

Improving Listening Comprehension In The Audiolingual Method

Aperfeiçoamento da Compreensão Aural no Método Audiolingual

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Resumo

Though many theorists agree that listening input is the key to the acquisition of a language, and that teachers should help learners build receptive skills before actually producing language themselves, listening to a native speaker is a difficult task. This fact added to the mismatches between the students' learning style and the style favored by the audiolingual method led us to search for a way to facilitate and enhance listening comprehension in these classes.

Palavras-chave: learning styles, audiolingual method, listening comprehension.

Abstract

Embora muitos teóricos concordem que o input aural seja a chave para a aquisição de uma língua, e que os professores devam ajudar os alunos a desenvolverem habilidades receptivas antes de se voltarem à produção; ouvir a um falante nativo é uma tarefa difícil. Esse fato somado aos desencontros entre o estilo de aprendizagem dos estudantes e o estilo favorecido pelo método audiovisual nos levou a pesquisar uma forma de facilitar e aumentar a compreensão auditiva nessas aulas.

Key words: estilos de aprendizagem, método audiovisual, aumento da compreensão auditiva.

LEARNING STYLES

Students learn in many ways - by seeing and hearing; reflecting and acting; reasoning logically and intuitively; memorizing and visualizing. Teaching methods also vary. In some methods instructors lecture, in others they

demonstrate or discuss; some focus on rules and others on examples; some emphasize memory and others understanding. How much a given student learns in a class is governed in part by that student's native ability and prior preparation but also by the compatibility of his or her characteristic approach to learning and the method.

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The ways in which an individual characteristically acquires, retains, and retrieves information are collectively termed the individual's learning style. Because a learning style involves perception, cognition, conceptualization, affect, and behavior, it is understandable that various learning models and definitions exist. Learning styles have been extensively discussed in the educational psychology literature (Claxton & Murrell 1987; Schmeck 1988 apud Felder and Henriques, 1995) and specifically in the context of language learning, and over 30 learning style assessment instruments have been developed in the past three decades (Guild & Garger 1985; Jensen 1987 apud Felder and Henriques, 1995).

Serious mismatches may occur between the learning styles of students in a class and the style favored by the teaching method, with unfortunate potential consequences. The students tend to be bored and inattentive in class, do poorly on tests, get discouraged about the course, and may conclude that they are not good at the subject of the course and give up.

Dimensions of Learning Styles

We can classify the learning styles into three major categories: sensory learning styles, cognitive learning styles, and personality learning styles. In the next two sections, we will briefly present some features of the cognitive and the sensory learning styles. It is not our intention to provide a complete description of all categories but only to discuss the more relevant aspects that define the way people prefer to learn. How they deal with ideas, how they approach tasks, and how they use their physical senses to study are the main topics shown in sections 1.2 and 1.3.

Cognitive Learning Styles: Sensing and Intuitive Learners

In his theory of psychological types, C. G. Jung (1971 apud Felder and Henriques, 1995) introduced sensation and intuition as the two ways in which people tend to perceive the world. Sensing involves observing, gathering data

through the senses; intuition involves indirect perception by way of the sub-conscious-accessing memory, speculating, imagining.

Everyone uses both faculties constantly, but most people tend to favor one over the other. The strength of this preference has been assessed for millions of people using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) (Myers & McCaulley 1985; Myers and Myers 1980 cited in Felder and Henriques, 1995), and the different ways in which sensors and intuitors approach learning have been characterized.

Sensor-intuitor differences in language learning have been explored by R. Moody (1988) and M. E. Ehrman and R. L. Oxford (1990 apud Felder and Henriques, 1995). Sensors tend to be concrete and methodical, **intuitors** tend to be abstract and imaginative. Sensors like facts, data, and experimentation; intuitors deal better with principles, concepts, and theories. Sensors are patient with detail but do not like complications; intuitors are bored by detail and welcome complications. Sensors are more inclined than intuitors to rely on memorization as a learning strategy and are more comfortable learning and following rules and standard procedures. Intuitors like variety, dislike repetition, and tend to be better equipped than sensors to accommodate new concepts and exceptions to rules.

Sensors are careful but may be slow; intuitors are quick but may be careless. Moody (1988) administered the MBTI to 491 college language students at the first- and second-year levels. Fifty-nine percent of the students were intuitors, substantially more than the 40 percent found for a sample of 18,592 general college students (Myers & McCaulley: 1985). This pattern is not altogether surprising if one presumes that a substantial number of the students were either majoring in a language or taking the courses as electives. As Moody notes, language is by its nature symbolic, needs representation. Which would tend to make it more attractive to intuitors than to the more concrete and literal-minded sensors.

Ehrman and Oxford studied learning strategies and teaching approaches preferred by sensors and intuitors in an intensive language training program. The sensors used a variety of memorization strategies like internal drills and



flash cards, liked class material that might better be described as practical than fanciful, and liked highly structured and well organized classes with clear goals and milestones for achievement. Intuitors preferred teaching approaches that involved greater complexity and variety, tended to be bored with drills, and were better able than sensors to learn independently of the instructor's teaching style.

