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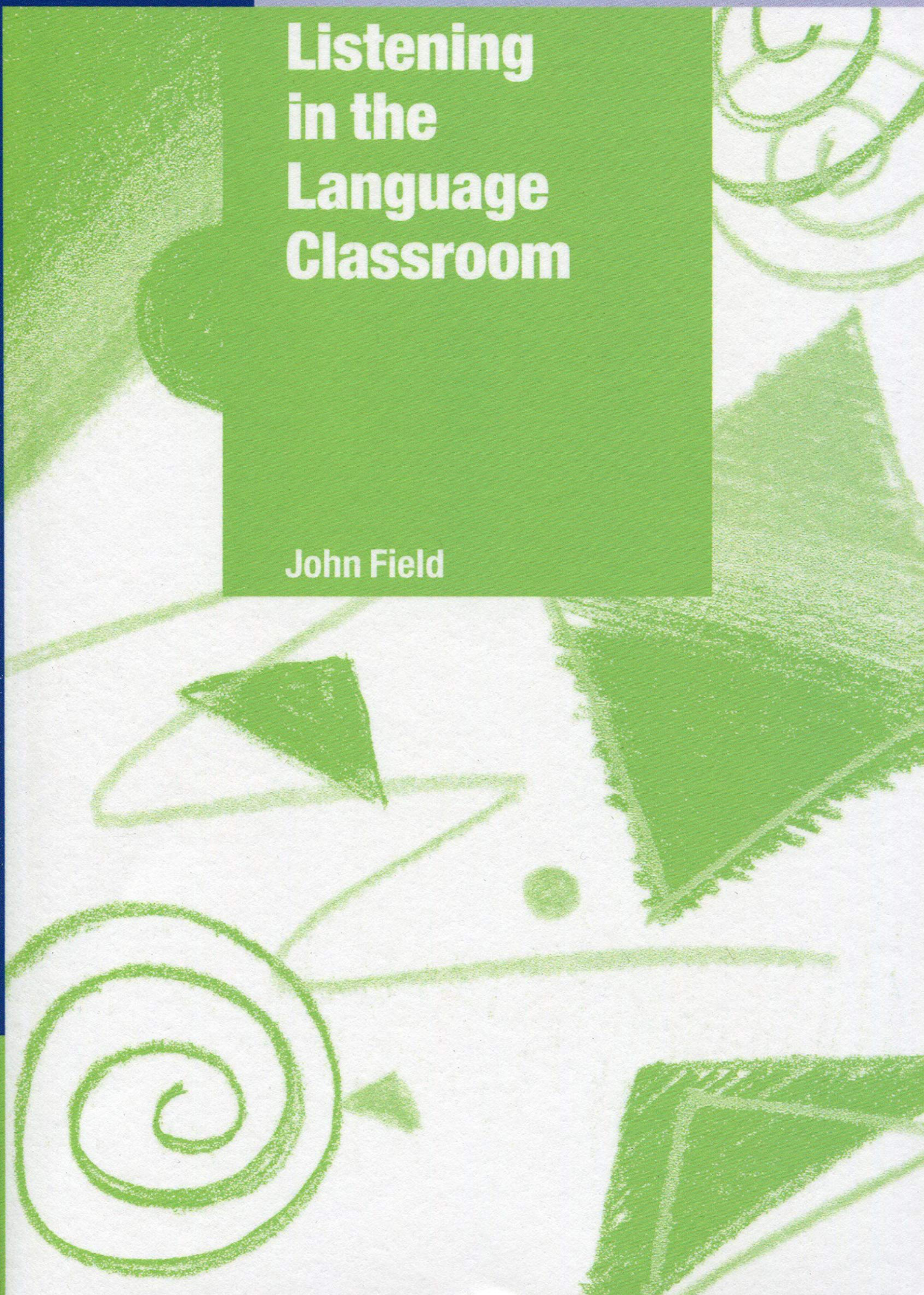

Listening in the Language Classroom

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Listening in the Language Classroom

John Field

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In recognition of all I owe to my mother
Maud Henrietta Field (1910–1983),
the best of listeners

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Acknowledgements

This book has a long history. It grew from an interest in second language listening that goes back over 25 years, and from an idea that was first mooted ten years ago. I had expected the writing to take eight months but it finally lasted three years. Unsurprisingly, I have built up more than a few debts of gratitude along the way.

As often happens, putting words on the page had the chastening effect of showing the author how little he knows. I rethought ideas that had seemed set in stone and questioned lines of argument that had once been utterly convincing. I also had to find ways of making information relevant to teachers in the field. In circumstances such as these, one badly needs to put one's ideas past an informed listener who has a complete grasp of the issues. I cannot think of anybody more competent to fulfil that role for L2 listening than Gillian Brown, who commands enormous respect among all who work in the area. Gill was enormously generous with her time; and it was a great pleasure and privilege to work with her on the final draft of the book. I cannot stress enough how much poorer the book would have been without the benefit of her experience and without her insights, always perceptive, invariably frank ('*Omit*' featured quite often, and she was always right), and punctuated at well-timed intervals by coffee and walks round the garden.

