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TEACHING LISTENING EFFECTIVELY IN ESL CLASSROOMS

By

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Abstract

Listening skills play a critical role in language learning, providing the aural input needed to develop other language skills (Krashen, 1985). In many language classrooms, however, Vandergrift and Goh (2012) have found that listening often receives the least attention from both teachers and instructional materials; these authors maintain that even when listening is the focus of a lesson, the activities intended to develop listening skills often merely test them. Fortunately, researchers have studied many factors which influence second language (L2) listening comprehension and have reported on their efficacy. In this paper I highlight the promising trends identified by L2 listening research and then discuss current practices instructors use to teach listening skills in adult English as a second language (ESL) classes in Edmonton, based on survey data and three focus group interviews. Next, I identify gaps between research and practice and provide recommendations of evidence-based principles. Finally, I offer examples of ESL classroom activities to develop effective listening skills.

Keywords: listening, listening comprehension, second language, English as a second language, classroom activities

Teaching Listening Effectively in ESL Classrooms

Listening is a hard-working language skill: Rivers (1981) maintains that listening is used twice as often as speaking and four to five times as much as reading and writing over an entire day. The skill of listening plays a critical role in language learning, providing the input needed to develop other language skills (Feyten, 1991; Krashen, 1985; Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010). Hirai (1999) found a relatively high significant correlation of .74 between listening and second language proficiency. In many language learning classrooms, however, listening often receives the least attention from both teachers and instructional materials (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012), which explains why Vandergrift (1997) refers to listening as the Cinderella skill. Even when listening is the lesson focus, the accompanying activities usually test listening skills by stressing outcomes rather than providing guidance on skill development (Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010).

Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) (2010) recently studied the effectiveness of the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program, comparing newcomers who had received instruction with matched immigrants who had not. They found that although LINC students improved in their proficiency in listening, speaking, reading and writing by over one benchmark level, their gains in listening and speaking were not greater than they would have been had they not taken the course. In light of this and other research findings, Derwing and Waugh (2012) have recommended that LINC instructors place a heavier focus on speaking and listening in their classrooms. To facilitate this recommendation in terms of listening, I will identify promising trends in teaching listening, explore some instructors' approaches to listening instruction in adult ESL classrooms, identify any gaps between the two and provide recommendations and classroom materials that instructors can implement in their classrooms.

Listening is not passive, but requires listeners to actively select and interpret auditory and visual clues (Richards, 1983; Van Dozer, 1997). Vandergrift and Goh (2012) refer to Anderson's (1995) listening model to explain what happens when people listen. Anderson divides listening comprehension into perception, parsing, and utilization phases. Perception involves encoding the spoken text to recognize individual sounds, pauses, stress, and intonation and place them in working memory. Parsing takes these phonetic forms and tries to identify potential words from memory or by making inferences. As words are identified, meanings are applied and mental representations are formed. In the utilization stage, language learners take the applied meanings from the parsing stage, interpret them using their background knowledge, evaluate them against the earlier listening text, determine intended meanings, and then store the intended meanings in long-term memory.

Both top-down and bottom-up processes are used when listening (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Bottom-up processing describes the decoding that happens when listeners use their knowledge of phonemes and prosody to identify words, phrases, and sentences. It is structural, and contrasts with top-down processing, which is meaning-based and relies on context and background knowledge to establish comprehension. Fluent listeners process their aural input automatically, moving seamlessly between top-down and bottom-up processes, but less proficient language learners do not; they pay conscious attention to different language elements (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Their controlled processing can use up both time and working memory, causing comprehension to suffer (Staehr, 2009). To circumvent this risk, second language (L2) learners must transfer input to long-term memory, freeing up working memory space and allowing new information to be processed (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012).

Although comprehension can fail at each stage of the listening model, Goh (2000) noted that 80% of L2 listener's problems are associated with decoding and word segmentation. Transferring the phonetic representations of input into words can be difficult for L2 learners, because unlike written text, speech does not provide spaces between words. To further complicate this issue, native speakers often reduce speech, blend words, eliminate words, use slang, and hesitate (Stetson, 2010). Listening comprehension difficulties in the early stages of acquisition can be further exacerbated by a listener's own first language (L1). Because the ability to recognize words is developed very early in life and is language specific, a low proficiency listener's L1 perception skills automatically dominate and can interfere with the automatic processing of the L2 (Goh, 2000). While overcoming these challenges may seem problematic, a review of research in pronunciation instruction, discourse cues, speech rate, repetition, vocabulary instruction, and strategy use can provide insights on the factors that affect L2 listening comprehension and may offer potential solutions.

Cross (2009) analyzed L2 learners' difficulties and concluded that they need to learn what the different phonemic sounds in connected English speech represent, their variations, and how to use context to change word choices. Although second language research strongly points to semantics as being the prominent and most successful predictor of word segmentation (Lee & Cai, 2010; Sanders, Neville, & Woldorff, 2002), learners at a beginner level have to use prosodic clues when they do not know many of the words used. Cutler and Carter (1987) analyzed a spoken corpus and found that 85.6% of content words in English are either stressed on the first syllable, or are only one syllable long, making listening for word stress a strong predictor of a new word. Zielinski (2006) found that native English listeners rely both on syllable stress patterns and on segments, especially vowels in strong syllables and word final consonants, to

identify words. Further studies (Al-jasser, 2008; Cutler, 2001; Sanders et al., 2002) reinforced the importance of word stress training to help beginner learners override the effects of their native language segmentation skills and use the target language's phonemic and prosodic indicators to help identify words.

