



## Interactive Listening – A Can-Do Paradigm

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### Abstract

*Two decades after being called “the Cinderella skill” by Nunan (1999), listening frustratingly still very much deserves the dubious honour of such a metaphor. Results from the recent national Invalsi tests for school leavers in Italy, as well as anecdotal evidence from several other countries, underline the lack of progress made in listening at secondary schools – what is sorely needed is a solution, a new paradigm. But where is that going to come from? Much of the difficulty of listening in English comes from deciphering sounds in a stress-based language as opposed to a syllable-based one, and when we also factor in such variables as language-specific vowel and consonant sounds, speed, local/national accent, clarity of enunciation, choice of lexis, and background noise, the huge variety of combinations of sound possible are a constant source of frustration to language learners’ self-efficacy (except for those select few who reach autonomy). Add to that of course an idiosyncratic spelling “system” (for want of a better word) in English, and learners struggle to connect sound and meaning, sometimes of even the commonest words. Current listening approaches based almost wholly on “comprehension” questions are thinly disguised tests, and thus often counterproductive, seeking to find out what the listener cannot understand. New smartphone technology, which almost every student now has, can provide that new paradigm, encouraging the comprehension of even a single word or phrase, and enabling each user to work at their own comprehensible input i+1 level as Krashen (1982, 1985) put it so long ago – come and try it out for yourselves!*

**Keywords:** *Listening, comprehensible input, smartphone technology, interactive, self-efficacy.*

### 1. Introduction

At most language conferences, the Cinderella skill, mentioned *en passant*, often taken for granted by presenters, pushed into fourth place, is poor old listening. There may be many reasons for this, as we will see below, but there is little doubt that a poor listener will be unable to communicate adequately, given that so much information around us is delivered orally.

Results from Italy’s national INVALSI examinations in 2019 clearly illustrate the problem, with huge swathes of school leavers showing much lower scores for listening than for reading. These results appear to be common to many other contexts, not just to Italian schools.

Backed up by anecdote, this suggests that students are often left to their own devices when dealing with listening, asked to ‘try harder’ or to ‘keep on listening’ rather than being given a range of tools to help improve their lot. In addition, listening tasks are overwhelmingly structured in the form of comprehension questions, unwittingly mimicking listening tests, which provide teacher and students with a ‘pass’ or ‘fail’, but does almost nothing to boost learning. Furthermore, there is precious little help available to those who are unable to decipher the sounds they are hearing. This paucity of tools to help with bottom-up listening strategies often leads to a rejection of listening or even of English on the part of weaker listeners, who tend to compare themselves unfavourably with their stronger counterparts, falling even further behind them and damaging their self-efficacy, i.e. their belief in their ability to accomplish a task [1].

Clearly a new paradigm is needed to help these students with bottom-up processing of sounds, splitting them into meaningful words and understanding the features of connected speech, a paradigm which might help all students raise the bar on what they can comprehend.

Using traditional media, from pen and paper all the way through mp3 files, does not seem to have provided any significant breakthroughs in terms of deciphering sound, largely due to the fact that students fail to get any positive feedback when they are unable to make sense of what they are perceiving.

We would like to share with you one attempt to create such a paradigm and invite you to test it out with your classes.

Dictation and dictogloss activities have been used successfully for decades by teachers, though neither is designed specifically for improving listening skills, with the former concentrating on spelling (in itself a considerable hurdle for most English L2 speakers) and the latter on written production.



What might happen when we shift the focus onto transforming sound into meaning in an *i+1* listening text?

Smartphone technology enables each student (or better still, each group of students) to access audio in English on their own devices (which they often do for music) and to process it at their own speed.

Teachers in Italy, and probably elsewhere, bemoan the lack of hours allotted on the school timetable to their subject, and feel stressed at what they regard as the impossible task of helping the students to bolster their listening abilities. Indeed, traditional listening lessons with classes that usually feature a considerable gap between stronger and weaker listeners become boring for the former who do not feel challenged, and a nightmare for the latter, persuaded by their poor self-efficacy into believing that they are so ill-equipped for the task as to render any effort at deciphering increasingly complex audio a pointless and thankless task. What if there were a way of catering for and providing a challenge for all of these students at one and the same time? And what if it were possible to set such tasks without having to use up any of the precious hours assigned to English in the classroom?

The above premise led the authors to devise a solution for smartphones and other devices which would help all levels of students to decipher English spoken discourse at their own *i+1* level, providing immediate feedback whenever the student requested it from the device, just as a game does. This aspect of gamification is, as we will see later, a vital part of the challenge and the attraction of this new paradigm.

The accomplishment gap between reading and listening comprehension can of course be readily explained by the fact that literate readers can recognise each word separated by a space and by punctuation and/or capital letters, whereas listeners will often not even have the luxury of a pause to mark the passage from one word to the next. Given the huge number of homophones and near-homophones in this tricky language of ours, we may be asking rather too much even of most upper-intermediate listeners if we ask them to differentiate between 'it's tough', 'its stuff', 'hit stuff', and even 'hits tough' in fluent discourse, and such permutations of similar sounds are almost infinite, often forming the basis for the puns so prevalent in English humour.

Accordingly, L2 listeners will often stop to "inspect in their short-term memory" [2] what they have just heard for meaning, "a skill that is a prerequisite for understanding" [3]. However, by doing so they lose track of time and thus miss out on vast parts of the discourse, or else they try to catch the gist of what they are hearing (as we teachers often encourage them to do, for better or for worse!); such an approach inevitably leads to stress and frustration on their part at their inability to decode, especially given that our task as teachers is nominally to help them improve their listening skills. The predominance of school leavers signing up for university courses here in Italy with a level below (and often well below!) that required to carry out their studies and chosen profession using English would seem to indicate that we are still rather a long way from achieving success across the board on this score, and the authors suspect that poor self-efficacy plays a key role in this failing.

The solution we have envisaged and which we would be delighted to share with you, involves a special interactive player which allows users to "inspect" speech and to test out their hypotheses in terms of perception. The disappearance of such perception exercises from syllabuses and textbooks over recent decades, described by Brown as "a quite extraordinary case of throwing the baby out with the bath water" [4] has led to English language teachers generally treating listening not as an exercise in itself, a skill to be worked on and learned, but rather as a prelude to discussion or "consolidation". Understandable as this is, given the frustration which listening engenders in many students, it loses sight of the vital goal of providing learners with the tools needed to perform in an English speaking environment.

## **2. Description**

In this interactive player, based on gamification principles, learners coordinate ear, brain and eye, writing down any words or fragments thereof which perceive and ask the player to provide feedback, which at an *i+1* level will generally be required. Listeners can lose points by slowing down the speech, by asking for hints for unguessed words etc. Interestingly, we have found that when students work together collaboratively on such perception exercises to try to defeat the machine, one of the most effective tools in their arsenal is metalinguistic discussion, much to the delight of their teachers.

## **3. Conclusion**

Following initial trials in both of our workplaces, we are confident that the success of this approach to listening can be mirrored elsewhere. We are currently launching an investigation into whether and how much such a new paradigm might impact learner perception and understanding and would be delighted to recruit any colleagues interested in investigating this together.



## References

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