Basic language instruction that involves a great deal of repetitive drill and memorization of vocabulary and grammar - the sort of teaching style found in audiolingual classes - is better suited to sensors than intuitors. If there is too much of this sort of thing without a break, the intuitors - who constitute the majority of the class, if Moody's results are representative - may become bored with the subject and their course performance may consequently deteriorate.

On the other hand, strongly intuitive language instructors may tend to move too quickly through the basic vocabulary and rules of grammar in their eagerness to get to "the more interesting material" - grammatical complexities, nuances of translation, linguistic concepts, and cultural considerations. While the intuitive students may enjoy these topics, overemphasizing such material may result in insufficient grounding in the building blocks of the language. The sensors, in particular, may then start to fall behind and do poorly on homework and tests.

Effective instruction reaches out to all students, not just those with one particular learning style. Students taught entirely with methods antithetical to their learning style may be made too uncomfortable to learn effectively, but they should have at least some exposure to those methods to develop a full range of learning skills and strategies (Smith & Renzulli 1984 apud Felder and Henriques, 1995). To be effective, language instruction should therefore contain elements that appeal to sensors and other elements that appeal to intuitors. The material presented in every class should be a blend of concrete information (word definitions, grammatical rules) and concepts (syntactical and semantic information, linguistic and cultural background information), with the percentage of each being chosen to fit the level of the course (beginning,

intermediate, or advanced) and the age and level of sophistication of the students.

Sensory Learning Styles: Visual and Verbal Learners

Felder and Henriques (1995) propose to classify the ways people receive sensory information as visual, verbal, and other (tactile, gustatory, olfactory). **Visual learners** prefer that information be presented visually - in pictures, diagrams, flow charts, time lines, films, and demonstrations - rather than in spoken or written words. **Verbal learners** prefer spoken or written explanations to visual presentations. The third category (touch, taste, smell) plays at most a marginal role in language instruction. According to the authors this categorization is somewhat unconventional in the context of the learning style literature (e.g., Barbe & Swassing 1979; Dunn, Dunn, & Price 1978 cited in Felder and Henriques, 1995), in which sensory modalities are classified as visual, auditory, and kinesthetic.

Since the five human senses are seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling, they suggest that "kinesthetic" does not properly belong on a list of sensory input modalities. A student's preference for motion or physical activity of some sort during the learning process belongs in a separate learning style category: Felder and Henriques' proposed system and D. A Kolb's (1984) model place it in the active/reflective dimension, and the familiar model based on Jung's typology includes it in the extravert-introvert dimension.

Joy Reid (1995), however, includes the kinesthetic learner - the one who learns more effectively through touch (hands-on) in the sensory or perceptual learning styles list, which is divided in auditory, visual, tactile, kinesthetic and haptic. The last one is the combination that some researches do of tactile and kinesthetic modalities. A haptic learns more effectively through touch and whole-body involvement.

The distinction between the **visual-auditory** and visual-verbal classifications has to do with whether reading prose is more closely related to seeing pictures (which leads to the visual-auditory contrast) or to hearing speech (visual-verbal). Nancy Kroonenberg



(apud Reid, 1995, p. 84) asserts that “visual” has two components - text-visual and picture visual - and that photos, videos, and the like, when used effectively, may be stronger visual learning devices for sustained learning than is the printed or written word.

Recent studies of learning styles in foreign language education (e.g., Oxford & Ehrman 1993) consistently place reading in the visual category, implying that instructors can meet the needs of visual learners solely by relying on written instructional material. Certainly visual learners learn better if they see and hear words in the target language, but so do auditory learners: presenting the same material in different ways invariably has a reinforcing effect on retention.

According to M. Martin (1978 apud Felder and Henriques, 1995), three mechanisms have been proposed for the process of extracting lexical significance from written words:

Direct access (the reader jumps directly from the printed form of the word to its lexical meaning), **indirect access** (the printed words are translated internally into sounds before information about their meaning can be located in lexical memory), and **dual encoding** (lexical memory can be reached either directly or indirectly).

An extensive body of research supports a form of the dual encoding hypothesis. Direct access is possible when words are familiar or when artificial conditions imposed in a research setting make speech encoding inefficient; however, when material is unfamiliar or difficult, lexical memory is speech-accessed (Crowder & Wagner 1992 Felder and Henriques, 1995). The implication is that expository prose of the sort one finds in books and on classroom chalk-boards is much more likely to be speech-mediated than directly accessed when silently read, and so belongs in the verbal rather than the visual category.

Sensory Learning Styles - A Classroom Survey

According to Joy Reid (1995), one of the most obvious aspects of learning style concerns sensory preferences. These are the perceptual

modes or learning channels through which students take in information. They include auditory, visual, tactile, and kinesthetic.

