SECOND LANGUAGE LISTENING PROCESSES

Mr. Sato is a young executive in a company based in Osaka, Japan. He often meets with international clients, and although his English proficiency level is intermediate, he finds that in social situations when he has to use English, he has a great deal of difficulty following casual conversation.

Sonia is a first-year university student from Italy, studying in Canada. Although she doesn't have trouble following English when it is spoken slowly and clearly, she cannot follow seminars or lectures in English very easily.

Faisal has little difficulty understanding the English used by his teacher in class, but when he tries to understand English spoken by native speakers in other situations, he has great difficulty catching the gist of their conversations.

Eli's mother is Scottish, and her father is Greek. They speak both English and Greek at home, but Eli is having a lot of difficulty understanding her new eighthgrade English teacher, who is from New Zealand.

At her school in India, Lalitha was a top student in English. When she came to the United States to study, however, she was shocked to find that she often could not understand what members of her host family were saying to her.

These examples illustrate a common feature of many situations second language learners face. Although they may have reached what they consider is a reasonable level of proficiency in English, when it comes to understanding spoken English, they often feel frustrated by their inability to follow what people are saying. They often describe the following kinds of problems:

I find people speak too fast. I just can't keep up with what they are saying.

I can understand a lot of the words people are using, but I still can't quite catch what they are talking about.

I find it very tiring to try to listen for any length of time because it takes so much concentration.

I am not familiar with my host family's accent, and it makes them difficult to follow.

People use too many unfamiliar words and expressions that I don't understand, so it's hard to understand what they are saying.

The other students have many different accents, and I can't always understand what they mean.

I don't understand when people say they are telling me jokes, and I'm too embarrassed to ask them to explain.

Some English sounds, such as "I" and "r", confuse me, and then I lose track of what people are saying to me.

The processes involved in listening are complex. For example, here are some of the factors that come into play when we are engaged in the process of understanding spoken language and that can affect how successfully someone understands what is said:

Listener factors

- What purpose does the listener have?
- How proficient is he or she in English?
- How confident is he or she as a listener?
- How familiar is he or she with the topic or situation being talked about?
- How interested is he or she in the topic?
- What strategies does the listener make use of while listening?

Linguistic factors

- What variety of English is the speaker using (e.g., American, British, Indian, Nigerian)?
- Is the speaker using a colloquial variety of speech or a more formal variety?
- How fast is the speaker speaking?
- How many speakers are there?
- What are their relationships to each other?
- How long is the spoken segment of language?
- · What kind of nonverbal communication is involved (e.g., hand and facial gestures, body language)?
- What kind of discourse is involved (e.g., casual conversation, discussion, interview, lecture)?

Situational factors

- Where is the communication taking place?
- Does the situation give clues about the content?
- How does the situation affect what people say to each other?
- What are the roles of the different participants?
- What are they doing and why?
- Does what they are doing affect what they say?
- Are they talking about something unrelated to the actual context?

Throughout this book, we examine the role that factors such as these play in listening in a second or foreign language and what their implications are for teaching listening. In this chapter, we examine some of the processes that are involved in understanding spoken English and the factors that contribute to difficulties learners face with listening.

TIPS FOR DEVELOPING LEARNERS' LISTENING PROCESSES

The tips in this chapter prepare students to listen in different contexts and with different approaches. Each tip highlights an important dimension of the listening process.



- 1. Prepare students for listening in different kinds of situations.
- **2.** Provide opportunities for students to make use of bottom-up processing, or language-based processing.
- **3. Provide opportunities for students to use top-down processing, or knowledge-based processing that draws on background knowledge.**
- **4.** Prepare students for interactive processing, an approach that moves between bottom-up and top-down processing.

Throughout the rest of the chapter, we explain each of these tips with

- an explanation or description of the tip;
- a summary of what the teacher should know about the tip; and
- suggestions of what the teacher can do in the classroom.

