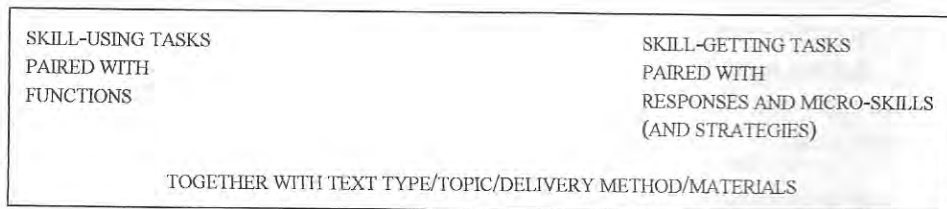


Figure 5

Rivers suggests we first plan for the proficiency level we want to achieve, establishing this as the instructional objective at the top, then plan in a top-down design in which the elements mentioned above are systematically incorporated.

Now let us consider the analysis of Porter and Roberts (1987). In their work entitled "Authentic listening activities", they present the discrepancy between "real language" and "authentic language". For them, "real language" is the language not intended or made specifically for the teaching of an L2, while "authentic language" is a language intended for teaching. The authors pose the problem of a mismatch between the language we listen to and the language our students listen to; also, there is a mismatch between the language students listen to and the language we ask them to produce. Why is this so? According to the authors, the main reason for this is that listening was considered "a channel" through which the other skills were taught, and not as a real skill to be developed and learned. With this we can also explain

why there is little transfer from the language learned in the classroom and the language "in the real world". What do Porter and Roberts propose as a solution for this problem? Their position is to expose students to authentic language, which should be both "real" and "authentic" under their definition. No differentiation between these two should be made. Students should be exposed to and taught to develop guessing, anticipation, prediction and purpose strategies in class and to then be able to transfer those strategies into real life listening.

Without dealing specifically with the use of "authentic language" according to various authors, we can consider the following model summarized from Porter and Roberts (1987).

ACTIVITIES (INPUT)	PROCESSES (LISTENING ITSELF)	RESULTANT BEHAVIOR
<i>LISTENING TO PHONE CONVERSATIONS, WEATHER FORECASTS, EAVESDROPPING, FACE-TO-FACE CONVERSATION, ETC.</i>	<i>WHAT DO SS LISTEN TO? WHY?</i>	<i>WHAT DO SS DO AFTERWARDS?</i>

Figure 6

According to Porter and Roberts, we ought to expose students to a variety of authentic language in authentic ways.

Regarding materials conducive to our listening goals, students should be in contact with materials that are as authentic as possible. It is advisable to consider whether listening is difficult "in tasks or in texts". Lund says it is good to ask, "how can I use this text?" rather than asking ourselves "when can I use this text?" At the same time, Richards provides us with a checklist, developed as a practical instrument for us to make better decisions when evaluating teaching materials. This checklist is reproduced in Appendix 3.

As was stated at the beginning of this review, EFL/ESL teachers usually lack a solid, clear framework for targeting and developing listening as a skill in a teaching-learning process. Several studies on listening have been considered here in order to provide teachers with some fundamentals about the skill which is not explicitly and thoroughly taught in typical English courses. Moreover, given the taxonomies proposed, and the design and

teaching implications these may have for the teaching of English, the author hopes better decisions can be made and renewed points of view can be brought into the teaching of the "forgotten skill", that of listening.

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Appendix 1
Lund's Function-Response Matrix for Listening (Lund, 1990)

Function-Response	Identification	Orientation	Main Idea Comp.	Detail Comp.	Full Comp.	Replication
Doing						
Choosing						
Transferring						
Answering						
Condensing						
Extending						
Duplicating						
Modeling						
Conversing						

Appendix 2
Taxonomy of Listening Skills by Richards (1982)

Conversational (Ability to...)	Academic (Lectures) (Ability to...)
1. Retain chunks for short time	1. Identify purpose, scope of lecture
2. Discriminate different sounds of L2	2. Identify, follow topic of
3. Recognize word stress	3. Identify relationships (ideas)
4. Recognize rhythm of L2	4. Identify discourse markers in lecture
5. Recognize stress/intonation as signals	5. Infer relationships
6. Recognize stressed/unstressed words	6. Recognize jargon
7. Recognize reduced forms of words	7. Deduce meaning from context
8. Recognize word boundaries	8. Recognize cohesion markers
9. Recognize word order in L2	9. Recognize intonation as a signal
10. Recognize key vocab. words in topics	10. Follow different lecture modes
11. Assimilate accents, speed	11. Guess meaning from context
12. Recognize different parts of speech	12. Follow different styles of lectures
13. Recognize syntactic patterns	13. Recognize irrelevant information
14. Recognize cohesive devices in oral L2	14. Recognize nonverbal language
15. Recognize communicative functions of utterances in different situations	15. Knowledge of classroom-lecture conventions
16. Reconstruct situations, goals, participants, procedures	16. Recognize instructional/learner tasks (e.g., warning, advice, suggestions, instructions)

Appendix 3

Richard's' evaluating activities / exercises checklist (Richards' 1987)

Checklist items:	YES	NO	Comment
a) Content validity-Does it practice L/C or something else (reading, general information?)			
b) L/C or memory?-T/F after message is not L/C but recall of information			
c) Purposefulness and transferability-Is it "Classroom English" of real-life language and authentic listening?			
d) Testing or teaching? Is the activity really developing skills or does it assume some already mastered pre-requisites? Pre-listening prepares for the task; "cold turkey listening" is likely a testing activity.			
e) Authenticity-Is it aimed at preparing SS for real-life listening?			
Exercise Types:			
f) Mode: dialogue / monologue			
g) Support: scripted / unscripted			
h) Rate of delivery: fast / slow			
i) Level of vocabulary: high / low			
j) Topic: familiar / unfamiliar			
Other			