Bottom-up decoding: listening

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In a previous post I explained some of the reasons why we should focus on bottom-up strategies for listening and reading. In this post, I’d like to show how this might work in practice for the skill of listening.

Even learners who have a good range of grammar and vocabulary can struggle with understanding natural speech. And the same is true even for listeners who have a reasonable grasp of the topic and good prediction skills (usually associated with top-down strategies). There could be a number of reasons for this, but one essential reason is that they have difficulty in decoding the “signal” which is coming at them. By “decoding”, I mean perceiving the sounds of English and linking them mentally to words and phrases that they have in their store of language. (Even so-called native speakers struggle with this – for example, the recent case of a man who thought the phrase “as opposed to” was “as a pose to” until he was nearly 20.)

English is often described as a particularly difficult language to understand in this respect, as

(a) the sounds we hear don’t always correspond to what we think is the spelling

(b) certain sounds change when spoken quickly and/or in groups of words. In the example above, the schwa sound at the start of “opposed” could be spelt as an O or an A, and the /d/ sound at the end of “opposed” gets lost (elided?) in the following /t/ sound

(c) it is sometimes difficult to work out where one word ends and another starts, as in “I scream/ice cream”.

Our learners’ stories confirm this: a classic example from my own experience was a B2 level class asking me at the end of a course why I kept talking about festivals, when I had just been giving instructions: “First of all....”

So what kinds of activities would help our learners with this problem? Firstly, learners need to be made aware of these features – in my experience, even high level learners may be unconscious of them. Features might include: connected speech, including weak forms, elision, assimilation and so on; the use of reference words like it and this to refer back to something mentioned previously (very difficult even for advanced learners); the use of stress to carry meaning (as in “I didn’t want to GO” vs “I DIDN’T want to go”); interpreting auxiliary verbs (“Where did you live?” Vs “Where do you live?”)

Teachers often feel that the practice of these features helps in awareness-building. That is, if the learners try saying these forms (even if they do not wish or need their own pronunciation to reach “native-speaker” level), they are likely to be in a better position to recognise them.
Secondly, learners need to work on the best strategies for successful listening. For example, it is very important for learners to understand the topic of a conversation, but they often interpret a key word wrongly and misinterpret the topic. This could be because the word has multiple meanings (a student of mine went through a whole lesson thinking we were talking about people from Poland when in fact we were discussing the coldest parts of the Earth) or because the word is close in sound to another (eg track/truck). Students can be asked to listen to snippets of natural speech and choose between different words (“did she say track, truck or trick?”), or different meanings of the same word (“is she talking about a party as in a celebration or a political party?”).

Another important point is how we check comprehension. John Field and others have rightly criticised materials for focussing too much on assessing comprehension as opposed to training learners. But if our comprehension activities focus on the features above, then we can assess how successful our skills training has been. For example, we might ask learners “why does the speaker stress DIDN’T?” or “what does these refer to in John’s last sentence?”. This will help learners become aware of issues they had not previously been aware of.

We said in the previous post that we should not ignore top-down strategies, partly because the kind of knowledge and schemata that we activate before learners listen help to compensate for the various hurdles they face (not least, the poor quality of some recordings). Also, prediction and activation activities are usually fun, and motivate the learners into the listening. But top-down approaches will only take you so far: learners need to become skilled at decoding as well.

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To see bottom-up decoding in practice in the classroom, watch Navigate author Rachael Roberts’ video demonstration here.