

# **Theoretical and Practical Aspects of Teaching Listening in Korea**

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## **1. Introduction**

This paper will be divided into three parts. The first section will include a brief account of the author's academic and professional background. This will be followed by a more detailed discussion of some current theoretical approaches to teaching and listening. Finally, the paper will close with an in-depth look at several practical in-class activities, procedures, and materials. All the information presented in this paper as well as supplementary materials and resources can be downloaded from: <http://epik.walterforeman.com>. The author can be reached for questions or comment via email at: [epik@walterforeman.com](mailto:epik@walterforeman.com).

## **2. Background**

### **2.1 Academic Background**

In 1996 I graduated from the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan with a Bachelor of Secondary Education degree. My teaching areas were English and Human Geography (Social Studies). In 2005 I graduated, with merit, from the Faculty of Arts (Department of English) at the University of Sydney with a Master of Professional Communication degree.

### **2.2 Professional Background**

I first came to Korea in March of 1998 and taught in, and later administered, an English language program at YBM/ELS. In 2000 I taught in an English language program at Daegu University. In 2002, I worked as the International

Liaison for Daegu University's Institute of International Studies and Programs. Most recently, in March of 2005, I began teaching in the Intensive English Teacher Training Program at the Center for In-service Education here at the Korea National University of Education.

### **3. Theoretical Aspects of Teaching and Listening**

#### **3.1 Top-down versus Bottom-up Processing**

Top-down listening activities allow learners to use their prior knowledge to understand what they hear in a given text. Such activities will generally have learners listening for gist. In my experience, it is more effective to have top-down activities follow bottom-up activities. In bottom-up listening activities learners rely on their linguistic knowledge to recognize specific linguistic elements: vowels, consonants, words, phrases, or sentences. Bottom-up activities are an excellent way to pre-teach specific vocabulary and will reduce the “language load” of the lesson.<sup>1)</sup>

For a simple but effective demonstration of the difference between top-down and bottom-up processing, consider the following paragraph:

When you process English slowly, one word at a time, as you are doing now, it is easy to catch the meaning of each individual word. However, it can be difficult to understand the overall meaning of the passage.

Few L1 English speakers (or fluent L2 speakers of English) would actually process the above paragraph one word at a time in a bottom-up fashion. However, if the same paragraph is shown again, only this time in a slightly modified format, the effects of bottom-up processing can be simulated:

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1) Meyer, L. (2000). Barriers to meaningful instruction for English learners. *Theory into Practice*, 39, 4, 228-236.

you as ,time a at word one ,slowly English process you When  
each of meaning the catch to easy is it ,now doing are  
understand to difficult be can it ,However .word individual  
.passage the of meaning overall the

When planning materials and lessons for your class it is important to include a mix of both top-down and bottom-up listening activities as both are important in developing the ability to understand a second language.

### **3.2 Comprehensible Input**

Although it may sound commonsensical to say that L2 learners of a language can only begin to learn that language once they understand what is being said to them, the concept of comprehensible input is often overlooked or forgotten in the language learning classroom. Comprehensible input means that learners can understand the essence of what is said or presented to them. As you will be the main source of linguistic input in your class, it is essential that you develop an acute sense of how much (or how little) your students understand what is being said or presented to them. It is also essential that you develop the ability to generate comprehensible input. The concept of comprehensible input is not meant to limit instructors to using only vocabulary and structures already known by the learners. New vocabulary and structures *can* be introduced but only in the proper context, with sufficient background information, and accompanied by appropriate paralinguistic information (body language, gestures, pictures and other visuals, concrete objects).

As an example of the importance of comprehensible input, imagine the uninitiated L2 learner of English listening to Abbot and Costello's comedy routine "Who's on first?". Without sufficient background information and context, even a fluent English speaker may find the task daunting. However, when given the necessary background information and context and a specific listening

task (perhaps counting the number of times the word 'who' is said), the listening becomes manageable.

While on the topic of humor, I have found that certain types of humor in the classroom, especially irony and sarcasm, can severely hinder comprehensible input and should therefore be used judiciously.

