

Thinking Allowed

Research into practice: Listening strategies in an instructed classroom setting

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1. Introduction

This paper considers research and practice relating to listening in instructed classroom settings, limiting itself to what might be called unidirectional listening (Macaro, Graham & Vanderplank 2007) – in other words, where learners listen to a recording, a TV or radio clip or lecture, but where there is no communication back to the speaker(s). A review of the literature relating to such listening reveals a tendency for papers to highlight two features in their introductory lines: first, the acknowledged importance of listening as a skill underpinning second language (L2) acquisition more broadly, and second, the relative paucity of research into listening compared with the skills of speaking, reading or writing. In the last ten years or so, however, there has been a growth in the number of studies conducted in the field, as evidenced in Vandergrift's review in 2007 and Vanderplank's more recent overview (2013). Consequently, my view is that it is possible to identify from that research certain key principles in relation to listening within instructed settings, particularly regarding listening strategies. These are outlined in Graham, Santos & Francis-Brophy (2014) and can be summarised as follows:

1. Without instruction in how to improve listening, learners are very slow to develop effective listening strategy use, if at all; by contrast, it is possible to develop that effective use through instruction, with potential benefits for learners' listening proficiency.
2. The development of metacognitive strategies and metacognitive awareness in relation to listening can be particularly helpful and can be achieved through learner discussion of strategy use.
3. Attention to the development of bottom-up and top-down strategies is important for helping learners to develop their listening.
4. Prediction/pre-listening strategies need to be combined with strategies for verifying and monitoring predictions.

Two other arguments also feature in recent discussions. On the one hand, while listening arguably needs to be TAUGHT, in many contexts TEACHING takes the form of TESTING. That is, learners' comprehension is assessed, rather than there being a focus on the processes they used to achieve that comprehension (Field 2008; Goh 2010; Graham, Santos & Vanderplank 2011). Or, listening occurs as an activity to be completed, a form of practice, but with little or

no attention to its improvement as a skill. On the other hand, it seems clear that the picture we have of what teachers actually do in the classroom with respect to listening is very limited as few studies have gathered evidence systematically of teachers' classroom practice. The same applies to what we know about their pedagogical beliefs about listening. My own recent work, however, with Denise Santos, has focused on those two areas, particular with regard to the extent to which teachers' beliefs and practices reflect current thinking from the listening strategy research literature. We have also been interested in exploring the extent to which it is possible to modify teachers' beliefs and practices regarding listening.

This article will draw on that empirical research conducted in England alongside findings from other contexts where relevant, discussing the extent to which the findings from listening strategy research, particularly those summarised in the principles listed above, are reflected in classroom practice and teachers' expressed beliefs about what form such practice should take. I will also draw on my own experience as a teacher educator in England, working with pre-service and in-service teachers, making it clear when I am expressing my own views and reporting on my own experiences rather than on research evidence. The focus will be on language classrooms in secondary/high schools, and where the languages being taught are chiefly French, Spanish and German (known as Modern Foreign Languages or MFL). In addition, it is worth noting that in the context of England, foreign language learning is compulsory only up until the age of 14 (and compulsory between 7 and 11 only since 2014). I therefore comment mainly on language learning for 11–14 year olds, i.e. those who are at the beginner to lower-intermediate stage. It is also important to note that in England the teaching of language skills, including listening, is considered to be in need of improvement (Ofsted 2011). There has also been criticism of the way in which teaching is influenced by an assessment system which seems unrelated to what research suggests about how language proficiency develops (Macaro, Graham & Woore 2015). For listening, it seems to me, this has led to a focus on assessing learners' ability to extract specific details and information from texts, to recognise opinions (often at a fairly trivial level), and to understand passages that include different tenses and certain topic-based items of vocabulary, at the expense of assessing whether they can gain global understanding, infer meaning, and generally employ listening strategies effectively.