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Many of the ideas in the book were first developed during a three-week summer school on second language skills that the British Council ran at Oxley Hall in the University of Leeds. (Sadly, like much of the enlightened work that the Council once did, it has now been axed.) I taught there for ten years and remain grateful to the Director, Niall Henderson, for employing me on what was undoubtedly the most rewarding teacher-development experience of my career. Oxley Hall gave me the

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opportunity of exchanging views on listening with teachers from all over the world. Many of those attending taught in difficult conditions. Some (from Tanzania, Vietnam, Cambodia, the poorer parts of South America) had to make do with the most limited of resources. Others (from eastern Europe, from Palestine, from South Africa, from the Sudan) had been the victims of occupation or intimidation. I developed a huge respect for their commitment and for the enthusiasm with which they embraced the idea that second language listening might be handled more productively – even where they had no reliable power supply or their books and equipment had been destroyed. I hope that former Oxley Hall students will come across this book and remember some happy and stimulating times.

Another much-valued source of ideas has been the relatively small group of teachers, writers and researchers who specialise in second language listening. Over the years, I have been fortunate to work with some and to engage in fruitful discussions with others at conferences or via email. I imagine that traces of all these exchanges can be found somewhere in the pages that follow. I add the usual rider that any errors of interpretation are entirely my own – but (given the topic of the book) I can always fall back on the defence that listeners and readers have no choice but to remake the message.

Finally, it is not surprising that a project that took up so much time and was so important to me put a severe strain upon my personal life. I am lucky indeed to have a group of loyal friends who have kept faith with me over many years; and I cannot thank them enough for their concerned enquiries and their tolerance of my prolonged absence from the scene. Above all, I would like to thank Paul Siedlecki for the support and understanding that has helped me to get through what has been a very long haul.

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Introduction

The word is half his that speaks and half his that hears it.
Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592), French essayist

Why teach listening?

Why teach listening? seems an odd question. It is standard practice nowadays for language teachers to provide sessions that focus on this particular skill. There is a wide choice of listening materials available with accompanying CDs, and DVD or video is used in many classrooms.

Nevertheless, there is still plenty of evidence that listening is undervalued. When there is pressure on contact hours, it is often the listening session that is cut. Students are rarely assessed on their listening skills, and the problems of many weak listeners pass undiagnosed. The methodology of the listening lesson has been little discussed, researched or challenged; and there is a tendency for teachers to work through well-worn routines without entire conviction. Alternatively, a faddish commitment to an 'integrated skills' approach may result in listening being relegated to a hasty topic-driven session wedged between reading and writing, which tend to be regarded as more manageable skills.

Listening on the back burner

The reasons for this lack of priority are partly historical. There was a time when listening in the language classroom was almost entirely subordinated to the presentation of new items of language. Short dialogues on tape provided examples of structures to be learned (see, for example, Alexander, 1967), and this was the only type of listening practice that most learners received. It was not until the late 1960s that enlightened teachers began to practise listening as a skill in its own right – and even then the idea persisted for a while that an important function of the listening lesson was to reinforce recently taught grammar by exemplifying it in use.

Another reason for downgrading listening is, frankly, the difficulty of teaching it. It is widely seen as a 'passive' skill, one that takes place in the hidden reaches of the learner's mind. It is not tangible in the way that speaking and writing are, and a listening text is not easily manipulated like a reading one. Demonstrable results are difficult to

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achieve. Even after extensive practice, there may be little evidence of any improvement in performance. If teachers want to demonstrate a class's progress in knowledge of the target language, how much better to focus on grammar, vocabulary, speaking and writing. At best, this lack of measurable benefits makes teachers chary of spending too much time on the listening skill. At worst, it leads to a complacent (and perhaps defensive) claim that listening can be 'picked up' simply by exposure to the target language in a way that other skills cannot. Once the learner's ears have adjusted to the phonology of the target language (the argument goes), listening skills from the first language (L1) will transfer themselves to the second (L2) by some process of osmosis.

To this, a quasi-psychological justification is sometimes added. The process of listening to our native language demands little effort. As infants, we acquire listening skills without being conscious of any cognitive demands being made upon us. Surely, then, listening to a foreign language is something that learners will achieve sooner or later for themselves, without too much intervention by the teacher?

Given these received ideas, it is worth giving some thought to the role that listening plays in second language learning.

A rationale for teaching listening

A two-way traffic

Why bother about listening? If we asked the same question about speaking, the response would be one of incredulity. It has been taken as axiomatic for many years that the development of spoken fluency is one of the most important goals (if not *the* most important goal) of the language teacher. The view goes back to the assertion by Harold Palmer (1922) and others that speech is 'primary' because it antedates writing, or even further back to 1878 and Berlitz's claim that languages are best learnt by 'direct' methods involving the spoken word. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, instructors placed great emphasis upon speaking, on the grounds that possession of this skill constituted the most important long-term need of the majority of language learners.

But there has perhaps been some rather muddled thinking here. The long-term needs of the learner do not, in fact, reside in speaking as such but in *interacting orally with other speakers of the target language*. Communication requires a two-way traffic, and unless the non-native speaker has a listening competence as developed as his/her command of speech, then it will simply not be possible to sustain a conversation. This may seem a blindingly obvious point. But the briefest review of listening proficiency in a language class will identify more than a few learners

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whose ability to interpret what is said to them lags well behind the level of language that they are capable of producing.

Fluency forms one side of the coin in developing speaking skills; the other being accuracy. But how often do teachers make a concerted effort to develop the equivalent competencies in listening? These might be regarded as (for fluency) the acquisition of patterns of listening which approximate to those of a native listener and (for accuracy) the possession of an ability to decode pieces of connected speech, word by word. The prevailing tendency in the teaching of listening is to provide practice and more practice without clearly defined goals. How comfortable would we feel about an approach to speaking which told learners simply to 'get on with the task' and provided no pronunciation teaching, no modelling, no controlled practice, no pragmatic input and little feedback?