### **3.3 Affective Filter**

The term 'Affective Filter' was coined by Stephen Krashen.<sup>2)</sup> Essentially, the affective filter is a screen or wall in the minds of learners which can interfere with the reception and processing of comprehensible input. Affective filter is said to be high when learners feel anxious, self-conscious, bored, annoyed, alienated, angry, frustrated, nervous, or any other of a host of negative emotions. It follows then that effective learning takes place when the affective filter is low. As such, effective language teachers plan lessons and activities which include methods for lowering learners' affective filter.

Lowering the affective filter in the classroom is a simple procedure, but it does take some attention and careful planning. In my classroom I focus on creating an environment where learners feel comfortable and confident. I try to create an environment that makes learners feel that they *want to* attend class rather than that they *have to*. One of the techniques I use to accomplish this goal is to have learners create nametags which I later post in the classroom. This procedure is an extension of the traditional first-day-of-class partner interview activity. By creating nametags based on their interviews learners can see the fruits of their labor while creating a sense of community in the class. These nametags also help me to remember each learner's name and by using names in the classroom, the affective filter is reduced further. In addition, when

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2) Krashen, S.D. (1981). *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

learners see their English names (or Korean names written in English) posted in the classroom, it helps to reinforce their English identity, which in turn lowers the affective filter.

Another simple technique I use to create a sense of community in the classroom is to hang a calendar near the door. In addition to posting important due dates and holidays, I invite and encourage learners to write their birthdays or other special events on the calendar. Whenever there is a special day, I make an announcement before the start of class; if the situation warrants, I prepare a small gift or prize.

In my classrooms I also have something called 'English Corner' where I invite learners to form creative phrases or sentences in English using small magnetic words posted in a corner of the whiteboard. Periodically throughout the term I add new words to the board so that learners can continue to make new phrases or sentences. Particularly interesting or creative works can be submitted for publication in the school newspaper, yearbook or other student publications.

Finally, I also make an effort to change something in the classroom everyday. This does not mean just changing the position of an existing object (although this can be effective), but instead bringing something new to the classroom everyday. My rationale behind this practice is to pique learners' curiosity and interest in their classroom.

## **4. Practical Activities, Procedures, and Materials**

### **4.1 Bottom-up Activities (Listening for Perception)**

As there are certain sounds in English that have no equivalent in Korean, I like to focus on these sounds in my listening classes to help learners become accustomed to them. While there are several of these differences one good

example is the English ‘ɔɪ’ sound in words like law, ball, and bald. Korean L2 learners of English tend to pronounce this sound as ‘oʊ’ like low, bowl, and bold (a rather unfortunate linguistic phenomenon for my colleague Collin).

To give learners practice in distinguishing between these two sounds, assign each particular sound a number: 1 for ɔɪ (law) and 2 for oʊ (low). The instructor then calls out a set of three words, for example 'bald, saw, bold'. The learners should write one, one, two, based on the sounds they hear. Later as they become more proficient at distinguishing between the sounds, you can have the learners practice the same activity in pairs or small groups with the learners themselves calling out the word sets; this extension gives the learners an opportunity to listen to their fellow classmates and to practice their pronunciation.

To extend this activity further you can write a short text that incorporates several different sounds (see Figure 1). Learners circle which of the words they hear as the instructor reads the text. This activity gives learners the added benefit and challenge of having to listen for specific sounds in the context of a sentence. Again, once they have become more proficient at this activity learners can practice in pairs or small groups with the same benefits as discussed above.

Alice asked her friend [A. John / B. Joan], “Would you please [A. wash / B. watch] my [A. cups / B. caps] for me?” Then Alice went home and saw her brothers playing with their [A. cards / B. cars]. Alice asked her brothers, “What did you do today?” They told her that they had seen some pretty [A. girls / B. gulls]. Later, Alice asked her brothers to [A. wash / B. watch] her [A. birds / B. buds] for her.

Figure 1. Minimal Pairs in Context

## 4.2 Generating Comprehensible Input

As discussed in Section 3.2, comprehensible input is of paramount importance in the language learning classroom. The following are some practical tips to help generate comprehensible input in the classroom.

