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What Teachers Say About Listening and Its Pedagogy: A Comparison Between Two Countries

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Introduction

About two decades ago, listening was described as ‘the Cinderella skill in second language learning’ (Nunan 1997: 47), receiving little teaching or research attention compared with other language skills. Research carried out over the past 20 years or so has yet increased knowledge about the factors that contribute to successful listening comprehension in a second language (L2). However, we still know little regarding teachers’ beliefs about, and stated practices in, that skill, or about the extent to which these align with research-based perspectives on what might lead to more effective second language listening development.

In this chapter we explore teachers’ stated beliefs and practices about listening and its pedagogy drawing on questionnaire data from two different settings: we start by briefly outlining results we obtained in a study with 115

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A. Burns and J. Siegel (eds.), *International Perspectives on Teaching the Four Skills in ELT*,
International Perspectives on English Language Teaching,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-63444-9_2

foreign language teachers in England (reported in Graham et al. 2014), and we then comment in more detail on findings from a similar study with 40 Brazilian EFL teachers. Our main focus is to comment on the data from Brazil with the data from England being used for comparison. From these data we draw out implications teachers can consider for the teaching of listening.

We take a cross-national perspective in the exploration of listening for several reasons: first, to identify the commonalities between groups of language teachers in different parts of the world, and therefore to assess the extent to which research-based perspectives are being taken into account in different contexts. In addition, by looking at the differences across contexts we hope to gain a better understanding of the impact of local priorities and constraints in listening pedagogy. Differences may also help us identify gaps that should be addressed in particular contexts. Finally, these insights can potentially help us to devise globally relevant, yet simultaneously locally sensitive, recommendations for helping teachers to develop effective listening pedagogy. As we have argued elsewhere (Graham and Santos 2015: 4), understanding L2 teachers' beliefs and practices relating to listening is 'a necessary precursor to making suggestions for how to address any gaps in teachers' pedagogical understanding and practice; and offering practical activities for addressing those gaps'.

Teaching Listening: Findings from Research

Recent research into L2 listening and its pedagogy has focused on how the following three key areas impinge on successful listening: (1) the presence of and interplay between bottom-up and top-down processes; (2) the application of strategies—here defined as 'ways of listening that are planned and consciously adopted to improve comprehension and communication as well as cope with listening difficulties' (Goh 2014: 73) in listening performance, for example making and verifying predictions or listening out for key words; and (3) the use of metacognition (that is, thinking about thinking and learning). We provide a brief overview of each of these areas and their relationship next.

Successful listening involves skillful integration of bottom-up processes entailing attention to smaller components of what is heard (sounds, words, sentences) and top-down processes including activation and retrieval of prior knowledge about contextual features characterizing the listening event (its topic, genre, participants, register and so on). An important factor in this discussion is that neither top-down nor bottom-up approaches are inher-

ently good or bad, or better or worse than each other, which leads us to the conclusion that listening pedagogy should not focus solely on either aspect of listening. However, there will be occasions when listeners should be able to, for example, discriminate sounds or recognize specific words and they must be prepared for that. Similarly, although the potential benefits of top-down strategies are generally acknowledged, research has demonstrated that inflexible and random application of prior knowledge may hinder comprehension (Macaro et al. 2007); that occurs, for example, when listeners draw their conclusions based on expectations supported by world knowledge even when what they hear does not match such expectations. Thus, what seems to characterize successful listeners is their ability to apply top-down and bottom-up strategies depending on the listening demands. It remains unclear, though, what balance of top-down or bottom-up approaches teachers, in general, promote in their classes.

Likewise, little is known about teachers' beliefs and practices regarding learners' listening strategy development in spite of indications from research pointing to improved listening performance and increased confidence facilitated by instruction in the use of these strategies. While there has been variation in the extent to which interventions involving learners' strategy development have led conclusively to improved outcomes, greater success has come from studies that have involved a metacognitive and reflective component (e.g. Graham and Macaro 2008; Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari 2010).

