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## Background

Listening comprehension is a little understood cognitive process (Dandonoli & Henning, 1990), and a very complex one, especially for learners of a second language. Essentially, it involves the way in which the phonological, lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic features of speech are perceived and understood by a listener. This article proposes to examine various aspects of listening comprehension, and then to discuss the first phase of a research study about aural comprehension, a preliminary analysis of the findings of a communicative listening test based upon teacher talk.

The complexity of the underlying components of aural comprehension according to Chastain (1976), requires that the listener must be able, in an ascending order, to: "(1) discriminate between the significant sound and intonation patterns of the language; (2) perceive an oral message; (3) keep the communication in mind while it is being processed; and finally (4) understand the contained message" (pp 81-82). Further elaborating the notion of perception, Bowen, Madsden, and Hilferty (1985) explain that the listener needs to "segment the stream of sounds, group them into lexical and syntactic units (words, phrases, and sentences) and understand the message they convey" (p. 74).

The understanding and storing of meaning from a schema-theoretic perspective, one which also regards individuals as active processors of speech, or to use the term now common in our computer age, linguistic input, is described by Long (1989) as follows:

> Learners . . . construct meaning during the comprehension process by segmenting and chunking input (i.e., that which they hear or read) into meaningful units, actively matching the results, known as intake, with their existing linguistic and world knowledge, and filling in the gaps with logical

guesses. Intake is then recoded and stored in long term memory in the form of propositions, or basic meaning forms.(p 32)

The important role of listening in second language learning has also been observed by many language teachers and theorists, particularly its contribution to the development of oral proficiency (Asher, 1977; Krashen, 1982; Nord, 1981; Potovsky, 1981; and Winitz, 1981). In addition, it is an ability greatly influenced by anxiety which contributes to its being difficult to acquire as learners work toward proficiency in a foreign language.

Still, in comparison with other language skills, listening comprehension has been neglected as a topic of fundamental research (Long, 1989) and as part of the foreign language curriculum (Larson & Jones, 1989). It is only recently, according to Brown and Yule (1983), that listening comprehension has been seriously considered by language teachers. It was assumed learning to listen in the target language would occur without instruction. This, unfortunately, often fails to happen.

Reasons for the lack of incidential listening comprehension in a foreign language (FL) classroom, pointed out by Ellis (1984) and others, is the tendency for some foreign language teachers not to use the target language in the classroom. For example, in an extensive study of FL teacher talk at the University of California, Los Angeles, in second quarter and more advanced classes, thirteen different language classrooms were studied (Duffy & Polio, 1990). Results indicated a wide range of foreign language usage in the UCLA classes, from 10-100%, with over half of the observed teachers using the target language less than ninety percent of the time. In interviews, some teachers expressed doubt that students would understand their explanations. Duffy and Polio (1990) recommend the following to teachers with similar fears:

> Modifying the L2 in the following ways can help learners comprehend: (1) repeat utterances, (2) slow down the speed of discourse; (3) paraphrase; (4) simplify syntax and vocabulary; and (5) use high frequency patterns

and routines, including common classroom management expressions which may be explicitly taught from the beginning. (pp 162-163)

Brown and Yule (1983), on the other hand, discuss the adverse affects on listening comprehension of language teacher talk modifications Because teachers often use a formal public style, speaking more clearly and slowly than one finds in normal conversation, students can understand only clear and slow speech; they also learn to speak in this clear and slow way. When students hear only one teacher's accent, according to these authors, they have difficulty understanding other speakers.

A particular difficulty for many Mexican university English students is that although exposed to many different English teachers for a number of years (Tanner, 1989), they have had little contact with native English speakers or authentic English writing. The vast majority of their secondary and preparatory school teachers were native Spanish speakers who did not speak English in the same manner as native English speakers, and their contact with written English was largely that found in EFL textbooks. This form of English writing is not only generally different from academic or general writing, but is also markedly at variance with informal spoken English, both in its structure and vocabulary.

By examining the ten original Flanders Interaction Analysis Categories (FIAC), it becomes apparent that spoken language contains a great variety of structures and vocabulary seldom found except in literature. These discourse categories include the following: (1) accepts feelings, (2) praises or encourages, (3) accepts or uses (clarifying, building, or extending) ideas of others, (4) asks questions, (5) lectures, (6) gives directions, (7) criticizes or justifies authority, (8) makes responses, (9) initiates a subject, (10) silences or confuses (Malamah-Thomas, 1987).

Research on teacher talk has found that most classroom teachers use a wide variety of discourse patterns in the course of instructing their classes (Sinclair and Brazil, 1982; Wong-Fillmore, 1985; Wing, 1987; Ellis, 1984; Strong, 1986; and

Chaudron, 1988). Among these patterns are: (1) opening and closing the class, or greetings and farewells; (2) telling students things, i.e. describing things, processes structures, vocabulary, etc., and explaining and informing. In any one lesson, this might entail establishing a point, giving a demonstration, giving an example, beginning an activity, deriving a generalization.

The majority of language teachers also (3) get students to say things, that is, they stimulate communication by questioning, probing, even challenging. Humanistic teachers are also careful to (4) reward students through their evaluations, through acknowledging their responses, giving them indications of their progress. Finally, conducting the business of the class entails (5) language involved in giving out homework, instructions, dividing the class into groups, introducing visitors, etc.

