Attentive listening

Peter Zoeftig believes that improved listening techniques will reap rewards for teachers and students.

In Issues 81 to 83 of ET*p*, I outlined how I use coaching methods to enhance the acquisition process in learners. Focusing on the elements of understanding, processing and composition leading up to performance, I described the techniques involved in pacing and guiding students towards their desired outcomes.

Coaching takes account of the learners' ongoing processing of new information in vocabulary, structure, sound and context. These processes are translated in their heads into an 'inner dialogue', which the coach can access by means of acute observation of gestures, eye movements, vocal pacing and breathing patterns, thus gaining an awareness of the learners' emotional state, stage of comprehension or preference for certain forms of language and their changing physical state, eg if they are searching for meaning, sweating or stressed.

In this article, I wish to develop these ideas further, with particular reference to how we, as teachers, listen – but also how we can help our students to listen to themselves and others. I believe that, all too often, teachers talk far too much, imparting information and skills simply by telling the students what to do and how to do it.

While teachers stand on top of the knowledge 'mountain' and can see clearly what they believe the students' problems to be, the students themselves are often standing either somewhere near the bottom of what they perceive as a dauntingly long climb up (from CEFR level A2/B1, etc) or else believe they are half-way up or more (level B2/C1) and think that the instructions for further progress given by the teacher are obvious and not worth listening to! We experience this in the baffled looks we get from lower-level students when we think we have told them the same thing dozens of times and they still don't 'get it', and in the bored 'Yes, I know that' looks that we get from the upper-level ones.

Knowing where to go next in the language programme and how to improve the students' performance depends on how the teacher listens. By listening in an enhanced way, teachers can adapt their responses in light of what they have heard conveyed and what they have learnt about the frame of mind of the students. Using this knowledge, they can consciously work to reduce or modify stress or confusion and will have a better idea of where to lead.

The art of listening

In a coaching model, the teacher needs to have access to what is going on in the students' heads in order to lead them further towards their goals – as opposed to just telling them where to go next. I call this approach 'outcomes-based' because it places the student's own desired outcomes at the centre. The ultimate goal might be performance in an exam, interview, meeting, presentation or social event, and it is the teacher's job to get the student there.

Listening to how the inner dialogue is changing (and thus seeing the mental map that the student is acquiring) is key to helping this process, and at the centre of this is the teacher's ability to listen appreciatively and attentively, which can also dramatically alter how the students listen to themselves and others. Listening is an art, and one that is integral to the success of a teaching or learning programme.

When we listen actively, we show our students that they are being listened to with an appreciative ear and that we are noticing what is emerging from their own thought processes. In other words, when we listen actively we are aware not only of the message being communicated, but also of the thinking behind it. The simple 'mechanics' of active listening are: eye contact, asking supportive questions and listening to the end of what the person is attempting to say, and then summarising, perhaps using the formula *'If I understand correctly, ...'*. Added to this is an awareness of body language, noticing facial expressions, nodding, matching posture, etc. Many teachers will be familiar with these ideas. However, there is more to it than just the mechanics. As Carl Rogers has pointed out, listening is a growth experience for *both* parties, because, when people are listened to sensitively, they tend to listen to themselves with more care and to make clear exactly what they are feeling and thinking: *'Not the least important result of listening is the change that takes place within the listener himself ... listening tends to alter constructively the attitudes of the listener.'* My point here is that the changes take place in the learner by dint of the approach used by the skilled coach, and that while evaluation must be made of the learner's performance, the listening approach should enhance the acquisition process, rather than create a negative feeling.

Types of listening

Carl Rogers and Richard Farson distinguish between different types of listening. The first is *internal* listening, where we listen to the words of the other person, but our attention is on what this means to us personally. In a classroom context, the teacher is often merely receiving information from within him/herself, not really listening to the content but consciously or subconsciously correcting the language. The question of how to transfer the correction to the student so that they learn from it and are able to amend their language, rather than simply feeling that they were wrong in a way that they don't understand, is critical here.

A second type is *focused* listening, where we give all our attention to the other person. When we do this, as teachers or ordinary listeners, we realise that we have a reduced awareness of the outside world since we are focusing on receiving information. Often, this is because we are noting down points we wish to return to later. However, this leaves open to us a more valuable insight, that of how the student's mind is working – if we pay attention to the right things.

A third kind of listening is *global* listening, where we also receive information from the context and environment in which a conversation is taking place.

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If we, as teachers or coaches, are good listeners, we can help our students to be good listeners, too. We believe this is important because it will help them with language acquisition. However, if we are not good listeners ourselves, it will be difficult for us to tell whether our students are listening well or not. Is asking them a question to obtain confirmation of their comprehension of a new grammar point or lexical item enough to know if they have really acquired it?

In coaching terms, the answer is no. In assessing whether a student has successfully acquired new language, it helps if we are able to pay attention to the deeper processes at work. This will help us to anchor those 'eureka' moments when the student gets it right, so that the student continues to use the newly acquired language correctly in the future.

From listening to learning

In order to know how students are acquiring new language, it is crucial to know how they are listening – by somehow getting inside their minds. Otto Scharmer's work tells us more about shifting the structure of our attention and how various types of listening can affect the teacher and the student in their deeper understanding, better processing and, ultimately, more successful composing and performing. Scharmer also talks in terms of different types or levels of listening.