Indeed, and moving on to the third area mentioned earlier in this section, the profiles of successful and unsuccessful listeners developed over the past 30 years or so (e.g. as summarized in Macaro et al. 2007) have consistently highlighted the role of metacognition as a distinguishing factor between the two groups, with the former tending to plan, monitor and evaluate their listening more effectively than the latter. There is also evidence that development of metacognitive awareness is possible through post-listening reflections and discussion, as shown in studies such as Goh and Taib (2006) with young EFL learners. Again, however, there is limited research on the extent to which teachers generally attribute importance to the development of metacognition in listening.

Altogether, the points raised so far highlight the importance of teaching listening as a *process* and not as product; in other words, learners should be encouraged not simply to listen and answer comprehension questions, but rather to understand what listening involves, to reflect on difficulties and contemplate solutions, to discuss the application of knowledge from particular listening experiences to future listening events.

Stated Beliefs and Practices About Listening in England: An Overview

In our investigations looking at high school L2 (French, German and Spanish) teachers' beliefs and practices in England (see Graham and Santos 2015; Graham et al. 2014), we found little attention to listening as a *process*. Instead, *listening effectively* in that context seemed to be associated with successful task completion rather than skill development, with an emphasis on *clarifying task demands*, justified by a need to ensure learners do *what is expected* and *find the right answer*. Post-listening procedures tended to emphasize checking the number of right answers and identifying how those results match the expected levels of attainment from the English National Curriculum.

While teachers in England seemed aware that learners might have problems with the bottom-up aspects of listening, they reported little attention to listening activities that might develop bottom-up skills in learners. In addition, we found little evidence of listening strategy development or metacognitive activities fostering learners' reflection about their listening. The emphasis on product rather than process seems to stem from the weight given to achievement levels and assessment in the English educational system. This conclusion made us wonder about the extent to which different priorities in different countries might contribute to shaping listening pedagogy. With that in mind, in the next section, we provide an overview of key priorities in the Brazilian educational system as a background for our discussion of what we found out about a group of Brazilian EFL teachers' views on listening.

Learning English in Brazil: The Place of Listening

The learning of a foreign language is mandatory in Brazilian schools in the final seven years of compulsory education (student age 11–17), and English is the predominant choice. In addition, English tuition is offered by a large number of language institutes as an extracurricular activity. Both private and state schools (but not language institutes) are expected to follow curriculum guidelines articulated in the Brazilian National Curricular Parameters (Brasil 1998, 2000).

Regarding listening development, at the time of writing there are no specific aims for different stages of learning, but the guidelines emphasize the overarching idea that listening practice must address the socio-interactional features of human encounters (who speaks, to whom, when, with what purpose, etc.). Recommendations for the operationalization of those priorities include: exposure to a wide variety of genres and accents; activation of prior knowledge (of the world, of the language learnt, of textual organization including turn-taking rules and speaking rights) prior to the listening; reflections about paralinguistic characteristics of the listening passage (e.g. what can be inferred by intonation or tone of voice), as well as extralinguistic features (e.g. who has the right to speak or take the turn).

Standardized tests of English at the end of compulsory education do not include listening assessment—their focus is on reading, as is the case in most university entrance exams. Although there are no wide-ranging statistics about Brazilians' proficiency in oral comprehension in English, a recent report by the British Council (2014) suggests that listening is perceived as an area of weakness by many Brazilians.

In order to explore Brazilian EFL teachers' views about listening, we asked a group of teachers to answer a questionnaire (slightly modified from our study in England) about their beliefs and practices regarding the teaching of the skill. Most of the teachers who responded were experienced teachers with nine or more years of teaching experience and most worked in just one educational setting. Overall they represented a wide variety of teaching contexts, including language institutes, private and state schools, universities, continuing education and private tuition. Thus, we believe we had access to a wide range of teachers' voices and were therefore able to identify patterns that may characterize the teaching of English more broadly in the country. In what follows we comment on the themes emerging from our questionnaire, in particular in response to an item in which we asked respondents to list the three or four of the most important procedures they usually followed when they asked their students to listen to an audio-recording in class, and to justify each procedure. Each of these themes will be discussed in light of the three key areas in listening research presented earlier in this chapter.