As we have seen, there is some confusion in the learning-style literature with regard to modalities. First, the words tactile and kinesthetic are often used interchangeably. However, according to Kate Kinsella (apud Reid, 1995, p. 172) **tactile** suggests learning with one’s hands through manipulation of resources, such as writing, drawing, building a model, or conducting a lab experiment. **Kinesthetic** implies total physical involvement with a learning environment such as taking a field trip, dramatizing, or interviewing.

The auditory and visual modalities are also frequently referred to in an oversimplified manner, but there are important distinctions within each sensory category. Some students with a strong **auditory** orientation process information most efficiently through listening to instruction via lectures, tapes, or films; others may additionally require opportunities to process information aloud themselves through small-group activities, class discussions, and individualized conferences or tutorial sessions.

Visual students prefer to learn via the visual channel. Therefore, they like to read a lot, what requires concentration and time spent alone. Visual students need the visual stimulation of bulletin boards, videos, and movies. They must have written directions if they are to function well in classroom. Some visual learners absorb information most effectively by silent reading; others may be overwhelmed by extensive printed material and require a less verbal/visual presentation of information through media such as pictures, graphs, charts, and diagrams.

In accordance to Reid, the visual sense is the most popular in North American culture and in many other cultures also. In hundreds of informal style surveys involving language teachers and learners, she has discovered that 50-80 percent of the people in any group say they are visual learners or that the visual sense is a major part of their sensory preference (e.g., visual and tactile combination). She also points out that the proportion of visual students in groups of language teachers and learners appears to increase with age to some degree.

Indeed age seems to play a significant role in defining learning styles. We applied the Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire elaborated by Reid (1984) with a group of 112 students from the seventh and eighth grades of an elementary school, and with a group of 20 students from a language course, and our findings were quite surprising. We found that, among the elementary school students, only 23 percent of them were visual. These students ranged between thirteen and eighteen years old. However, the language course students, whose majority was older than thirty years did demonstrate a strongly visual preference - 61 percent of them were visual learners.

Among the elementary school students visual percentage does also increase with age (the eighth grade students presented a higher score). The results are summarized in tables 01 and 03 and in graphs 02 and 04 below.

Table 01 - Perceptual Learning Styles Scores - Elementary School Students

Visual	Auditory	Tactile	Kinesthetic	Class
30	5	3	16	Basic I
3	7	6	13	Basic III
Total of students				81
Visual	Auditory	Tactile	Kinesthetic	
Total of students				4
Total of students				3
Visual	Auditory	Tactile	Kinesthetic	
15	2	2	2	

Graph 02 - Perceptual Learning Styles Percentage - Elementary School Students

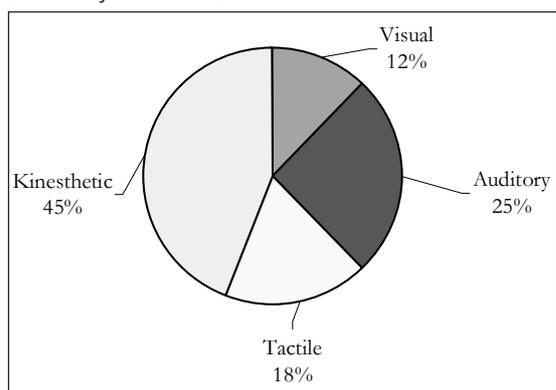
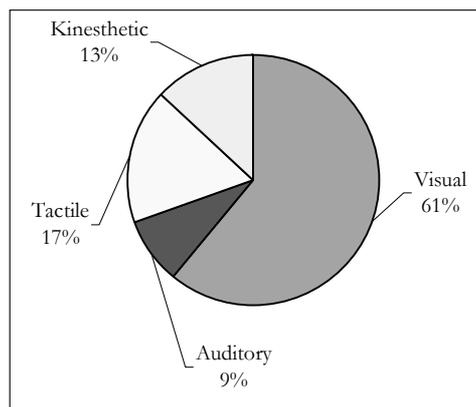


Table 03 - Perceptual Learning Styles Scores - Language Course Students

Graph 04 - Perceptual Learning Styles Percentage - Language Course Students



The highest percentage involving the kinesthetic style among the elementary students is consistent with the groups' behavior since kinesthetic learners are often described as restless. They require movement and frequent breaks in activity. These are the students who cannot sit still for longer than 20 minutes at a time. They like Total Physical Response activities, games, and role plays that let them get off their chairs and move around. Activities for kinesthetic students should involve some movement and some manipulation of objects. Audiolingual classes, in which they should sit down quietly and silently listen to the tape recordings, are not the best way to teach those types of students.

Another kind of activity that works well with haptic (kinesthetic/tactile) and visual learners is computer use. Fingers on the keyboard seem to have a different impact than pen/pencil on paper. Students who often do



not write anything in classroom surprisingly assume the control of the mouse and get completely involved with the exercises on the screen.