The skewed priorities of educators

To make matters worse, the plight of the weak listener often goes unrecognised. This is partly because of the inaccessible nature of listening, which can only be tested indirectly, often by means of cumbersome comprehension questions. But it is also a reflection of the priorities adopted by language teaching professionals. Let us take a typical language school in the UK, USA, Australia, Canada or New Zealand. The school is very professionally run and has a sophisticated entry test for those who come from overseas to study there. The test consists of a battery of grammar exercises followed by a short composition and perhaps a hasty oral interview. Mainly on the basis of their knowledge of grammar, students are graded and allocated to a class at the appropriate level.

In syllabus design terms, the procedure appears to work well: the learner is slotted in to the system at the point where much of the grammatical information being presented will be new. But we should not lose sight of the fact that the incoming learner will now be required to learn entirely through the medium of the target language. Some of the information will be presented visually through coursebooks and on the whiteboard; but most will be presented through the voice of the teacher. A critical factor in the success or failure of the learners, and in how much they benefit from their course, is thus the ability to understand speech. This consideration should surely outweigh what the learners do or do not know of grammar. Yet listening ability is rarely taken into account during entry tests and, if it is, is accorded only minor importance. On my many visits to language schools as a listening researcher and as an inspector, I have come across disturbingly large numbers of learners who

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have been graded as (say) 'intermediate' on the basis of a grammar test, yet whose listening skills are minimal. They sit in class day after day, comprehending little and often blaming themselves. But the fault lies with a system that does not accord sufficient attention to the skill that, above all others, is crucial to their learning.

Lest anyone should feel that I have unfairly singled out language schools for criticism, I should add that the same situation prevails in state systems where the teaching of modern foreign languages is carried out mainly through the medium of the target language. The policy of using L2 as widely as possible is a commendable one but is only valid if it is accompanied by adequate assistance in understanding L2 speech.

Learner concerns

In setting priorities for skills teaching, we also need to take account of learners' perceptions of their needs. Many of them, if asked to rate the relative difficulty of the four language skills, cite listening as the area about which they feel most insecure.[1] There are several possible explanations for this concern. One is the lack of tangible evidence that they are making progress in acquiring the skill. Another is the fact that listening takes place in real time. If a stretch of speech is not understood at the moment it is heard, it is extremely hard to relive it in memory. Failure at a basic level (matching speech to words under the pressure of time) often leads to a loss of confidence, and to the belief that listening is too difficult or that L2 speakers speak too fast. If teachers omit to address these and similar concerns, they create insecurity which may seriously affect learners' motivation for acquiring the second language.

Language learning for life

There is another, and equally compelling, argument for paying greater attention to listening as part of language learning. One of the central goals of the language teacher must be to provide for life after the classroom. Much has been written about the concept of autonomous learning, which is usually taken to refer to the sort of learner training (Ellis and Sinclair, 1989) that enables students to operate more effectively within the classroom and within a learning centre. However, there is another type of learner training which has not yet received the attention it deserves.

[1] See Graham, 2006, for evidence to this effect, drawn from British learners of French.

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It involves preparing learners so that they can take full advantage of the sources of linguistic information that the real world provides. It offers a more exciting form of independence than autonomy within the learning environment: namely, the ability to continue learning when the course is over and the teacher is no longer there. Surely this, rather than successful mastery of the Third Conditional or the vocabulary of shopping, should be the stuff of language teaching. The reason is that it constitutes, to use a currently fashionable term, a transferable skill.

Once the classroom has been left behind, two channels of information enable learners to extend their knowledge of the target language. The first is exposure to the written word through reading. The second is exposure to the spoken word through listening – listening to videos, radio broadcasts, podcasts, talks and announcements, or to an interlocutor. Of the two, it is listening which is arguably the more important since it is listening which enriches the learner's *spoken* competence with new syntactic, lexical, phonological and pragmatic information. But this wealth of material is available only to those who are able to crack the code of speech with a fair degree of confidence. A strong case can therefore be made (Field, 2007) for training learners in listening, with a view to equipping them for independent learning in the outside world.

Rethinking our approach

In this introduction, several reasons have been cited for giving more prominence to second language listening than we currently do. We need to recognise that successful L2 communication demands listening in equal measure with speaking. We need to ensure that the words of teachers do not fall on stony ground because they have taken the comprehension of learners for granted. We need to address a major cause of anxiety among learners – especially those confronting oral exams. And we need to open up a rich source of new linguistic material for those who leave the classroom behind and enter the L2 environment.

But any change of priorities is pointless unless we also recognise the limitations of the methods that we currently use in the listening lesson. Part of the neglect of second language listening must be attributable to the rather sterile methodology that teachers have to rely upon. For many years, teachers have based their teaching and testing upon an approach which measures achievement in terms of the ability to provide answers to comprehension questions. No matter that those answers might be derived by a variety of means, including intelligent guesswork. No matter that they tend to be supplied by the more able listeners, while those who most need help simulate an understanding they have not achieved. The format

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is a well-established one and, though it may not lead demonstrably to better listening, it is easy to apply. Teachers and teacher trainers tend not to ask why this particular approach has become attached to the teaching of second language listening or to question whether it is the most effective way of developing the skill in learners.

A further indication that we have not given listening the attention it deserves can be found in the dearth of reliable background information about the skill. In order to teach listening effectively, it is important for teachers to have a clear picture of the end behaviour they are aiming to achieve in their learners. Yet teachers' manuals tend to be vague or sometimes inaccurate about the processes that make up listening, about the problems it poses for those acquiring a second language and about the precise nature of the input which novice listeners have to learn to handle. If teachers are to raise the profile of listening in the language classroom, they need to know considerably more about the skill and about how it operates. The information will help them to define their goals more clearly and to identify more closely with the challenges that learners face.