The language of such management tasks tends to be fairly easy for students to comprehend because it is highly repetitive, contextualized, and modified according to student's proficiency level. In addition, management task language tends to be a closer proximation to actual discourse than other teacher talk because it is conducive to requests for clarification from students who are responsible for the completion of the tasks.

In summary, the difficulty which Mexican learners of English have in developing listening comprehension skills is linked to experiential factors influencing their contact with native English speakers, inside and outside the language classroom and unfamiliarity with the variety of structures generally found only in spoken language.

Confounding phonetic factors also affect listening comprehension. For example, English vowel sounds do not correspond to vowel letters with the same regularity as Spanish vowels. To overcome a tendency to transfer Spanish vowel sounds to English words, students need to be taught the spelling patterns of American English along with their letter-sound correspondences.

Learners must also become accustomed to the striking differences between the stress and rhythm patterns in Spanish and English; patterns in Spanish, a syllable timed language, are very regular, whereas in a phrase timed language like English, many syllables are weakened, reduced, and even eliminated. Spoken English is also characterized by elisions, the omission or dropping out of a sound or sounds resulting in a shortened speech form, assimilations, the process by which sounds change phonetically to become more like neighboring sounds, and juncture which does not always coincide with English orthography. Consequently, native Spanish speakers need to adjust their hearing to suprasegmental elements of English which differ from those of Spanish.

While learning to aurally recognize words and meanings with unfamiliar spelling-sound correspondences embedded in the markedly different stress and rhythm patterns of English is a rather slow and frustrating process without instruction, it appears to be easier for foreign language students to make these associations through guided speaking, while they are actually producing these sounds, reductions, and junctures in a systematic way. For this reason, many instructors and students of English phonology courses have noticed that marked improvement in listening comprehension accompanies speech changes.

Despite the tremendous research interest in the influence of comprehensible input or intake on oral language development (Krashen, 1982; Nord, 1981; Potovsky, 1981; and Winitz, 1981) and on second language acquisition in general (Gass & Madden, 1985), little research has focused on causal influences in the reverse direction, that is, the influence of instruction in speech production on aural comprehension, despite a common knowledge acceptance of the relation between improvements in pronunciation and listening comprehension. Because no published research could be found which has tested this association for Spanish learners of English, this type of study would appear to be a contribution to the field of language acquisition.

In an attempt to better understand the association between production of the English sound system and aural comprehension, as well as to help guide both teaching and testing of listening comprehension, a research study is being conducted at the University of the Americas, Puebla in Puebla, Mexico. Being examined is the influence of instruction and practice in the English phonological system on listening comprehension, particularly of the language that foreign language teachers use in the classroom.

The remainder of this paper will examine the initial testing phase of this research, and will include a description of the testing procedures and an analysis of the test results. Finally, recommendations for teaching based upon the findings of this communicative listening comprehension test will be presented.

## Methodology

To gather data on a change in listening comprehension, a valid test was required for English language learners in a non-native English speaking country. Most desirable from the researcher's point of view would be an instrument which serves as a measure of the aural communicative needs of this population. Since the learners are living in an environment in which the target language is not spoken, the most critical listening requirement would appear to be the ability to understand the teachers' questions and descriptions about the English language as well as their instructions regarding classroom activities.

### Instrument

A multiple choice test of 40 items was constructed from authentic teacher talk, taken from recordings of various teachers while teaching English courses during the summer of 1990. Twenty nine of the test items are class management tasks or conversation with students and eleven are explanations about some aspect of the English language. A test suitable for a range of

proficiency levels was also required. Therefore, items were chosen specifically because of their high frequency words and fairly short stems in order to minimize errors due to unfamiliar vocabulary or variances in processing time needed for both listening and reading.

To assist the listeners, disadvantaged by not actually seeing the speaker as they do in actual classrooms, situational sentences were presented as context in the test booklet in the form of written text. After the contextual sentences, four sentences, phrases, or questions were printed, all of which were both grammatically correct and logically possible.

The task of the students was to listen to a recording of the contextual sentences. After hearing the contextual sentences, the listeners heard an additional phrase, statement or question, which was one of the four choices listed in the test booklet. Listeners then chose from among the four choices, the one which was heard on the tape, and marked the letter of the item on the answer sheet.

Based on the assumption that English learners must understand their language classroom teachers, the listening comprehension test, Teacher Talk, is considered to be a measure of the aural communicative needs of English language learners. A communicative competence (although not necessarily performance) test, according to Morrow (1981) would be expected to have four characteristics, the first of which is:

> 1. It will be criterion-referenced against the operational performance of a set of authentic language tasks. In other words, it will set out to show whether or not (or how well) the candidate can perform a set of specified activities. (p.17)

In reference to this expectation, the language tasks of the instrument developed for this study were segments of authentic teacher talk uttered by English classroom teachers at the same institution. Listeners demonstrate understanding by selecting from four choices, an utterance actually heard.