1 Prepare students for listening in different kinds of situations.

Learners need to be prepared for many different kinds of listening. For example, in addition to the need to understand the English of the language classroom, they may also need to be able to understand casual conversation, telephone conversations, podcasts, interviews, discussions, public announcements and instructions, or lectures. They may encounter English in situations involving face-to-face contact where they are expected to interact, or media sources such as radio, TV, the movies, or the Internet, where they simply listen. Each of the contexts for the use of English involves a different type of listening input and makes different demands on the listener.

What the teacher should know

Some situations are not really intended for deep exchanges of information. Rather, they are what Brown and Yule (1983) call interactional exchanges; that is, they may be very casual exchanges that "oil the social wheels," and the people involved don't necessarily have to listen intently. Some types of listening may be transactional exchanges (again to use Brown and Yule's terms) where listeners are hoping to get different types of information. These situations may involve listening carefully for very specific details in order to complete various types of tasks. Listening might involve reciprocal talk, where turns are taken in being a speaker and a listener; or the situation may be nonreciprocal (talk), where one participant just listens.

It's useful for teachers to think about the kinds of events and situations listeners might find themselves in and the different kinds of listening responses they might have to make (Field, 2008). Listening makes different processing demands on listeners in different contexts and when listening for different purposes is involved. Listening is not just a question of comprehending what you are listening to, but also knowing what to do with what is being said and understanding how you need to react to it (Lynch, 1995). The following table (adapted from Field, 2008) lists some different types of listening, their purposes, and the roles a listener might take.

Type of Listening	Purpose	Listener Role
Casual conversations	To exchange social and personal information	Listen and respond
Telephone conversations	To exchange informationTo take a messageTo obtain goods and services	 Listen and respond Listen for specific details Listen and give specific details
Lectures	To expand knowledgeTo learn about various topics	 Listen for important themes or concepts Listen for main points Listen and take notes
Class lessons	To expand knowledgeTo learn about various topicsTo interact with others	 Listen for instructions Listen for key content and main points Listen and respond
Movies, drama, songs	To be entertained and to gain pleasure	 Listen to follow plot Listen to get the gist Listen to learn the words of a song
Announcements	To gain informationTo act on information	Listen for specific items Listen to do something
Instructions	• To carry out a task	Listen for steps in a taskListen to do something

These different types of listening provide the language *input* that is the starting point for a listener's understanding. But how can teachers help learners move from *bearing* language to arriving at an appropriate understanding of what was said or intended?

What the teacher can do

Before planning a listening program, it's valuable to monitor the kinds of listening situations students encounter outside class and compare them with the listening activities they encounter in class. When a textbook is being used, the teacher should examine the listening activities in the book to see whether the tasks engage learners in a variety of situations and roles and give them different experiences of listening. The teacher should also decide how realistic the tasks are. Many classroom listening tasks are not very authentic, as they ask learners just to listen and report on something. For example, only listening to two or more speakers discussing something and then responding to comprehension questions is not a task that would be authentic in real-life situations outside the classroom—in fact, that is more like eavesdropping on someone's conversation. These kinds of activities don't have to be discarded, but they should be supplemented by a wider range of activities, some that require listeners to interact and some that don't. These could include listening to some of the "listening and doing" activities in the table on page 5. For example, students could

- listen to recorded telephone messages that give instructions and react to them;
- watch excerpts from a movie and afterwards discuss the main events in the plot; or
- find a favorite song on YouTube and listen to the words.

A variety of classroom activities can be used to prepare students for listening in different kinds of situations. An example is given in the following activity. Additional activities are given in Appendix B on page 189.

Level Beginning

Handout Pages 147–148

Tip Prepare students for listening in different kinds of situations.

Description This activity helps learners draw on their experience of contexts

in which formulaic utterances are made. They will hear train

announcements and departure times.

1. Prepare students for the activity by talking about train trips. Ask if anyone has been on a train trip recently.

- 2. Check that students understand the vocabulary items presented and the departure times shown.
- 3. Play the audio. Model the first train picture with its time of departure. Then have the class do Part A of the activity and correct it.
- 4. Introduce the next section (Part B), in which learners will listen to the recording and complete five sentences.
- 5. Play the audio. Then correct the exercise with the whole class.
- 6. Using the same procedure, do Parts C, D, and E.

