

Listening Strategy Instruction in a Higher French Class

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Abstract: Listening is recognised as the most difficult of the four skills to be mastered when acquiring a second or foreign language. These difficulties are particularly acute for learners of English or French, which are not phonetic languages. Pupils making the transition from Standard Grade to Higher French also find it difficult to cope with having to listen to an extended conversation in French for the first time, to which several questions are attached. This project investigated and attempted to address the problems encountered by pupils. Over the short period of the project, and working with a small group of only nine pupils, there was moderate improvement in listening ability and strategy use. Using a Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ) and learning logs allowed the class teacher to gain insights into how pupils approach listening and the barriers to listening faced, and facilitated formative feedback of a high quality. Although pupils generally did not report greater levels of confidence about listening, there is qualitative evidence to indicate that they do not attribute success in listening to external or arbitrary factors, believing that they can and will improve over time. The findings of the research project are sufficient to lead to the conclusion that the work carried out had an impact.

Keywords: Scotland, Higher French, listening, strategy instruction

Introduction

The mean mark for Paper 2: Listening and Writing, at just over half marks, indicates that Listening is still the skill most candidates find most difficult, as there was overall a satisfactory performance in the Writing element in Paper 2 (SQA 2011, External Assessment Report, Higher French)

Research has found that listening is the skill which learners report feeling most anxious about (Graham, 2006), and but it is also the skill which is least likely to be taught by the teacher. A great deal of recent research has focused on the impact of strategy instruction on listening attainment. Graham and Macaro (2008: 750) refer to a recent trend for “increased emphasis on the importance of a controlled orchestration of a cluster of strategies”, and assert that “strategies are all part of a balanced set of tools at the disposal of the listener (ibid: 770).” Vandergrift et al (2006) developed a Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ) as a diagnostic tool for strategy use because they believed that if a class “is underusing a particular strategy or set of strategies (such as planning strategies), instruction can be adjusted to place greater emphasis on predicting and/or goal setting before beginning a listening task (ibid: 453).” However, “instruction in individual strategies may not necessarily lead to overall listening improvement” (Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari, 2010: 472)

Many language students experience barriers to listening comprehension based on bottom-up processing difficulties, e.g. difficulty in identifying sounds or word boundaries in continuous

speech, or lack of awareness of how graphemes correspond to phonemes. Pupils often claim that they cannot find words in the dictionary, as they cannot work out how to spell the words; thus, any programme of listening instruction also needs to include an element of sound discrimination, as acknowledged by researchers such as Graham and Macaro.

Literature Review

It is now commonly accepted that a combination of both top-down and bottom-up processes are required for listening comprehension and that “their respective contribution to effective listening is still not clearly understood” (Graham, 2006: 166).

The bottom-up view of listening comprehension is based on the assumption that language is first decoded into phonemes and words, then syntactic processing occurs, followed by analysis of semantic content. Top-down processing occurs when knowledge of the topic, of the world, and of features of listening texts is combined with knowledge of the language (Buck, 2001).

Buck believes that the main disadvantage of bottom-up processing is the heavy focus on word-for-word decoding, leading to insufficient time to process meaning before the text moves on. The top-down processing ability is important because there needs to be understanding of the context before sounds and words can be correctly and unambiguously identified (Flowerdew and Miller, 2005).

A number of authors (Graham,1997; Goh, 2000; Graham & Macaro,2008) highlight the fact that some listeners focus on words which are not key or content words, but simply the words they know, and may make inappropriate inferences. Graham and Macaro (2008) also suggest that successful listeners have a good knowledge of the language and can process much of the input automatically, only having to use top-down strategies to fill in the gaps.

However, it is estimated that a second language listener will have to understand 95% of the words in a text in order to understand more than just the gist. Goh (2000: 68) concluded that low ability listeners possibly had “a general lack of vocabulary or an underdeveloped listening vocabulary.”

Anxiety about listening, whether due to the fleeting nature of the output, the inability to control the speed, or to other factors, is another barrier to success. Mills et al. (2006: 283-4) concluded that “listening anxiety was significantly associated with the listening proficiency of all participants” and support “the adoption and investigation of teaching techniques that enhance students’ beliefs about their ability to succeed.”

Oxford (1990: 8) believes that “Metacognitive strategies help learners to regulate their own cognition and to focus, plan and evaluate their progress” and “affective strategies develop the self-confidence and perseverance needed for learners to involve themselves actively in language learning”. Formative assessment techniques which are widely and successfully implemented in secondary schools in Scotland today have a similar rationale.