The second critera for a communicative competence test specified by Morrow (1981) is concerned with validity:

> 2. It will be crucially concerned to establish its own validity as a measure of those operations it claims to measure. Thus content, construct, and predictive validity will be important, but concurrent validity with existing tests will not be necessarily significant. (p. 18)

Content validity, whether the test items really measure comprehension of teacher talk, was a rather simple matter to satisfy, since actual expressions used by classroom teachers were used in its construction. Construct validity, that the test reflects accurately the principles of a valid theory of foreign language learning, can also be satisfied by a teacher talk instrument, given (1) the high regard for the efficacy of comprehensible input for language acquisition and learning, and (2) the recognition that learners must segment a stream of speech into meaningful units in order to participate in classroom activities. Finally predictive validity, whether a test accurately predicts performance in some subsequent situation, will need to be determined by comparing listener performance with other measures of listening competence.

The third and fourth criteria for communicative language tests according to Morrow (1981) are:

> 3. It will rely on modes of assessment which are not directly quantitative, but which are instead qualitative. It may be possible or necessary to convert these into numerical scores, but the process is an indirect one and recognized as such.
>
> 4. Reliability, while clearly important, will be subordinate to face validity. Spurious objectivity will no longer be a prime consideration, although it is recognized that in certain situations test formats which can be assessed mechanically will be advantageous. The limitations of such formats will be clearly spelt out, however. (p. 18)

Constraints of time and the desire to collect sufficient data to make comparisons between students over a broad range of proficiency necessitated an underemphasis of the "qualitative" critera for this study. Clearly, a test which

uses a prerecorded message rather than an authentic teacher speaking, a prepared text booklet, and an answer sheet upon which choices are indicated, requires an artificial operation which may affect students differently than authentic conversations between teacher and student in a classroom. This artificiality is acknowledged to be a limitation of the research. It is hoped, however, that the advantage of gaining data on a large number of cases will at least partially compensate for the artificiality imposed by practical considerations.

Subjects

One hundred thirty nine students from four English proficiency levels (high beginner, low intermediate, high intermediate, low advanced) at a middle class private university in Cholula, Mexico participated in this investigation. These students were 1st to 7th semester students in the School of Social Sciences at the University of the Americas, Puebla.

Procedures

Eight groups of English students (139 individuals) were administered the listening compre- hension test during the first and second weeks of the autumn semester. They were asked to relax and enjoy the experience as the results would not influence their grades. At the same time, they were encouraged to answer the questions as well as they could.

The test administration procedures were as follows: After a test booklet and an answer sheet was distributed to each student, they listened to the prerecorded test. To accustom the students to listening while following a printed text, the recording included a brief description of the test. Instructions for taking the test and a sample item followed this description. These instructions included the following suggestion; "if you are not certain of an answer, it is better to guess than to leave the item blank." The tape was then stopped, and students were

asked if they had any questions. When all doubts had been resolved, the test began.

At the end of the test, the students were asked to evaluate their performance on the test by drawing a face which indicated how they felt during the test. Five faces ranging from estatically happy to weeping were drawn on the board with the words, "great", "good", "so-so", "bad", and "terrible", written next to the five faces.

## Data Analysis

A contrastive analysis approach was used to examine the test results. The intent was to determine to what extent good and poor FL listeners process teacher talk differently. In other words, the performance of the best and the worst listeners, as measured by this test, were compared by examining the errors of approximately the top and bottom fifths of the scores, the exact number varying depending upon the number of people achieving each score. The items found to be the easiest and most difficult for both groups were also compared in order to more fully comprehend the cognitive processing of these two distinct groups of good and poor listeners in a foreign language.

## Results

The least proficient listeners and their test results will be discussed prior to those of the most proficient listeners. The test items found to be the most difficult, i.e. answered incorrectly, will be examined before the items found to be the easiest or answered correctly by the poorest listeners. First, however, a brief overview of the students and some observations about their test taking behavior.

The Least Proficient Listeners

Of the forty items on the test, seventy percent or more were either not answered or answered incorrectly by twenty four (17%) of the 139 students who took this test (see Table 1).

Table 1: Least Proficient Listeners Errors (n=24)

| Students | Errors on a Forty Item Test |
|---|---|
| 6 | 34-36 |
| 8 | 31-33 |
| 10 | 28-30 |

More surprising than the large number of errors was the distribution of these poor listeners in English courses; of the 24 students with poor English listening proficiency, less than half, 9, were enrolled in beginning English courses. Five of these poor listeners were in low intermediate courses, 7 in high intermediate courses, and 3 were enrolled in low advanced courses.

Information gained in interviews with a number of these students explains some of the reasons for this anomaly. Many of these students have had unfortunate speech and English language learning experiences. Several persons were found to have speech problems not only in English but also in Spanish; excessive jaw rigidity and tongue protrusion caused misplacement of speech organs while speaking and resulted in poor articulation. It seems very likely that the embarrassment these students expressed feeling in their English classes, may be merely extensions of long standing embarrassment about their speech in their native language, Spanish. This self consciousness may create for them a rather high anxiety state in English classes, rendering them less than efficient as listeners, particularly during examinations.

Some students in this group of poor listeners had other reasons for self consciousness and anxiety in English classes. Many had not taken required English courses in sequence. That is, they had enrolled in one or two courses during their first year at the university, but failed to continue with the latter two or

three required courses until after a year or more had passed; several of these students delayed taking their last compulsory course until their final year at the university. In these cases, much vocabulary and structure had been forgotten and processing of English at a normal speed had also reportedly deteriorated, thus creating an anxiety experienced by those who realize they are among the poorest students in a class.

