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Research Article

DEVELOPING LISTENING SKILL BY ACTIVATING STUDENTS' PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the similarities and differences between listening and reading, and then looks specifically at why the activation of prior knowledge is perhaps even more important in listening than in reading comprehension. Finally, there is a concrete example of activating prior knowledge in listening materials.

KEYWORDS

Listening comprehension, activating, cognitive

INTRODUCTION

We have known at least since the 1930s that people's prior knowledge has an effect on their cognition.

One very important idea for teaching listening is that listening courses must make use of students' prior knowledge in order to improve listening

comprehension. To make this idea clear, this article introduces several concepts from the cognitive view of language learning, including schema, scripts, and top down / bottom - up processing.

Prior knowledge is organized in schemata (the plural form of schema): abstract, generalized mental representations of our experience that are available to help us understand new experiences. Another way to look at this phenomenon is the idea of scripts. For example, everyone who has been to a restaurant knows that there is a predictable sequence of questions involved in ordering a meal. In England these have to do with whether you want soup or salad, the kind of dressing on the salad, choice of side dishes, etc. Even if you do not hear a question, perhaps because the restaurant is too noisy, you can guess from your place in the script what the server is probably asking. Unfortunately, this script does not transfer perfectly from country to country because the routine is slightly different in each place.

THE MAIN RESULTS AND FINDINGS

However, when traveling in another country, and eating in a restaurant, you can make certain assumptions about the kinds of questions that will be asked. If food has been ordered but drinks have not, and the server asks another question, you might fairly predict that the question is about the choice of drinks, based on your prior knowledge of what happens in restaurants. Indeed, successful language learners often can be separated from unsuccessful language learners by their ability to contextualize their guesses and use their prior knowledge in this way.

The idea of prior knowledge is one part of the cognitive model of language processing. That model says that when people listen or read, we process the information we hear both top-down and bottom-up. Top-down means using our prior knowledge and experiences; we know certain things about certain topics and situations and use that information to understand. Bottom-up processing means using the information we have

about sounds, word meanings, and discourse markers like first, then and after that to assemble our understanding of what we read or hear one step at a time.

I like to use as an example of the two kinds of processing my experience buying books at the Bulgaria museum. I did not speak Bulgarian. Having calculated that the books would cost ten leva, I walked up to the counter and gave the clerk a ten lev note. She opened the cash register, looked in it, and said something in Bulgarian. As a reflex, I dug in my pocket and produced fifty stotinka coins, and gave them to her. She smiled and handed me a five-stotinka coin. I managed the conversation based on my prior knowledge of how one deals with small changes at a store. In some sense, I didn't need to speak the Bulgarian language; I just needed my prior knowledge. The purpose of a pre-reading task is usually to activate students' prior knowledge. If the reading is about a famous person, for example, the task might require students to list as many things as they can about that person. Reading courses also have used the idea of bottom-up processing when they have pre-taught new vocabulary and other word- and sentence-level knowledge that students might need to know before reading.

Students obviously need both bottom-up and top-down processing skills in listening as well. Students must hear some sounds (bottom-up processing), hold them in their working memory long enough (a few seconds) to connect them to each other and then interpret what they've just heard before something new comes along. At the same time, listeners are using their background knowledge (top-down processing) to determine meaning with respect to prior knowledge and schemata.

The cognitive view of language learning sees listening comprehension as being basically the same as reading comprehension and consequently pedagogical practices have been very similar: In a typical lesson, there are “pre” activities, “while” activities, and “post” activities. However, teachers know that, despite our practice, listening is a bit different from reading.

For instance, students can skim a text quickly to get a good idea what it’s about, but listeners can’t skim. The language comes rushing in at them. Listening must be done in real time; there is no second chance, unless, of course, the listener specifically asks for repetition. When students read, cognates (words that are similar in two languages) help understanding. But while cognates may look alike on the page, their sounds may be quite different and they may be less useful while listening.

Listening also involves understanding all sorts of reductions of sounds and blending of words. There are false starts and hesitations to be dealt with. In a study that compared reading and listening in a foreign language (Lund 1991), it was found that readers recalled more details than listeners, and that listeners, while understanding a lot of the main ideas, had to “fill in the blanks” in their understanding by guessing at context. Again, with the words rushing in and the student having no control, these findings make sense.

At this point, there is a need to introduce one more concept from cognitive psychology: the human as a limited processor of information. Think of the ability to pat your head and rub your stomach at the same time. This is an interesting analogy to apply to listening because it is first a matter of individual differences: Some people can do this better than others. So it goes with listening.

Some people are inherently better listeners than others. But even the best listeners, as anyone who has studied or taught a language knows, can have a difficult time. Like patting your head and rubbing your stomach, listening in a foreign language is subject to individual differences. Our task as teachers is to first understand that all humans are limited in their ability to process information.

Then we must figure out a way to help, to take away some of the difficulty. That’s where activating prior knowledge comes in. In the context of a listening class, one could take the following approach. Let’s assume the topic is jobs. The goal is to give students practice in listening for job titles. Even if students are not employed, they have spent a good part of their lives hearing about the jobs people do. They certainly know the names of many jobs in their first language.

They may even know several common job titles in English (like doctor and teacher). They probably do not know how to say other jobs in English. A pre-listening task should have two parts, then. Students should have an opportunity to learn vocabulary terms (and perhaps structures) they don’t know but that they will need to successfully complete the task. However it is just as important to give the students the opportunity to use what they already know – their prior knowledge – to help them do the task.

This may take the form of having them list jobs they know how to say in English. It really doesn’t matter whether the words actually will appear in the listening task because activating prior knowledge, in addition to helping comprehension, motivates students by bringing their lives into the lesson.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, listening is a complex activity, and we can help students comprehend what they hear by activating their prior knowledge. The next section will consider another way teachers can help ease the difficulty of listening: training students in different types of listening.

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