Aims and Objectives

There were two main aims of the research project: (1) to ascertain if, over a short period of time, pupils showed improvement in listening tasks similar to the test in the final exam; (2) to evaluate if reported use of listening strategies went up over the same period, and to look for correlation between attainment and strategy use.

In addition, I wanted pupils to feel more confident about listening and to believe that they can improve through sustained practice in using a cluster of strategies, as well as by improving their vocabulary and sound discrimination ability.

Methodology

In preparation for the action research project, pupils improved their knowledge of rules governing pronunciation and liaison, using a Glow¹ Learn course containing sound files, word documents and links to websites. I drew up a list of high frequency words taken from Thornber (2006) and Higher French exam transcripts from 2000 to 2011, and pupils began to learn these words, practise them and were then tested on them. The research phase ran from August to October 2011 and began with the administration of the pre-test of listening and the MALQ, and finished with the post-test of listening and the MALQ again.

During the research period, strategies were introduced and practised and listening activities were done in class twice per week. Firstly, pupils discussed the importance of attentive and active listening. Certain strategies were taught formally, e.g. predicting and inferencing, using materials by Chamot et al (1990) as well as Graham and Macaro (ibid). Other strategies were explained and discussed in class, e.g. directed attention. The Graham and Macaro materials on segmentation and sound discrimination were used. Pupils were encouraged to continue to develop understanding of pronunciation and liaison through lesson starter activities, and by the incorporation of a pronunciation element into vocabulary tests. Pupils were also given a pronunciation test, consisting of a passage to read aloud at the start and the end of the research period. The aim was to add a “bottom-up” processing element to the listening strategy programme.

From the start of September onwards, the class followed the Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari (2010) direct strategy system of listening, which covers the metacognitive skills of prediction, planning, directed attention, verification, selective attention, monitoring, evaluating and problem-solving. When attempting a listening task they were asked to do the following:

- Divide their paper into 3 columns, “Anticipations”, “Première écoute” and “Deuxième écoute”.
- Predict (as a whole class for the first week, then in pairs, then individually) the information they might hear and enter this information (in French or in English) in the “Anticipations” column.

¹ Glow is the intranet for all Scottish schools

- During the first playing, tick the predicted information and words heard. Note any additional information understood in the “Première écoute” column.
- Next, work in pairs to compare predictions and information understood so far. Discuss points of confusion and disagreement, consider other logical possibilities, and identify the parts of the text that require particular attention during the second listen. (This is the metacognitive strategy of directed or selective attention.)
- Listen to the text a second time and attempt to resolve points of difficulty. Enter newly comprehended information in the “Deuxième écoute” column.
- Answer the comprehension questions in English.
- Volunteer their answers, to confirm comprehension and to enable them to share how they succeeded in comprehending.
- Listen for a third time with a transcript, (to add a “bottom-up” element.)

In their “listening logs” pupils answered the following questions: What went well? Why? What did not go well? Why? They were instructed to write positive comments, and had Oxford’s (1990) list of positive statements in their listening logs (Appendix 1).

The listening tasks were subsequently made available on Glow and pupils were asked to listen again at home, with the transcript or without, as they felt appropriate. Pupils who found comprehension difficult due to the speed of delivery, their inability to separate sounds from continuous speech, or inability to translate phonemes into graphemes, were asked to follow Graham and Macaro’s advice (Appendix 2)

Findings

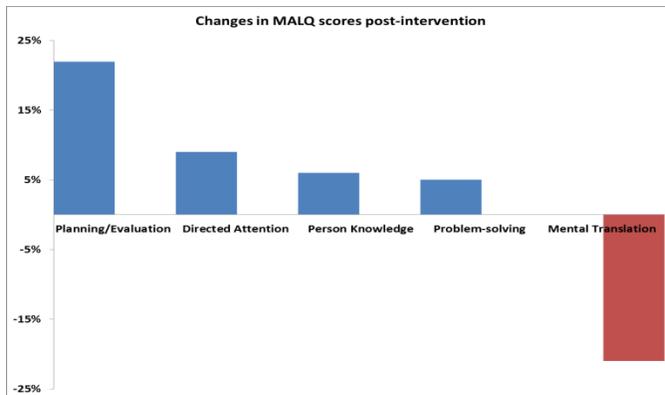
The MALQ contains 21 statements to test 5 learning factors: Directed Attention, Mental Translation, Person Knowledge, Planning / Evaluation and Problem-solving. Pupils stated their level of agreement with the statements using a 6 point scale. Results in the pre-test and post-test of listening were compared, along with the MALQ scores on the two occasions. Qualitative data was gathered through the pupils’ listening logs, the answers volunteered in class, and through the interviews conducted at the end of the research phase. All pupils were asked questions on at least one of the five categories of metacognitive awareness represented in the questionnaire.