What Brazilian Teachers Say About How Listening is Taught

Interplay Between Top-down and Bottom-up Practices

When asked to outline frequent procedures in their teaching of listening, teachers tended to list procedures corresponding to the order of the pedagogical sequence adopted while teaching, as in the example below:

Procedure 1: We talk about the topic of the listening;

Justification 1: To familiarize students with the topic, and with some vocabulary.

Procedure 2: They listen to the recording;

Justification 2: To have a general idea of what the listening is about.

Procedure 3: They read the questions and then listen to the recording again;

Justification 3: To try to answer/complete blanks.

Procedure 4: They listen to the recording one more time;

Justification 4: To check their answers.

Procedure 1 and Justification 1 point to an emphasis on the topic of the listening passage in the early stages of a listening pedagogical sequence. Indeed, this initial *focus on context* (i.e. a top-down approach to listening) seems to characterize most of the responses. It finds resonance in another fairly frequent procedure that emerges, namely *focus on meaning*, which may reflect some of the Brazilian curriculum guidelines referred to earlier.

A focus on meaning can be identified in Justification 2 above ('general idea') and it is also articulated in other statements such as 'Listen once first just for understanding' or 'Make sure [the students] can understand the overall meaning'. This focus is also reflected in teachers' comments about playing the audio-recording once with no interruptions (as in Procedure 2 above) or, conversely, in fairly frequent mentions of pausing or replaying the audio. The purpose of these pauses and/or replays seems to be to create opportunities for listeners to deal with 'the difficulty in understanding' or with 'answering the activities'.

Teachers thus seem to be moving from a top-down approach in early procedures to a bottom-up emphasis when they attempt to break the task down, a movement which Field (2008: 15–16) calls 'narrowing in'. Although teachers seem to be giving students opportunities to apply both top-down and bottom-up practices while listening, there is no evidence that

learners are being taught to judge independently what processes (i.e. either top-down or bottom-up or a combination of the two) are at stake in a particular task. It is thus unclear whether such guided teaching prepares them to trigger different processes autonomously in response to different listening demands in out-of-classroom listening.

Strategy Development

As we found in England, questionnaire responses in Brazil did not point to systematic work on learners' listening strategy development. Granted, prediction-making was sometimes mentioned as an important procedure to be followed in classroom listening tasks, such as predicting the topic of the passage, the specific vocabulary to be heard, or possible answers to the given comprehension questions. However, there was little evidence that teachers also asked learners to verify any predictions made, during or after the listening. On the rare occasions when prediction verification is mentioned by Brazilian teachers, the focus seems to be on mechanical checking rather than on metacognitive reflection which might also help learners to consider the potential benefits of predictions while listening. These two statements illustrate teachers' approaches respectively: 'Students discuss whether their predictions were right or wrong'; 'While listening to the recording, learners are requested to check their predictions'.

In other words, prediction-making appears to be reported as steps to be taken but not necessarily as ideas to be reflected upon by learners. A similar pattern occurs regarding preparation for vocabulary that learners might hear: a typical statement made by teachers is 'Revisit and/or pre-teach vocabulary before learners listen to the audio recording'. Arguably, teachers are describing the preselection of relevant vocabulary and the carrying out of some work around it: in that case, students would be guided to identify key vocabulary in a particular task without necessarily being taught how to distinguish for themselves what is relevant while listening.

The Role of Metacognition

Comments from our Brazilian teacher respondents indicated that they encouraged lower level rather than higher level (or metacognitive) practices as precursors to listening activities: those practices aimed at getting learners' ready for listening especially in connection with the activation of prior knowledge. As one teacher explained, 'If they activate their previous

knowledge, they will be able to recognize words or expressions while they are listening'.