Brown (2011) highlights the importance of teaching language learners to use discourse markers to predict what they might hear. Discourse markers are words or structures that signal how information in a text is organized, connected, compared, or contrasted (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Tyler and Bro (1992) asked 115 native speakers to evaluate the speech of four International Teaching Assistants and found that listeners had much more difficulty understanding speech when lexical discourse markers were missing than when ideas were presented out of order. Tyler and Bro encouraged ESL practitioners to train L2 learners how to use discourse structures, not only to help them understand what they hear, but to help them be understood when they speak. Rossiter, Derwing, Manimtim and Thomson (2010) also advocate teaching discourse markers to promote oral fluency, improve memory retention, and increase listening comprehension. Jung (2003) examined the effect of discourse signaling cues on L2 listening comprehension of high- and low-level academic lectures. The group that listened to lectures with discourse cues accurately recalled more information than the group without cues and comprehended more high- and low-level lecture content. Jung concluded that discourse markers play a significant role in L2 listening comprehension.

Andeeva's (1992) language students maintained that their listening activity speech rates were too fast, hindering their comprehension. Derwing (1990), however, found that native speakers (NS) who successfully communicated with both NS listeners and non-native speaker (NNS) listeners did not adjust their speech rate, and that speech rate was not correlated with

listener success (although she noted other significant adjustments to NS speech that facilitated comprehension). Even NSs who slowed their speech when talking to NNSs did not spend more time articulating words; they added more pause time instead. Blau (1990) also concluded that speech rate did not influence comprehensibility, but Griffiths (1990) examined the effect of speech rate on language comprehension and determined that an intermediate language learner's comprehension drops at 200 wpm. In a subsequent study, Griffiths (1991) found that intermediate language learners had the highest comprehension scores at 127 wpm. Zhao (1997) conducted a study in which participants could use a dial to decrease or increase speech rate without distortion. Generally, lower speech rates resulted in greater comprehension, but Zhao observed that there was considerable variability between listeners and wondered if decreasing the speech rate encouraged complacent learners rather than motivated ones.

Instructors generally provide students with increased repetitions of the listening input if students are having comprehension difficulties. Jensen and Vinther (2003) found that repetition was a stronger factor in listening comprehension than speech rate. Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari (2010), however, found that their study's control group did not improve in comprehension by merely listening to input three times with no other interventions. Sakai (2009), as well as Chang and Read (2009), found that repetition positively influenced comprehension scores in their studies, but in these instances, participants answered questions before the first listening and between each repetition, or wrote recalls between the two listening sessions. Vandergrift and Goh (2012) conclude that it is not simply listening to input repeatedly that improves comprehension, but the activities that students complete before and between listening segments that contribute to greater understanding.

Research has also examined the role of vocabulary knowledge in listening comprehension: Bonk (2000) studied 59 Japanese university students learning English and found a positive correlation between vocabulary and listening comprehension scores. Bonk's study also had unexpected findings: a quarter of his Japanese study participants could not make sense of the speech they heard, even though they were familiar with 100% of the words. Hirai (1999) found similar results, indicating that vocabulary knowledge does not guarantee listening comprehension. Bonk (2000) found additional anomalies: for example, some participants who knew fewer than 75% of the target words managed to obtain high listening comprehension scores and outperformed other students who had 100% lexical knowledge. Staehr (2009) studied 115 advanced Danish learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). He used a standardized academic language proficiency test to assess participants' listening comprehension, and a vocabulary levels test and depth of vocabulary test to determine the extent of their word knowledge. He found that the positive effect of vocabulary knowledge on listening comprehension had a significant correlation of .70, and that vocabulary breadth predicted 49% of the variance in the listening scores. He also noted that out of the 56 participants who were at the 2,000 or 3,000 word vocabulary level, 21 achieved a score of 60% on the listening test and five obtained 70%, while 48 participants at the 5,000 word level averaged 73%. Both Staehr (2009) and Bonk (2000) concluded that although vocabulary knowledge is an important factor in listening comprehension, other factors may also be involved. Bonk (2000) noted that "effective use of coping strategies can make a major contribution to listening comprehension and enable listeners to comprehend far beyond their lexical level" (p. 28). Both authors recommended that researchers explore the use of listening strategies.

A metacognitive, learner-centred approach to teaching listening is promoted by Goh (2008), Graham and Macaro (2008), and Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari (2010). Metacognition, or thinking about thinking, is defined by Vandergrift and Goh (2012) as "the ability of learners to control their thoughts and regulate their own learning" (p. 5). Self-regulated learners understand the listening process, know the specific demands of different types of listening tasks, and can develop their listening skills by using a variety of listening strategies to deal with different contexts. They record, analyze, and share their reflections; create plans for future learning; and follow-up on their plans with actions.

By encouraging students to step back and become agents of their own learning, instructors also promote self-confidence (Hacker, Dunlosky, & Gracer, 2009) and a willingness to communicate (MacIntyre, 2007). By drawing on experience, knowledge, and strategies, learners become "self-knowing, self-directed, and self-managed" (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012, p. 85), but not self-absorbed. Goh (1997) and Cross (2010) maintain that metacognitive listening activities should involve peer dialogue because learners teach each other and enhance their own metacognitive awareness when they evaluate their experiences together.

Although Field (1998) advocated the use of listening strategies, he did not endorse their explicit instruction. He questioned the effectiveness of teaching something that students could not see and hypothesized that learners who are weak strategy users might have trouble learning and applying strategies. Subsequent research, however, has not supported his stance. Goh and Taib (2006), for instance, studied the effect of eight lessons incorporating metatcognitive instruction on the listening comprehension of ten primary school students: nine students improved their listening performance, with weaker students experiencing the greatest improvements. Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari (2010) found that 106 French as a second language

students who used a metacognitive approach for listening significantly outperformed the control group in listening comprehension. Furthermore, beginner level students experienced the greatest improvement.

Gains in listening understanding may generate positive side effects. Hirai (1999) noted that higher levels of listening skills contributed positively to overall language development, while Mendelsohn (1995) found that more proficient listeners experienced higher levels of self-confidence. Self-confidence, one of many personal attributes, was noted by MacIntyre (2007) as contributing to a willingness to communicate, which positively affects language learning overall. Given the benefits of increased listening comprehension, I decided to study how the skill of listening was being taught in adult ESL classrooms by asking instructors of beginner and intermediate students to complete an online survey about their teaching practices and to discuss the teaching of listening in focus groups. My goal was to address the following questions:

1. What value is placed on teaching listening skills in the classroom?
2. What activities do instructors use when teaching listening in adult ESL classrooms?
3. Do gaps exist between the methods currently used to teach listening and the strategies and techniques presented in research?
4. If gaps exist, which activities and materials could be used to enhance the teaching of listening?