Teaching note:

• With early-stage beginners, considerably more preteaching may be required. It is important to position learners so that they experience success and can come away from the class feeling positive about their own capabilities and the new language.



2 Provide opportunities for students to make use of bottom-up processing, or language-based processing.

Listening is a process that makes use of several different kinds of information. Some of the information comes from what the speaker actually says: the words and sentences spoken. Comprehension goes from the bottom (i.e., language: sounds, words, phrases) to the top (i.e., meaning), and for this reason it is referred to as bottom-up processing (Vandergrift, 1997).

Essentially, bottom-up processing involves recognizing the words that the input contains and using knowledge of the meaning of the words, as well as knowledge of grammar, to determine the speaker's meaning. Other information the listener makes use of comes from the situation itself or from the topic of the conversation or discourse, as well as from knowledge of what people typically do and say in relation to the situation or topic, i.e., from top-down processing, which we discuss later in this chapter. Let us first consider bottom-up processing and its role in listening.

What the teacher should know

Bottom-up processing is perhaps the most traditional view of how speakers understand messages, and a common-sense view of comprehension that many teachers and students share. The meaning is contained in the text, and the listener's task is to use knowledge of vocabulary, syntax, and text organization to extract meaning in order to understand the text. But how does this process take place? Imagine someone said the following to you:

The guy I sat next to on the bus this morning on the way to work was telling me he runs an Italian restaurant downtown. Apparently it's very popular at the moment.

In order to understand this utterance using bottom-up processing, we have to mentally break the utterance down into its components. This is referred to as *chunking*. Here are the chunks that guide us to the underlying core meaning of the utterances:

the guy
I sat next to on the bus
this morning
was telling me
he runs an Italian restaurant downtown
apparently it's very popular
at the moment

The chunks help us identify the underlying propositions or core meanings that the utterances express, namely

I was on the bus. There was a guy next to me. We talked. He runs an Italian restaurant. It's downtown. It's very popular now.

It is these units of meaning that we remember, not the form in which we initially heard them. Our knowledge of vocabulary and grammar helps us find the appropriate chunks. The speaker also assists us in this process through intonation and pausing (Clark & Clark, 1977; Field, 1998, 2003).

The role of bottom-up processing in understanding a second language is illustrated in the following comments by an English teacher:

I speak pretty good French, but no Spanish. However, there is a lot of common vocabulary between French and Spanish (although the pronunciation of the words is different), so when I listen to Spanish, I can often pick out and recognize quite a lot of words the speaker is using and often get a rough idea of the meaning. However, when I listen to someone speaking Japanese, the situation is quite different. None of the languages I speak are similar to Japanese, so there is not a core of recognizable words that would enable me to guess what someone is talking about.

As this comment illustrates, building up a basic receptive vocabulary as well as a knowledge base of the most common grammatical patterns is essential to bottom-up processing.

What the teacher can do

Students need to have a good recognition vocabulary to begin to process language since content words are one of the main carriers of meaning. The size of this vocabulary will depend on the learner's proficiency level, but a basic recognition vocabulary of 500 to 1,000 words is needed to understand simple daily conversation. To understand more complex language, a greater number of words is needed. Targets of 5,000 words are often set for intermediate-level learners (O'Keeffe et al., 2007).

An important aspect of bottom-up processing is word recognition skills. It is often hard to recognize the boundaries between words in natural speech, particularly for low-level learners. A transcript of a listening text (after students have carried out a listening task) that can draw attention to how the boundaries of words occur in speech is a useful classroom tool that can develop word recognition listening skills. Hulstijin (2003, p. 422), describes a six-step procedure in which students

- 1. listen to a recording;
- 2. check whether they have understood the text;
- 3. listen to the recording again as often as necessary;
- 4. consult the written text of the recording;
- 5. note where their misunderstandings may have occurred; and
- 6. listen to the recording again without the use of the written text.

Grammatical knowledge also plays an important role in bottom-up processing since familiarity with common grammatical patterns and structures is needed in order to arrive at an understanding of sentences. Many different activities can be used to prepare students for bottom-up processing. The following activity practices listening for specific information. Additional activities are given in Appendix B on page 189.