Here, then, are the concerns of the present book. It aims first and foremost to challenge the present orthodoxy so far as pedagogy is concerned. In doing so, it suggests ways in which our current methodology can be adapted to make it more viable. It also proposes some quite radical alternatives that enhance the support we give to learners. Secondly, it aims to provide the reader with a clear understanding of what second language listening entails: examining both the raw material which the listener has to make sense of and the processes which an expert listener brings to bear.

About this book

The book falls into six parts.

- *Background.* The first two chapters cover current approaches to the teaching of listening. Chapter 1 contains a brief history of the methodology of the listening lesson. It outlines how present-day instructors tend to design their lessons and considers the thinking that lies behind the procedures they adopt. In Chapter 2, there is a critical look at current practice. One problem is that our thinking about how to teach listening has been largely shaped by previously established methods for the teaching of second language reading. Another is that a routine based on asking learners questions about a series of recorded texts

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is not the most constructive way of improving L2 listening performance. Answers to comprehension tasks provide few, if any, insights into where learners' listening problems lie.

- *Rethinking the comprehension approach*. In the next part, I examine ways in which the current approach to teaching second language listening might be adapted so as to make it both more effective and more learner-friendly. The focus of Chapter 3 is upon practical innovations to change the dynamics of the listening classroom. I consider how the roles of both teacher and learner can be modified to ensure greater engagement. I then go on to examine how teachers can ensure more intensive listening practice by promoting listener autonomy. In Chapter 4, the view is expressed that current pedagogy limits the forms of listening that are practised in the classroom. Ideas are put forward for expanding the range of listening types and tasks that are featured, with a view to aligning them more closely with the listening experiences that a learner might have in the real world.

- *Process, not product*. The third part of the book presents two alternatives to current methodology. One, described in Chapter 5, entails treating the listening lesson as a diagnostic exercise, in which the teacher makes use of learner responses in order to detect areas of difficulty. The teacher can then devise small-scale tasks that provide remedial practice in the specific problems that have been identified. The other approach is prognostic, attempting to anticipate the problems that a second language listener is likely to encounter. It entails dividing listening into a set of components that can be practised intensively and individually. Proposals for a sub-skills approach similar to the one adopted in second language reading are discussed in Chapter 6. An alternative framework for deciding what is to be practised is then put forward in Chapter 7: a framework based not upon the intuitions of commentators but upon psychological models of how expert listeners actually perform. This is referred to as a process approach.

- *A process view of listening*. If, as advocated here, instructors are to base their programmes upon the behaviour of expert listeners, then it is clearly important for them to have a better understanding of (a) the nature of the signal that reaches the listener's ear and (b) the processes that the listener employs when making sense of it. The aim of the next part of the book is to provide a detailed account of these areas. Though the treatment is partly theoretical, implications are drawn for the practising teacher, and extensive examples are given of exercise types that enable the relevant processes to be practised.

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Chapter 8 provides an introduction to the listening skill which distinguishes between two principal operations. One (known as **decoding**) broadly consists of the listener matching the signal to words, while the other consists of the listener constructing larger-scale meaning. We consider the ways in which these operations interact and which might be the more important to success in L2 listening.

The next two chapters focus upon decoding. Chapter 9 contains a detailed look at the many ways in which the speech signal deviates from standard forms and at the problems that this variation causes for the non-native listener. Chapter 10 describes how expert listeners succeed in identifying sounds, syllables, words and phrases in what they hear, despite its inconsistencies.

We then move on in Chapter 11 to consider the part played by larger units in the form of grammar and intonation. Each is examined first in terms of its role in decoding and then in terms of the contribution it makes to meaning.

Chapters 12 and 13 are concerned with meaning building. We consider how a listener enriches the bare meaning conveyed by a speaker's words. We then take note of the subsequent decisions that the listener has to make about the relevance and logic of the information that has been obtained. Suggestions are once again made for exercises which enable a learner to practise these processes in a second language context.

- *The challenge of the real world.* The types of listening practice illustrated so far have been developmental and likely to extend over a period of time. But while learners are in the process of acquiring listening competence, the teacher also needs to ensure that they are capable of coping with the everyday demands of real-world listening. In Chapter 14, I consider the use of authentic materials in the classroom, with an emphasis on their importance to the early stages of listening instruction. Chapter 15 concerns the compensatory strategies that learners use in order to extract meaning from partially understood pieces of everyday speech. In Chapter 16, I consider how effective it is to train learners to use these strategies.

- *Conclusion.* A final chapter brings together the various themes of the book and summarises the proposals that have been made.

English is used throughout the book as the language of exemplification, but the general comments made apply to the teaching of all foreign or second languages. Examples are sometimes cited from languages other than English and allowance is made for differences in pronunciation systems.

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Certain chapters of the book (particularly Chapter 9) make use of phoneme characters to represent the sounds of English. For those who do not have a background in this area, Appendix 3 briefly explains the sound system of the language and how to interpret the non-alphabetic characters. Also to assist the reader, there is a glossary of listening-related terms at the end of the book, and there are suggestions for further reading after each chapter.