Graph 04 above shows the learning styles preferred by a group of 20 students from a language course which adopts the audiolingual method. That kind of student could be classified as visual-verbal since, during instruction, they always asked to see the words written. One of the learning principles of audiolingualism was the idea that

language skills are learned more effectively if the items to be learned in the target language are presented in spoken form before they are seen in written form. Aural-oral training is needed to provide the foundation for the development of other language skills. (Richard and Rodgers, 1986, p. 51)

Many theorists agree with that position. Nevertheless, researches have shown that

when lessons are presented visually as well as verbally, and reinforced through writing, drawing, or speaking activities, students are not only able to learn in the way best suited to their style, but also to develop a full and varied repertoire of modality strengths. The best instructional approach, then, regardless of subject matter or grade level, is a deliberate multisensory approach. (Kinsella in Reid, 1995, p. 175)

The students' preference for visual learning revealed in the results of the survey should be taken into account if we want those students to really improve their comprehension of and performance in the target language.

It is widely known that the problem does not lie on a certain method, once each of them has pros and cons. The problem is on the insistence of employing only one type of practice. A point no educational psychologist would dispute then is that students learn more when information is presented in a variety of modes than when only a single mode is used. The point is supported by a research study carried out several decades ago, which concluded that students retain 10 percent of what they read, 26 percent of what they hear, 30

percent of what they see, 50 percent of what they see and hear, 70 percent of what they say, and 90 percent of what they say as they do something (Stice 1987 apud Felder and Henriques, 1995).

Although it can be helpful for an instructor to know the distribution of learning styles in a class, the point is not to place all students into one or another style category and to teach each student exclusively according to his or her preferred style. Even if this formidable goal could be achieved, it would not be desirable, for students should be encouraged to diversify their styles preferences. Rather, the goal is to achieve a balanced teaching style, in all classes at all levels. Our hypothesis is that instruction that seeks to address both poles of each of the five given dimensions should come close to providing an optimal learning environment for most (if not all) students in a class.

IMPROVING AUDIOLINGUAL

A glance at a book like *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* (1986), by Jack Richards and Theodore Rogers, will be sufficient to show that there is no scholarly consensus concerning the best methods of teaching a language to non-natives. Because there is no unanimity as such concerning the nature of language, or the question of how knowledge of a foreign language is actually acquired, or the question whether the best model for a language learner to follow is whatever is possessed by a native speaker of that language, teachers generally do what they like in the language classroom.

Controversy still abounds. While a majority of applied linguists might agree that habit formation is a theoretically unacceptable explanation for language acquisition, many still feel that audiolingual teaching may help some students acquire a second language.

In constructing a new language and cultural studies course for first year ex-high school students of French at the University of Western Australia, Rosemary Lancaster (Lancaster and Philogene, 1999) found herself



wondering whether to abandon audiolingual classes in favor of computer-centered ones. At the same time she said she was loath to omit from the course the obvious value of helping students to listen well. She finally decided to offer both on alternate weeks, and to evaluate the students' progress and reactions.

Nevertheless it was clear that the audiolingual program would have to be reinvented if it was to integrate appropriately with the rest of the course's structure and aims. She did not completely abandon traditional audiolingual strategies - situation-based dialogues, drills and expansion activities. In her opinion, the role of repetition and practice of structures is still important in the communicative style and these were specifically tailored to aspects of the weekly language program. Rather, the aim was to reformat the format by enriching it with up-to-date and varied materials and pertinent cultural content and by incorporating into the classroom more opportunities for participatory activities and interactive exchange. The goal was to be as holistic as possible in the spatial confines of the laboratory, to ensure improved listening with the support of appropriate mental, physical and visual stimuli.

What Lancaster did in her language program represents our primary idea in this paper. The use of the audiolingual method as it was first designed did not deliver what it had promised: bilingual speakers at the end of instruction. It needs a new format. Though its emphasis on aural-oral training is of remarkable relevance, there are many aspects that should be paid attention to in order to enhance listening comprehension.

Second Language Listening Comprehension

Not only do adult and child learners have differences in the way they approach acquiring a second language but also each person has different learning styles that make him/her unique. Our goal here is to verify which learning styles are favored by the audiolingual method and cite some researches that could improve it.

One of the first problems to be corrected was the insistence audiolingualism put on the development of oral skills with no use of printed materials. The two reasons for this principle were that children learn the oral skills without reference to written material (this was a result of direct analogies between first and second language learning), and the written code of the native language would supposedly cause interference in learning the target language, resulting in the transfer of native language habits of pronunciation into the target language. Researches on this topic, however, have shown that interference does not play a major role on second language learning. At least for adult learners, the mother tongue can be a facilitating factor.

In addition, many had experienced the total dependence on the written word of the grammar-based methods which preceded audiolingualism. Most felt strongly that this dependence had to be broken.

In all three cases, the observations were accurate: children do not use the printed word or initial language acquisition, the transfer of pronunciation features from the native language may occur when the student sees the printed word in the target language, and students in grammar-based approaches generally became completely reading-dependent. However, the cure, which was to present all material, both dialogues and drills, without permitting students to see how the sounds were written, was a disaster.