The following changes in MALQ results occurred over the research period:

- There was a 7% increase in the cumulative score.
- There was an increase in both mean and median scores.
- 7 out of 9 pupils recorded a rise in overall MALQ score
- The most positive increase was by 21%, whilst two pupils achieved an increase of 14%.
- One pupil recorded a decrease of 5% and another of 4%.

There was a reported increase in use of four learning factors and a significant decrease in the fifth.

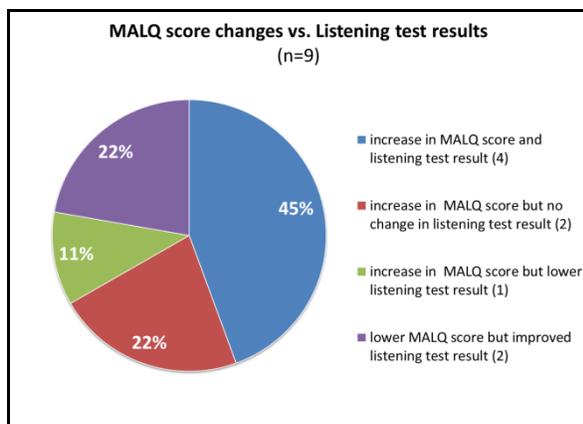
Figure 1



- At the beginning of the research period, Problem-solving and Directed Attention were the highest scoring factors (78% and 75% respectively). These remained the highest scoring factors at the end, with 82% for both.
- In the first MALQ, pupils recorded the lowest scores for Person Knowledge (41%) and Mental Translation (43%). These remained the lowest scoring, but the positions were subsequently reversed with Mental Translation (34%) scoring lowest, followed by Person Knowledge (44%).

MALQ scores were also compared to improvement in listening test performance (cf. Figure 2):

Figure 2



Nearly half of the nine pupils recorded an increase in both the MALQ score and listening test result. A further two recorded an increase in the MALQ score but had no change in the listening test result. Interestingly, two pupils attained an improved listening test result but a lower MALQ score and one pupil achieved a lower score in the listening test despite recording an increase in the MALQ score.

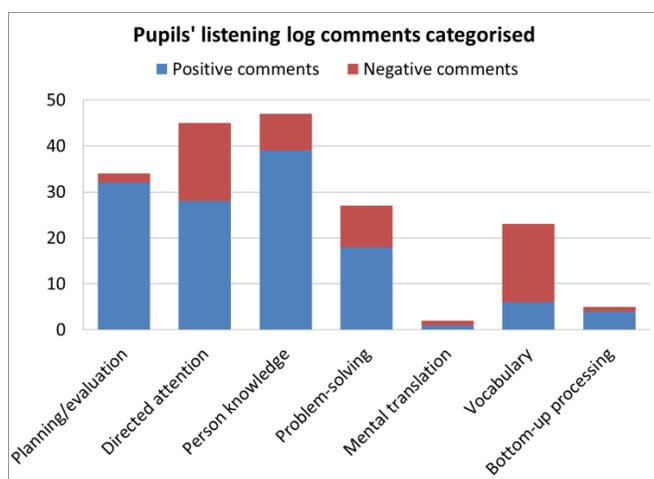
I was not able to ascertain to what extent bottom-up processing ability (as indicated by the pronunciation test) might positively impact on performance in listening tests. A different way of assessing bottom-up processing ability will have to be identified in future. However, there is some qualitative evidence, in the form of comments made by pupils in their listening logs, which can provide evidence of some progress in bottom-up processing skills.

As well as improvement in listening test scores and strategy use, the aim of the research project was improved confidence, the factor of “Person Knowledge” in the MALQ. Whilst the overall score for Person Knowledge rose by 6% in October, it was striking that five pupils scored very poorly in this category; these same five pupils also recording the lowest marks in the listening test.