Anyone writing about human communication encounters a thorny problem in determining the gender of the two or more participants. An early draft of this book attempted even-handedness by making the listener male and female in alternate chapters. This created some confusion, and I have therefore settled for a consistently female listener – except, of course, where the text refers to a specific individual – and a male speaker. Lest this decision be misconstrued, I hasten to add that listening (the point is made many times in the book) is *not* by any means a passive skill.

Finally, a note on terminology. In discussions of second language listening, certain terms such as 'skill', 'process' and 'strategy' tend to be employed rather loosely. Attempts have been made here to use them with some degree of consistency, though I apologise in advance for any oversights. I have used the word 'skill' when referring to the four 'language skills' and to the 'listening skill'. The latter is represented as being divisible into 'sub-skills' or (in the approach preferred here) into a set of 'processes'. Throughout, the book attempts to sustain a distinction between 'processes' which are part of the expertise that we all need in order to listen and 'strategies' which are ways in which listeners (particularly L2 listeners) compensate for gaps in their understanding. All of this will, I hope, become plainer as the book proceeds.

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Part I: Background

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1 Listening then and now

In order that all men may be taught to speak the truth, it is necessary that all likewise should learn to hear it.
Samuel Johnson (1709–1784), British lexicographer

1.1 Early days

In the early days of English Language Teaching (ELT), listening chiefly served as a means of introducing new grammar through model dialogues. Commentators have sometimes implied that it was not until the late 1970s and the advent of communicative approaches that the skill was first taught in its own right. This version of events is not strictly true. In language schools in Britain, listening practice featured quite regularly in course programmes from the late sixties onwards, though the materials available were relatively few and on tape rather than cassette. One of the first listening courses (Abbs, Cook and Underwood) came out in 1968, and Mary Underwood's now-classic authentic interviews and oral narratives date from 1971 and 1976 (though, admittedly, they were ahead of their time in terms of recorded content). Still, it is sobering to reflect that it was only from 1970 that a listening component featured in the Cambridge First Certificate exam, and that until 1984 its listening texts consisted of passages of written prose which were read aloud.[1]

The lesson format used by many teachers in those early days was a relatively rigid one which reflected the structuralist orthodoxy of the time (see Table 1.1).

Some features of this early lesson format are worth noting.

- *The three stages.* The lesson provided for a preliminary stage when teachers prepared learners for the listening exercise and for a final stage during which the listening experience was reviewed. During **pre-listening**, teachers traditionally presented the new items of vocabulary that learners were about to encounter in the recording. In **post-listening**, they checked the answers to comprehension questions and explored the language of the recording.

[1] Spolsky (1990) identifies the first-ever second language listening test as being the Barnard–Yale Aural test, developed by Brooks in the early 1950s.

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Table 1.1 ***Early format for a listening lesson***

Pre-listening
Pre-teach vocabulary 'to ensure maximum understanding'

Listening
Extensive listening followed by general questions on context
Intensive listening followed by detailed comprehension questions

Post-listening
Teach any new vocabulary
Analyse language (*Why did the speaker use the Present Perfect here?*)
Paused play. Students listen and repeat

- *Listening at two levels.* A procedure developed whereby learners are first asked to listen to the recording generally, in order to gain some idea as to who the speakers are and what they are speaking about. This phase of **extensive listening** serves a similar purpose to skimming a reading text: it ensures some familiarity with the content and also allows the listener to establish the 'geography' of the recording in the form of what information is provided where. The kind of question that the teacher might ask at this stage is extremely general: *Who are the people? What are they talking about?* and (one I personally favour) *How are they feeling: angry? happy? disappointed?* During the second and subsequent plays, the listeners, now familiar with the general content of the text, are able to listen for detail and to respond to more focused questions. This central part of the listening exercise was traditionally referred to as **intensive listening.**

- *Multiple-play.* The format embraced the notion that the listeners might benefit from several plays of the listening passage during intensive listening. The thinking at the time (with its emphasis on form rather than meaning) was that repeated listening enabled the teacher to focus by degrees on the language of the recording and habituated the learner to the rhythms and intonation patterns of the target language.

These three characteristics have proved remarkably robust and continue to feature in present-day practice. The overall format of 'pre-listening – listening – post-listening' has formed the basis for many accounts of listening methodology (e.g. Underwood, 1989; Wilson, 2008), though there are serious questions to be addressed about the

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relative timing and importance accorded to each part, and about what constitutes appropriate 'preparation' and 'follow-up'.

The continued use of an 'extensive listening' phase might perhaps be questioned on the argument that, in real life, a listener does not have the opportunity to listen twice. That may be so, but in real life a listener usually has the advantage of visual cues which establish both the context of the conversation and the respective roles of the participants. In a hotel check-in encounter, we would see a hotel foyer, a guest with a suitcase standing on one side of a desk and a receptionist (possibly in uniform) standing on the other. Our understanding of the conversation might also be considerably assisted by facial expressions and gesture. None of this is available when a learner is listening to an audio recording.

Recognising the issue, listening teachers increasingly make use of visual material on DVD or video. One could argue that, when this kind of information is available, the case for an extensive listening phase is less convincing. But we also have to bear in mind that the situation of sitting and listening to a recording in a classroom is a highly artificial one. As Brown and Yule (1983b: 82) point out, eavesdropping on somebody else's dialogue rather than participating in it is not a conventional listening activity. It is all very well to aspire to real-life conditions, but a real-life conversation would provide the listener with the possibility of interrupting the speaker and asking for a clarification of anything that had not been understood.

On these grounds, most teachers continue to favour a first hearing which enables learners to establish a general idea of what is going on. In point of fact, the extensive listening phase does much more than compensate for the limitations of an audio recording. It also serves an important function for the weaker listeners in the class. They may have understood very little the first time round, but the answers given by their peers provide them with a few pegs upon which to hang ideas when they listen again.