It normally took three or four times as long to teach the material without the aid of orthography. Students invented their own systems of writing to record what they were to memorize and the entire experience was frustrating for both students and teachers. In addition, once the students finally were allowed to see what they had been learning written, transfer of the pronunciation errors might occur in any case. Certainly an improvement in pronunciation did not compensate for the problems created by denying access to the printed word.

Our experience in an audiolingual classroom, and lately our survey with the students, revealed a serious mismatch between their learning styles and the procedures used



in the method. The interdiction of use of printed material was clearly one of the main factors which affected their comprehension. Most of them complained that speech was too fast, and asked to see the words written on the board. One group, during instruction, made notes of what they listened to - a practice the pedagogical coordinator prohibited. But such prohibition discouraged the students, and about fifty percent gave up. Undoubtedly, other aspects added to this difficulty: educational background, for instance, played an important role. The students who were graduated or were in college performed better than those who had only an elementary or high school certificate.

Another potential drawback of audiolingualism, and related to the interdiction of use of written material in the presentation of language, is that the audiolingual method does not take into account the variety of learning styles. Indeed, the method does not consider those students who are visual-verbal, the ones who learn better when seeing the language presented in written form. Neither does it account for the kinesthetic and tactile learners. As we can see, much of the criticism of audiolingualism came from the recognition of the very limited options available to learners in audiolingual methodology. Learners were seen as stimulus-response mechanisms whose learning was a direct product of repetitive practice.

Reading and Listening

Despite the widespread implementation of the communicative approach to secondary language learning since the 1970s, listening is a skill that has not enjoyed as much special attention as have spoken skills. Added to this is the fact that listening is in itself a difficult skill to acquire, although it accounts for half the time we spend using a language.

While the communicative method recognizes the importance of modern forms of message transmission to the extent that computer, film and video exercises are now common media teaching tools, it is worth remembering that students habitually find the radio and the telephone uncomfortably

daunting to use. Sheer listening, unaided by visual supports, is, it seems, hard to master on the language learning scale.

E. Dale (1969 apud Felder and Henriques, 1995) argues that most people extract and retain more information from visual presentations than from written or spoken prose, while most language instruction is verbal, involving predominantly lectures, writing in texts and on chalkboards, and audio tapes in language laboratories. Given the preference of most students for visual input, one would expect the last of these modes of presentation in particular to be unpopular, an expectation born out in research cited by Moody (1988). When community college students were asked to rank-order 13 instructional modes, including lectures, discussion, slides, field trips, and audiotapes, audiotapes ranked at or near the bottom for the overwhelming majority of students surveyed.

Yet we know that good listeners make good speakers; that comprehending what is said prompts us to respond in a meaningful way. Any comprehensive communicative course wishes to improve learners' listening abilities; indeed, pioneer listening theorists such as James Asher, Tony Lynch and Douglas H. Brown (cited in Lancaster and Philogene, 1999) have gone so far as to claim it is the foundation skill on which the other macro-skills can be acquired.

When audiolingual methodologies became popular in the early 1960s, many second language programs and materials began to place primary emphasis on the development of speaking skills, a reversal of the trend in the grammar-translation era that emphasized reading as the primary goal of language study. Classrooms full of students could be heard performing their oral drills, but it was not uncommon for students to orally practice phrases they did not even understand.

In the years that followed, oral communication continued to receive high priority in many second language classrooms. The vast majority of programs today still consider speaking proficiency one of the most important instructional goals for second language learners to attain.

As a result of this emphasis on speaking skills, the teaching of listening and reading

comprehension had been somewhat superficially treated. Nevertheless, attitudes about the importance of the receptive skills in language acquisition have been changing, and comprehension-based approaches, such as The Natural Approach and Total Physical Response, have generated quite a bit of interest among practitioners.

Stephen Krashen's views about the need for comprehensible input in language acquisition have sparked interest in these comprehension-based methodologies. Krashen maintains that input that is comprehended is the primary source of acquisition of the grammar and vocabulary of the target language and that learners will begin to produce the language naturally when they have had enough of this type of exposure.

Through reception, we internalize linguistic information without which we could not produce language. In classrooms, students always do more listening than speaking. Listening competence is universally larger than speaking competence. (Brown, 1994, p. 233)

Wilga Rivers (1981 apud Omaggio, 1986) has pointed out the importance of developing listening skills and reading skills, citing research studies that show that adults spend 40 to 50 percent of their time listening and 11 to 16 percent of their time reading. When nearly three-fifths of all communicative interaction involves comprehension skills, it seems that a rationale exists for teaching them more actively and systematically.

