

Developing Top-Down Bottom-Up Listening

By Denok Lestari

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**DEVELOPING TOP-DOWN AND BOTTOM-UP
PROCESSES TO HELP STUDENTS BECOME
MORE EFFECTIVE LISTENERS**

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ABSTRACT

Many recent studies assume that language learning depends on listening since it provides the aural input as the basis for language. In real-life listening, students will have to use a combination of top-down or bottom-up listening processes, with more emphasis on either of them depending on their reasons for listening. Top-down listening processes are listener-based, in which the listener uses his/her background knowledge of the topic, the situation or context, and the language. This background knowledge helps the listener interpret what is heard. On the other hand, bottom-up listening processes are text-based, where the listener relies on the language in the message, that is, the combination of sounds, words, and grammar that creates meaning. Indonesian students are generally lacking bottom-up processing skills since they do not have adequate linguistic competence. This paper is aimed to give contribution for language teachers in developing listening strategies in order to help students become effective listeners.

Keywords: listening, top-down, bottom-up, processes, effective listeners.

1. INTRODUCTION

As an essential part of communicative competence, listening skill deserves intensive treatment in language classes. It is believed that in initial stages of language study, students can build awareness of the language systems and establish more fluent productive skills through listening. There are a number of up-to-date researches which offer innovative theories about the teaching of English listening, a larger number of problems are still found during the practice though. In real-life listening, students have to activate both of their linguistic competence and background knowledge in order to understand what is being said by the speakers. Even though the students have sufficient knowledge about a particular topic, they (especially the beginners of English) are lacking linguistic competence such as word recognition, connected speech, cluster sounds, etc. This gap between background

knowledge and linguistic competence is one of the frequent problems encountered by Indonesian students who are learning English as a foreign language. For this reason, combining top-down (background knowledge) and bottom-up (linguistic competence) processes are highly recommended to help the students improve their listening skills.

Top-down and bottom-up models are the most widely-known listening processes function in adult learning. The first model to be developed was the bottom-up model, around 1940s-1950s (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005: 24). In this model, students initially build understanding by listening to individual sounds, which then combined into words and sentences. While the later top-down model focuses more on the prior knowledge rather than relying upon the individual sounds and words. At the level of the group, beginners are likely need to spend more time on developing basic bottom-up skills of decoding language spoken (Rumelhart in Flowerdew & Miller, 2005).

Since listening lessons should be designed as real-life listening, it is appropriate to use the task-based approach. With this approach, students are required to do real-life tasks, like completing diagrams/charts, filling in tables, following directions, etc. in which they may get used to listen to texts which are spoken naturally in normal speed. For the sake of language teaching, this research is aimed to share experience of how to explore listening materials by combining top-down and bottom-up processes in order to give students highly effective learning experiences.

2. TOP-DOWN AND BOTTOM-UP PROCESSES

In real-life listening, students will have to use a combination of top-down or bottom-up listening processes, with more focus on either (or both) of them depending on their reasons for listening. Before discussing more about the combination of the two listening processes, it is worth having a clear perception of each process separately.

Top-down processes are listener-based; the listener uses his/her background knowledge of the topic, the situation or context and the language. This background knowledge activates a set of expectations that help the listener interpret what is heard and anticipate what will come next. Top-down strategies include listening for the main idea, predicting, drawing inferences, and summarizing. Morley (2007) proposes some optional activities which are possible to employ for developing top-down processes, such as putting a series of pictures/events in order, identifying where the conversation takes place, reading information about a topic then listening to find whether or not the same points are mentioned, or inferring the relationship between the people involved.

Bottom-up processes are text-based; the listener relies on the language in the message, that is, the combination of sounds, words, and grammar that creates meaning. Bottom-up strategies include listening for specific details,

and recognizing word-order patterns. Beginners are lacking bottom-up processing skills since they have not yet developed the linguistic knowledge of the target language. Some students admit that they recognize the new language as undifferentiated noise. They have no idea that phonological rules might change sounds in certain environments or cause reductions of sounds. Therefore, it is necessary to design activities which help students recognize the divisions between words (Morley, 2007). The teacher may read out a number of sentences in a very natural way and ask the students to write down how many words there would be in the written form.

When listening, students need to employ a number of skills in order to understand the content of the spoken text. Harmer (2001: 144-5) suggested teachers to focus on these skills:

- a. Predictive skills: emphasizes on the lead-in stage to encourage the students' expectations and interest so they have a definite purpose for listening.
- b. Extracting specific information: students should learn to disregard everything except the information they are interested in, only to find out particular facts
- c. Getting the general picture: requires the students' ability to pick out the general idea of main points and discard details.
- d. Inferring opinion and attitude: students may have to understand what the speaker's opinions and attitudes which are not always directly stated in the text, based on the recognition of linguistic style and its use to achieve appropriate purposes.
- e. Deducing meaning from context: students are required to be able to guess the meaning of the unknown word based on the context.
- f. Recognizing function and discourse patterns and markers: the students should be able to recognize which sentence is a generalisation and which sentence backs up that generalisation with evidence.