Method

Participants

The instructors who participated in this study were teaching beginner and intermediate adult learners of English at two post-secondary institutions in Edmonton. Information letters were emailed to 21 instructors: 16 attended one of three focus group sessions and 15 completed

an online survey. The participants had an average of 10 years' teaching experience, ranging from one to 30 years. Instructors from two program types were represented: a federally funded Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program based on the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLBs), and a tuition-based independent program which does not employ the CLBs.

Procedures

Three instructors were recruited through email requests: they received an information letter (see Appendix A) and two consent forms, one for the survey and one for the focus group. The remaining instructors first attended an information session where they could read the information letter, ask questions directly, and provide their email address if interested in participating in the study. Willing participants then received a copy of the information letter via email as well as a link to the online survey on *SurveyMonkey*®.

Survey. A survey was developed to obtain answers to multiple choice, open-ended, and rating scale questions to supplement the open-ended focus group interview questions. The survey consisted of 17 questions regarding listening genres, assessment, and the frequency and use of different listening activities in the classroom. The listening activities were divided into pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening sections, with seven, nine and ten different activities provided for each section respectively. Because metacognitive strategies were identified by researchers as contributing positively to listening proficiency, there was a metacognitive option in each section. Results were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The survey can be found in Appendix B.

Focus Groups. Sixteen instructors participated in the focus groups: three in the first, four in the second, and nine in the third. All respondents had a period of twelve days between initial contact

and focus group participation. Eight participants answered the survey during this interim time and seven completed it after the sessions were over. The focus groups were conducted using a semi-structured format with open-ended questions and averaged 38 minutes in length, ranging from 30 to 47 minutes. The focus group interview guide appears in Appendix C. The discussions were recorded with two digital voice recorders and transcribed in standard orthography. The transcripts were reviewed to identify major themes; each comment was then grouped according to theme and subtheme. The popularity of each subtheme was determined by first identifying the number of focus groups in which it was mentioned and then noting the number of contributing participants.

Results

Listening Survey

Fourteen instructors required their students to complete pre-listening activities, whereas all 15 instructors had students complete activities during and after listening to input. The teachers reported using the pre-listening activities, 'discussing the listening topic' and 'studying new vocabulary', more frequently than the other activities (see Table 1). Instructors had their students read transcripts before listening approximately 27% of the time; this figure did not include students reading a text on a related topic, which was mentioned in 'other pre-tasks'. Instructors with six or more years of teaching experience tended to use the metacognitive pre-listening option, 'predicting activities'. The instructor who did not use pre-listening tasks at all was new to the profession, as was the instructor who supplied reading texts to students as a pre-listening activity roughly 100% of the time. Overall, instructors reported using listening pre-tasks more often than while- or post-listening tasks.

Table 1

Frequency of Pre-Listening Tasks (n = 14)

Pre-listening, I have my students	Frequency of activity					Mean	SD
	0%	25%	50%	75%	100%		
Discuss the topic	0% (0)	7% (1)	7% (1)	43% (6)	43% (6)	80%	22%
Study new vocabulary	0% (0)	7% (1)	14% (2)	29% (4)	50% (7)	80%	24%
Preview questions	0% (0)	7% (1)	36% (5)	36% (5)	21% (3)	68%	23%
Discuss visuals	14% (2)	7% (1)	29% (4)	36% (5)	14% (2)	57%	32%
Make predictions	7% (1)	29% (4)	36% (5)	21% (3)	7% (1)	48%	27%
Read the listening text	36% (5)	36% (5)	21% (3)	0% (0)	7% (1)	27%	29%
Other pre-tasks[a]	78% (7)	11% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)	11% (1)	14%	33%

Note. The numbers in brackets refer to the number of participants who selected each frequency category.
[a]Only 9 out of 14 participants responded to this category.

According to the survey results for activities used while listening, participants asked their students to 'complete exercises' approximately 72% of the time on average and had them 'carry out actions' roughly 22% of the time overall. An examination of the responses for the post-listening section revealed that 'completing charts' and 'completing exercises' were the most popular tasks, while 'setting goals' and 'discussing predictions', the two metacognitive options, were the least popular (see Table 2). The two respondents who had their students frequently set goals and evaluate predictions were both experienced, with 8 and 25 years in the profession, respectively.

Table 2

Frequency of Post-Listening Tasks (n = 15)

After listening, I have my students	Frequency of activity						
	0%	25%	50%	75%	100%	Mean	SD
Complete exercises	0% (0)	13% (2)	40% (6)	20% (3)	27% (4)	65%	26%
Complete charts	7% (1)	27% (4)	40% (6)	13% (2)	13% (2)	50%	28%
Read the listening text	8% (1)	38% (5)	15% (2)	38% (5)	0% (0)	46%	27%
Repeat the text	21% (3)	29% (4)	14% (2)	29% (4)	7% (1)	43%	33%
Problem solve	21% (3)	29% (4)	21% (3)	21% (3)	7% (1)	41%	32%
Role-play	21% (3)	50% (7)	14% (2)	7% (1)	7% (1)	32%	28%
Write paragraph/summarize	23% (3)	46% (6)	23% (3)	8% (1)	0% (0)	29%	22%
Discuss predictions	36% (5)	43% (6)	7% (1)	7% (1)	7% (1)	27%	30%
Set goals	43% (6)	29% (4)	21% (3)	0% (0)	7% (1)	25%	29%
Other post-tasks	67% (4)	17% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)	17% (1)	21%	40%

Note. The numbers in brackets refer to the number of participants who selected each frequency category. Not all participants answered every question.