Finally, for the purpose of this review I am employing the following definitions of strategies broadly, as 'conscious mental activity', applied in pursuit of a learning goal which is 'transferable to other situations or tasks' (Macaro 2006: 328). For listening strategies in particular, Rost's (2002: 236) definition of 'conscious plans to manage incoming speech' is employed. Importantly, these definitions encompass top-down strategies (e.g. using contextual clues to work out meaning) but also bottom-up strategies (e.g. attending to intonation patterns, to word prefixes, or to other linguistic features to make meaning more accessible); likewise, they cover both cognitive strategies (operating at the level of the input itself) and metacognitive strategies, 'higher order executive skills that may entail planning for, monitoring, or evaluating the success of a learning activity' (O'Malley & Chamot 1990: 44–45). It is beyond the scope of this piece to explore fully the difference between 'skills' and 'strategies', but in brief one might refer to Field's (1998) description of listening skills as native speaker-type competencies, such as the perception of words and phrases, while strategies have the much more conscious, goal-directed element outlined above.

My review will be in three main sections: areas of classroom practice where findings from listening strategy research have not been well applied to the language classroom, i.e. where teachers' views and practices bear little trace of the principles outlined above; areas where findings from research seem to have been over-applied, in the sense that certain practices highlighted by research seem to be dominating what teachers do and say to the exclusion of others, or used extensively but not necessarily effectively; and areas where there is evidence of at least potential for good application. In the last section in particular I hope to stimulate discussion of ways in which it might be possible to bridge the gap between research and practice, in a discussion about teacher cognition and professional development in relation to listening instruction.

2. Research findings that have not been well applied in the language classroom

2.1 Learners can and should be taught how to listen not just tested on their listening

Research provides evidence that learners of MFL in England perceive listening as one of the most difficult skills in which to improve, particularly beyond the immediate beginner stage (Graham 2006). Problems noted among learners, even those in their sixth year of language learning, include poor monitoring of understanding, poor application of background knowledge to help overcome problems of comprehension; problems in speech segmentation and recognising familiar vocabulary in the speech stream. In Graham et al. (2011) we found that over a six-month period, during a time when they were exposed to much more challenging listening material than they had experienced beforehand, learners displayed stability in how they used strategies and that differences between proficient and less proficient listeners, regarding strategy use, persisted over time. In a more recent study with younger learners (aged 13–14), Macaro (2014) found they relied almost totally on just one strategy, listening out for cognate words, when trying to understand what their teacher was saying to them in French classes.

Several authors (such as Field 2008; Goh 2010) have called for more teaching of listening as a skill in its own right, rather than something which teachers assume will develop of its own accord. Listening strategy instruction is one approach to the teaching of listening. There is some variability in outcomes from studies exploring such instruction (see Macaro et al. 2007) but I would argue that more recent investigations provide firmer evidence of its benefits. These studies include those that investigate (a) approaches combining explicit strategy instruction and a metacognitive element (e.g. Harris 2007, who studied 13–14 year olds in England; Graham & Macaro 2008, working with 16–17 year olds in the same context); and (b) more implicit approaches where the development of metacognitive awareness and/or metacognitive strategies is the main objective (e.g. Goh & Taib 2006; Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari 2010). Both explicit and implicit approaches are underpinned by the notion that practice and contact with spoken language alone are insufficient to improve how well learners listen. They also reflect a growing emphasis on the development of metacognition in relation to listening (see also below).

The extent to which the methods underlying the generally positive outcomes of such studies have reached classroom practice seems, from my perspective, to be limited, a view that is also expressed by other authors across a range of contexts who comment on teachers DOING listening activities or tests with their learners rather than teaching them how to listen. This ‘doing’ or ‘testing’ approach dates back a long while in England; thus Chambers (1996) outlines what he sees as the typical approach to listening in foreign language classrooms in that context: learners listen to a text and complete an accompanying exercise, which is then corrected. Listening becomes principally a test of comprehension, typically based on an exercise from a textbook, which, as an examination of such materials indicates, usually requires the understanding of specific details rather than the global meaning of the text (thus probably depriving learners of a sense of achievement if they rarely feel they understand more than a few snippets of class listening materials). This constitutes what Field (2008) calls the ‘Comprehension Approach’ and which, he argues, does little to develop effective listening skills. Working as a teacher educator, a couple of years ago I asked my 26 student teachers about the practice they had observed during their ten-week practicum. Twenty-two (or 85%) of the students had rarely or never observed teachers showing learners how to improve their listening skills.