Another peculiarity was discovered while examining omitted answers. More than half of the poor listeners had left ten or more items blank without guessing, despite instructions suggesting this test taking strategy (Table 2).

Table 2: Least Proficient Listeners Omissions (n=24)

| Students | Omissions on a Forty Item Test |
|---|---|
| 3 | 20 + |
| 10 | 10-19 |
| 11 | 1-9 |

Leaving items blank may indicate test taking ignorance or that students did not understand the written and oral instructions to guess when uncertain of an answer. It is also possible that some people may have elected not to follow the testing directions, knowing there was no penalty for poor performance.

On the other hand, omissions might also indicate anxiety about being incorrect, a preference for avoiding commitment. To examine whether this was in fact true, a comparison of the students' post test evaluations was made. Recall that students had reported their feelings by drawing a face or writing one of the words, "great", "good", "so-so", "bad", and "terrible", on their answer sheet. The affective responses of these poor listeners are shown in Table 3. It is obvious that for these poor listeners, the affective experience of this test was not positive, since 13% reported feeling "terrible" and 50% feeling "bad."

Table 3: Least Proficient Listeners Affect (n=24)

| FEELINGS DURING TEST: | | GREAT | GOOD | SO-SO | BAD | TERRIBLE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Proficiency Level: | No. | No. | No. | No. | No. | No. |
| Low Advanced | 3 | 0 | 1 33% | 0 | 1 33% | 1 33% |
| High Intermed. | 8 | 0 | 2 25% | 0 | | 6 75% |
| Low Intermed. | 4 | 1 25% | 0 | 2 50% | 1 25% | 0 |
| High Beginner | 9 | 0 | 3 33% | 0 | 4 44% | 2 22% |
| TOTAL | 24 | 1 4% | 6 25% | 2 8% | 12 50% | 3 13% |

In addition, for poor listeners in high intermediate and low advanced classes, being a minority in a group of far more proficient listeners is very likely to exacerbate feelings of anxiety, perhaps causing them to avoid answering items wrongly or omitting answers to some items by mistake; this behavior would also contribute to poor test performance. To test whether this hypothesis might be true, a comparison of the items omitted by students in each level was also made. This analysis can be found in Table 4.

Table 4: Least Proficient Listeners (n=24 )

Mean Number of Omissions according to Proficiency Level

| Proficiency Level | Omissions | |
|---|---|---|
| | No. | Mean |
| Low Advanced | 3 | 20.6 |
| High Intermediate | 8 | 10.7 |
| Low Intermediate | 5 | 10.8 |
| High Beginner | 9 | 7.6 |

While this example is too small to consider statistical analysis useful, the higher number of omissions by students in higher proficiency classes (20.6 - for advanced students) and the lower number of omissions by students in lower proficiency classes (7.6 - for high beginners) suggests that perceptions of their

ranking in a group may have affected student performance on the test. In this study, at least, it appears to have influenced the number of omissions.

Difficult Items for the Least Proficient Listeners

Many people who have difficulty understanding a foreign language believe the source of their problems stems from a vocabulary deficiency or the absence of context. Some report difficulty processing rapid speech because they must translate words into their native language. Analysis of the most difficult items on the test for poor listeners shows the likelihood of additional reasons, since these items had very common vocabulary and most spoken utterances were short.

In answering what were later determined to be difficult items, listeners with the lowest proficiency appeared to be using the following strategies: (1) preference for familiarity; (2) rhythm or number of beats in utterances, and (3) focusing on a single word. Error analysis suggests two major obstacles: (1) unfamiliarity with vocabulary or structure, and (2) juncture which does not coincide with orthography. These hypothetical strategies and obstacles will be illustrated further by using test items as example.

The recorded expressions being tested, also called the key, are indicated by an (*). The number of students choosing each distractor or erroneous response, is indicated in the column to the left of the item, as are the total number of correct responses and omissions.

Preference for familiarity:

For several items, it appeared that poor listeners made no association between the sounds of the key and the written response. Instead, they seem to have chosen distractors which may have been more familiar than the key or the uttered expression. In item 17, for example, the distractor with the familiar word,

Random guessing due to non-orthographic juncture

A high degree of linking of unstressed words in the key with consonants of preceding words appears to have rendered them incomprehensible to the least proficient listeners, leaving them no choice but to simply choose a response at random, despite the fact that the uttered phrases were very short.

For example, in item 29 linking of /notas/, /asimportant/, and /importantas/ is likely responsible for the high error rate. Note that the most attractive distractor, (a), had the same number of syllables as the correct answer, perhaps suggesting that listeners were again conscious of the number of beats in the uttered key.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 2 correct | 29. | The person who performs the action is . . . |
| 7 omissions | | |
| 8 | | (a) just as important as |
| 4 | | (b) more important than |
| | | (c)* not as important as |
| 3 | | (d) as important as |
| | | . . . the object that receives the action. |

It also appears that random selection occurred with item 3. Linking of /thinkingup/and /upa/,i.e., nonorthographic juncture, may have made the uttered phrase unrecognizable. This item was also among the most difficult for the best listeners.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 2 correct | 3. | When she says the two words, all of you start . . . |
| 13 omissions | | |
| 3 | | a) dreaming up |
| 2 | | (b) making up |
| 4 | | (c) writing down |
| | | (d)* thinking up |
| | | . . . a sentence. |

The above examples illustrate what seemed apparent in most of the difficult items, that had these poor listeners heard these statements in actual classroom situations, they would not have grasped the messages intended. In

item 17, for example, confusing "change" and "match" would result in very different responses to the teacher's request. In item 29, many students understood the opposite of what the teacher had intended. It also appears that the least proficient listeners did not understand these short phrases and clauses due to unfamiliar structures, vocabulary, and nonorthographic juncture.