The survey also revealed that all respondents reported having their students listen to dialogues, conversations, or interviews. Video clips and radio broadcasts were the next most popular, followed by songs. Experienced instructors were more likely to use lectures as an input genre than inexperienced instructors, whereas the latter were more likely to show movies or movie clips in the classroom. According to survey results, the average audio segment used in listening lessons was three minutes long, and audiovisual input was preferred over audio input alone by a ratio of two to one. The greatest disparity between experienced and inexperienced instructors involved informal assessment; about 71% of experienced instructors reported using teacher checklists and roughly 57% stated they used learner checklists, whereas only a quarter of inexperienced teachers claimed they used either type.

Focus Groups

The focus group data were categorized according to the following themes: teaching strategies, listening activities, assessment, listening materials, challenges, and general observations. All names attributed to cited comments are pseudonyms.

Teaching Strategies. Edmonton instructors discussed 19 different strategies to teach listening, listed in Table 3. The top two strategies discussed in all three focus groups were 'listening for the main idea first' and 'using difficult listening texts to promote learning'. Bob stated "I definitely throw things up at them that's a higher level than what they can completely understand, because then we continue to communicate about it. I don't mind Krashen's 'i + 1.'" For 'out-of-class listening', participants encouraged students to listen to the radio, watch English TV programs, eavesdrop on English speakers at the bus stop, visit ESL listening websites, complete online listening homework assignments, and attend choir and clubs within the institution. Repetition, both instructor-controlled and student-controlled, was a popular method to improve listening comprehension, as was integrating listening with reading, writing, or speaking activities to deepen language learning. 'Pre-teaching vocabulary' was the most popular pre-listening strategy, because, as Tara indicated, if students "get too much new vocabulary they just get lost in the lack of knowledge, lack of the whole listening activity." Similarly, Carla keeps her audio segments "short so that the students feel that they can get a handle on it and they're not intimidated"; Lori teaches listening "when people are alert"; Brenda "expresses confidence in the students"; Carol gives "them a little bit more help in the beginning"; and Carla also noticed that "if you can make them think that they are just having fun and not learning, they are actually learning a lot more."

Table 3

Listening Strategies Identified in Focus Group Sessions

Activity/Strategy	Focus Groups (n = 3)	Speakers (n = 16)
Focus on the main idea	3	6
Use difficult texts to challenge students	3	6
Use a variety of texts	3	3
Replay the audio input	2	8
Promote out-of-class listening	2	7
Integrate listening with other skills	2	5
Pre-teach vocabulary	2	5
Provide background or context	2	5
Teach chunks of language	2	3
Promote fun	2	3
Start with easy material	2	3
Boost students' confidence	2	3
Vary speech rate	2	3
Use nonverbal cues	2	3
Choose optimal time of day for listening	1	5
Teach prosody (stress, intonation)	1	4
Promote relaxation techniques	1	3
Eliminate visuals	1	3
Use questions before listening	1	1

Note. The focus group numerical data represent the number of different focus groups in which a strategy was mentioned; the speaker data indicates the number of different participants who contributed to the discussion regarding the strategy.

Listening Activities. In addition to these teaching strategies, eight specific listening activities were highlighted in the focus group sessions: scanning the written text for the main idea, playing bingo, completing jigsaw activities, taking dictations, physically following a series of commands, reading a transcript after a second listening, taking notes, and transcribing input orthographically. 'Dictation' was the favorite by a wide margin and 'transcribing' followed second.

Assessment. Instructors also discussed their assessment of students' performance, both informally and formally. Four different practitioners mentioned they informally evaluated students' responses to oral questions, two observed facial expressions, one reviewed students' listening notes, and one reported giving his students the CLB self-assessment tool (Hajer, 2012, pp. 34-35). One instructor's students were not formally assessed, and seven teachers reported testing their students by having them first listen to audio input and then answer questions: true/false or multiple choice for lower level students, and open-ended for higher levels. Two focus group participants were concerned about the validity of their tests. Dave "would go over the questions in reading and make sure they understood the reading part and then they did the listening to find the answers, right? So the challenge wasn't reading, it was listening." Carol felt the quizzes provided "good feedback for them, too, to see how they're doing."

Listening Material. The instructors' primary concern was finding listening materials at their students' level which related thematically to the lesson: they had to be authentic, not too fast, relevant, legally available, interesting, multilevel-friendly, and not too long. Instructors used both curricular and online sources to find appropriate listening materials. *Top Notch* (Saslow & Archer, 2011) and the *LINC Activities* text (Watson et al., 2009) were the most popular of the eight curricular choices mentioned. When discussing online options, CBC's English as an Additional Language (EAL) program (CBC, 2013) had both positive and negative reactions: Becky felt that "CBC news is wonderful, the EAL for LINC 4, that's nice," but Sarah has "been stung by taking a news story and making a wonderful activity and then in my class CBC has taken it down." YouTube was often referred to as a general online resource and Vocaroo as a useful online voice recorder for students' use.

Challenges. Focus group participants highlighted several challenges involved in teaching listening. Instructors' concern over the time needed to prepare listening lessons was reported in all three interviews. Glenda noted that "it can take three hours to do a 20 minute lesson plan. It's really labour-intensive. Sometimes I just feel like it's 'arrgh'. There's got to be a better way of doing it." Assessment was also problematic. Lori indicated that "it's not easy coming out with a good listening test. It takes a lot of work." Like many of her peers, Rita's main challenge was "where to find authentic listening materials that are good and level-appropriate." Focus group participants stressed that while the CLBs provide national consistency in language standards, they can also be problematic: Cathy feels that "they are still too general and different people would interpret them differently." In addition, many participants were concerned about their students' emotions. Some of Glenda's students were "just foaming at the mouth with fear" and Dave observed that "a lot of them get flustered, you know, they hear something they don't know and that's it. They shut down and they don't hear anything else."