Seeking further evidence of what teachers believe and do with regard to the explicit teaching of listening, we carried out a study of language teachers in England involving questionnaires given to 115 teachers with a range of years of teaching experience (the findings from those questionnaires are reported in Graham et al. 2014). We then conducted observations followed by interviews with 13 of these teachers. In addition, we analysed a number of commonly used textbooks for the type of listening activities presented and what support they gave teachers for listening instruction (a full analysis of these data sources is given in Graham & Santos 2015). While there was a strong level of agreement from the closed questionnaire responses of teachers with the idea that it is possible to teach learners how to ‘listen more effectively’, such agreement was then contradicted by other aspects of teachers’ replies. When we asked them through an open-ended item to outline the four most important things that they did when conducting listening activities, and to give reasons, there was very little sign of any actual teaching of listening or teaching of listening strategies. Most respondents outlined steps taken to make sure learners were clear about task completion procedures (e.g. where and how they should record their answers) rather than any practices adopted to focus on improving listening as a skill. Justification for practices adopted was mainly concerned with helping learners get the right answers to questions set, behaving in the expected manner, and meeting assessment requirements.

The subsequent observations and interviews largely confirmed the questionnaire responses: that teachers DID listening activities with their classes but rarely TAUGHT listening. The purpose of such activities was rarely seen as helping learners to improve their listening; instead, other purposes such as preparing learners for assessments, for developing some other skill or body of knowledge (e.g. of verb endings; preparing learners for speaking tasks) were identified. Siegel (2014) argues that teachers do not teach listening because they lack the pedagogical knowledge to do so, a view which I tend to share and which seems to be borne out by a comment from one of the teachers we interviewed about the best way to teach listening:

I think, to a certain extent, yeah possibly, you know, by practising, by doing it different ways, by approaching listening tasks differently you probably do teach them a little bit more to listen effectively, but there's only so much you can do. So I suppose yes, by doing different types of activities on the same kind of text like gap fill or listening for the whole meaning before just picking up a few words or just answering questions [...] trying to do different activities on the task ... probably does help, but there's not really any ... method for them to follow.

The hesitancy from this teacher suggests a certain resignation ('there is only so much you can do') as well as uncertainty about what might be useful ways to teach listening.

Teachers' lack of pedagogical knowledge may arise from lack of input on listening in their training; it may also be exacerbated by a lack of guidance in the materials they use. In addition, more than may be the case for other skill areas, teachers may turn to commercially produced materials for listening, because of the difficulties involved in creating their own. Our textbook analysis found little support for teachers, with scant focus on the teaching of listening strategies, and indeed the tasks set offered little scope for doing so. Activities mainly consisted of locating very specific, local information from generally quite short texts with little or no redundancy, and with very little or no potentially more challenging vocabulary. Any advice given for using materials with learners was mainly of a practical, procedural nature. Furthermore, teachers responding to our questionnaire confirmed that they relied heavily on textbooks as sources of listening material and activities, something to which the school inspectorate in England (Ofsted 2011) attributes learners' weaknesses in listening.

2.2 The development of metacognitive strategies/metacognitive awareness through peer discussion and reflection is helpful

The previous section highlighted that studies have reported improvement in listening attainment through approaches that seek to develop learners' metacognitive awareness and use of metacognitive strategies. For example, working with quite young learners, i.e. 11 years old, Goh & Taib (2006) found that combining traditional listening activities with post-listening reflections and discussions of metacognitive strategies for listening led to improved confidence among learners, especially for the less proficient ones. Similarly, Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari (2010) record improved listening scores for lower proficiency learners (although not for those of higher listening proficiency) as a result of a metacognitive instruction programme for listening, in which there was no explicit teaching of named strategies but 'guided practice on the listening process as a whole', developing 'implicit knowledge about L2 listening through task performance' (487–488). The programme took the form of a 'pedagogical cycle' (Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari 2010: 472) involving prediction of what might be heard, verification or checking of these predictions and peer discussion of what was heard, reflection on strategies employed and future goal-setting. Learners of all proficiency levels showed greater metacognitive awareness and sense of control over their listening after the intervention. The authors comment that the peer discussion element was particularly helpful, aiding the development of strategies for planning, evaluation and problem-solving.

