

Teaching listening comprehension in MFL: application to French

PGCE 2013 - University of Huddersfield DHD7230: Specialist Conference Paper

Maurice Jégado

<http://french.eduzephyr.com>

1 Rationale

I teach French as a foreign language to groups of adults in the Community Adult Education sector. These courses are private and take place at a local community centre. When playing a sound file, I noticed that most learners find it a very difficult exercise and their comprehension tends to break down quickly thus leading to a feeling of failure. Therefore, my concern is to improve my teaching approach in listening comprehension so as to make it a more successful experience for the learners.

Being able to understand an oral message is fundamental. For instance, how can we communicate effectively in reciprocal communication if we don't understand our interlocutor? It is also known that the development of listening skills has a very positive effect on learners' progress in other language skills and speaking in particular.

In the following, we will first discuss some of the reasons why listening is inherently difficult. Next, we will progressively elaborate the various steps of a method for teaching listening. We will strive to ground our choices in the findings of research in the theory and practice of learning and second acquisition language. We will conclude with the assessment of this approach with our learners. The learning outcomes I intend to achieve are K1, A1, A4, and A5.

2 Why is listening considered difficult by learners?

There are many reasons that make listening difficult; let's review some of them.

When a learner is exposed to an oral message, the sound stream needs to be parsed and word boundaries have to be elucidated. Recognising word boundaries in a speech is difficult in many languages and French in particular, since adjacent words are often run together in a single phonetic sequence belonging to the same breath group with no voice pause (Madeleni and Wioland 2005). If the previous word ends with a vowel and the next one starts with a vowel as well, the voice doesn't pause between the two words ; this so-called "enchaînement vocalique" (vowel sequence) is present in "*Ça y est*" for instance. Likewise, the last pronounced consonant of a word is run with the initial vowel of the next word ; this so-called "enchaînement consonantique" (consonant sequence) is present in "*Tête arrondie*" for instance, where the resulting syllabic decomposition is [tɛ / ta / rɔ̃ / di]. In addition, words whose last letter is a mute consonant when pronounced individually, give rise to a "liaison" with the initial vowel of the following lexical word as in, "*les enfants*" for instance, where the ending s of the article *les* is run with the beginning *en* of *enfants* to form the phoneme /z/. Therefore, even if learners know the individual phonetics of lexical words, they may not be able to recognize them in connected speech where words are concatenated in sequences. But in contrast to reading for instance, where it's possible to pause and read again, in a live listening activity, you can't hear again the chunk that posed difficulties in the stream.

Spoken language and written languages are different, as reviewed in Lam (2002). In spoken language, speakers tend to use various facilitation devices such as pause fillers (e.g. "um") or readily available group of words (e.g. "I mean..."). Another difference between spoken and written languages is that in spoken language, speakers tend to suppress some words, for instance the "ne" in a French negative utterance "ne ...pas" tends to be suppressed and can't be heard. Also, pauses in spoken languages don't necessarily correspond to the punctuation of a written text and speakers use a wide range of intonations and pitches to express their emotions

or attitudes such as joy, anger, surprise, etc. Finally, when exposed with homophones such as the words “terre” and “taire”, only the context enables the listener to choose the right word.

Beginners tend to translate what they hear into their own language L1, but this inevitably induces a delay and soon the listener is out of synch with the speaker leading to comprehension breaking down. Also, the sound rules (intonation, stress, pitch) learners are used to in their native language will generally not be suitable for the decoding of the message in the target language.

After this short introduction to listening difficulties, let's embark on a practical method for teaching listening.

3 Choosing appropriate settings and oral materials

Finding appropriate materials for listening activities is not easy although the availability of the internet has considerably eased the task. Cook (2008), for instance, suggests that auditory materials shouldn't come from the interview of native speakers only since these documents might be too difficult and represent a model out of reach for the learners; the gap between their possibilities and the model being too far apart. This is also claimed by Krashen (1993 cited in Johnson 2008) whose input hypothesis states that learners learn best if the input is slightly more advanced (level $i+1$) than their present (level i) states of proficiency ; in other words the listening activity is meant to help learners move from state i to $i+1$ but will fail this objective if the difficulty level of the input is too high.

As a start, we discovered that beginning with simple documents, which we read and taped, gave learners much confidence in their listening abilities. In such a setting, many of the difficulties mentioned in the first section are avoided and thus the message easier to grasp.

As our students progress, we can introduce more difficult texts and settings. For instance, the so-called “easy French” news broadcast of the radio “Radio France International” is a good source of oral texts.