Discussion

Strategies. Both instructors and students face many obstacles which hinder the effectiveness of listening instruction and the comprehension of listening input, respectively. The survey responses and focus group discussions revealed how the strategies used in Edmonton's adult ESL classrooms could counteract these obstacles. The most frequently mentioned strategy was listening for the main idea; it was discussed several times in all three focus groups. This strategy is supported by research: Berne (2004) noted that a major distinction between more and less proficient listeners is that the former generally focus on 'obtaining the main idea' whereas low level listeners tend to 'listen for each word'. Another popular strategy discussed in the sessions was 'encouraging students to listen to English outside the classroom', a form of extensive

listening promoted by Waring (2010). Seven instructors in the LINC program discussed 'out-of-class listening', but no one in the tuition-based program mentioned it; further research could determine whether there is any significance to this pattern and identify any contributing factors. Dave observed that one of his students "is Asian and he's working in a place that is predominantly Chinese so he really needs to gain exposure, be out in a setting where he can try to speak with people and try to listen to what they say". Derwing , Munro, and Thomson (2008) noted that most of the Mandarin participants in their longitudinal study were unable to take advantage of opportunities to listen to English outside of class, and recommended that ESL programs encourage learners' opportunities to encounter English.

The survey results indicated that pre-listening activities were used more often than while-listening and post-listening activities. Field (2011), however, cautions against the use of certain pre-listening activities, specifically 'reviewing written questions before the listening' and 'listening for key words'. His study found that these activities did not contribute to listening comprehension and, according to participants' comments, might hinder the ability to find the main idea of the listening text. Post-listening activities, as opposed to pre-listening, received the most attention in the focus groups and they garnered a series of positive comments as well. Brenda indicated that "it's amazing how much higher students can go when they do a jigsaw lesson"; Carla liked to break down the text into manageable chunks because she wanted "them to focus on something small and really do it well" and Dave enjoyed transcribing four lines of the listening text on the whiteboard with his students because his students "are curious about all those words in between and how they connect and make this idea, right? And so they like to see what it is". Dave's practice of transcribing small portions of text to help students decode the

message is promoted by Reed (2013) and Brown (2011), as a large percentage of students' errors occur at the word segmentation stage (Goh, 2000).

Brown (2011), Field (2003), Lynch (2009), and Nation and Newton (2009) recommend that teachers use dictations to help students notice the variations in spoken English and improve their word segmentation skills. In the focus group discussion, dictations were the most highly discussed activity by a large margin. The instructors talked about nine separate methods of dictation, gave instructions on their use, and listed the learning benefits for students. Conversely, multiple choice, true/false and gap-fill exercises were only mentioned by one participant, Carla: "I think it's also really, really important that they understand what they hear instead of just a cloze exercise. They might do it really well but not understand what they are writing in there." Vandergrift and Goh (2012) do not recommend using one word cloze exercises for the same reason. Field's (2009) study found no correlation between performance on gap-fill and multiple choice questions and the ability to listen in real time and consequently discourages their use in listening lessons.

There were some disparities between the focus group and survey results. In the survey, teachers stated that, on average, they had students complete multiple choice, true/false and gap-fill exercises about 73% of the time while listening, and dictations approximately 13% of the time. In the focus groups, however, dictations were mentioned six times in two focus groups and cloze exercises once. Further studies should include classroom observations to compare what actually happens in the classroom with teachers' self-reported accounts.

Assessment. The survey responses on assessment indicated that while all students were tested formally, experienced instructors used more forms of informal assessment, such as teacher and student checklists, than did inexperienced teachers. According to Vandergrift and Goh (2012),

checklists are particularly helpful for beginner learners and can help them focus when listening and aid them in evaluating their strategy use after listening.

The focus group discussions on assessment mentioned the aspects of validity, reliability, practicality and providing feedback. Lori, a LINC instructor, was also concerned with CLB implications for testing: “Well, for listening you have to make sure that your test is actually testing certain criteria, or some of the criteria that we need to know for that level of CLB.” Awareness of the factors necessary for effective assessment, however, did not encourage instructors but discouraged them; according to Glenda “assessing listening isn't easy … It's one of the hardest things of all.”

Material Selection. According to the focus group discussions, finding appropriate listening materials was more challenging than creating assessments. If materials were authentic, they were too fast (Tara, Becky), or too difficult (Lori, Tara, Carol, & Dave), which caused learners to become discouraged (Glenda, Dave, Tara, & Sarah). As a consequence, some instructors have opted to do less: “I feel like I need to do more of it, or I would like to do more of it, if only it was a little bit easier to do” (Lori), but other instructors met the challenge by becoming more resourceful: “We beg. We bribe. We go and ask people, ‘What are you using?’” (Carla).

According to Reed (2013), listening materials that are considered too difficult or too fast are often incomprehensible because of connected speech sounds. She therefore recommends training students to recognize linked, contracted, reduced, and altered speech. Field (2011) and Vandergrift and Goh (2012) also feel it is valuable to teach learners how to decode speech, and recommend doing so post-listening, when learners are more relaxed.

Observations. Instructors from different institutions varied in the way they approached difficult listening material: one group actively pursued challenging texts, whereas the other seem to

avoid them. LINC teachers noted that their students often felt discouraged (Carol), and embarrassed (Dave) when the listening material was too difficult and then "shut down" (Sarah & Dave). Conversely, Brenda, from an independent institution, deliberately chose listening materials at a higher level than her students could completely understand because "it's kind of like the iceberg or whatever. You know, you might only see that top ten percent of what they've actually figured out because they don't have the confidence to give you more of it yet." Bob, from the same school, was "constantly amazed how much better they are than what you think." Lesson preparation for the non-CLB group was not problematic: Evan found "it's just like trial and error and it works." Tara, who taught in the CLB institution, was not as cavalier: "Because you can't just do, what is it, comprehending information. Then you need to do it for all the CLB competencies." Although the CLBs provide guidelines for lesson preparation, they may also restrict listening material choices and lower teachers' assessments of their students' abilities; future research could explore this issue and its impact on teachers and students.