Giving learners opportunities to reflect on, and talk about how they listen and how they arrive at understanding might seem to be a relatively uncomplicated thing to do in the

classroom, and as the study by Goh & Taib (2006) shows, can be achieved alongside working on traditional listening activities and with relatively young learners. It does not need to even involve much teacher input as Cross (2010) found, in a study in which adult learners of English increased their metacognitive awareness merely by discussing listening activities in pairs, comparing solutions to problems with listening, and writing about their strategies in a diary format. Nevertheless, there seems to be few signs that this metacognitive development occurs frequently in classrooms, although more in some contexts than in others. Siegel (2014), observing 30 listening lessons from ten teachers of university level learners of English in Japan, recorded 24 instances of teachers encouraging metacognitive strategies for listening, which he defines as ‘planning, monitoring, and evaluating listening as well as problem-solving’ (p. 25). This is a relatively high number of occurrences compared with what our research in classrooms in England reports, possibly because of the difference in age range of the learners under investigation and in their levels of language proficiency. Siegel (2014) does also point out, however, that many of the 24 instances involved attention to task procedures, which arguably are not part of metacognitive development. It is also not clear that Siegel’s teachers engaged learners in metacognitive reflection any more than seems to be the case for teachers in England. Such teachers, responding to the Graham et al. (2014) questionnaire, referred to post-listening discussions with learners that centred almost totally on what answers they had given to comprehension questions. In the lessons observed in the same study, we saw minimal discussion of the listening process, of how listening ‘problems’ or challenges might be approached, either before, during or after learners heard the passage, with teachers tending to discuss assessment-related or procedural issues instead. There was little sign of developing a problem-solving approach to listening. In one of the post-observation interviews, a teacher indicated that she avoided asking learners about how they had tried to understand what they had heard, claiming that they disliked such questions: ‘If I ask them that question they lose the will to live’. Another explained that she had tried to engage learners in more metacognitive discussions about listening, but with little success, because learners were ill-equipped for such discussions: ‘Even though I ask them a lot “how do you feel about the listening?” they just say . . . their vocab to describe it is limited [to]: “It’s hard, it’s too fast”. They use the same words all the time.’ This might suggest that such learners need more opportunities to get used to this kind of reflection, perhaps through approaches other than whole-class discussions. For example, this might involve keeping a journal of their listening reflections and the strategies they have tried out, or paired discussions about listening. Our questionnaire indicated that tools like these are hardly used by teachers in England, perhaps because they are unaware of what benefits they might have, or because they are more focused on assessing whether learners have met the rather narrowly conceived expected levels of attainment in listening stipulated by national frameworks I outlined earlier.

2.3 Attention to the development of bottom-up and top-down strategies is important

In an exploration of what differentiates learners who gain high overall scores in listening exams from those gaining low scores, Tsui & Fullilove (1998) found that the former were better able than the latter to verify predictions made on the basis of prior or background

knowledge by attending to later in-text information (i.e. applying bottom-up and top-down strategies in appropriate combinations). Other research (e.g. Vandergrift 1998) emphasises the importance of such combinations. In my reading of the research literature, learners seem to have more problems with bottom-up aspects of listening (e.g. speech segmentation, recognising known words in connected speech), as noted in a number of studies across a range of contexts including UK learners of French and German, and Chinese and Arabic learners of English (e.g. Goh 2000; Hasan 2000; Graham 2006). In addition, it has been argued that listening strategy interventions that include a bottom-up element as well as attention to top-down and metacognitive development are likely to be more successful (Graham & Macaro 2008). Indeed, Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari (2010) surmise that their intervention might have had more impact on learners of higher listening proficiency levels had it included a bottom-up aspect.

While textbooks designed for learners of English often seem to include attention to bottom-up features through activities such as minimal pairs and dictation, our review of courses written for learners of French, German and Spanish in England indicates much less attention. Books aimed at beginners might include short passages for learners to listen to and repeat, but without any explicit focus on phonology, on grapheme/phoneme correspondences, intonation patterns, etc. In our questionnaire, while teachers seemed very aware that one of the main causes of difficulty in listening for their learners was identifying word/sentence boundaries, they reported using very few classroom practices that might address such difficulties, such as focusing on grapheme-phoneme correspondences or other activities suggested by Field (2008). It may be that textbook authors are more concerned with providing teachers with listening activities that allow them to assess what level of proficiency their learners have reached, or whether they know the vocabulary that will be assessed later in the textbook unit, rather than activities that develop these bottom-up skills. In addition, in a context where, generally, high school learners receive only two hours of language instruction a week, teachers may feel they can ill-afford to devote time to such skill development rather than to covering the syllabus and getting to the end of the textbook.