Activity 1.2 Listening for specific information

Intermediate Level Page 149 Handout

Provide opportunities for students to make use of bottom-up Tip

processing, or language-based processing.

Description This activity can be integrated into a general unit on health and

exercise. It begins with a general orientation to the topic of health and fitness and moves on to listening for specific information.

- 1. Introduce the topic of health and fitness.
- 2. Discuss ways people can keep fit.
- 3. Elicit from students their own fitness activities.
- 4. Have students read summaries of six people's lifestyles.
- Have students listen and match speakers and lifestyles (Exercise A).
- Correct Exercise A.
- Introduce Exercise B in which students listen for specific items (key words).
- 8. Correct Exercise B.

Teaching notes:

- Students may want to hear the audio a number of times. This helps in the process of acquiring the sounds of English and increases students' confidence in their listening skills.
- This activity can broaden out into a pairwork discussion on the best ways to keep fit.

3 Provide opportunities for students to use top-down processing, or knowledge-based processing that draws on background knowledge.

Top-down processing describes how the listener's background knowledge affects listening. When we listen, we use our knowledge of the world as well as our knowledge of different kinds of texts (e.g., narratives, explanations, reports; see Chapter 4). A good listener listens actively from the top (the meaning level) down to the word level, making predictions about the topic of the text and what he or she is likely to hear (Carrell, Devine, & Eskey, 1998).

What the teacher should know

In addition to bottom-up processing, listeners make use of background knowledge together with conceptual knowledge and processing strategies in order to arrive at an understanding of texts. This involves going from meaning to language, rather than from language to meaning, hence it is known as top-down processing. The listener has a set of expectations about the topic and the situation, and then samples enough information to confirm these expectations. Predicting, *inferencing*, and using background knowledge are also involved in top-down processing (Buck 1995, 2001).

A further aspect of top-down processing is the use of *schemas* (Schank & Abelson, 1977). Schemas can be thought of as providing a set of questions to which we expect to find answers in a text. So, for example, if we hear a news broadcast about an earthquake, our schema for "earthquake" generates questions such as, "Where was it?", "When did it happen?", "How serious was it?", "How many people were hurt?", and so on. Different situations call to mind different kinds of schemas that describe what normally happens in that situation. Thus we have knowledge of the "supermarket schema," the "visit to the dentist schema," the "eating in a restaurant schema," and so on.

When we apply our knowledge and schema about things, concepts, people, and events to a particular utterance, top-down processing guides us towards the intended meaning. Consider the meaning of the expression "Good luck!" and how its meaning would differ if said as a response to the following statements:

- a) I'm going to the casino.
- b) I'm going to the dentist.
- c) I'm going to a job interview.

The meaning of "good luck" differs according to the situation we mentally refer it to and according to the background knowledge we bring to each situation when it is used. If the listener is unable to make use of top-down processing, an utterance or discourse may be incomprehensible.

What the teacher can do

When considering how to use a listening text, first decide how much bottom-up and how much top-down processing the text will require. Is it a text on a difficult topic, with quite a lot of unfamiliar vocabulary items? In that case, more processing time may be needed, and the teacher will have to stop the recording at different times to give students a better chance to process what they have heard. Some vocabulary preparation may also be required, and tasks will be needed that rely on information stated explicitly in the text. If the text depends upon background information rather than information that is stated directly in the text, students will need adequate time to think about the passage in advance and to activate their schema for the text through prediction activities and other activities that prepare them for top-down processing. Pre-listening tasks (see Chapter 6) provide a good preparation for top-down processing. When students brainstorm about a topic prior to listening to a text about it, or generate a set of questions that

they expect to hear answered in a text, they activate language and schema that provide a basis for top-down processing. The following activity practices top-down processing. Additional activities are given in Appendix B on page 189.

Activity 1.3 Practicing top-down processing

Level Intermediate **Handout** Page 150

Tip Provide opportunities for students to use top-down processing, or

knowledge-based processing, that draws on background knowledge.

Description Students are often under the impression that they must hear

every word in an utterance and feel inadequate when they cannot

do this.