## Easiest Items for the Least Proficient Listeners

Now let us examine the easiest items for the listeners with poor comprehension, i.e. those which a large number of the poorest listeners answered correctly. As will be seen, the strategy employed by the listeners, as indicated by error analysis, seemed to be one which also appeared with the difficult items: focusing attention on a stressed element in the uttered phrase. Position of the stressed word, i.e., in the initial or latter part of the uttered phrase seems to have been of little importance. Familiar teacher expressions also seem to characterize this group.

### Single word focus

The easiest item for the least proficient listeners was item 2, probably because the task was to listen for a single stressed word, even though it was embedded in the middle of a question. Unfortunately the high number of omissions renders the errors impossible to analyze.

10 errors
6 omissions
1

2
1

2. First, you'll open the book at random like this. What is the . . .

(a) third
(b)* first
(c) last
(d) fifth

. . . word on the page?

Listeners also seemed to focus on a single word in item 39, despite its rather lengthy uttered clause. Curiously, a number of the best listeners also

answered it incorrectly. From the large number of poor listeners who erroneously selected distractor (c), it appears that "some", located in the initial part of the key, was the stressed word upon which attemtion was focused, rather than "don't", also stressed, located at the end of the phrase.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 12 errors | 39. | Some of them have a problem with the verbs . . . |
| 2 omissions | | |
| 0 | | (a) but not with the nouns. |
| 1 | | (b) but all of them don't. |
| 9 | | (c) or some with the nouns. |
| | | (d)* and some of them don't. |

The strategy of single word focus seems also to have been employed in items 1 and 35. In item 1, the listener's attention was obviously focused on the initial stressed part of the uttered expression. The absence of "side" at the end of the utterance appears not to have been noticed by the people selecting distractors (a) and (d).

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 14 errors | 1. | We're going to play a game. Ten on this side, ten on . . . |
| 4 omissions | | |
| 4 | | (a) the other side. |
| 5 | | (b) another. |
| | | (c)* the other. |
| 1 | | (d) that side. |

Judging from the many poor listeners who selected distractor (c) in item 35, it seems focused attention was on the stressed word "matters" at the end of the key, in contrast to the initial focus in items previously discussed. The rising final intonation pattern in distractor (c) rather than rising/falling, the case in the uttered question, was also apparently not noticed.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 13 errors | 35. | Should I do it outloud or should I do it quietly? |
| 4 omissions | | |
| 1 | | (a) I don't know which is better. |
| | | (b)* I don't think it matters. |
| 8 | | (c) You think it matters? |
| | | (d) Which way is better? |

The response pattern in item 21 was similar to the preceding item; more that twice as many students apparently focused on the latter, stressed word in the sentence, "easy", rather than the initial two words which were reduced and unstressed.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 13 errors | 21. | It's like an exam, but not exactly. Don't worry. |
| 3 omissions | | |
| 2 | | (a) It won't make you freeze. |
| 2 | | (b) It will be a breeze. |
| | | (c)* It will be easy. |
| 9 | | (d) It won't be easy. |

A comparison of the easy and difficult items for the poor listeners (see Table 5) showed some interesting differences. Probably unimportant were the elisions and assimilations. Length of the key, however, may have influenced difficulty level slightly. Difficult items were somewhat longer, (mean 5.1 syllables) compared with 4.5 for easier items, suggesting that the ability to process lengthy phrases might have been a factor contributing to poor listening comprehension of teacher talk.

The most marked phonetic difference between the difficulty and easy items, however, was nonorthographic juncture. There was nearly twice as much linking in the difficult items (11) compared with the easy items (6). Thus we can probably safely conclude that nonorthographic juncture and to a lesser extent the utterance length were the factors emerging from this item analysis which seemed to characterize the teacher talk which is difficult for the least proficient listeners.

These test results will now be compared with the responses of the best listeners to determine whether the same obstacles and identical strategies prevail.

Table 5
Least Proficient Listeners

| Most Difficult Items | | | | | Easiest Items | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Item No. | No. of Syl. | Stress: Syllable Ratio | Nonortho-graphic Juncture | Elision or Assimilation | Item No. | No. of Syl. | Stress: Syllable Ratio | Nonortho-graphic Juncture | Elision or Assimilation |
| 3 | 3 | 2:3 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 1:1 | 0 | 0 |
| 4 | 3 | 1:3 | 1 | 0 | 23 | 2 | 2:2 | 0 | 1 |
| 16 | 4 | 2:4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 1:3 | 0 | 0 |
| 17 | 4 | 2:4 | 0 | 0 | 10 | 4 | 2:4 | 0 | 1 |
| 27 | 4 | 2:4 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 4 | 1:4 | 0 | 0 |
| 15 | 6 | 2:6 | 0 | 0 | 21 | 5 | 1:5 | 0 | 1 |
| 25 | 6 | 2:6 | 0 | 0 | 39 | 5 | 1:5 | 2 | 0 |
| 29 | 6 | 1:6 | 3 | 0 | 35 | 6 | 2:6 | 2 | 0 |
| 8 | 7 | 2:7 | 1 | 0 | 38 | 7 | 3:7 | 0 | 1 |
| 37 | 8 | 3:7 | 3 | 0 | 24 | 8 | 3:8 | 3 | 1 |
| | **51** | **19:51** | **11** | 1 | | **45** | **17:45** | **6** | **4** |