According to Omaggio (1986, p. 121), comprehension, both in listening and in reading, is an active process involving at least three interrelated factors: (1) the individual's knowledge of the linguistic code, (2) cognitive skills of various types, and (3) the individual's knowledge of the world. Although the goals and some of the global processes in listening and reading comprehension are often similar, the nature of the input (speech or writing) and the way in which that input is processed are quite different. The way in which the communication is organized in spoken language differs from the organization of written language: whereas spoken language

moves along a time axis, written language provides in its typography an idea of its organization and overall duration. In this sense, aural comprehension may be more difficult than reading. (Stevick, 1984 apud Omaggio, 1986).

The accessibility of the message also differs in reading and listening. The reader can look back at what was read before and can also look ahead to get an idea of what is coming. The listener, however, cannot do the same thing, and any inattention to what is being said at the moment may easily cause him or her to lose an important part of the message, or maybe even all of it. Researchers (Cauldwell:1996 cited in Brown, s/d) say that L2 learners consistently report that listening comprehension is more difficult than reading, and some of the reasons for this are outlined below.

The processes of L2 listening and listening comprehension

Theorists have made distinctions between two types of listening processing. This may explain why students find that searching for meaning in what is being heard while it is being heard is hard. Basically, says Shannon Johnston (1997 apud Lancaster and Philogene, 1999), the problem stems from the fact that two types of mental processing, "bottom-up" and "top-down", need to complement one another if effective listening is to proceed.

"Bottom-up" refers to the way we naturally segment the spoken stream of language as it is being received, discerning within it in an on-line way phonetic and lexical features, morphological and syntactic structures, and divisions into word, phrase, clause and sentence boundaries. Yet such processing, complex but habitual in native speakers, is characteristically insufficient in itself for second language learners to comprehend adequately. Vocabulary gaps and unfamiliarity with the foreign language's structural features can impede effective reception, as can the speed and the syntactic incoherences that typify normal speech flow. Chunks of texts can be missed and fatigue and frustration can ensue. What is needed to aid



comprehension is “top-down” or global processing.

In the “top-down” process listeners understand by seeking intent, using expectations, predicting and inferring meaning. So, such fundamentals as having prior knowledge or experience of the subject in hand, recognizing the cultural context, being prepared for what is to be said, being physically involved (in a two-way or group conversation for example, or by using visual apprehension to support the auditory) come into play. Brown (1994, p. 246) characterizes the different listening techniques in this way:

Bottom-up techniques typically focus on sounds, words, intonation, grammatical structures, and other components of spoken language. Top-down techniques are more concerned with the activation of schemata, with deriving meaning, with global understanding, and with the interpretation of a text.

One important issue is whether, while processing input, listeners are using and focusing on the linguistic forms of the message, the words and grammar, or using world knowledge and focusing on the meanings in the text. This is the ‘bottom-up’ versus ‘top-down debate’. Van Patten addressed this and found that when learners paid attention to the linguistic forms, this process interfered with their comprehension of the content. He concludes that there is

evidence that conscious attention to form in the input competes with conscious attention to meaning, and, by extension, that only when input is easily understood can learners attend to form as part of the intake process. (1990, p. 296 cited in Brown, s/d)

There is a study (Vandergrift: 1996 cited in Brown, s/d) about the different listening strategies used by learners at different levels. Beginners relied mainly on semantic clues, cognates, and tone of voice, together with cognitive strategies, such as elaboration and inferencing. Intermediate listeners used more metacognitive strategies, but were mostly reliant on similar cognitive strategies, although they were able to process larger amounts of text.

The main characteristic of successful listeners was the use of more metacognitive strategies.

Speech rate and L2 listening comprehension

When working with listening activities, a number of special characteristics of spoken language need to be taken into consideration. Second language learners need to pay special attention to such factors because they highly influence the processing of speech and can often block comprehension if they are not attended to. In other words, they can make the listening process difficult. Brown (1994, p. 238) cites a list of eight characteristics of spoken language, which he has adapted from several sources. They are (1) clustering, (2) redundancy, (3) reduced forms, (4) performance variables, (5) colloquial language, (6) rate of delivery, (7) stress, rhythm, and intonation, and (8) interaction.

Among those characteristics rate of delivery is the one learners of English most complain about. They often remark that one of the main obstacles to comprehension is that speech is too fast. Students often have difficulty recognizing word boundaries in the spoken language, especially if they are not familiar with some of the words. Listening to and reading the text at the same time could at least help students distinguish known from unknown.

Video texts and L2 listening comprehension

Considering the difficulties visual-verbal learners faced in the audiolingual classrooms and the fact that listening to a non-native speaker is not easy, we hypothesize that if the students could, previously or while instruction, see some words written, listening would be easier, and more comprehensible. Ausubel, in his criticism on the audiolingual method, argues that the written form of the language could be beneficial, and that students could be overwhelmed by language spoken in its natural speed. The studies we will present will serve as arguments for our hypothesis.



Research into the effects of video on L2 learning has investigated its relationship to listening comprehension, to the development of the reading, writing and speaking skills, and also to the learning of grammar and vocabulary. Studies that have been carried out with L2 learners seem to indicate that the use of visual support materials do enhance comprehension. Some studies (Mueller: 1980 cited in Brown, s/d) reveal that simple line drawings supported comprehension of recorded interviews, but that the usefulness of the visual aids declined in relation to increased language proficiency.