3. LISTENING PROCESSES IN THE CLASSROOM

Harmer (2001) suggests some hints for teachers in conducting more effective listening classes. First, students comprehend more of a text if they are familiar with the topic or they know in advance what the spoken text concerns. It is therefore necessary to give clear lead-in to build students expectations and activate their background knowledge about what they are going to hear. Second, there should be visual backup – pictures, graphs, etc. that helps the students confirm their expectations (or predictions) to the listening material. Third, pre-listening questions are always found useful to direct students' attention to the section that they need to focus on during the listening.

A listening lesson should have five basic stages, which may vary and are not designed to be strictly implemented in listening classes (Harmer, 2001: 151-2). They are:

- a. *Lead-in*: get familiar with the topic
- b. *Teacher directs comprehension task*: teacher explains and directs the students' purpose for listening
- c. *Students listen for task*: students perform the task that the teacher has set.
- d. *Teacher directs feedback*: teacher checks students' answers to see how well they have done.
- e. *Teacher directs text-related task*: encourage students to use the information they have just heard.

As Harmer (2001: 232) stated that most listening sequences involve a mixture of language skills, the listening materials discussed here integrate the other basic skills such as reading, speaking, and writing. We will now look at three examples of activities which involve both bottom-up and top-down processes in listening class. The materials are adapted from Richards's *Interchange 2*.

Listening Activity 1

- (1) The students are going to listen to a conversation entitled *What have you been doing?* The learning objective is to practice listening to people talk about recent experiences and to see the present perfect continuous in context. The teacher first asks the students to cover the script and directs their attention to the picture and ask the following questions: "*Where are they? What do they look like? Do you think this is their first meeting?*" etc. then accepts any reasonable answers. This is the *lead-in* stage.
- (2) While the conversation script is still covered, the teacher writes these questions on the board: *What are Gina and Pete doing? How long have they been doing it?* This is the *Teacher directs comprehension task* stage.
- (3) The audio program is played. Students listen for the first time and answer the questions. This is the third stage called *the students listen to the task* stage.
- (4) By eliciting the students' answers after listening, the teacher is doing the *teacher directs feedback* stage.
- (5) Now the script shall be uncovered and the students listen again to the conversation.

- 1
- Pete : Hey, Gina! I haven't seen you in ages.
What have you been doing lately?
- Gina : Nothing exciting. I've been working two jobs
for the last six months.
- Pete : How come?
- Gina : I'm saving up money for a trip to Morocco.
- Pete : Well, that's exciting.
- Gina : Yeah, it is. What about you?
- Pete : Well, I've only been *spending* money.
I'm pursuing a full-time modelling career.
- Gina : Really? How long have you been modelling?
- Pete : Since I graduated. But I haven't been getting any work.
I need a job soon. I'm almost out of money!



The teacher will likely need to elicit or explain any new words and expressions, as the students are usually reluctant to ask questions. They prefer to remain silent even though there is something that they do not understand. In this case, the teacher should always check for their understanding about the text. Here, the teacher may predict which words or phrases the students might not recognize yet, such as: “*I haven't seen you in ages, lately, how come?, pursuing, and out of money.*” The teacher might as well draw attention to the use of present continuous tense and the contrastive stress in the conversation. Alternatively, the teacher might as well use the listening material to teach contrastive stress.

- (6) After having discussed any new vocabulary, the students are then asked to role-play the conversation with a partner. The teacher may ask one or two pairs of students to model the dialog. This is the *Teacher directs text-related task* stage.

Listening activity 1 above involves both top-down and bottom-up processes. Sequence (1) and (2) are top-down where the teacher activates the students' prior knowledge by having them look at the picture and answer questions. The *lead-in* stage is necessary in building students' expectation and interest about the topic going to be presented. While sequence (5) can be said to be bottom-up where the students gain new vocabulary and learn to talk about recent activities using the present perfect continuous tense. The listening material might also be used to teach contrastive stress – how stress is used in responses to emphasize a contrast. Teacher may likely explain that the meaning of a sentence can be changed by stressing different words. Teacher then points out the extra stress on the contrasting words in additional conversations in which the stress is shown by making a word or syllable higher, longer, and louder.

- 2
1. A: Has your brother been studying German?
B: No, I've been studying German.

3. 2 have you been teaching French?
B: No, I've been studying French.

2. A: Have you been studying for ten years?
B: No, I've been studying for two years.

- 2
4. A: Have you been studying at school?
B: No, I've been studying at home.

The follow-up task gives students opportunity to practice the new vocabulary and grammar they have just learnt.

Listening Activity 2

- (1) *Lead-in* stage: teacher writes the names *Yang Zhifa* and *Gwyneth Paltrow* on the board and presents their photographs, asks what students know about them then elicits answers.