3. Research-based pedagogical approaches that have been over-applied

3.1 Prediction and pre-listening

As discussed earlier, Vandergrift's pedagogical cycle (see, for example, 2004, 2007) has been shown in a number of studies to be potentially beneficial to learners. An important part of that cycle involves learners in making predictions, before listening, about what they might hear, and then verifying and discussing those predictions. What we might call 'pre-listening' also occurs in a body of research regarding the role of so-called Advance Organisers, whereby the teacher pre-activates learners' linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge by providing, for example, mind-maps, vocabulary lists, asking learners to engage in brainstorming activities related to expected content of what is going to be heard. By and large, studies of the provision of such Advance Organisers suggest that they improve learners' ability to understand what

they hear (e.g. Herron et al. 1998; Jafari & Hashim 2012). However, it is not clear whether this improved understanding has any long-term benefits for listening development.

Nevertheless, prediction and pre-listening activities seem to have found their way into the languages classroom in England. In our 2014 questionnaire, around 48% of teachers said they often or always asked learners to predict vocabulary that might occur in the listening passage; even more (78%) reminded learners of vocabulary linked to the topic in hand. These figures for ‘pre-listening’ discussion were far higher than those for post-listening discussion, and there was little evidence of learners and teachers monitoring or checking any predictions made. Siegel (2014) likewise reports that in the tertiary-level classes he observed the setting up of predictions was much more frequent than any checking of those predictions after listening. Teachers in England also seem to direct learners’ attention more to individual items of vocabulary than to broader themes that might rise in a listening passage, possibly because they see it as a surer way of helping learners obtain ‘correct answers’ to accompanying comprehension questions. In an earlier study, reported in a number of papers (e.g. Graham, Santos & Vanderplank 2010), older learners of French were also reportedly using prediction very frequently before listening. This often took the form of noting down nouns that might be heard in the up-coming passage and might relate to multiple-choice items accompanying the listening passage. There was some evidence that learners had been advised by their teachers to follow this approach (Graham et al. 2011). Unfortunately, in many instances, prediction proved to be unhelpful; for example, by leading learners to imagine hearing the predicted word even if it did not occur, and then drawing erroneous conclusions about the passage as a whole; or focusing so much on trying to hear the predicted items that the overall sense of the passage was ignored. Problems also arose because learners failed to verify whether their predictions were correct or not, possibly because they had never been taught how to.

3.2 Learners find L2 listening difficult and it causes them anxiety

Language-related anxiety has received less research attention in recent years than was the case in the 1970s–1990s; however, the findings of such studies may have resonated clearly with teachers, with Arnold (2000) commenting that studies into language learning anxiety have confirmed what teachers know ‘intuitively’ (p. 777). Earlier studies (e.g. Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope 1986) found that aural comprehension was a source of much anxiety, with students, for example, worrying that they needed to understand every word that they heard in order to be able to comprehend. More recently, Bekleyen (2009) identifies listening as a source of anxiety for student teachers in their own language development.

Teachers might make at least two responses to these research findings, it seems to me. First, they might look for ways to give learners the tools to cope with the problems they experience in listening. In other words, teaching them how to improve their listening by means of some of the methods in Section 2. Alternatively, however, they might decide to try to remove the source of difficulty in the first place, by simplifying the material and tasks that learners are given. In the context of England, the second approach seems to be the one most frequently taken by teachers, materials writers and curriculum designers. It is arguably the least helpful reaction to the difficulties learners experience in listening, because of the