**Slower speech:** Teacher talk must be natural but sensitive to the level of the learners; it must be neither too fast nor too slow. When you speak to your class it is important that you enunciate clearly, speak loudly, and emphasize important words and structures. Instructors must also be cognizant of their use of reduced forms; while second nature for L1 speakers of English, to the L2 learner of English there is a world of difference between the expressions, "What did you have for lunch?" and "Whadja have fer lunch?".

**Repetition and Paraphrasing:** Learners will need to hear key words many times before they can establish a connection between form and meaning. Repetition does not mean that you should repeat each new vocabulary item two or three times one after the other. Instead, the repetition needs to occur at different times throughout the lesson. Future lessons should recycle previously taught vocabulary and structures. When you first introduce a new word or expression (particularly if the learners look puzzled) find a way to paraphrase it, to restate the same idea using different words.

**Cognates:** Use words that are similar in both languages. There are many of these between Korean and English and this is an excellent way to include your co-teacher in the lesson. Cognates can be very useful in paraphrasing and can also be used in minimal pair distinction.

**Body language:** When talking to learners, point to objects and make appropriate gestures and facial expressions. Good actors make good teachers and especially

good language teachers. Effective use of the classroom space is also an overlooked area of both comprehensible input and classroom management. Do not be reluctant to move about the classroom. Learners sitting at the back of the classroom deserve to see and hear you just as much as those sitting in the front of the classroom. Your moving about the classroom will keep learners focused and attentive and help to make input comprehensible for all.

**Pictures and Realia:** During your lessons show pictures, make sketches or drawings, bring in real objects. Not only do pictures and realia help to make input comprehensible, but they will make your class more fun and interesting which will thereby lower the affective filter.

If your classroom is multimedia equipped, you can use an online image search engine to find pictures relevant to your lesson. A word of caution if you are planning to search for pictures during class as in response to a learner's question, ensure that the search engine's 'safe search' feature is enabled; I learned this lesson the hard way when searching innocently enough for a picture of a sausage.

As many people may already be familiar with the image search functions of major search engines like Google, Yahoo!, and MSN, I would like to suggest three excellent alternatives: [www.picsearch.com](http://www.picsearch.com), [www.naver.com](http://www.naver.com), and [www.answers.com](http://www.answers.com). Picsearch is an English language image search engine that provides quick access to a wide range of high-quality images. Naver is a Korean language portal and search engine. Because the site is all in Korean, using this alternative requires at least a rudimentary knowledge of Korean. The benefit of this site is that once you have achieved some knowledge of Korean, the site will make real-time suggestions based on what you type. Lastly, Answers is an extremely comprehensive site that offers concise definitions and examples together with images on wide range of topics. I use this site on a

daily basis and recommend it to all my students and colleagues.

### **4.3 Lowering the Affective Filter**

Another technique that I have found useful for lowering the affective filter in my classes is to use ordinary playing cards as a teaching tool. Magic and cards tricks have enjoyed a surge in popularity in Korea recently and many learners will have a natural curiosity about the cards. After each learner has a card you can do a variety of activities, most of which are centered on Total Physical Response (TPR) (itself an effective technique for lowering the affective filter). Examples instructions include, "everyone with a red card jump three times", "everyone with a card between 2 and 5 move to the door", "everyone with a diamond trade cards with someone else" and so on.

As with any TPR activity, if you have a learner with limited mobility in your class you will need to consider this when planning your activities. Also, it can be time consuming to give each learner a card. To overcome this obstacle, I simply give, or better, have learners pick a card as they enter the classroom before class (this is also a great chance for me to greet each learner by name!). This method generates curiosity and excitement as the learners do not yet know what they will use the cards for. Collecting the cards can also be time consuming; this complication can be overcome by assigning the task of collecting cards to certain learners in the form of a listening instruction. For example, "everyone with an Ace, collect all the cards and give them to me".

Playing cards can be purchased at most convenience stores (Family Mart, 7-11, Buy the Way, GS 25) and most large shopping centers (E-mart, Home Plus, Carrefour, Wal-Mart).

## **5. Conclusion**

As an EPIK participant you have an unsurpassed opportunity to affect English

education in Korea. The learners in your classroom today will become the English speakers of tomorrow. It is my hope that you take full advantage of this wonderful opportunity and that while doing so you come to learn more about Korea, about education, about the English language, and about yourself.