Description of the Most Proficient Listeners

In this section will be discussed the responses of the twenty nine students who committed seven or fewer errors on the Teacher Talk listening comprehension test. Table 6 indicates the number of students committing errors.

Table 6: Most Proficient Listeners Errors (n=29)

| Students | Errors on a Forty Item Test |
|---|---|
| 2 | 0 |
| 12 | 1-2 |
| 9 | 3-5 |
| 8 | 6-7 |

It was obvious from proficient listener's evaluations of their feelings during the test that they realized they had performed well on the test in contrast to the many "bad" and "terrible" responses of the poor listeners. Table 7 also shows very proficient listeners in all except the beginner proficiency level, again suggesting an absence of homogeneity in listening abilities across proficiency levels.

Table 7: Most Proficient Listeners Affect (n=29)

| FEELINGS DURING TEST: | | GREAT | GOOD | SO-SO | BAD | TERRIBLE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Proficiency Level | No. | No. | No. | No. | No. | No |
| Low Advanced | 18 | 6 33% | 10 56% | 2 11% | 0 | 0 |
| High Intermed. | 6 | 2 33% | 4 66% | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Low Intermed. | 5 | 0 | 4 80% | 1 20% | 0 | 0 |
| High Beginner | 0 | | | | | |
| TOTAL | 29 | 8 28% | 18 62% | 3 10% | 0 | 0 |

Difficult Items for the Most Proficient Listeners

This section will discuss the items which the 29 best listeners found to be the most difficult. In general, difficulty seemed to have been caused by the paucity of stressed words or a low stress ratio in the utterances and a high ratio of nonorthographic juncture (linking), also found to be a probable cause of difficulty for the poorest listeners in English.

An example is the most frequently missed item, no. 26. Even though the key was a single word, its difficulty probably can be attributed to its being unstressed. It seems, however, that erring listeners focused on the terminal consonant sound of the word /r/, and possibly also on the similarity of the vowel sounds, because the vast majority selected "we're" instead of "they're" which was actually heard on the recording.

| 12 errors | 26. | It's very common, this kind of sentence, when . . . |
|---|---|---|
| 2 | | (a) he's |
| 9 | | (b) we're |
| | | (c)* they're |
| 1 | | (d) she's |
| | | . . . talking about a book. |

The paucity of stressed syllables in the key of item 13, only "out", probably contributed to its difficulty for the best listeners. Elision, i.e., elimination of the "h" of "him" and linking /without-im/ might also have made it difficult to identify the key. Instead, it appears that three erring listeners focused attention on, "to do", the initial part of the utterance, while four others paid more attention to the latter part, "without him."

| 10 errors | 13. | He won't be back until Monday. So you'll have . . . |
|---|---|---|
| 2 omissions | | |
| 3 | | (a) to do it for him. |
| | | (b)* to do without him. |
| 1 | | (c) to choose it for him. |
| 4 | | (d) done it without him. |

Similar to an earlier item, the length of utterance can not be responsible for errors in item 14. The linking of /hasonly/ may have contributed to its difficulty. The only distractor selected, (c), has the same number of syllables as the key, suggesting that seven listeners may have attended to the rhythm of this unstressed utterance, although they could not distinguish the actual words.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 7 errors<br>1 omission | 14. | All right. I want to talk to you about paragraphs. OK, a paragraph usually has . . . |
| 0<br>0<br>6 | | (a) no more than<br>(b) not only<br>(c) more than<br>(d)* only |
| | | . . . one important sentence. |

Another frequently missed item by proficient listeners was no. 39. The distribution of errors suggests student guessing. It is unlikely that the key's length (only 5 syllables) caused processing strain within the time available. The most likely explanation for difficulty is the unstressed nature of the utterance; only "don't" was stressed. Linking of /someof/ may also have increased the difficulty.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 11 errors<br>2 omissions | 39. | Some of them have a problem with the verbs . . . |
| 3<br>2<br>4 | | (a) but not with the nouns.<br>(b) but all of them don't.<br>(c) or some with the nouns.<br>(d)* and some of them don't. |

Error analysis of these difficult items suggest that the major obstacle to listening comprehension of teacher talk for high proficiency English language learners is their inability to process expressions characterized by (1) high nonorthographic juncture, i.e. linking, and (2) little contrastive stress, ie., low stress:syllable ratios. In addition, it seems that (3) the length of the utterance may have had no influence on the difficulty level. Support for these three hypotheses

is found in the following section, where the easiest items for the proficient listeners will be discussed.