Documents shouldn't be too long; in our practice, we noticed that one to two minutes is a good average duration.

Watching short videos (Hanington 2010) is also a good source of materials since the oral message is accompanied with visual material which helps visual learners.

Listening comprehension should be an enjoyable activity and as noted by Renandya and Farrell (2011), extensive practice is a key for success: “listening is best learned through listening”.

4 Prelistening activities

As discussed in Johnson (2008), two main processes are involved in reading as well as in listening, namely the « bottom-up » and the « top-down » approaches. In the bottom-up approach, the starting point is the message itself. Learners pay attention to the individual words and how they are grouped together; they then build progressively a representation of the meaning of the message. In other words, linear parsing of the input chain is performed. Although the bottom-up approach is fundamental in that it enables to reflect precisely on the form such as grammar issues; the use of that approach alone is far from being sufficient in a listening activity. Learners applying that skill only, tend to stop at the hearing of an unknown word and the application of this sole strategy is very likely to lead to the breaking down of listening.

In contrast, the starting point of the “top-down” strategy is the reference framework of the listener. In most cases, we don't need to go through all possible interpretations of a message. Inferencing, predicting and guessing make it possible to infer meaning and comprehension from the interweaving of what is heard with what we already know. For instance, let's assume you're travelling to London by train and that you hear the message “passengers to Manchester should

change train platform 6” at the station. Once you've recognised the word Manchester in the input, you can safely ignore the rest of the content of message. When listening for a specific purpose, a 100% comprehension is not strictly necessary to make sense of the message; the listener can safely perform selections. The same applies to the message form. If the listener has prior knowledge of some linguistic expressions that are very common when talking about the topic dealt with in the message, noticing just a few words of one of these expressions, might be sufficient to infer the likely expression in full and make immediate sense of what is said. These short-cuts free cognitive resources to process the rest of the message and stay in synch with the delivery pace of the speaker.

The role of prelistening activities is to present contextual and pragmatics information to help listeners be more effective in their top-down approach. In a cognitive model where knowledge is represented by schemas (Meurer 2009), prelistening activities aim at priming and sensitizing those schemas relevant to the subject. Prelistening activities also increase motivation for the proper listening activity.

5 Playing the message: the “top-down” approach

Most of our learners are more trained in the “bottom-up” strategy than in the “top-down”. This probably dates back to past education where this strategy used to be the most developed in language classes. Consequently, one of our teaching role is to help learners develop “top-down” skills. In order to do so, we will give learners a prior MCT (Multiple Choice Test) sheet about the message content since, as discussed in Vandergrift (2007), listening with a clear specific purpose is more effective than trying to have to grasp the whole detailed content of the message.

After learners have read the MCT, we are ready to play the message first time. Next, peer-assessment takes place and learners work in pairs to fill the MCT. The message is then played a second time and pairs meet again to elucidate their possibly remaining doubts. This is followed by a whole class interaction with teacher assessing learners' strategy and difficulties and providing feedback accordingly.

Notice that at this stage, we haven't introduced the written script of the message. Several reasons grounded in the theory of learning justify this approach. It's known that a multi-modal teaching approach, whereby visual material is introduced together with verbal material, is beneficial to learning (Mayer and Johnson 2008). However, the simultaneous exposure to the written text and the oral narration of the text, the so-called “redundancy principle” leads to cognitive overload through the saturation of the auditory buffer of the working memory in Baddeley's model (Repovš and Baddeley 2006), and has a detrimental effect on learning.

As reported in Vandergrift (2007), the introduction of the written text too early in the cycle of the listening activity may lead learners to apply inefficient translation strategies. Therefore, for all these reasons, the use of the written text in our method is deferred until the “bottom-up” stage, which is the subject of the next session.

6 The “bottom-up” analysis

While the “top-down” approach was mainly targeted at listening for comprehension, the starting point of the “bottom-up” approach is the text itself. Richards (2005) refers to these two aspects as “listening for comprehension” and “listening for acquisition” respectively. The “bottom-up” approach will focus on a detailed analysis of the linguistic aspects of the text and we will introduce the written script at this stage.

Schmidt, as reported in Johnson (2008), states that consciousness plays an important role in language acquisition. The input is what a learner hears while the intake is what is consciously noticed in the input stream. It is claimed that there exists a strong connection between intake and language development. Hence, ideally, each learner would consciously notice all gaps between their present language competence and the input so as to maximize the benefits of the listening activity for their language development. In reality, this is unlikely to happen of course,

but it raises an interesting question as to whether, in teaching, we can help learners increase their relevant intake.