As a whole, while there is no clear indication of encouragement of metacognitive practices prior to the listening by the Brazilian teachers we surveyed, some comments such as 'Teacher reads the instructions aloud and students discuss the questions in pairs' do open up possibilities for metacognitive development triggered by collaborative work. Indeed, we found frequent mentions of pair or group work that might lead to collaborative, metacognitive thinking about the ways learners listen. However, these mentions of collaboration seem to focus simply on checking, as in: 'Before discussion in plenary I ask students to check their answers in pairs'.

These are valid attempts to bring learners together in their listening experience, and to potentially create opportunities for sharing the challenges encountered when listening as well as for jointly considering ways of dealing with them. Nevertheless, such discussions need to consider 'how' learners listen (rather than just 'what they got right or wrong') if they are to help students develop metacognitive awareness about how they listen in English and about what they need to do in order to listen better.

We found little mention by teachers of discussions about the problems encountered while listening; a rare example is given below about listening to connected speech:

Once I had a group who couldn't understand that the customer at a restaurant was complaining about a hair in his soup simply because the speaker put all the words together like this: 'there was a hairinit'. At the end of the listening, students wondered what was this animal or insect called 'hairinit'.

We find this example insightful because it brings the learners' voices to the surface and reveals what might go on in their mind while listening: what they find challenging (the difficulty here seems to lie in speech segmentation), what they do not understand (and why not). However, for opportunities like this to be really meaningful and lead to learners' listening development, additional steps need to be taken: the teacher would need to help learners identify the cause of their difficulties and then offer strategies and practice opportunities to overcome them.

The teacher in this last example seems to be taking an initial step along what might be viewed as a continuum between a wholly product-focused approach to listening, and an approach firmly focused on process. When we analysed each Brazilian teacher's complete set of procedures and

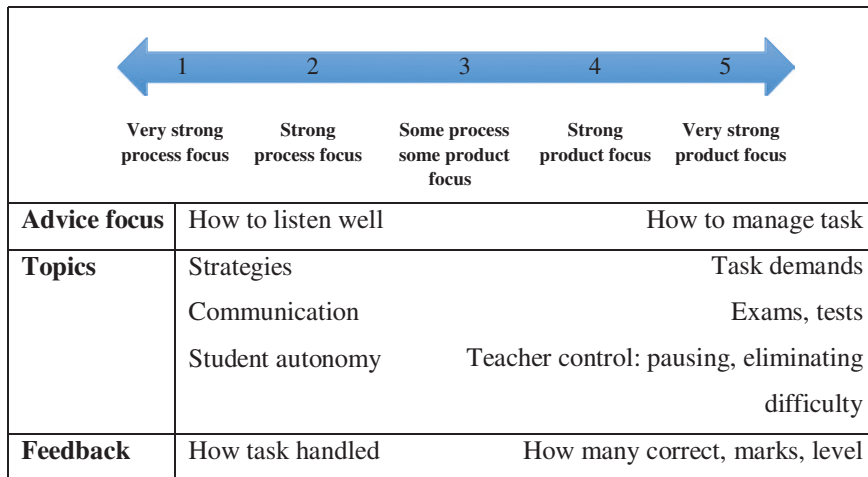


Fig. 2.1 Process vs. product focus in listening pedagogy (adapted from Graham et al. 2014)

justifications using a scale of 1–5, we found that most were firmly at the ‘strong focus on product’ end of the continuum (see Fig. 2.1).

This focus on product is seen in the following example (where *P* is *procedure* and *J*, *justification*):

- P1: Briefly talk about the topic of the listen (sic);

J1: To prepare the students for the listening exercise.
- P2: Present new vocabulary;

J2: Provide tools for the students to [do] the listening exercise.
- P3: Play the audio CD;

J3: Students listen to the audio CD.
- P4: Ask some comprehension questions;

J4: To check students’ comprehension.