Although instructors often discussed challenges in the focus groups, the general tone of all three sessions was positive and lighthearted. The laughter in each focus group session indicated that instructors liked talking about listening, and Becky admitted that she enjoyed teaching listening: "I've always liked it for whatever reason, I don't know why." Dave clearly knew why: "you can see over the weeks that there was an increase in confidence and an increase in their ability to identify the main ideas and the supporting details and you could tell the way that they were approaching it too was different, you know, and the frustration would leave with those who were a little frustrated." Field (2011), Mendelsohn (1995), and Vandergrift and Goh (2012) all noted that students' confidence increases when listening comprehension improves.

Recommendations

Although a great deal is being done to teach listening in Edmonton ESL classrooms, there are gaps between listening comprehension research and stated classroom practices.

Explain the Listening Process

Explicitly outlining the steps in achieving listening comprehension can provide context and relieve stress (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Teaching students to focus on the process of listening rather than the product of listening gives them greater control over their own learning. Additionally, realizing that listening involves both overcoming L1 phonological interference as well as learning new patterns may motivate beginner L2 learners to use metacognitive strategies.

Explicitly Teach Metacognitive Strategies

Research has identified a positive correlation between metacognitive strategy instruction and improved listening comprehension in language learners (Goh, 2008; Graham & Macaro, 2008; Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010). Vandergrift and Goh (2012) have developed a listening worksheet (Appendix D) which incorporates the metacognitive elements of predicting, monitoring, planning, evaluating, reflecting, and goal setting. Before listening to input, students predict the words they expect to hear and note them. During the first round of listening, they check the accuracy of their predictions, listen for overall meaning and note problematic areas. After the first listening, students talk about their successes and difficulties with partners and make a plan for the second round, in which they note the new information gleaned, and, after listening, discuss the strategies used and their impact on their listening comprehension. Vandergrift and Goh recommend providing transcripts only after the second round, with an option for a third listening with the text to reinforce sound/symbol connections. At the end of the listening exercise, students set goals for the next listening activity. Reed (2013) advocates using

progress logbooks where students can record their listening difficulties, their proposed solutions and their effectiveness. Evans, Hartshorn and Strong-Kruase (2011) found that students who used this type of record keeping significantly improved their linguistic accuracy in their L2 writing; perhaps such logbooks would have a similar effect on listening.

Metacognitive Makeovers

Teachers can either incorporate new listening activities in their lessons or modify existing ones. Although single word cloze exercises can potentially be completed without understanding the topic, they can be improved by having students scan the exercise before listening, predict and write responses for the blank lines, and monitor their success while listening. The focus group participants in the current study are already adapting traditional dictations to enhance student learning; of the nine dictation variations given, six required students to speak to one another. Brown (2011) promotes communicative dictations where students write dictated sentences, or parts of sentences, and add their own content at specified points, or where the teacher holds up a picture and dictates both true and false sentences, and requires students to correct the false sentences. Wajnyryb (1990) combined a dictation with a jigsaw activity to create a dictagloss, which Wilson (2003) later modified by adding student reflections and goal setting. An adapted dictagloss is provided in Appendix E.

Traditional dictations still have a place in the listening lesson. Kiany and Shiramry (2002) found a positive correlation between traditional dictations and increased listening comprehension in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) elementary school students, and Nation and Newton (2009) maintain the traditional dictation's effectiveness in developing bottom-up skills. There is, however, a great need for additional research on the effects of both traditional and non-traditional dictations on listening comprehension, especially in the adult learner context.

Explicitly Teach Stress, Linking, Intonation and Discourse Markers

Goh (2000) found that the majority of students' listening errors occurred when trying to determine word boundaries. Brown (2011), Gilbert (2008), Reed (2013), and Vandergrift and Goh (2012) recommend teaching students the prosodic elements of the English language, specifically word stress, intonation, and connected speech features. Zielinski (2006) recommended paying special attention to the accuracy of segments in strong syllables, as this was a strong factor in intelligibility. Reed (2013) concurs; students should be taught the stress pattern of each new word they learn. She advises teaching phrasal stress first, then standard level stress, followed by non-standard level stress and intonation. Reed entreats instructors to explicitly highlight the importance of intonation in establishing meaning. She also advocates teaching students how to break the English language code with a three-step process of asking students what they heard, whether it made sense and what they think was really said.

Teaching learners to identify discourse markers can help them anticipate what they will hear, remember what they have heard, and improve their level of understanding (Jung, 2003; Tyler & Bro, 1992). Vandergrift and Goh (2012) encourage instructors to also teach their students how to recognize the discourse cues important to interactive listening. Learners need to know when they are expected to take a turn, when and how they should respond, and how to give appropriate back-channeling cues to continue the conversation and signal understanding.

Slower Is Not Necessarily Better

In his TESOL virtual seminar, Vandergrift (2012) argued against using listening materials at a slow rate of speech, even for beginner level students, because students need to achieve real life comprehension in real time as soon as possible. He encouraged instructors to minimize the difficulty level of the listening material by breaking audio segments into smaller

chunks and allowing students to listen repeatedly. His rationale was twofold: slow speech reinforces word-by-word listening and also discourages strategy use because students are not challenged to try something new. Vandergrift and Goh (2012) maintain that using listening materials at a normal speech rate is reasonable if speed is the only difficult factor. For beginner students, the listening content should not be a lecture, which is textually dense, but an authentic conversation which contains pauses, repetitions, and fillers, making it easier to understand. In addition, the topic and vocabulary should be familiar to the students. The listening segment should be more than one minute long because students need time to adapt to a new voice. If the listening text is a news article, however, the density of the text may become the challenging element, in which case the rate of speech should be decreased. Vandergrift and Goh's guideline is that listening materials should only have one difficult element at a time, but should always have one difficult element.

Incorporate Discussion

Cross (2010) demonstrated in his study that students' interactions increased their metacognitive knowledge. Swain and Lapkin (1995) indicated that when students speak with each other they are better able to notice language features and modify their output. Brenda observed that her students "support each other in their community listening. You know, so between the five of them they can figure out what one person says." Vandergrift and Goh (2012) promote social learning and endorse jigsaw activities, while Hazell Yildirim and Hoffman (2010) advocate the benefits of students developing and teaching listening lessons to the entire class.