Easiest Items for the Most Proficient Listeners

Nine items were answered correctly by all of the most proficient listeners. Four of the items of very familiar "teacher talk" were also among the easiest for poor listeners. By and large, the length of the uttered keys was more or less the same as the keys of the more difficult items. The primary difference was that stress:syllable ratios are higher and the incidents of linking are fewer than in the items difficult for the most proficient listeners.

Item no. 18 is an example of an utterance characterized by a short key, no linking, and contrastive stress (stress:syllable ratio, 2:3).

18. Here in green, OK, you have the verb that you . . .

(a) shouldn't use.
(b)* have to use.
(c) want to use.
(d) have to choose.

A high stress:syllable ratio (2:5) and the absence of nonorthographic juncture were also characteristic of item 32.

32. I want everybody to buy this.

(a) You will be grateful.
(b) I would be grateful.
(c) It might be helpful.
(d)* It should be helpful.

High linking characterized item 24: /wantall/, /allof/, and /thisone/. Neverthe-less, a high stress:syllable ratio (4:7) and a familiar expression probably made this item highly comprehensible to both poor and good listeners.

24. There are some grammar booklets that I want you to get. They look like this. Now, I . .

(a)* want all of you to get this one.
(b) want you to buy this one.
(c) wish all of you would get this one.
(d) wish you would buy this one.

Item19 also contained two incidents of linking, /spenda/ and /lotof/, but both were very familiar expressions.

19. If you translate from Spanish, it is very difficult to understand what you are saying, and you . .

(a) might spend too much time.
(b) might waste a lot of time.
(c) will feel you are trying.
(d)* will spend a lot of time.

A summary of the easiest and most difficult items for the most proficient listeners are in Table 8. The totals indicate that key syllable length in both groups are nearly the same, 42 versus 46, supporting the third hypothesis that utterance length does not necessarily affect its difficulty level. Note also the little difference in the number of elisions or assimilations, so conclusions can not be drawn about their influence on aural comprehension.

Support for the second hypothesis can be seen in the remarkable difference in the number of stressed syllables; the easy items contain twice as many stressed syllables (20) as the difficult items (10). Finally, a substantially greater number of nonortho-graphic junctures (13) appear in the difficult items compared with the easy items (8), supporting the first hypothesis.

Table 8
Most Proficient Listeners

| Most Difficult Items | | | | | Easiest Items | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Item No. | No. of Syl. | Stress: Syllable Ratio | Nonortho-graphic Juncture | Elision or Assimilation | Item No. | No. of Syl. | Stress: Syllable Ratio | Nonortho-graphic Juncture | Elision or Assimilation |
| 26 | 1 | 0:1 | 0 | 0 | 23 | 2 | 2:2 | 0 | 0 |
| 14 | 2 | 0:2 | 1 | 0 | 18 | 3 | 2:3 | 0 | 1 |
| 4 | 3 | 1:3 | 1 | 0 | 17 | 4 | 2:4 | 0 | 0 |
| 3 | 3 | 1:3 | 2 | 1 | 21 | 5 | 1:5 | 0 | 1 |
| 16 | 4 | 1:4 | 1 | 1 | 32 | 5 | 2:5 | 0 | 0 |
| 39 | 5 | 1:5 | 2 | 0 | 19 | 6 | 2:6 | 2 | 0 |
| 13 | 5 | 1:5 | 1 | 1 | 35 | 6 | 2:6 | 1 | 1 |
| 33 | 5 | 2:5 | 1 | 0 | 20 | 7 | 4:7 | 2 | 1 |
| 12 | 14 | 3:14 | 4 | 0 | 24 | 8 | 3:8 | 3 | 1 |
| | **42** | **10:42** | **13** | **3** | | **46** | **20:46** | **8** | **5** |

## Discussion

The micro-analysis of Mexican student perception of English teacher talk reported herein demonstrates that teacher input is not necessarily equivalent to student intake. Various commands, questions, and other utterances were completely incomprehensible to many participants in the study. Some listeners appeared to have focused on a word or two and guessed the meaning of the rest. In other cases, it seems that despite short phrases, in some instances only two and three words, because of the tendency of native English speakers to link words, students occasionally understood the opposite of what teachers tried to communicate to them. English vocabulary and structure deficiencies undoubtedly also seems to have contributed to listening difficulties of less proficient students.

This test analysis has identified two important variables intervening between the input generated by teachers in the English language classroom and intake, the speech actually processed by native Spanish speakers. These variables are nonorthographic juncture and contrastive stress. A logical deduction of these findings is that since the participants were, in many instances, unable to segment the flow of the teacher's speech into identifiable meaningful units, then certainly they could neither process the message nor use this intake to accelerate the language acquisition process.

As Chaudron (1981) accurately points out, "for learners to acquire a new form by means of comprehensible, simplified, or negotiated input, they must first perceive the form and encode it, before perhaps trying to employ it"(p 286). While it is believed that language acquisition is enhanced by teacher modified input, by simplification, slower rate, clearer articulation, negotiation, and redundancy (Brown & Yule, 1989; Hatch, 1979; Krashen, 1982; Scarcella and Higa, 1981), such modifications do not allow learners to benefit from the wealth of other input outside of the classroom.

On a practical level, then, there would seem to be numerous reasons for teachers to concentrate specifically on helping students to decode natural native speaker speech in spite of those two intervening variables, nonorthographic juncture and contrastive stress, in order to develop listening comprehension skills for use in the foreign language classroom and outside. The teaching and programming implications of this study will be elaborated in more detail below.