A fair number of respondents, however, were further down the other end of the continuum, showing ‘some process, some product’ focus, as in this example:

P1: Warm up tell students about the main subject;
J1: To get them 'prepared' for the listening.

P2: Ask students to give their own opinions;
J2: To arouse interest and interaction in class.

P3: Ask students if they understood the purpose of the activity;
J3: Check understanding → vocab + grammars patterns.

In other words, while a focus on product predominates, some teachers may be at a point where, with further opportunities for professional development, they might be able to build on the beginnings of a process-oriented approach that we see in some responses.

Summary: Convergences and Dissonances Across Contexts

Overall, responses from England and Brazil both overlap and diverge. For most teachers in both countries the main purpose of carrying out listening activities in the classroom was to teach learners how to listen more effectively, but the two groups of teachers seem to conceptualize *listening effectively* in different ways.

In our data from England, *listening effectively* seemed to be interpreted in classroom practice as *answering comprehension questions correctly*. In the Brazil data there is no such emphasis; instead we detect a focus on *comprehension* or *understanding* (albeit vaguely defined) orchestrated around a movement from top-down to bottom-up practices which is absent in the data from England. Typical pedagogical practices in the two settings can be summarized thus (Table 2.1).

These sequences do not suggest systematic attention to the development of listening strategies or to metacognition about listening. In the Brazil data, pedagogical sequences may indicate some attention to strategy development (e.g. by focusing on predictions; by fostering post-listening collaboration) but there is no clear evidence that these steps have the longer term goal of fostering learners' autonomy as L2 listeners. Pre-listening activities (typically involving the activation of prior knowledge) mostly focus on the immediacy of the task at hand and there is no mention of discussions about why predictions are important or how listeners can make the most of them. Moreover, on the rare occasions when verification of predications is reported, it is

Table 2.1 Typical pedagogical sequences in Brazil and in England

Brazil	England
1. Teacher guides students' activation of prior knowledge about the topic	1. Teacher checks students' understanding of task
2. Teacher revises or pre-teaches relevant vocabulary	2. Teacher plays audio
3. Teacher plays audio and students listen for general idea	3. Teacher checks how many answers have been completed
4. Teacher plays audio again and students listen for details	4. Teacher plays audio again
5. Students check answers in pairs or groups	5. Students swap answer sheets
	6. Teacher asks for answers and students respond
	7. Teacher checks how many correct responses each learner has

unclear whether the procedure is restricted to checking the accuracy of the predictions or whether it is accompanied by metacognitive awareness-raising about the role of prediction-making, monitoring and verification throughout a listening event.

The same comment applies to post-listening procedures involving student collaboration in the Brazil data: students are being asked to collaborate quite frequently, but such collaborative work appears to be aimed more often at checking answers than at discussing how they got to those answers, how they dealt with difficulties, what *listening lessons* they have learnt for the future. Arguably, the lack of emphasis on such lifelong skills in Brazilian education policy (at least regarding listening development) might explain these omissions. In a sense, such 'pseudo-collaborative' practices mirror the teacher-centred checking done in England; moreover, they illustrate quite well a point made by Cazden (1988: 124) regarding that fact that socializing the 'seating' does not necessarily lead to socializing the learning.

To summarize, there are differences characterizing teachers' beliefs about listening in Brazil and in England and these differences may be partly due to local demands, especially regarding priorities in their respective educational policies. There are, however, striking similarities across the two countries: in both, while resorting to a wide repertoire of procedures in their listening lessons, teachers seem to approach listening as a product placing an emphasis on listening comprehension involving an immediate task. Any evidence of work on listening aiming at the development of listening skills that may help learners not only in the *here and now* of a task but also in future listening events (i.e. on *teaching listening*), is rare (although occurring more in the Brazil than the England data). When listening strategies are mentioned in both contexts they tend to be tackled as procedures to be followed, illustrating what Oxford

(2011: 181) describes as ‘blind/covert strategy instruction’; that is, strategies are part of the teaching ‘but are not explicitly or overtly mentioned’; nor are they discussed or reflected upon as part of learners’ awareness about listening.