One possible answer to this question is to draw learners' awareness to specific parts of the input by creating blanks in the written text. Blanks can be introduced for various purposes. Based on a corpus of widely spread difficulties and errors in listening comprehension (Hoeflaak 2004), some blanks can be targeted at remedying these difficulties. For instance, as discussed in section 2, the recognition of word boundaries, when these happen in vowel or consonant sequences, is often a source of difficulty with the pronunciation of French. Blanks may also be used for pointing fundamental grammar constructs; these constructs might be new or already known in which case the blanks act as a reinforcement and recall of previously knowledge. Blanks referring to common word groups or useful collocations can also be inserted to help learners memorise these groups of formulaic language (Wood 2002). Now, a drawback of this approach is that drawing learners' attention to some specific parts of the text might be done at the expense of attention to the matching pronunciation of the other parts of the text. Practice and feedback from learners should help determine how best to introduce these gaps in the written script.

At this stage of the method, learners are given a few minutes to silently discover the written script of the text with the inserted blanks. Next, we play the message again so that learners can match the written text against the spoken input, and try to figure out what the gaps stand for in the input message. Next, pair-assessment takes place; each pair trying to agree on a unique answer for the blanks. A replay of the message can be done if necessary. We expect that phase of the method to develop word recognition skills, vocabulary and also increase learners' knowledge of form to meaning relationships.

7 Conclusion

In this paper, we've proposed a practical method for developing listening skills in foreign languages applied to French. First, an appropriate sound document has to be chosen. The method contemplates two stages namely prelistening activities followed by the listening itself. The latter stage, which is the bulk of the method, is further decomposed in listening for comprehension and listening for intake. A summary of the method is pictured in figure 1 and a concrete example of its use is given in the appendix.

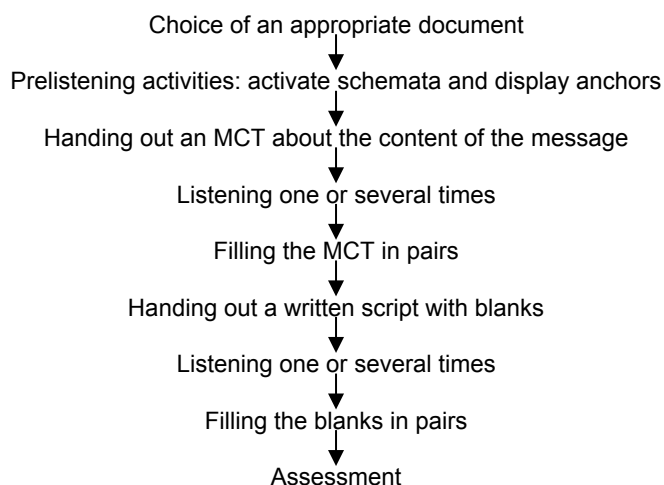


Fig. 1. Synopsis of the listening method.

This method is quite generic and would be adequate in a wide range of contexts. Naturally, the teacher may adapt it to their needs and in case of insufficient time, for instance, may decide to skip some steps. Conversely, should time be available, the listening activity can be followed up by post-listening activities, such as restructuring in speaking, where learners are encouraged to use actively some of the structures met in the document in order to increase memorisation,

fluency, and proficiency.

We intend to use that method intensively with our students and assess its efficiency over time. One question, about which feedback of our students will be very useful, is how to genuinely insert blanks in the script while working the bottom-up approach of the document. Another challenge for the teacher is to design an appropriate MCT for the top-down approach. The MCT should focus on the main comprehension points and likely distracters have to be defined. However, experience shows that creating such genuine MCTs is, in general, not an easy task.