Firstly, there is a process of listening that he calls 'downloading', rather like parrot-fashion repetition of new language, in which habitual judgements about what we 'already know to be true' are reconfirmed. For the student, as for the teacher, this path is loaded with all kinds of false knowledge and potential pitfalls, from the *'What did I tell you yesterday?'* syndrome, to the students' view that they 'have seen it all before'. However, from this listening standpoint, the teacher can evaluate the problem so as to take care of how the student later uses new language. In practice, this means that the teacher can deal with students who have learnt an expression parrot-fashion (and therefore probably without really knowing how or when to use it) and so help them to use it better.

Scharmer's second level of listening is *empathetic* listening, or the capacity to connect directly to another person, which implies a shift beyond the boundaries of our mental-cognitive organisation. It enables us to begin to see how the world unfolds through someone else's eyes.

At a third level, he mentions *generative* listening, which requires us to access our capacity to connect openly to future possibilities that are trying to emerge.

All these styles are fundamental to what I am advocating here, and reinforce what has been written about generative *learning*. Both student and teacher are getting their 'old' self out of the way, in order to open a space that allows for a different sense of 'presence' to manifest. So, if we have noted what is changing, where, when and how this is happening (ie in what contexts, in what ways the right and wrong forms of language – linguistically and culturally speaking – appear), we can reiterate and repeat these, drawing attention to the models we want

Attentive listening

to encourage and, just as importantly, the ones that the student needs to improve. By referencing the student's growing awareness of language goals and the targets that they want to emulate in the language they hear (in films, on the internet, in books and magazines, by their friends and colleagues, etc) we are in effect *listening with* our students and joining them along their journey.

Techniques for listening

The author and coach Nancy Kline provides a good list of what not to do when listening, which is useful in helping us eliminate bad habits. These include:

- *Don't finish the students' sentences.*
- *Don't interrupt them in mid-sentence.*
- *Don't look overly critical.*
- *Don't fill in the pauses with your own stories and anecdotes.*
- *Don't add information and 'rules to follow' during these listening phases.*
- *Don't distract the student (eg by – perhaps unintentionally – looking at the clock, sighing, frowning, etc).*

One of the worst things we do when listening is to give advice. It is important that we don't put our own belief systems in the way of the authentic and valid experience that the other person is going through. Often, giving advice merely goes over the head of the student or conflicts with what they feel they know or what is self-evident. Telling or advising someone to do something is not the same as enabling them to understand and do it.

Many teachers find it helpful to reformulate what a student has said: *'From what you've just said, I understand that you wish to ... If I have understood you correctly, you are saying that ... .'* They also teach their students to use the same structures in order to re-frame ideas and state them clearly. In addition, they use and teach bridging expressions, such as *in order to be clear* and *so that there is no misunderstanding*, and these expressions are conducive to good listening. When used with questions, such as *'When you say that you are demotivated, what are you referring to exactly?'*, they bring about a deeper thinking and listening process. They need, however, to be used in a listening environment that has been sensitively set up.

From process to performance

As Laura Whitworth and her colleagues assert in their book on co-active coaching, *'the story being told belongs to the speaker, and not the listener'*. Rectifying the lapses and mistakes made by a student, when these are the fruit of painstaking processing and faulty composition, means not just correcting them by saying what is wrong, or getting the student to repeat the correct forms ad infinitum. Students who are made to do this (or who are given handouts of the corrected forms or of 'new/better' material to 'learn') often cannot assimilate this information. It is known that people have difficulty taking in and retaining more than seven items of information at a time. This means that we should try to address *how* our students acquire new language skills, rather than overloading them with huge quantities of material to absorb. In other words, we should aid the *process* of acquisition and understanding in a way that will lead to good composing skills and skilful performance, but not by pushing parrot-like behavioural change.

What I am advocating is listening to the evolving speech of the students and drawing attention to new aspects of this carefully and in the rhythm most suited to the learners, thereby leading gracefully from the 'listening together' phase to clearer understanding. The teacher should not move on to new material too quickly or until the students have grasped what is being practised and are starting to use it more skilfully. This can be achieved by having the students adapt and convert the language points to express their own content, supported by the teacher. Corrections are not always converted into better use of language, whereas helping students to listen to themselves and to others who are good models of language use does result in improved performance.

The key is to provide time for more examples of a new language-learning point to be examined, and in different contexts, rather than moving on to new and unconnected ones and piling on masses of new work. The more time given to one point, but promoting a widening awareness of that point through the careful selection of associated models, the better: just as a laptop works better when it has had all the extraneous programs running in parallel temporarily switched off, allowing energy and space to be given to the one program that needs it.

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By spending more time listening to our students (and not rushing them through the next hoop), we will lead them better to where *they* need to be. Students, in turn, should be encouraged to listen to themselves and to pay attention to their personal inner dialogue, in order to learn how new language is being processed and integrated into active use.

The writers I have mentioned in this article are renowned for the impact their ideas are having in the world of business. These ideas have created tangible improvements in communications which have led to fundamental changes in thinking and performing, resulting in massive benefits in financial terms and in levels of satisfaction in work and business relationships. Language learning is part of the rapid development of cultural and personal effectiveness and, as teachers, we can make a life-changing contribution to our students and their current and future employers, colleagues and customers. ETp

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