I. Balatova investigated the importance of the visual clues contained in video used with Grade 8 learners of French. Her findings again support the effectiveness of video in aiding comprehension, with significantly better scores by the video and sound groups when compared to those of the sound only group. She summarizes the research results as follows:

visual clues were informative and enhanced comprehension in general, but did not necessarily stimulate understanding of the text itself. Video was by far the more popular teaching tool when compared to audio, and unlike audio, it generated positive attitudes and confidence in understanding, even in the case of poor comprehension. (1994, p.520 cited in Brown, s/d)

In summary, it appears that video can have a positive and cumulative effect on the levels of comprehension attained with spoken texts. There is also evidence that the use of video for listening comprehension has a positive effect on SLA.

The effects of crosslanguage subtitled video on listening comprehension

Research into the effects of cross-language subtitling on second language learning involves using combinations of L1 and L2 in the audio and subtitles. W.E Lambert, I. Boehler and N. Sidoti (1981 cited in Brown, s/d) found that pupils who had received only one form of L2 input, either written or spoken, fared considerably less well on comprehension post-

tests than did those subjects who had received combinations of input. Least impact on comprehension came from the standard form of subtitling, as used by foreign films, where the audio track was in L2 and the subtitles in L1. They concluded that these have a negative effect by distracting viewers and preventing them from processing the L2 aural input. The most promising combination seemed to be reversed subtitling, where the soundtrack was in the L1 and the written subtitles in L2. There were however positive effects of L2 subtitling with L2 aural input as well. They suggested that this was due to subjects' dominant and automatic L1 language processing faculties addressing the more transient audio input, which in turn freed up more cognitive processing for the L2 subtitles. In addition, any smooth L1 interpretation of the audio channel should provide a wealth of contextual evidence which would facilitate more effective L2 reading.

Moreover, the bimodal input subjects also increased their scores significantly over time. The authors see the use of subtitles as "... especially promising devices for second or foreign language learning and for enhancing comprehension of verbal information" (1984, p.59).

These results suggest that when subtitles are made available to language learners with developed reading proficiency they will be exploited automatically, even if they are unnecessary for comprehension. They also suggest that there would be no need to train learners to exploit subtitles.

Likewise, Dutch speakers spent considerable time reading subtitles of a Dutch movie and the authors believe that this strategy was preferred "... because of efficiency in following and understanding the movie" and was due to "the more dominant processing of the visual modality" (1991, p.650). It appears that reading subtitles may be an automatic activity that occurs as the result of the cognitive priority of visual, rather than oral, input.

Roger Hawkins (1988, cited in Ellis, 1994) used the same study with British undergraduates of L2 French and found that reading combined with listening to texts, both using L2, produced the highest comprehension. Students often have



difficulty recognizing word boundaries in the spoken language, especially if they are not familiar with some of the words. Listening to and reading the text at the same time can at least help students distinguish known from unknown. (Danan 1992, p.521 in Brown, s/d).

The results also showed benefits for beginners using such bimodal input. M. Danan explains the success of reversed subtitling for vocabulary recall through the way in which translation facilitates foreign language encoding and that it may help with the segmentation problems described above (Cutler 1997^a in Brown, s/d) as follows:

Although gains in comprehension have been achieved with combinations of L1 and L2 written and aural input, current second language communicative teaching pedagogy holds that increasing learners' reliance on their L1 through use of translation, while learning L2, is likely to be counter-productive. Such a reliance on L1 will ultimately inhibit implicit acquisition of L2.

The effects of L2 subtitled-video on listening comprehension

A group of studies focusing exclusively on L2 subtitles have looked at the effects on comprehension, language recall and retention. G. Price (1983 in <http://pers-www.wlv.ac.uk/~le1969/3.htm>) found that the use of subtitled-video with five hundred students from twenty different language backgrounds significantly improved performance on comprehension tests, even with only one viewing of the video.

Subjects indicated they found that subtitles were useful and beneficial. So, like N. E. Holobow (1984 in Brown; s/d), there is an indication that subtitles are of benefit to comprehension for those who already have a certain level of L2 knowledge and skills. Although acknowledging the need for further research, he dismisses the implication that learners are in fact merely reading while watching a video. That the use of the reading skill affords better comprehension than the listening skill is accepted by L2 researchers (e.g. Lund 1991). Robert N. Vanderplank, however, believes that learners were doing more than

reading and that they were matching the sounds with the text and comparing their match for correctness. He sees additional benefits for subtitles in promoting a low "affective filter" (Krashen, 1982) and for unlocking accents and dialects. R. J. Lund (1991, p. 202 apud Chela-Flores, 1993) goes even further to suggest listening after reading. He says that listening after reading helps learners recognize acoustically what they can already comprehend in print and instills satisfaction and confidence in listening.