8 References

- Cook V. (2008) “*Second Language Learning and Language Teaching*”, Edward Arnold 1991, fourth edition 2008.
- Hanington L. (2010) “Video Dictation”, *Modern English Teacher*, Vol. 19, No. 3.
- Hoeflaak A. (2004) “Computer-Assisted Training in the Comprehension of Authentic French Speech: A Closer View”, *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 17:3-4.
- Johnson K. (2008) “*An Introduction to Foreign Language Learning and Teaching*”, Pearson Longman, 2nd Edition.
- Lam W. Y. K. (2002) “Raising students' Awareness of the Features of Real-World Listening Input”, in Richards J. C. and Renandya W. A. (eds) “*Methodology in Language Teaching: An Anthology of Current Practice*”, Cambridge University Press.
- Madeleni E. and Wioland F. (2005) “La Phonétique au Chevet de l'Apprentissage du Français Parlé”, http://francparler-oif.org/FP/dossiers/phonetique_wioland.htm, accessed February 2013.
- Mayer R. E. and Johnson C. I. (2008) “Revising the Redundancy Principle in Multimedia Learning”, *Journal of Education Psychology*, Vol. 100, No. 2.
- Meurer J. L. (2009) “Schemata and Reading Comprehension”, *Journal of English Languages, Literatures in English and Cultural Studies* 25/26.
- Oxford R. L. (2003) “Language Learning Styles and Strategies: an Overview”, GALA 2003.
- Renandya W.A. and Farrell T.S.C (2011) “Teacher, The tape Is Too Fast! Extensive Listening in E LT”, *E LT Journal*, Volume 65/1.
- Richards J. C. (2005) “Second Thoughts on Teaching Listening”, *RELC Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 1.
- Repovš G. and Baddeley A. (2006) “The Multi-component Model of Working Memory: Explorations in Experimental Cognitive Psychology”, *Neuroscience* 139, pp. 5-21.
- Vandergrift L. (2007) “Recent Developments in Second and Foreign Language Listening Comprehension Research” *Lang. Teach.* 40.
- Wood D. (2002) “Formulaic Language in Acquisition and Production: Implications for Teaching”, *TESL Canada Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 1.

9 Appendix: Applying the method to a short video dealing with environmental issues in the river “La Loire”

...9.1 Video script

La Loire, un des derniers fleuves sauvages d'Europe à l'équilibre précaire. Guy Bourlès est très impliqué dans la défense de ce milieu naturel. Son domaine, c'est le marais de Mazerolles ; un marais inondé sept mois de l'année. Pêcheur professionnel depuis plus de 25 ans, spécialisé dans la pêche à l'anguille, il introduit chaque année des civelles, des bébés anguilles, pour maintenir dans le marais un nombre de poissons suffisant. Lorsqu'il part à la pêche, une de ses préoccupations est la présence d'écrevisses de Louisiane, un crustacé introduit par hasard dans la région et qui menace aujourd'hui l'écosystème du marais.

« — Voilà, ça c'est le poisson qu'on cherche, les anguilles, le poisson qui nous intéresse, voilà et ça c'est qu'on cherche pas mais qu'on trouve quand même, l'écrevisse de Louisiane. Donc ça, on l'élimine. L'objectif c'est de préserver l'équilibre naturel. Il me semblerait pas logique que moi arrivant dans un milieu naturel, je le déséquilibre. Un des symptômes très intéressant de la bonne santé du marais, c'est justement tous ces oiseaux qui trouvent ici le gîte et le couvert. »

Cette zone humide d'une valeur exceptionnelle est devenue un site de reproduction et d'hivernage pour les oiseaux migrateurs.

...9.2 Multiple Choice Test

Le marais de Mazerolles est inondé :

- toute l'année
- 7 mois de l'année



Guy Bourlès est spécialiste de :

- la pêche aux écrevisses de Louisiane
- la pêche à l'anguille

Cette zone est un site de :

- reproduction de bébés anguilles
- reproduction des oiseaux migrateurs

...9.3 Script with blanks

La Loire, un des derniers fleuves sauvages d'Europe à l'équilibre précaire. Guy Bourlès est --- ----- dans la défense de ce milieu naturel. Son domaine, c'est le marais de Mazerolles ; un marais inondé sept mois de l'année. Pêcheur professionnel depuis plus de ---- -----, spécialisé dans la pêche à l'anguille, il introduit chaque année des civelles, des bébés anguilles, pour maintenir --- --- ----- un nombre de poissons suffisant. Lorsqu'il part à la pêche, une de ses préoccupations est la présence d'écrevisses de Louisiane, un crustacé introduit par hasard dans la région et qui menace aujourd'hui l'----- du marais.

« Voilà, ça c'est le poisson qu'on cherche, --- -----, le poisson qui nous intéresse, voilà et ça c'est qu'on cherche pas mais qu'on trouve quand même, ----- de Louisiane. Donc ça, on l'élimine. L'objectif c'est de préserver ----- ----- . Il me semblerait pas logique que moi arrivant dans un milieu naturel, je le déséquilibre. Un des symptômes très intéressant de la bonne santé du marais, c'est justement tous ces oiseaux qui trouvent ici le gîte et le ----- . »

Cette zone humide d'une valeur exceptionnelle est devenue un site de reproduction et d'hivernage pour les ----- ----- .