- 1. Explain that even in first-language listening, every word is not heard, and that listening for overall meaning is an important skill to acquire.
- 2. Tell students they will hear two friends talking about their names.
- 3. Discuss with students ways that people get their first names, family names, and nicknames in various cultures.
- 4. Preteach vocabulary items as necessary.
- 5. Distribute the handout.
- 6. Play the audio of the conversation. Have students complete the handout and compare answers with a classmate.
- 7. Correct the handout, playing the audio again to clarify answers where necessary.

Teaching note:

• This exercise can be extended into listening for details (bottom-up listening) through a second listening in which students listen for a number of details and inferences (for example, see *Real Talk 1*, p. 3, B: Listening Exercise 3).

Prepare students for interactive processing, an approach that moves between bottom-up and top-down processing.

Interactive processing means making use of both bottom-up and top-down processes while listening. Successful comprehension requires effective use of these two processes.

Overuse of bottom-up processing can lead the listener to pay too much attention to the individual words in a text and to assume that they are all equally important to the message. Overuse of top-down processing, on the other hand, can lead to skipping some of the important information in a message because the listener is incorrectly filling in too many of the details based on an assumed familiarity with the topic or the situation.

What the teacher should know

As we listen, we make use of bottom-up factors (i.e., the words and individual sentences the listening contains) as well as top-down factors such as our background knowledge, familiarity with the topic, and the structure of the listening text (Field, 2008). Sometimes we depend more on bottom-up processing and at other times more on top-down processing. For an unfamiliar topic and a difficult text, more bottom-up processing may initially be required; but as we understand more of the text, we are able to use more top-down processing. Similarly, knowledge of grammar might help to identify the meaning of a word; and at other times, ideas about the topic might be used to help understand the grammar. Comprehension is therefore an interaction between the two kinds of processing (Grabe, 2009). In teaching, it is useful to use a cycle of activities with a text in order to practice both bottom-up and top-down listening. These activities should involve both attention to word recognition skills as described previously, as well as the use of background knowledge, inferencing, predicting, and focusing on the elements of the text that are relevant to the listener's purpose.

What the teacher can do

Students often feel that all listening texts must be processed bottom-up. In other words, they feel that they should always adopt a word-by-word listening strategy and focus on meanings that are contained explicitly in the text. This belief is reinforced by the way listening is sometimes taught. The teacher plays a passage and students answer multiple comprehension questions about it. To encourage an interactive view of listening, different tasks can be used with the same passage—some that that require bottom-up and some top-down processing. Tasks that require identification of explicit information can be followed by tasks that require inferencing and prediction or that draw on students' prior knowledge. The following activity practices interactive processing. Additional activities are given in Appendix B on page 189.

Activity 1.4 On the air: Listening for main ideas, details, and inferences

Level High Intermediate-Advanced

Handout Pages 151–154

Tip Prepare students for interactive processing, an approach that

moves between bottom-up and top-down processing.

Description This activity makes use of both bottom-up and top-down listening

skills as students listen to a radio interview about ways of

addressing people.

Source Real Talk 1

1. Distribute the handout. Guide a pre-listening discussion, based on the discussion questions.

- 2. Have students fill in the chart to activate prior knowledge on the topic. Students' different answers can be used to generate discussion on cross-cultural differences in the proper way to address people.
- 3. Conduct a vocabulary preview in which students first read sentences containing key vocabulary they will hear, and then match the vocabulary with definitions.
- 4. Have students listen to the entire recording and answer Section B Part 1 on the handout, relating to the main ideas of the listening. They may write answers to questions as they listen, but should also be given time after the listening to complete the questions. The recording may be played again if necessary.
- 5. After listening, students compare their answers in pairs. Go over answers with the whole class.
- 6. Students then complete Section B Part 3, relating to details and inferences. Repeat Step 5.

Teaching note:

 A useful strategy with inference questions is to ask students, How do you know? They must then justify/support the conclusions they have reached, thus enabling the teacher to determine whether correct answers are arrived at by reasoning or chance.