## Implications for English Program Administration

### Placement Testing

An important finding of this analysis pertains to class homogeneity. Even though foreign language students place into particular proficiency levels through written grammar, reading, or vocabulary diagnostic tests, or have passed courses at lower proficiency levels, as was true in this study, this does not assure equal ability to understand or learn from the oral discourse in the foreign language class.

The wide variance of listening proficiency in all four proficiency levels found in this research suggests that adding a listening evaluation to the battery of placement tests would contribute to obtaining greater homogeneity in proficiency, particularly in students' ability to benefit from teacher input in the classroom.

### Test Anxiety

The influence of anxiety on listening comprehension performance modestly examined also suggests that nervousness about one's fit in a particular group may also be a potentially important factor in the foreign language classroom. At the very least, it appears to have influenced performance during this examination, even when it was explicitly stated that results would not influence students' grades.

Teaching to Make Input More Comprehensible

The Teacher Talk listening test analysis, a simple measure of responses to input, suggests that students failed to understand their teachers in the foreign language classroom. While it is generally agreed that comprehensible input is an important factor in the acquisition of language, if teacher talk is not understood, then speaking in the target language is not efficient. Student guessing at the meaning of teacher's utterances rather than input serving as reinforcement of structures and vocabulary learned in formal lessons is a waste of precious classroom time and energy.

This research suggests that the development of listening comprehension, i.e. the ability to maximize intake from input, might be enhanced by focusing learners' attention upon suprasegmental factors, contrastive stress patterns and nonorthographic juncture, generally acknowledged to be in the sphere of pronunciation rather than listening instruction. Yet, while there are notable exceptions (Kenworthy,1987; Morley,1979; Lado and Fries,1975), most pronunciation texts concentrate on teaching segmentals and individual word stress, paying far less attention to juncture and contrastive sentence stress (for example, see Doff, 1988; English Language Services, 1968; Bowen, 1975; Roach, 1983) even though the importance of suprasegmentals in intelligibility has been recognized (eg. Bansal, 1976), and research reviewed by Cutler (1984) demonstrated the crucial role of stress patterns in listeners' recognition of words. The research reported herein strongly suggests that instruction in suprasegmentals would help learners to distinguish and recognize meaning as they process streams of speech.

Capturing the Natural Motivation of Learners:

Previous research (Tanner, 1989) demonstrated that Mexican university students have a multitude of reasons for studying English. English is viewed as a necessary tool for speaking with and learning about people of other cultures, for

working in the future, for traveling and studying abroad, for enriching their general education, as well as for reading specific articles and books in their own professional fields. For most of these interests and future plans, reading and writing skills in English are clearly insufficient; greater emphasis must be directed toward oral and aural proficiency in foreign language classroom.

In agreement is Finocchiaro (1974) who wrote more than fifteen years ago, "many teachers feel that oral practice activities leading to communicative competence are at the very heart of the language learning process" (p 74). With respect to this priority, some responsibilities of language teachers are:

> 1. *To know* intimately the students and the community in which they live in order to relate new language and cultural material to the probable experiences and interests of the students.
> 2. *To broaden* the students' experiences through discussion of music, art, hobbies, and other areas of interest in the school curriculum or in the community.
> 3. *To enrich* the students' vocabulary not only through studies of antonyms, synonyms, cognates and words of the same family, but also by giving them -- from the outset -- the words and expressions they will need to talk about their communities and their backgrounds. . .(p 74-75).

An alternate route to foreign language proficiency which is far more intrinsically motivating for young university people than ordinary English textbooks is the use of authentic materials that are a part of the international popular culture. With an increasing use of home videos and a continuing interest in foreign music, English as a foreign language teachers have available to them a means of exploiting a natural inclination of young people to their advantage (see Tomalin, 1979). That is, to teach many of the sounds, rhythms, vocabulary, and structure of the English language through popular music and video. Obviously, however, to make adequate use of popular culture media, skills in listening comprehension must be more fully developed. For without adequate instruction in the aural skill, this tremendous interest in other world cultures, a highly motivating one, may be missed.

## Conclusion

In many institutions, foreign languages are taught using traditional methods with an emphasis on grammar, reading, and writing skills, with little particular attention paid to the learning of oral language. Nevertheless, some courses are conducted by the direct method, that is to say, by using the target language as the language of instruction, despite the fact that listening comprehension is not a factor in course placement. The students of other teachers who use the native language for instruction hear even less of the target language. It is unfortunate, but true, that many students struggle to complete required language courses in various institutions without having even the most fundamental listening skills.

If the results of this research accurately illustrate what occurs in the foreign language classroom, that is, if the responses of these students is somewhat typical, and interviews with many participants indicates that they are, too often learners, some at every course level, understand very little of what their teachers say in the target language due to unfamiliarity with the phonetic, as well as the semantic and grammatical system. Even the most proficient listeners occasionally missed important details.

Without accepting the premise that listening comprehension is an important skill in and of itself, at the very least, one must accede to the fact that to facilitate the process of language acquisition in foreign language classrooms, even when the focus is on written skills, teachers are advised to give more priority to teaching listening comprehension, at least so that students will be able to understand the discourse patterns used by teachers during the learning process.

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