

Paths to Competence in Listening Comprehension¹

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Abstract

We present two paths to increasing listening comprehension ability, one in-class and other in the country where the language is spoken. In both cases, we predict that those with higher reading ability in the second language will progress faster.

Consider the case of an adult second language acquirer with high competence in reading comprehension, but with substantially lower competence in listening comprehension. Such cases are typical of many users of English as a foreign language who have done a great deal of reading but do not live in an English-speaking environment. They have large vocabularies, and have acquired a great deal of grammar, but have difficulty understanding spoken input. This is because they lack competence in phonological aspects of the spoken language, which is made more challenging because speakers often “modify, drop, and add sounds” (Renandya and Farrell, 2011, p. 53). Spoken language also includes intonation and, in some languages, tones, and even a large percentage of the language used in classrooms by university lecturers is “conversational” (Biber, 2006).

There are two possible paths for improving listening competence for those in this situation. Either path, it is hypothesized, will work. Both assume that acquirers’ previous English competence gained through reading can help make aural input comprehensible, resulting in rapid improvement in listening.

Path A: Provide aural comprehensible input as part of a language teaching program.

Such a program could follow the stages described by the conduit hypothesis (Krashen, 2018).

Stage 1: stories, made comprehensible with the use of visual context (e.g., drawings, as in Mason and Krashen, 2004; Mason, Vanata, Jander, Borsch and Krashen, 2009) and occasional translations. Mason and colleagues have provided consistent evidence supporting the effectiveness and efficiency of this approach. As students become more advanced, include read-alouds, made

comprehensible through pictures, discussion and translation (Elley, 1989, Lee, Lee, and Krashen, 2014, provide supporting evidence).

Stage 2: comprehensible recreational listening, in the form of interesting films, videos, and audiobooks (see Dressman, Lee, and Sabaoui, 2016, on the use of youtube videos).

Stage 3: academic listening, in the form of lectures and academic discussion on topics of personal interest.

Path B: Go to the country where the language is spoken and where aural comprehensible input is plentiful. Many acquirers of English as a second or foreign language, especially those with financial means to study in an English-speaking country, can forgo most of Path A, and then take Path B when convenient.

Path A never tried, Path B rarely studied.

According to our experience, extensive and detailed versions of Path A have not been set up or evaluated (see Renandya and Farrell, 2011, for suggested resources). The bulk of L2 listening research has not dealt with the effects of providing extensive aural input, but has instead focused on explanation and training on cognitive and metalinguistic strategies such as prediction (“what do you think is going to happen next?”), comprehension monitoring, and summarizing. Renandya (2012) has pointed out that research on the efficacy of teaching such

strategies is weak, and that positive correlations between strategy competence and language competence may be the result of higher proficiency resulting in the natural emergence of strategies, rather than strategy use leading to increased proficiency.

Preparation for Path B might include strategy instruction, but of a kind much different from the strategies typically taught to beginning students in classes. We refer here to strategies for finding comprehensible input in the real world and for making “authentic” input more comprehensible. Such strategies, in contrast to those discussed earlier, do not require extensive training. In fact, often they need only be mentioned. They include finding a particularly friendly and comprehensible language “parent” (Krashen, 2012) and taking advantage of background knowledge through the use of the first language (e.g., first reading about current events in the first language and then following stories in local TV and radio in the second language).

Path B usually happens accidentally, and its impact on listening comprehension, while informally acknowledged, has not been fully appreciated by the field of language education (but see Moyer, 2006). Nor has the potential contribution of competence in reading comprehension to listening comprehension been seriously considered.

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