Indeed, any rehearing of the recorded material assists all members of the class to extend their understanding of it. A case can be made not just for keeping the extensive/intensive tradition but also for employing multiple replays throughout the listening lesson. The original thinking was that replaying the recording allowed attention to be given to the forms of language, but it is now recognised that repeated listening enables the learner to build increasingly on the information that is extracted. A first hearing of a foreign-language passage may produce a partial understanding, which can be deepened only by subsequent exposure and by increasingly demanding questions on the part of the teacher.

The convention of multiple-play thus embodies a principle which shapes much text-based work in language teaching – the idea of

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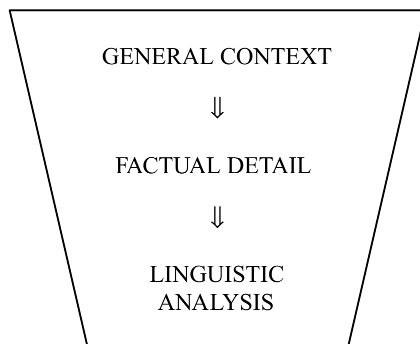

Figure 1.1 'Narrowing in'.

'narrowing in' (see Figure 1.1). The lesson starts with general notions and focuses on more detail as the learner becomes increasingly familiar with the text.

So much for the features of this early lesson format that have survived. But a general criticism of the format is that it was inflexible, and that the sequence of activities became highly predictable. Over time, a number of other aspects of the approach were also called into question.

- It was not correct (and smacked of 'nannying') to assume that students could handle a listening exercise only if they knew most or all of the vocabulary in it.
- Intensive listening took place without any clear aim. Students were not asked questions until after they had heard the passage, so they did not know what they were listening for. Their success in answering depended on memory as much as on listening skill.
- The convention of drawing attention to examples of grammar was a relic of the idea that the listening lesson should serve to demonstrate recently taught language in everyday use. In the end, lessons often focused more on discussing the language of the recording than on practising listening.
- Paused play could lead to 'parroting'. Its critics argued that students could repeat a stretch of sound without necessarily understanding what it meant.

1.2 Current practice

Over the years, the original model has been modified. The listening lesson that one encounters in good ELT practice today has a rather different

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Table 1.2 ***Current format for a listening lesson***

Pre-listening
Establish context
Create motivation for listening
Pre-teach only critical vocabulary

Extensive listening
General questions on context and attitude of speakers

Intensive listening
Pre-set questions
Intensive listening
Checking answers to questions

Post listening (optional)
Functional language in listening passage
Learners infer the meaning of unknown words from the sentences in which they appear
Final play; learners look at transcript

structure, which includes some or most of the elements shown in Table 1.2. Let us consider the rationale behind the changes.

1.2.1 Pre-listening

- *Pre-teaching vocabulary*. There are a number of reasons for not pre-teaching all the unknown vocabulary in a recording. It takes time – time which is much better spent listening. Very importantly, it also leaves students unprepared for what happens in a real-life listening encounter where, inevitably, there will be words which they do not know and have to work out for themselves. A third consideration is the effect upon the listening process. By pre-teaching all the new words in a recording, regardless of their importance, the teacher encourages the learner to listen out for those words. Result: the learner's attention is focused upon the language of the text rather than its meaning. It may also be misdirected to parts of the recording which are not strictly relevant to the main argument.

  The current policy is to pre-teach only **critical words**. 'Critical' is taken to mean those words without which the recording could not be understood (for example, in a passage about jogging, we would want to be sure that learners knew the verb *to jog*). In any given listening

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text, there should be very few such critical items – at most, four or five.

- *Establishing context.* As already noted, it is important to compensate for the limitations of using an audio cassette by giving students a general idea of what they are going to hear. In a real-life situation, they would usually be aware of who the speakers were, where they were and so on. It is only fair to provide some of this information before the listening exercise.

  However, the information does not need to be extensive. In fact, there is considerable danger in expounding too much on the context of the listening passage. The more we tell the learners, the less they will need to listen to the recording to extract the answers they need. The criterion should be: *what would the listener already know in real life before the speech event began?*

Here are typical pieces of contextualisation from the Cambridge First Certificate (FCE) exam:

You will hear part of a radio programme in which two women, Mary and Pat, will talk about their interest in being an amateur radio operator, or radio 'ham'.

(Paper 103, Part 3)

You will hear a man talking about how he jogs – runs – in order to keep fit.

(Paper 103, Part 2)

These introductions serve three different pre-listening purposes:

a. They establish 'context': including the situation, the topic and the genre of the recording.
b. They introduce critical vocabulary.
c. They mention names which help the listener to 'label' the speakers. A teacher might also include other proper nouns (e.g. names of cities) which would not be regarded as 'fair game', i.e. as part of any learner's normal vocabulary base.

- *Creating motivation.* This is an important goal of pre-listening, and one that is sometimes neglected. We need to give listeners a purpose for listening. The quality and depth of listening is also enormously enhanced when the listener has the right **mental set** – in other words, when she has given some forethought to what the listening passage is likely to contain.

  How to create motivation? One way is to write a title for the listening passage on the board, and then to ask the learners to predict what

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they will hear (see panel below). Once they have created a set of expectations, the goal of the extensive listening phase is to check which of their predictions prove to be correct and which not. The process can even be competitive (*Anna thinks there will be something about noise pollution; Enrique doesn't agree. Let's see who is right.*). Note, by the way, that the interaction exemplified in the panel does more than just create mental set. It also performs the pre-listening functions of outlining context and introducing critical vocabulary.