Analysis of the Qualitative Data

Figure 3 illustrates how the pupils’ listening log comments were categorised. There were 87 log entries in total. Each pupil’s log entry for a particular day is analysed as a whole, not broken down into individual comments. Several categories can therefore apply to one log entry.

Figure 3



The logs indicate the importance pupils attach to particular strategies and by implication how effectively the relevant strategies were taught. The logs complement the MALQ, giving a snapshot of how pupils feel about listening on a given day, whereas the MALQ itself elicits information which the pupils would not normally provide. The logs suggest that some strategies were used more than others. One pupil made remarkably similar comments throughout the log, and this is not necessarily reflected in the MALQ results. It suggests that the qualitative evidence is not as reliable as the MALQ.

The most useful information for the class teacher is the individual pupil scores for each of the learning factors in the MALQ, which allow for high quality formative feedback to take place, with the aim of developing self-understanding and personal effectiveness. Without the MALQ information the points for discussion would not have been so obvious.

Discussion

The manner in which listening strategies were taught and discussed in class had an influence on reported strategy use. Although Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari's approach aims to train pupils in the use of multiple metacognitive strategies, the comments in the logs and the MALQ show that Directed Attention, Planning/Evaluation and Problem-solving predominated. Some categories of strategies, particularly Directed Attention and Person Knowledge, are easier for pupils to understand and therefore it is more likely that they are aware of employing or not employing these strategies. Pupils also had a keen awareness of the inference strategy (part of Problem-solving) as they had enjoyed the inferencing lesson. The strategy of Planning/Evaluation was encouraged by the classroom methodology (pair work, discuss what you have understood).

Due to the format of the Higher exam, pupils in this research project were required to answer questions in English, which can make difficult texts accessible as prediction is easier. The External Assessment Report, Higher French 2011 (SQA) suggests that teachers "encourage candidates to make use of the questions as a means of anticipating the sort of information they will need to extract from the text".

Nevertheless, there are disadvantages to having comprehension questions in English, as explained by the highest attaining pupil, who admitted to using the unhelpful strategy of mental translation:

I'm not thinking in French... I'm answering in English so I have to know what it is in English... It's still completely separate in your head and it's switching back and forth in your head all the time (Pupil 4)

Another pupil when asked to comment on the statement "I translate word by word as I listen" stated:

I do that more now, just translate it as I go. I find it easier even though sometimes you miss bits. You know the next bit and you understand it and you can try and make a guess at the bit that you missed (Pupil 8)

When asked if that was risky she responded:

I don't translate word for word; I translate all the big words, the words that I know.

Mental translation is considered unhelpful, yet "I quickly adjust my interpretation if I realise that it is not correct" (Problem-solving) is deemed a helpful strategy. Perhaps pupils are unclear of the distinction. Some pupils implied in their logs that they translated the key words as they were writing their answers:

I was able to look up a word in the dictionary from hearing it (Pupil 1)

I'm starting to recognise more words and remembering how to spell them so I can look up the dictionary (Pupil 3)

Once again, it is clear that the MALQ can be an essential tool to ensure high quality formative feedback. It would not have become apparent that pupils misunderstood and misused the

strategy of mental translation without it. More class time was spent in Term 2 trying to convince the class to try listening to the French without attempting mental translation.

One of the aims of the project was for pupils to feel more confident about listening and to believe that they can improve. Pupil 4, with 16/20 in both listening tests, “agrees” that listening in French is more difficult than reading, speaking and writing, and “partly agrees” that listening is a challenge. His interview confirmed this. Whilst there are 39 positive comments relating to Person Knowledge in the listening logs and only 8 negative comments, it must be reiterated that pupils were instructed to write a positive comment on each occasion, in an attempt to develop a positive mental attitude. This data is therefore not necessarily representative of their ‘real’ views. The comments pupils made after the post-test of listening are more reliable as they were simply asked to say how they felt the listening test went and how they felt about listening in general.

I feel I have improved and learned how to listen better from listening out for certain parts and listening out for what the question is asking, but overall I don't think I've improved my marks (Pupil 1)

In general my listening skills have improved now. I am using certain strategies – for example making predictions. (Pupil 7)

I felt that over the term I have learned better techniques for listening and am a bit better at focusing on the listening. (Pupil 8)

Despite these encouraging signs, all pupils scored poorly for Person Knowledge in the MALQ. Therefore, the initial aim that pupils would feel more confident about listening was not achieved over the research period. Two of the three questions in the MALQ point to the correlation between listening competence and listening confidence, and pupils clearly have a long way to go before they become confident.