FINDING GOOD LISTENING ACTIVITIES

The examples in this chapter illustrate some of the factors that influence listening in a second language and some of the processes that successful listening involves. Students need opportunities to use bottom-up processing, top-down processing, and interactive listening processes; they also need to be prepared for listening in a variety of situations. Teachers can use the tips in this chapter and the questions summarized in the following table to design and select appropriate listening activities for these purposes.

What to Look For	Focus Questions
Variety of situations	 Do the listening texts illustrate a variety of listening situations such as listening to monologs, dialogues, announcements, and instructions? Do the texts involve interactive as well as noninteractive listening?
Relevance to learners' needs	 Do the texts reflect the kinds of listening students will encounter outside the classroom? Do the texts address students' listening difficulties?
Listening processes	 Do the texts allow learners to practice bottom-up processing? Do the texts allow learners to practice top-down processing? Do they allow students to practice interactive processing?
Linguistic level	 Are the vocabulary and grammar of the texts at a suitable level? Is the length of the texts suitable?
Topics	 Are the topics of the listening texts of interest to students? Do students have relevant background knowledge needed to understand the texts?

CONCLUSION

It's important to understand the various components that come into play in listening. Although there is a wider variety of materials now available for teaching listening, listening has sometimes been an overlooked skill in language teaching. It has tended to be overshadowed by the other skills, particularly speaking. Some people have argued, "You can't really teach listening as it's something that learners have to acquire internally." But this is not altogether an accurate assumption. Having a sense of how the key areas of bottom-up, top-down, and interactive listening work in everyday situations can help teachers to select activities that promote the skills their learners need at different points in their learning. It also helps teachers to fine-tune their ideas about what kinds of activities need to be introduced at what points in the teaching program.

LISTENING SKILLS

When we listen, we make use of many different sources of information, engage in a number of different processes, and use various skills simultaneously. For example, consider what is involved in understanding the following examples of authentic discourse:

Example 1

A = Anne, J = Jane

A: years ago when I was married, about I don't know how long ago, about ten or twelve years ago, I lived in Mosman and I had a really nice neighbor called Stan . . . sometimes he used to cut the grass outside our place, and sometimes we'd cut the grass outside his place . . . and one weekend, I was away when this happened, but he told me about it much later, this weekend Stan cut the grass outside the front and was clipping along the edges of our garden with a little axe.

J: mmm . . .

A: and a funnel web spider jumped out and . . .

J: a funnel web!

A: yeah, and bit him on the fleshy part of his thumb . . . and unbelievably he banged the spider with the axe or something, took off his belt, wrapped his belt around his arm, went in and got a jar, put the spider in the jar and walked to the corner . . .

J: good heavens!

(Burns & Seidlhofer, 2010)

Example 2

When President de Gaulle ensured that France had a prominent role in Africa, it was part of his strategy to try and make France a world power along with membership of er NA . . . what . . . membership of NATO at the time

but . . . had a seat on UN Security Council and his nuclear weapons. How has francophone Africa benefited from this policy? Well it doesn't appear economic growth is anything better in francophone Africa than anywhere else despite the large sums of aid given by France to the region. The vast majority of the population have not seen their lives improve as a result of the relationship with France.

(Carter & McCarthy, 1997, p. 135)

As you probably realized, the first example is a casual conversation between two friends where one friend is recounting a rather dramatic event. It's a good example of the kinds of informal stories we tell each other every day. What skills does Jane have to use as the listener in this exchange? Briefly, she has to process the sounds and intonation patterns of the interaction in real time, as Anne proceeds. Then, she needs to be able to process the main story content (the *who*, *what*, *where*, and *when* elements that enable us to understand the events) that is expressed through the vocabulary Anne uses. Jane also needs to understand the grammatical features that link the vocabulary items together into the ongoing message. The details in the story need to be retained in her *short-term memory* if she is to understand what comes next and to show Anne that she is following. Jane's role as a listener is not a passive one. At various points she needs to respond; without her listener responses—*mmm*, *a funnel web*, *good beavens!*—Anne, the speaker, would start to feel as though she were talking to herself!