potential impact on their motivation and language learning development if they only ever encounter carefully scripted spoken extracts using a narrow range of language. Thus, within the National Curriculum for learners in the 11–14 age group, changes were implemented in 2007 that reduced the expectations of learners regarding their ability to ‘cope with language spoken at near normal speed in everyday circumstances that has little or no interference or hesitancy’ (QCA 2007). Prior to 2007, learners of average attainment were expected to be able to do this, but post-2007 that requirement was moved into the level descriptor for learners working a long way beyond normal expectations. In other words, there is no longer the expectation that most learners would be able to cope with any language approaching authentic speech. Furthermore, from 2007 to 2015, in the GCSE (examination taken at age 16), this lowering of expectations was matched by a reduction in the marks available for the listening component of the examination – from 25% to 20%. Observing teaching in language classrooms and talking to teachers leads me to conclude that these changes in national expectations for listening have resulted in less attention being paid to listening in England, and also lower expectations of what learners would be capable of understanding. From 2018 the GCSE will set higher expectations for listening, and it will be interesting to see what impact this has on how teachers approach it in the classroom.

There was evidence of lower expectations in the interviews we conducted with teachers. Several spoke of the anxiety learners experienced around listening and how they tried to ease this for them, through steps such as making sure passages only contained known language. Whether teachers, in offering easier, less authentic tasks and trying to shield learners from difficulties, really are responding to research findings about listening being an anxiety-inducing activity, is, however, a moot point. They may be equally motivated by the knowledge that language learning in England is an unpopular option, and believe that offering less difficult work will make it more popular. As I have argued elsewhere, however (e.g. Macaro et al. 2015), giving learners the tools with which to face any listening challenges they experience seems a more positive way to improve their motivation for language study. Of course, listening tasks and materials need to be accessible to learners, but in my view this does not mean they have to be without challenge.

4. Research findings where there is evidence of at least potential for good application: teacher cognition and professional development in relation to listening instruction

Any discussion of whether research findings have been well applied or indeed over-applied assumes that such findings reach practitioners in the first place. I am very doubtful whether this happens to any great extent in England, or indeed elsewhere. There is a wealth of literature suggesting that teachers find research hard to access and to interpret (summarised in Borg 2010). Nevertheless, my own experience suggests that it is possible to change this situation and to help teachers understand research relating to listening, and more importantly to apply some of its findings to their own practice. Thus, in this section, I am going to consider where I feel there is the most POSSIBILITY of research findings being reasonably well applied

in the future, and the approaches needed for this to happen. In addition, this will lead me to draw on research findings that extend beyond the area of listening – looking in addition at work that considers the extent to which it is possible to develop practitioners’ understanding of research-based principles and to help them incorporate them into their work with learners.

While there is evidence that many language teachers, like teachers of other curriculum areas, do not engage readily or easily with publications reporting research findings (Borg 2010), there is also evidence that such engagement is possible, if approached in an appropriate way, and that many teachers are in fact interested in what research has to say about language teaching and learning (Macaro 2003). It is clear that a simple ‘transmission’ approach, where research findings are presented as a list of recommendations or implications for practice, is unlikely to be successful. More success has been achieved in studies that allow teachers to examine their own current beliefs and practices in the light of what the research literature says, to be supported in making sense of that research, and then in transforming research findings into practice in a way that is meaningful to their own context (e.g. Macaro & Mutton, 2002; Rankin & Becker 2006). Studies that seek to engage teachers in research about listening are, however, few and far between.

With this in mind, Denise Santos and I conducted a small-scale intervention with teachers of French, German and Spanish as the follow-on phase from our research reported in Graham et al. (2014). We ran two, 2-hour workshops (attended by six teachers) followed by six online modules that some of these teachers completed over the next six to eight weeks. Most of the teachers had taken part in Phase 1 of the project, i.e. had completed questionnaires, been observed teaching and interviewed about the listening work they did in their classrooms. Workshops began by summarising some of the research evidence regarding learners’ use of listening strategies and interventions that have proved helpful in ‘teaching listening’. Much of the time was spent on inviting teachers to consider our (anonymised) findings from the questionnaire, observations and interviews and to compare these with what research suggests might be helpful ways to develop learners’ listening. Hence teachers were asked to look critically at their own practice in a non-threatening way. Modules took this activity further, leading teachers through stages of reflection that included reading extracts from accessible research reports about listening and additional reflection about their own practice. We also included tasks that required them to look critically at textbook listening materials in the light of what the research literature indicates about the teaching of listening. Finally, we included detailed suggestions for alternative approaches using the same textbook materials and invited participants to try these out in their own classes and evaluate their effectiveness. While not all teachers stayed the course, those who did reported clear impact of the process on the way they thought about listening – ‘a seismic shift’, in the words of one teacher. Transforming this shift in beliefs into changes in practice was somewhat slower to come about, as subsequent lesson observations that we conducted indicated. Nevertheless, changes in teachers’ understanding of listening are likely to be necessary precursors to changes in practice.