Assessment

Listening diaries, questionnaires and learner checklists are forms of informal assessment that promote self-reflection, monitor progress and create an awareness of the listening process

(Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). In terms of formal assessment, Field (2011) and Vandergrift and Goh (2012) encourage instructors to create tests that resemble the routine activities used to teach listening. Field (2011) claims that teachers do the majority of the students' listening comprehension work when drafting tests; he recommends shifting the responsibility to the student to demonstrate comprehension. Teachers could ask students to record themselves relaying the main idea of a listening text, for example, or could complete a partially-filled skeleton outline.

Conclusion

My goals for this study were to determine the value placed on teaching the skill of listening in the classroom, to discover the activities used when teaching listening, to identify the gaps between research findings and classroom practices and to find activities to narrow those gaps. I learned that listening is not ignored in some of Edmonton's adult ESL classrooms, nor is it a Cinderella skill, a moniker from Vandergrift (1997) that may no longer apply in 2013. The teachers in the current study are aware of the differences between proficient and less proficient listeners and claim to consciously promote activities which encourage listening fluency. Sixteen teachers reported using 22 research-supported strategies to improve listening comprehension. The main limitation of this study is that it relies on instructor's self-reports which have not been validated by classroom observations. Teachers may be providing information based on what they feel they should be doing rather than on what they are actually doing. Analyzing what was not said, however, reveals two significant gaps in instruction: both 'explicitly teaching metacognitive strategies' and 'training students to recognize and interpret prosodic elements' were missing from the discussions.

Teaching learners how to use metacognitive strategies provides them with a tool that may alleviate listening challenges, relieve stress, and boost self-confidence (Goh, 2008; Graham & Macaro, 2008; Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010). Teaching these strategies does not require extensive material development, but does require instructors who are committed to helping their students "by teaching them why, how, and when to apply which strategies" (Stoller, 2013, p. 11).

In addition to strategy instruction, language learners need to learn how to make sense of English oral speech (Brown, 2011; Field, 2003; Reed, 2013; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Teachers should be aware of the many phonemic and prosodic pitfalls capable of deceiving their students to help them notice, analyze and understand their errors (Field, 2003). For many instructors this could be a daunting task, much more challenging than teaching strategies. Foote, Holtby and Derwing (2011) concluded that, in general, ESL instructors in Canada do not receive the professional development they need to feel comfortable teaching pronunciation, and noted that 75% would appreciate more instruction. Similarly, Carol expressed interest in receiving formal training in teaching listening: "I would have liked, probably, some courses that offered more about teaching listening." Hopefully this study will stimulate further dialogue and promote interest in research, seminars, and professional development sessions devoted to improving listening comprehension, ultimately resulting in classrooms where students are taught how to listen to real life communication in real time.

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Appendix A

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Department of Educational Psychology

www.ualberta.ca 6 – 102 Education North Tel: 780: 492-5245
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Dear ESL Instructors:

Good listening skills are vital to succeed in the workplace and to integrate successfully into Canadian society, and yet many students do not progress in listening as quickly as they do in their other English language skills. I would like to address this inequality and am basing my Master's capping project on finding effective ways to teach listening.

I will examine current research to identify promising techniques, but I also need to find out what approaches are currently being used in Edmonton's ESL classrooms. You stated that you would be willing to participate in a 45 minute focus group session to talk about how you teach listening and what you find effective. The focus group session will be held in a meeting room at Westmount and refreshments will be provided. I will forward a separate email for a Doodle poll to find the dates and times that work best; if you would rather let me know your availability in another way, just reply to this email. After analyzing the focus group data, I will provide recommendations, activities, and materials appropriate for beginner to intermediate students.

In order to make the time spent in the focus group more efficient, would you also be able to complete a 10 – 15 minute online questionnaire prior to our meeting? The survey has questions about the activities you use when teaching and assessing listening and can be accessed by clicking on this link: https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/BTMR9QL Please read the attached consent form and email me any questions you may have before proceeding to the survey. Starting the survey confirms that you have read the consent form and agree to participate in this study. I have enclosed a copy of the consent form for the focus group so that you can read it in advance as well.

Would you also let me know if you have any allergies, or concerns? My email address is eneame@ualberta.ca

Sincerely,

Evelyn Neame
TESL Master's Student
Department of Educational Psychology
University of Alberta

Appendix B

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Department of Educational Psychology

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LISTENING QUESTIONNAIRE

I am currently researching how the skill of listening is taught in English as a second language (ESL) classrooms in Edmonton. You could provide valuable input on how listening is taught in your classroom. Would you take a few minutes to answer the following questions?

1. How long have you been teaching ESL?

_____years (full-time equivalent, ~ 25 classroom hours per week)

2. Please list the ESL class(es) that you are currently teaching. If you currently teach two or more different classes, please place a check mark in front of the class in which listening is most frequently taught. Then answer the following questions based on that class.
State the course name, the CLB level of the students, and the number of classroom hours per week:

☐_____CLB:_____Hours per week:_____

☐_____CLB:_____Hours per week:_____

☐_____CLB:_____Hours per week:_____

All questions below refer to **listening activities**, which are

(a) specifically designed for language learners to improve their skill in listening and
(b) involve an audio or audio-visual component, such as a recording, a radio broadcast, a video clip, or a movie.
Note: Classroom instructions given by an instructor over the course of a day would not be considered a listening activity.

In the following sections, please indicate how often you use the task types described below in your classroom before, during, and after listening.

Pre-listening

Do you ever use any activities to prepare your students *before* starting the listening lesson?

☐ No (Please skip to Question 10.)

☐ Yes (Please complete the following questions.)

You may use a range of pre-tasks in one listening lesson, or over several lessons: please indicate how often you use the pre-listening activities .