Gwyneth Paltrow



Yang Zhifa



Terracotta warriors

- 6
(2) *Teacher directs comprehension task* stage: teacher tells students they are going to listen to how people got their lucky breaks. (the teacher might first need to explain the meaning of lucky break). The teacher then divides the class into groups of four and distribute a set of slips with mixed-up stories to each group. Students read the slips and predict the initials of the person each sentence describes.

___ (a) was very poor.	___ (h) had a lucky break at the age of 18.
___ (b) poses for pictures and signs autographs.	___ (i) was at a movie theater when the lucky break happened.
___ (c) accepted the offer right away.	___ (j) was waiting in line to buy popcorn.
___ (d) found pieces of pottery and ancient weapons.	___ (k) noticed that Steven Spielberg was also in line.
___ (e) had to go to drama school and learn how to act.	___ (l) was offered a role in the movie <i>Hook</i> .
___ (f) was an ordinary farmer.	___ (m) hit something hard when drilling a well.
___ (g) now spends a lot of time in the museum.	___ (n) was looking for water one morning.

- (3) *Students listen to the task* stage: students listen and check their answers. They are suggested to listen to the text for several times but with different task at each time. There are two possible tasks to be completed here: writing the initials of the person and putting the events in the correct order.
- (4) *Teacher directs feedback* stage: Teacher may not only check students' answers but also direct their focus on the grammar, i.e. past continuous tense and simple past tense.
- (5) *Teacher directs text-related task* stage: in this final stage, the students might be asked to re-tell the story based on list of events which have been arranged chronologically.

Listening activity 2 also employs both top-down and bottom-up processes, with more emphasis on the top-down (3) sequence 1 to 3). As an initial stage in listening classes, it is essential to get the students predict the content of listening activity: looking at the pictures, answering questions, giving opinion, etc. During the lead-in stage, therefore, the teacher has students look at the photographs to build their interest in listening to the later conversation. In order to make the class more student-centered, the teacher assigns students to work in groups to complete the task. Sequence 4 is bottom-up, since it draws attention to the use of grammar in the listening text.

Listening Activity 3

- (1) *Lead-in* stage: teacher has students look at the picture of the Liberty Statue and asks what they know about it, then elicits answers.
- (2) *Teacher directs comprehension task* stage: teacher tells students to read a passage on their textbook and look up dictionary for unknown words. Afterwards, teacher asks students to listen to a dialog and find seven differences between the written and the spoken text.



The Statue of Liberty is located in New York Harbor. The people of Canada gave the statue to the United States. The Statue was designed by a French sculptor. Hundreds of people from all over the world visit the Statue of Liberty every year. There are 54 steps to the top of the crown. The Statue was manufactured in the United States and shipped to New York. In 1986, it was assembled on Liberty Island, which took nine months. Visitors may climb the stairs to the top of the statue.

- (3) *Students listen to the task* stage: students listen to the dialog then compare answers with friends, before listening again for the second time.
- (4) *Teacher directs feedback* stage: Teacher checks students' answers then draw their attention on the grammar, i.e. passive voice and the pronunciation of past participle *-ed* ending.
- (5) *Teacher directs text-related task* stage: in this final stage, the teacher asks students to work in pairs and give each pair two slips of sentences with some missing information. The students have to work together to complete the blanks, by asking questions using passive voice: *When was The Colosseum opened? It was opened in 80 AD., etc.*

Student 1

1. The Great Wall of China was begun in
2. The Colosseum in Rome was opened in 80 A.D.
3. Machu Pichu in Peru was constructed around
4. The Statue of Liberty was opened in 1886.
5. The Eiffel Tower in Paris was completed in
6. The Empire State Building was opened in 1931.

Student 2

1. The Great Wall of China was begun in 214 B.C.
2. The Colosseum in Rome was opened in
3. Machu Pichu in Peru was constructed around 1400 A.D.
4. The Statue of Liberty was opened in
5. The Eiffel Tower in Paris was completed in 1889.
6. The Empire State Building was opened

Sequence (1), considered as more top-down process, is the *lead-in* stage which activates students' knowledge about the Liberty Statue and sets up their purposes for listening. In sequence (2), the teacher applies both top-down (by reading the information) and bottom-up (by acquiring new vocabulary) processes. The activity focuses on reading about a topic then listening to find if there are different points mentioned. That way, students should concentrate listening on particular facts they need. Sequence (4) employs a more bottom-up process in which the students learn about grammar and pronunciation at the same time, so that they might improve their linguistic knowledge. Lastly, in sequence (5) the students are encouraged to use the knowledge that they have just acquired.

4. CONCLUSION

It is the teachers' tasks to provide worthwhile learning experiences and maximize the students' competence in learning the target language. Teachers therefore should expand their creativity in designing their listening lessons. Even a very ordinary listening material from a textbook can be explored to its maximum to help students improve both of their background and linguistic knowledge. It is worth remembering that the success of communication depends on the effectiveness of the way we listen.

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