THE NATURE OF LISTENING COMPREHENSION

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There are the distinction between reciprocal listening and non-reciprocal listening. Reciprocal listening refers to those listening tasks where there is the opportunity for thr listener to interact with the speaker, and to negotiate the content of the interaction. Non-reciprocal listening refers to tasks such as listening to the radio or a formal lecture where the transfer of information is in one direction only – from the speaker to the listener. Anderson and Lynch underline the complexity of listening comprehension by pointing out that the listener must simultaneously integrate the following skills:

- identify spoken signals from the midst of surrounding sounds;
- segment the stream of speech into words;
- grasp the syntax of the utterance(s);
- (in interactive listening) formulate an appropriate response.

In addition to these linguistic skills, the listener must also command a range of non-linguistic knowledge and skills. These include having an appropriate purpose for listening; having appropriate social and cultural knowledge and skills; having the appropriate back-ground knowledge. We do not symply take language in like a tape-recorder, but interpret what we hear according to our purpose in listening and our background knowledge. We then store the meaning(s) of the message rather than the forms in which these are encoded. The actual grammatical structures themselves are often rapidly lost. Conversely, being able to remember the actual words of a spoken message does not necessarilymean that the message itself has been comprehended.

In his analysis of listening comprehension, Richards distinguishes between conversational listening (listening to casual speech) and academic listening (listening to lectures and other academic presentations). (By "academic" listening Richards means listening to lectures in an academic context, not an English language learning context.)

Conversational listening involves the ability to:

- retain chunks of language of different length for short periods
- discriminate among the distinctive sounds of the target language
- recognise the stress partens of words
- recognise the rhythmic structure of English
- recognise the functions of stress and intonation to signal the information structure of utterances

- identify words in stressedand unstressed position
- recognise redused forms of words
- distinguish word boundaries
- recognise typical word order patterns in the target language
- recognise vocabulary used in core conversational topics
- detect key words (i. e. those which identify topics and propositions)
- guess the meaning of words from thecontext in which they occure
- recognise grammatical word classes (parts of speech)
- recognise major syntactic patterns and devises
- recognise cohesive devices in spoken discourse
- recognise elliptical forms of grammatical units and sentences
- detect sentence constituents.

Academic listening involves the ability to:

- identify purpose andscope of lecture
- identify topic of lecture and follow topic development
- identify relationship among units within discourse (for example major idea, generalisations, hypotheses, supporting ideas, examples)
- identify role of discourse marcets in signalling structure of lecture (for example conjunctions, adverbs, gambits, routines)
- infer relationships (for example cause, effect, cjnclusion)
- recognise key lexical items relating to subject/topic
- deduce meanings of words from context
- recognise markets of cohesion
- recognise function of intonation to signal information structure (for example pitch, volume, pace, key)
- detect attitude of speaker toward subject matter.

Rather than seeing these lists as relating to conversational and academic listening respectively, it would be better to suggest that the first list contains a set of enabling microskills whichlearners might employ in any listening task regardless of whether it is a conversational or academic task. The second list contains what might be called rhetorical or discourse comprehension skills. Once again, these may be needed for both conversational and academic listening.

In summary, then we can note that successful listening involves:

- skilll is segmenting the stream of speech into meaningful words and phrases;
- recognising word classes;
- relating the incoming massage to one's own background knowledge;
- identifying the rhetorical and functional intent of an utteranceor parts of an aural text;
- interpreting rhythm, stress and intonation to identify information focus and emotional/attitudinal tone.