Creating motivation for listening

T: You're going to hear somebody talking about camels. He's a zoologist who's studied them. What do you think he'll talk about?
S1: Desert.
T: Yes, he might mention deserts [*writes DESERT on board*]. Anything else?
S2: Water. Water on the camel's back.
T: He might mention what the camel has on its back. Its hump. The word is 'hump' [*writes HUMP*]. Any other ideas?
S3: Hot temperature.
S4: Walking. Long distance.
T: He might talk about the heat in the desert [*writes HEAT*]. How do we measure that?
S1: Degree.
T: Yes, in degrees. Anything else?
S4: Walking. Camels walk a long distance, carry people.
T: Yes, he might mention how far the camel walks [*writes DISTANCE*]. Or . . . ?
S3: Very slowly.
S5: How fast is the camel.
T: Yes, how fast the camel walks [*writes SPEED*]. [*Other possibilities explored*]
T: Well, some of you guessed correctly and some of you are wrong. Let's listen and see who was right.

A similar guessing activity takes advantage of the lack of real-life context in an audio recording by playing a short uncontextualised extract and asking learners to work out what is happening. This is done to great effect by Maley and Duff (1978) with passages such as the one below. Conflicting interpretations lead to animated

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discussion in the classroom and (most importantly) to some very careful listening and re-listening to justify the conclusions that have been reached.

Contextual ambiguity

A: You know what this is, I'm sure . . .
B: Um . . .
C: Oh, isn't it, er . . .
A: Yes, I thought you might like something familiar.
B: Oh, yes . . .
A: It's funny, it took me a long time to get to like it . . .
C: Oh?
A: But now I'm very fond of it . . . Of course, it's nothing special . . .
B: Oh no, it's . . . very good.
A: I thought you'd like it . . . (Maley and Duff, 1978: 82)[2]

1.2.2 During listening

The goals of extensive listening remain unchanged – for the reasons outlined above. However, the approach to intensive listening has been greatly restructured.

- *Pre-set questions.* If questions are not asked until after the recording has been heard, learners listen in a very untargeted way. They are unclear about where to direct their attention; and their ability to answer depends upon which parts of the recording they happen to have paid special heed to. Their responses also become heavily dependent upon memory – and their recall becomes unreliable as the teacher asks more and more questions and as time goes by.

  A policy of setting questions *before* the second play of the cassette ensures that learners know in advance what they are listening for. They can write notes of their answers during listening, and their ability to respond will not be dependent upon their ability to remember what was said. Note the convention in both teaching and testing (a convention that has rarely been questioned) whereby the questions follow the same order as the passage.

[2] Possible explanations: A has cooked a meal for two visitors from overseas. A has just played a recording of a rather heavy piece of classical music.

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- *Checking answers*. The teacher allows learners time to write up their answers, and then checks them with the class as a whole. This is sometimes a difficult phase of the listening lesson. Learners may be slow to respond – partly because they need to switch psychologically from the receptive role of listener to the active one of class participant but often because of a lack of confidence in their replies. Some learners attribute their insecurity to the fact that they do not (as in reading) have the text before them in order to double-check before they commit themselves to an answer. One way of overcoming reluctance is for learners to compare answers in pairs before submitting them to the whole class.

1.2.3 Post-listening

- *Functional language*. The practice of replaying a listening passage in order to reinforce recently taught grammar has been abandoned, along with other structuralist notions. However, many of the dialogues which feature in published listening materials represent common types of human interaction. They therefore afford useful and well-contextualised examples of language **functions** such as refusing, apologising, threatening, offering, etc. These functions are relatively difficult to teach in isolation. It is worthwhile drawing attention to any which feature prominently in a listening passage, and even pausing briefly to practise them.

Drawing attention to functional language

T: What did George say about the damage?
S1: He wanted to pay.
T: Do you remember the words George used?
S2: 'I'll pay the damage.'
T: Yes. 'I'll pay for the damage.' So what was he doing?
S3: He promised.
T: Not quite promising . . .
S4: He offered.
T: That's right. He offered to pay for the damage. He *offered* . . . Offer to carry my bag.
S2: [*pause*] I'll carry your bag.
T: Offer to post the letter.
S5: I'll post the letter. *etc.*

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- *Inferring vocabulary*. If only minimal vocabulary is pre-taught, listeners have to learn to cope with unknown words in the passage. Here, they are gaining experience of exactly the kind of process that occurs in a real-life encounter, where there is no teacher or dictionary on hand to explain every word in an utterance. It is usually assumed (perhaps by analogy with L2 reading) that the way in which an L2 listener deals with an unknown word is to work out its meaning from the context in which it occurs. If one accepts the assumption, it is appropriate to give listeners some controlled practice in the process of inferring word meaning, similar to the practice given to readers. The teacher identifies a number of useful words in the recording which may be new to the class and whose meanings are relatively clearly illustrated by the context (one or two sentences) within which they occur. The teacher then writes the words on the board, and replays the sections of the listening passage which contain them. Students suggest possible meanings.

  That is the principle; my experience is that it often does not find its way into practice. Although many teachers recognise the value of this kind of inferring activity, they are reluctant to engage in it. The reason is simple: even with a counter on the cassette or CD player, it can be quite complicated and time-consuming to locate a number of short pieces of text. In fact, the solution is simple as well. It is to pre-record the target sentences on to a separate cassette or CD so that they are easily retrieved for the inferring exercise.