P. L. Markham investigated the effects of captioned TV upon the listening comprehension of beginner, intermediate, and advanced learners of English. He used two subtitled-videos on topics which were not known to the learners. Each of the three groups viewed one with subtitles and the other without. He measured comprehension with multiple choice questions which were written using the language of the video. All three groups using the subtitles performed significantly better. He speculates that "ESL students might be able to improve their listening and reading comprehension simultaneously." (1989, p.40 in Brown, s/d)

In a study aimed at discovering how subtitles were assisting comprehension, Vanderplank (1990) investigated how EFL learners exploited uni-lingual, subtitled, television programs originally intended for the deaf. He showed groups of learners a variety of subtitled-television programs lasting 30 minutes or more and set a variety of tasks to be completed after watching. His findings were that learners' attention was drawn to new words and phrases, dialects and accents were made more accessible, complex information and humor were understood, learners were able to compare their own lexical and grammatical knowledge with that of authentic TV, and subjects were able to adapt and make use of the language for their own purposes.

Such benefits provide strong arguments for the use of subtitles in language learning. Vanderplank assigns a crucial role in obtaining the outcomes listed above to "... the degree of conscious attention paid to the language used in the programs" (1990, p.226) and concludes "... where there is a "willingness to receive" and

attention given by learners to programs as language learning resources, sub-titled television programs can be a valuable source of comprehensible input" (1990, p.230 in Brown, s/d)

It is specially difficult to comprehend the words and remember them only by listening. The post-use interview results also showed that the subtitles group recalled more, and used more of the original language from the video in their accounts of what they had viewed. Subtitles, then, had increased comprehension and had seemingly made the language more memorable. Thomas Garza saw five ways in which subtitles enhance language learning. These were: i) the use of the usually better developed reading skills to strengthen and develop aural comprehension, ii) making the authentic language more accessible and enjoyable, iii) allowing learners to use multiple language processing strategies, iv) increasing the memorability of the language, and v) promoting the use of this new language. He concludes that subtitles help to "... bridge the gap between the development of skills in reading comprehension and listening comprehension" (1991, p.246 in <http://pers-www.wlv.ac.uk/~le1969/3.htm>).

H. G. Guillory (1998, p. 104 in Brown, s/d) concluded that full subtitles may be detrimental in that "full text second language captions to authentic video encourage the learner to read the text, to the detriment of processing the linguistic message" and that the use of keyword captions may assist listening comprehension more than full subtitles. Text tracks or subtitles could also be hidden or revealed in order to support the series of listening and speaking exercises.

The research reported above is consensual on the positive effects of subtitles as to: comprehension, recall of vocabulary and ideas, reuse of the language from input, and attitudes. Researchers seem to agree that they might best be exploited with intermediate or higher proficiency learners. Explanations offered for these effects are: the primacy and automatic use of the visual channel, the more transient nature of aural input, the differential end effects of the processing of written or spoken texts, the interaction of the two types of input - each

complementing and supplementing the other, and the superior processing mechanisms invoked by exposure to both forms of input simultaneously. The weight of evidence suggests that inclusion of subtitles is going to assist comprehension, positively affect motivation, and may assist in the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar.

CONCLUSION

Though we cannot subtract from the audiolingual method the considerable merit of having a good deal of training in listening comprehension, considering that listening input, as many theorists argue, is the key to second language acquisition, the method does not fulfill what it promises: to develop in students the same abilities that native speakers have.

Because the method was antimentalistic, students were expected to be satisfied with parroting the lines given by the teacher, even if they did not immediately understand them. Since many students felt the need to know what they were learning and why, the disregard for meaningful learning in favor of rote learning caused considerable dissatisfaction, and even failure for some learners.

Even more important is the fact that Stimulus-Response approach does not account for the variety of learning styles in the language classroom, as some students learn better by seeing the language first or by learning grammatical rules deductively. These options were not provided within the audiolingual method.

According to our experience in an audiolingual classroom, backed with our readings and survey, we concluded that the method could be improved if we adapted the approach to suit the students' needs. Our hypothesis that the use of written material would facilitate listening comprehension was confirmed by the studies on the use of video and subtitles. The results of the researches showed increased comprehension. The availability of subtitles should help reduce processing load and would also provide access



to any linguistic features which have caused breakdowns in comprehension. Furthermore, the simultaneous availability of subtitles should help learners to deal with problems connected to fast speech.

The bimodal input would certainly appeal to a larger portion of learning styles, then enhancing comprehension. Besides, it would reduce the anxiety of having to memorize everything without the aid of printed or written material.

We focused our paper on the idea that seeing the words in the target language would facilitate the learning process, diminish students' frustration when they, even with great efforts, cannot understand nor repeat what they listen to, and that this would increase their comprehension. The audiolingual method still needs more improvements, but, as Jack Richards and Theodore Rogers say, there is no unanimity regarding the best method to teach a foreign language, our best choice is not to be so attached to only one kind of methodology.

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