

Listening to Improve Language Knowledge

We've talked about three types of listening activities: practice for comprehending more effectively, practice for building language knowledge, and practice for improving language processing. This week we'll focus on practice for building language knowledge. Note that technically, some of the time you're building knowledge you aren't actually listening, but you're working with material that you have listened to (or plan to listen to soon, if you're previewing a transcript). We have suggested that there are at least four components to language knowledge:

- Sound system (phonology): individual sounds, sound clusters and syllables, linking, reduction, rhythm, and intonation
- Vocabulary (words *and* phrases), including recognizing pronunciation of known items
- Grammar: recognizing the meaning in grammatical endings (like *-ing*), words (like prepositions and modal auxiliary verbs such as *can*), and structures (like passive or present perfect)
- Discourse: typical organizational structures of lectures, newscasts, discussions, etc.; how speakers introduce and shift topics and comments

The most basic area for building knowledge is in the *sound system*. As noted in VI in this week's notes, these are the key concepts for understanding the English sound system.

As a matter of knowledge, these can be studied independently and then you can listen closely to speech samples to identify each of these components. The assumption here is that by being aware of the components of the English sound system and the way it works, you will more easily notice and understand what you hear.

Vocabulary is of course the most obvious area of language knowledge. In most cases, we can identify whether or not we know a word, at least its basic form and meaning. While it is possible to pick up words simply from exposure and attention to context (that is, after all, how we do it as children in our native language), that seems to be a less efficient process for adults in a second language. To learn a new word consciously, you first need to notice it--to isolate its form. This is quite difficult to do in normal speech unless the context allows the word to be repeated a number of times or something else makes it particularly salient. Having text support in the form of captions or a transcript makes this job a lot easier (and again, more efficient). Once the form is recognized, in some cases you may be able to figure out the meaning from the context, but often you will need to look it up in a dictionary. Once you understand the meaning, both the basic meaning and the meaning in the particular context you have encountered it if they are different, your job is not finished. If you have the time, it's good to Google the word and explore how it is used in a couple of other contexts. I

also recommend writing down the word, its definition, and the sentence in which it occurs on a card or in a list for later study (an Excel spreadsheet is good for this). You need to review your new words regularly, especially in the days and weeks right after you've learned them the first time. We'll discuss specific recommendations for this in a later class. And if you want to move the word from just being something you recognize to one that you use yourself, creating *meaningful* sentences with it will help, especially if you can work this practice into your everyday speech.

Of course you don't need to learn every new word you encounter because learning takes time. As noted in previous classes, higher frequency words are generally more valuable--you're likely to see them more often. Use Google or <http://www.lex tutor.ca/vp/comp/> to help you figure out frequencies.

Words are not all there is to vocabulary--you need to be able to recognize, define, and learn phrases as well. Unfortunately, phrases, particularly idioms, are not always easy to spot. When you go through a transcript or captions and recognize words that appear together but don't seem to make sense in context given their literal meanings, try putting the phrase into Google. You can also sometimes find phrases, especially recent ones, defined in the Urban Dictionary (www.urbandictionary.com).

Another area of language knowledge is *grammar*. There is a sense that in listening once you know what the words mean, you can figure out the rest of the meaning of a sentence, but this isn't always true. For example, the difference between "The cat chased the dog" and "The cat is chased by the dog" requires more than just knowing the meanings of cat, chase, and dog. Looking through transcripts to try to understand the grammar can help in reviewing grammar rules you may have forgotten as well as in recognizing the differences between how English is spoken and written. It's especially good for noticing preposition and article uses.

Finally, there is also *discourse knowledge*, an understanding of how ideas are ordered in speech, how those ideas are related to one another, and the speaker signals those relationships. Take a look at the transcript below from a lecture on game theory and notice the functions of the italicized words and phrases:

OK, so, what does game theory say, *then*, is the right way to play this game? The theory of games says it's very important that you be unpredictable. Therefore, you must randomize. You must randomize. The only way to be completely unpredictable is to randomize, and *by that I mean*, in this case, you can simply take out a coin, flip a coin, and if it comes up heads, then you would put up one finger, if it comes up tails, then you would put up two fingers. *Now*, you can try in your own head to randomize, but it's a little bit unreliable. Because there may be a tendency to put up one finger more often than two fingers, and then your opponent can take advantage of that to win the majority of the time. *So* game theory says, "Be sure you randomize." *Now*, game

theory has two key assumptions. *The first assumption is that* both players are rational. Both players are rational. *That is,* they...that they use logical thinking for making their decisions. They're not basing their decisions on emotion. *That's the first assumption.* *The second assumption is that* both players choose their strategies solely to promote their own welfare.