- *Paused play*. Paused play has generally been dropped. It was often used as a way of practising intonation patterns – and was thus part of the unsatisfactory mixing of language and listening goals which has already been commented on. It was also criticised on the grounds that learners could repeat what they heard without necessarily understanding anything – the kind of parroting associated with behaviourist drilling. My personal belief is that paused play can still serve some purpose, as a way of checking whether learners can divide up short sections of connected speech into individual words. However, one has to recognise that it does not fit in well with current communicative approaches.

- *Final play*. There is sometimes a final play during which, for the first time, the students are given a transcript of the listening passage. This is a valuable activity, since it allows learners, on an individual basis, to clarify sections of the recording which they have not so far succeeded in decoding. It may also enable them to notice, for example, the presence of short weak-quality function words which they would otherwise have overlooked.

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> One of the strengths of early approaches to listening was the insistence on separating the spoken and the written word. However, there is no reason why the latter should not be introduced at a late stage in the lesson in the form of a transcript that assists word recognition. It is important that learners take away with them some kind of permanent record of what they have covered in the listening lesson – and not just an echo in their heads of the voices of the speakers.

In addition to the above, two other major developments have occurred. Firstly, it has been recognised that it is very difficult to check understanding accurately through the use of conventional comprehension questions. Answering such questions often involves a great deal of reading or writing; and if a learner gives a wrong answer, it may not be due to a failure of listening at all. It may be because he/she has not understood the question properly (a reading problem) or because he/she lacks the language to formulate a written answer (a writing problem). There has therefore been a move towards checking understanding by setting **tasks** rather than questions (see, e.g., Blundell and Stokes, 1981). These tasks can be quite simple. Many involve the completion of simple grids. Others involve filling in forms. If the listening passage is a dialogue between a customer and a travel agent, then the task might require the learner to complete the kind of form that the agent would be using (see Figure 1.2). The advantage of this kind of activity is not just that it reduces the amount and complexity of reading (and indeed writing) that has to be done. It also aligns the purposes and processes of listening more closely with what occurs in real-life encounters.

Task-based activities compare favourably with the practice of asking whole-class comprehension questions, where the strong listeners are often keen to respond while the weaker ones mask their failure of understanding behind bright smiles. All class members have to participate, and there is a tangible outcome in the form of a completed form or checklist which can be collected and marked.

Secondly, there has been a move towards using **authentic recordings** wherever possible. The term 'authentic' usually refers to listening items originally intended for the ears of a native listener rather than specially prepared for language learners. The arguments for using such materials are that they expose learners to the real sounds of the language (including the hesitations of spontaneous speech) and that they provide a listening experience more like that of real life, where students do not know every word and have to make guesses to fill in gaps in understanding. Authentic materials are discussed in Chapter 14 of this book.

To summarise, the changes that have taken place reflect three developments in the way listening is viewed. Firstly, there has been a shift

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Lemming Travel Ltd

Holiday no: ....

Client Family name: ....WILLIAMS..........

Given names: .... Nationality: ....

Address: ....

Telephone: Home: .... Work ....

Travel [ ] ship [ ] plane [ ] train [ ] coach

From: .... To: ....

Departure date: .... Return date: ....

Company/Airline: ....

Outward flight no.: ______________________

....

Accommodation [ ] Hotel [ ] Self-catering

No. of nights in hotel/apartment ....

Name of hotel/apartment ....

Resort (town and country) ....PATTAYA, THAILAND..........

Room: [ ] Single [ ] Double [ ]Twin-bedded
[ ] Without bathroom [ ] With bath [ ] With shower

Meals: [ ] None [ ]Bed and breakfast
[ ] Half-board [ ] Full board

Special requirements (balcony, sea view etc)

Cost [ ] low season [ ] mid-season [ ] high season

Cost of holiday HK$ ....
Single room supplement HK$ ....
Special requirements HK$ ....
Insurance HK$ ....

Total cost HK$

Payment by: [ ] cash [ ] cheque [ ] credit card

Figure 1.2 Example of a form-filling task (Field, 1983: 73).

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in perspective so that listening as a skill takes priority over details of language content. Secondly, there has been a wish to relate the nature of listening practised in the classroom to the kind of listening that takes place in real life. This is reflected in the way the teacher provides contextual background, gives practice in inferring the meaning of new words, uses recordings which are 'authentic' in origin and uses simulated tasks rather than formal exercises. Thirdly, we have become aware of the importance of providing motivation and a focus for listening. The listener is encouraged to develop expectations as to what will be heard in the recording, then to check them against what is actually said. By pre-setting questions and tasks, we ensure that learners are clear from the start about the purpose of the listening exercise and will not have to rely heavily on memory.

1.3 Conclusion

The purpose behind this review of changing practice has been to highlight some of the principles which gave rise to present-day approaches to the teaching of listening. It may seem curious that the discussion should have covered these important ideas in the brief space of a single chapter rather than extending them over the major part of the book. But the overview presented here is intended to serve simply as a point of departure. My aim is not to provide a detailed exposition of current practice; other sources (Ur, 1984; Underwood, 1989; Wilson, 2008) already do that comprehensively, if in rather different ways from the historical angle adopted here. Instead, it is to challenge many of the received ideas which underlie our views of second language listening and the methods that we employ in practising it in the classroom. It will be argued that our present comprehension-based methodology is flawed. A case will be made for a radical rethinking of the way in which we approach listening in the second language classroom so that we can more closely address the needs and concerns of the learner.

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