Before they listen, I have my students:	Never 0%	About 25%	About 50%	About 75%	Always 100%
1. discuss the topic of the listening text to connect it with what they already know.					
2. preview questions to be answered while listening.					
3. study new vocabulary.					
4. discuss visuals (graphs, tables or pictures) to provide context.					
5. make predictions about what they will hear.					
6. read the listening text.					
7. Other:_____					
8. Other:_____					
9. Other:_____					

During Listening

Do you have your students complete activities *while* they are listening?

☐ No (Please skip to Question 21.)

☐ Yes (Please complete the following questions.)

While they listen, I have my students:	Never 0%	About 25%	About 50%	About 75%	Always 100%
10. read the listening text.					
11. take notes.					
12. complete exercises (e.g., true/false, multiple choice, gap-fill).					
13. complete or sequence pictures.					
14. complete charts, tables, or forms.					
15. write what they hear (dictation).					
16. carry out actions that they hear.					
17. verify or evaluate their predictions.					
18. Other:_____					
19. Other:_____					
20. Other:_____					

After Listening

Do you have your students complete any activities *after* they have finished listening?

☐ No (Please skip to Question 32.)

☐ Yes (Please complete the following questions.)

After listening, I have my students:	Never 0%	About 25%	About 50%	About 75%	Always 100%
21. read the listening text.					
22. write a summary or paragraph about the listening.					
23. complete charts, tables, or forms.					
24. complete exercises (e.g., true/false, multiple choice, gap-fill).					
25. repeat the text.					
26. role-play the situation.					
27. use the information for problem solving or other task-oriented activities.					
28. discuss discrepancies in their predictions.					
29. set goals for future listening activities.					
30. Other:_____					
31. Other:_____					

Teaching Listening

32. Please indicate how many times your students listen to the audio input (e.g., dialogue, recording) in a lesson.

	Never 0%	About 25%	About 50%	About 75%	Always 100%
My students listen to the audio once only.					
My students listen to the audio twice.					
My students listen to the audio three or more times.					

33. Please check the four types of listening input that you use the most often in your class:

- ☐ Dialogues, conversations or interviews
- ☐ Fiction stories read out loud (instructor or recording)
- ☐ Non-fiction articles read out loud (instructor or recording)
- ☐ Movies or movie clips
- ☐ TV shows or segments of TV shows
- ☐ Video clips (YouTube, Ted Talks)
- ☐ Radio broadcasts
- ☐ Lectures
- ☐ Podcasts
- ☐ Songs
- ☐ Poems
- ☐ Other: _____
- ☐ Other: _____

34. Which do you prefer using in your classroom?

- ☐ Audio only
- ☐ Audio plus visual

35. How long is your average audio input? _____minutes.

Instructors can assess students' listening proficiency **formally,** through planned exercises, tests or procedures that often result in a grade or mark.
Students' progress can also be assessed **informally,** without recording results, but by providing comments, having students complete checklists, or conducting interviews.

36. Do you assess your students' listening proficiency *informally*?
- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes

If yes, please check all that apply.
- ☐ Learner checklists
- ☐ Teacher checklists
- ☐ Questionnaires
- ☐ Listening diaries
- ☐ Interviews
- ☐ Comments
- ☐ Other: _____

37. Do you assess your students' listening proficiency *formally*?
- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes

If yes, do you include a listening section in the following test situations? Check all that apply.
- ☐ Quiz
- ☐ Unit test
- ☐ Final exam
- ☐ Other: _____

38. Do you use the CLB descriptors in either your teaching or assessment of learners?

39. What percent of your class time do you spend teaching?
- _____ Reading
- _____ Writing
- _____ Listening
- _____ Speaking

Thank you for participating in this study and completing the questions. If you would like to receive a summary of the results, please email Evelyn at eneame@ualberta.ca.

Appendix C

Focus Group Questions for the Listening Study

1. What activities do you use to teach listening?

2. What do you consider when choosing activities to teach listening?

3. What helps your students when they are having difficulty understanding the listening activity?

4. Do you assess listening? How?

5. What do you know now about teaching listening that you wish you knew when you first started teaching?

6. Do you find that the CLB descriptions of listening are useful to you?

7. I want to make sure that everyone has had an opportunity to express all that they want to say. Is there anything else about teaching listening that you want to add?

Appendix D

Listening Activity Worksheet

Title: _____

Guess	First Listening	Second Listening	What Helped?
Words I will hear: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____	My notes: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____	What I heard better: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____	What helped me listen: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____
What will happen: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____	What I could not hear: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____	Next time I will: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____

Appendix E

Adapted Dictagloss Worksheet

1. First Listen: How much did you understand?

☐ Almost nothing ☐ Less than 30% ☐ About 50% ☐ More than 70% ☐ Almost all

2. Second Listen: Write key words.

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

3. Third Listen: Add more notes.

a._____

b _____

c._____

d._____

e._____

f._____

4. Now, in your group, try to write the sentences completely. They don't have to be exactly the same as what you heard, but they should have the same meaning.

a._____

b _____

c._____

d._____

e._____

f._____

Adapted from: Wajnryb, R. (1990). *Grammar dictation*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press and Wilson, M. (2003). Discovery listening: Improving perceptual processing. *ELT Journal, 57,* 342-343.

5. What problems did you have?

a) I couldn't hear which sound it was.

b) I couldn't separate the sounds into words.

c) I heard the words but couldn't remember their meaning fast enough.

d) The word was new to me.

e) I heard and understood the words but not the meaning of the sentence.

f) Other problems:_____

_____

_____

6. Which words or phrases were the hardest to understand?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

7. When you read the listening text, could you understand it?

☐ Yes

☐ No. I did not know _____

_____

8. Final Listen: How much do you understand now?

☐ Almost nothing ☐ Less than 30% ☐ About 50% ☐ More than 70% ☐ Almost all

Adapted from: Wajnryb, R. (1990). *Grammar dictation*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press and Wilson, M. (2003). Discovery listening: Improving perceptual processing. *ELT Journal, 57*, 335-343.