In a similar study with Ernesto Macaro, we worked with a small group of teachers to develop video clips of them using materials based on listening strategy research findings with their own classes. These were then presented at workshops for other teachers and teacher educators, in conjunction with summaries of the research on which the teaching was based, and later posted on a blog for teachers/teacher educators (www.pdcinmf.com).

Questionnaires, interviews and reports indicated that those who had attended the workshops and engaged with the materials significantly changed their views about listening, grasping the value of the teaching of strategies to help learners engage with more challenging and authentic spoken language. Follow-up contact with a number of teachers indicated that their listening classroom practice had changed considerably with a positive impact on learners.

5. Conclusion

This review suggests that very little of the research regarding the teaching of listening has reached the foreign languages classroom in England, at least not in a positive way. Alongside scant indication that teachers ever go beyond giving learners listening comprehension tasks to complete, an over-application of findings regarding pre-listening and learners' difficulties/anxieties surrounding listening is detectable. It is unclear, however, whether this over-application stems from any actual reading of the research literature relating to these areas. In my view this is unlikely, and I would hazard a guess that teachers' approaches to listening are guided by two inter-related factors: the assessment requirements of the curriculum (i.e. learners need to be able to find correct answers to comprehension questions that largely focus on local information); and the materials presented in textbooks. In addition to presenting tasks that are largely about finding such correct answers, based on closely scripted and often short passages, textbooks in England for learners in the 11–14 age group offer teachers very little advice about how to exploit these materials more fully. Furthermore, teachers in our survey indicated that they had received very little or no in-service training on how to teach listening. It is likely that, in such circumstances, teachers follow 'accepted' practices and conduct listening activities in the way that they see others around them doing, and also simply repeat the kind of listening activities that they themselves experienced as learners. Coupled with the difficulties teachers are reported to have in accessing research articles or seeing the relevance for the classroom of the research these report, it seems apparent that teachers have very little information about what the issues are regarding listening in a foreign language and what alternative approaches there might be to tackling them.

In one of a series of pieces criticising strategy-based approaches to improving L2 listening, Renandya (2012) argues that such approaches are unworkable because:

Strategy instruction places an unreasonable demand on teachers. To implement strategy training, and for optimal results, strategy researchers have suggested that teachers need to know:

- the theories and principles behind strategy training
- how to select the strategies that the students need to learn
- the order in which these strategies should be presented and practised
- how to integrate these strategies into the curriculum
- how much time should be allocated for strategy training (p. 4).

It is not clear which 'strategy researchers' have suggested such a list and from my own reading of the literature I am doubtful that anyone is arguing that teachers need to know every single aspect outlined above in order to be able to implement a strategy-based approach to listening. Nor am I convinced that the knowledge teachers need for such an approach places

any more demands on them than other aspects of their practice. More worrying, however, is the implication that teachers are neither interested in nor capable of developing a more research-based understanding of how listening might be improved. My own experience indicates that both these assumptions are incorrect. In addition, there is research evidence to suggest that outcomes for learners are improved when their teachers receive professional development that involves engagement with theory and research-based principles, including improving their understanding of the processes involved in language skill development (Short, Fidelman & Louguit 2012). Researchers themselves, however, do need to have an understanding of the processes of teacher development, and how the findings from research can be communicated to teachers in a meaningful way. In my view, the exploration of these issues needs to be an important item on any future research agenda with respect to L2 listening, whatever the context. While I have concentrated on the situation in England in this piece, there is evidence (e.g. Goh 2010; Siegel 2014) that the issues I have highlighted have a much wider relevance across a whole range of L2 learning environments.

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