In the next section, we discuss the implications of the points discussed so far, outlining practical recommendations for L2 listening pedagogy. These are relevant for contexts beyond Brazil and England; it is likely that the curriculum expectations and challenges faced by teachers in these countries will be mirrored elsewhere.

Implications for L2 Listening Practice

For each of the key areas below, we outline some suggestions that teachers may wish to consider in light of their respective contexts.

Analysis of Local Demands

Local demands in the form of educational policies, assessment and students’ needs, *inter alia*, are likely to have an impact on how listening is taught. However, those demands are also likely to create tensions (e.g. a focus on exams may lead to *teaching for the exam*; lack of exams may lead to inconsistent performance). Ideally, teachers should raise their awareness of which aspects of listening development such local demands neglect and try to make up for them. Questions that might guide these reflections include: Do local demands focus on listening as a product (i.e. is there an emphasis on exams, results, tasks) or as a process (i.e. is there a focus on learning ‘how’ to listen)? What is typically done in response to the local demands and what is achieved from these practices in the short and long terms? And what is *not* achieved?

Participation in Global Conversations

Teachers might learn to think outside the box in respect to listening by exchanging ideas with colleagues worldwide: chances are these colleagues will face similar challenges yet have come up with creative and successful ways of dealing with them. Global conversations might also help identify local, innovative approaches to teaching that might be adopted in one’s own context. There are many ways of participating in these professional

conversations, including participation in conferences, webinars, online forums, social media, etc.

Teacher Awareness-Raising About Beliefs and Practices

Teachers can write down and reflect on the procedures they usually follow when carrying out listening activities and justify those procedures. Procedures and justifications can be interpreted against the process–product continuum we outlined earlier. Questions to be asked during this activity might include: Do I tend to prioritize task completion or listening development? Do I tend to focus on the here and now of a listening task or am I contributing to the development of autonomous listeners? Am I more concerned with ‘what’ my students answered or with ‘how’ they have listened?

Materials Evaluation (and Adaptation)

Teachers can ask themselves: What listening skills and knowledge does this activity presuppose and/or develop? What skills and knowledge does it neglect? What do I want to teach my students? The answers to those questions should orient any materials adaptation needed (see also Graham and Santos 2015; McAuliffe and Brooks, this volume).

Continuing Professional Development

Teachers’ responses in both contexts we researched indicated that most had received relatively little pre- or in-service training in how to teach listening (see Tante, this volume, for a discussion of continuing professional development related to speaking skills). Our findings suggest that such development would be of benefit to teachers particularly regarding the role of strategy development and metacognition in listening pedagogy (for more details and practical suggestions see Graham and Santos 2015; Vandergrift and Goh 2012, respectively).

Conclusion

We believe this chapter provides important insights into the role of contextual factors in how listening is conceptualized by teachers and how listening pedagogy is realized in classrooms, but also illustrates a high degree of commonality across contexts. Such insights contribute to the task of finding ways of helping teachers to become more confident and proficient in developing the listening skills of their learners.

Questions for Reflection

1. In this chapter we reported some procedures teachers claimed to follow when teaching listening as well as how they justified those procedures. How have you reacted to these procedures and justifications? To what extent do they relate to your own procedures and rationales?
2. Where do you situate your own beliefs and practices regarding listening on the process versus product continuum presented in the chapter? If you had to choose one aspect of this chapter that made you stop and rethink your beliefs and practices about listening, what aspect would that be and why?
3. What is the role of strategies in the way you teach listening? To what extent do you think you help develop learners who are 'strategic listeners'?
4. To what extent do you feel that the curriculum and assessment frameworks in which you teach influence your beliefs and practices regarding listening? How might you work around any negative influences such frameworks might have on how you teach listening?

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International Perspectives on Teaching the Four Skills
in ELT

Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing

Burns, A.; Siegel, J. (Eds.)

2018, XIV, 260 p. 12 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-63443-2