The second example is from a seminar presentation on European politics given by an undergraduate student. Unlike the first example, this is an instance of "planned talk," where the speaker has prepared what to say in advance. After the presentation, the other students who are listening must be ready to discuss the case that has been made. Again, the listeners must be able to process the sound and intonation patterns and to decode the key vocabulary and grammar. But this time they are listening to a series of formal arguments or propositions being put forth by the speaker. They have to activate a considerable amount of (specialist) background knowledge of the topic—not just the knowledge of acronyms (NATO, UN) and so on, but also the broader political context of the topic. They also have to infer the key meanings of the arguments and evaluate whether they are sound. During the presentation, as listeners, they do not respond—in fact, it would seem very odd if they started joining in—but they have to be able to retain the key messages in their short-term memory to join in later.

As these examples illustrate, listening is a complex process and involves simultaneous attention to several different aspects of the *discourse*. The listener makes use of information from the situation (the context, the participants, the activity), from the input (words, sentences, *intonation*) and from the speaker (hand gestures, eye movement, facial expression) in arriving at an understanding of the message.

One way to try to understand the nature of the listening process has been through the notion of *skills*. Skills can be thought of as the different cognitive processes involved in understanding language, processes that are normally employed automatically and unconsciously. They can be distinguished from *strategies*, which are conscious procedures used to manage the process of listening and to deal with problems that occur during listening (see Buck, 2001, and Chapter 3).

There have been a number of attempts to describe the underlying skills and subskills (called *microskills*) that are employed in listening. For example, one early study (Richards, 1983) identified thirty-three different skills that contribute to listening. Among these skills are the following:

- Processing speech spoken at a normal speech rate
- Retaining chunks of language in short-term memory
- Discriminating the sounds of English
- Recognizing patterns of stress, rhythm, and intonation and how they signal meaning
- Recognizing reduced forms in spoken language
- Recognizing core vocabulary
- Recognizing core grammatical patterns
- Recognizing the communicative function of utterances
- Processing different speech styles
- Inferring meanings based on context, topic, and prior knowledge
- Choosing an appropriate strategy when approaching a text

Many listening courses and materials focus on teaching listening through a skills-based approach; that is, they teach and practice individual listening skills on the assumption that students will then be better able to make use of them while listening.

TIPS FOR TEACHING LISTENING SKILLS

The tips in this chapter focus on helping students process speech as it is naturally spoken, recognize key words, identify important words within a rapid flow of speech, and infer meanings from spoken language.

TIPS

- 1. Prepare learners to be able to process different rates of speech.
- 2. Prepare learners to process authentic speech.
- 3. Help learners recognize the sound patterns of spoken English.
- 4. Teach learners how to recognize key words in spoken discourse.
- 5. Give students practice in making inferences.

Throughout the rest of the chapter, we explain each of these tips with

- an explanation or description of the tip;
- a summary of what the teacher should know about the tip; and
- suggestions for what the teacher can do in the classroom.

1 Prepare learners to be able to process different rates of speech.

One of the most common problems learners face when listening to fluent natural speech is that the speakers often speak too fast. The listener is unable to pick out individual words or to recognize features that might guide him or her to the main meaning in the discourse (i.e., is unable to use bottom-up processing). In order to better understand the nature of this problem, we need to consider a) what the various rates of speech are in different kinds of spoken interactions; b) what kinds of speech learners might need to listen to; and c) the learner's role as a speaker in the interaction.

Not all interactions involve the same rate of speech. In casual conversation, a speaker may use a different speech rate than when describing a medical problem to a doctor, for example. In addition, the information exchanged in casual conversation may be less densely packed than in a discussion with a doctor and may contain a certain amount of repetition, so the processing load on the listener may be more limited. Similarly, some kinds of listening may not require the listener to participate actively in the interaction, allowing him or her more time to concentrate on listening and interpreting the meanings. Therefore, difficulty in listening depends on the listener's role and the extent to which he or she needs to participate as a speaker. In teaching listening skills, the challenge is to plan activities that allow learners to increase their ability to process speech over time. Materials for low-level learners typically provide input at a slower speech rate with pauses between utterances to provide more processing time. As learners develop their language proficiency, they need to be able to process discourse at a faster rate of speech with more densely packed information.