Although bottom-up processing skills have not been evaluated in depth, there is some evidence of use. During the listening tasks, pupils regularly questioned and discussed the meaning of words, repeating the words in French and showing they can identify and retain key words.

Conclusion

Graham and Macaro note that in most research studies “improvement has been slight and limited to certain areas of listening only”. The evidence I have presented leads to the same overall conclusion, but I believe that the time spent on strategy instruction has been well spent, has not been disproportionate and has not prevented pupils from progressing through the syllabus at a satisfactory pace. The evidence is strong enough to convince me that it is worth persevering with strategy instruction, not least because of the impact on pupils’ self-efficacy beliefs. Although there may not be strong evidence of increased confidence overall, comments made by pupils suggest that they feel more confident in non-assessed listening tasks, clearly enjoyed the collaborative approach to listening which made difficult tasks more accessible, and believe improvement over time is attainable.

In the listening logs, there are 17 comments which refer to the need to extend vocabulary, which is significant, bearing in mind that the focus was on strategies rather than vocabulary. As certain metacognitive listening strategies are difficult to utilise with a limited vocabulary, pupils were encouraged to use a range of vocabulary learning strategies and to focus on high frequency words.

Although my research project contained bottom-up elements, it essentially tested metacognitive strategies related to top-down processing. According to Macaro (2003), studies have suggested that although top-down processing is important, bottom-up processing is actually indispensable and, in fact, may be a better predictor of listening ability than schema-oriented listening.

I will continue with a blended approach to improving listening attainment. I already ensure that there is opportunity for what Goh (2000) calls “perception practice”, with regular training in pronunciation and the chance to listen with a transcript, but will implement more of her suggestions, e.g.

Write down the content words from short passages. Identify the most prominent words in short utterances. Identify meaning groups in sentences of varying lengths.

Although pupils certainly do need the opportunity to practise listening (Graham, 2006: 178) maintains “Practice in itself does not address the issue that learners need to feel a sense of control over their listening, that improvement is possible.”

I intend to continue teaching listening strategies with future Higher French classes. I have learned how to teach listening, not just offer listening opportunities, and I have been able to convince pupils that increased success in listening is attainable through the adoption of effective habits.

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Useful websites

French Pronunciation: Liaisons and Elisions <http://tiny.cc/mjb3dw>

Liaison – Linking <http://tiny.cc/ukb3dw>

Les homonymes <http://tiny.cc/vlb3dw>

Activities for improving listening skills <http://tiny.cc/wmb3dw>

Francophoniques <http://tiny.cc/unb3dw>

Homographie <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homonymie>

Liaison Linguistics – French Pronunciation <http://tiny.cc/hpb3dw>

Pronunciation <http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/french/lj/pronunciation/>

Pronunciation <http://www.languageguide.org/french/grammar/pronunciation/>

French Interactive Readings <http://www.languageguide.org/french/readings/>

Improve your pronunciation <http://tiny.cc/syb3dw> (intranet access only)

“Plus” in French expressions <http://french.about.com/library/weekly/aa101300.htm>

You Tube: French pronunciation – phonétique (various videos), e.g.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTOcsf2nR1o&feature=related>

Appendix 1

Positive statements for listening log

Positive statements about Listening based on Oxford (1990)

I understand more of what is said now.

I'm a good listener.

I pay attention well.

I can get the general meaning without understanding every word.

I enjoy understanding new language.

I'm confident and secure about my progress.

I'm taking risks and doing well.

It's OK if I make mistakes.

Everyone makes mistakes, I can learn from mine.

I didn't panic when I heard a word I didn't know.

I don't have to understand everything at once.

Appendix 2

Advice sheet for listening log

From Graham and Macaro (2008). (This section was used in their research study but not published in the appendices. I am grateful to Professor Graham for making it available to me.)

Problem – you can't identify sounds that you hear, even if they are in words that you would know if they were written down.

Strategy:

- Repeat the exercises which we have just done:
 - read the transcript
 - anticipate what the words will sound like
 - listen to the MP3 file on Glow while reading the transcript
 - listen again, without the transcript, trying to visualise the words
- Whenever you listen and have trouble identifying a sound, try to visualise it.