

# **The importance of listening to international students**

**Tony Lynch**

**inaugural lecture - 16 May 2012**

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# Outline of lecture

- Processes of listening
- Resolving comprehension problems
- Why listening is important for international students
- Their perceptions of lectures
- Making lectures more accessible to international students

# Knowledge used in listening

- **SCHEMATIC**

“TOP”

content

process

- **CONTEXT**

situation (who, where, when)

co-text

- **LANGUAGE**

“BOTTOM”

vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation

# Language

Edinburgh, autumn 1977

“How will I give you the money?”

# Context

Out of context

“What is game, sir?”

# Context

January 2012

Checkout at Savacentre, Cameron Toll

**Assistant:** “What is game, sir?”

**Me:** “Pardon?”

**Assistant:** “What is British game, sir?”

**Me:** “Sorry, I don’t understand”

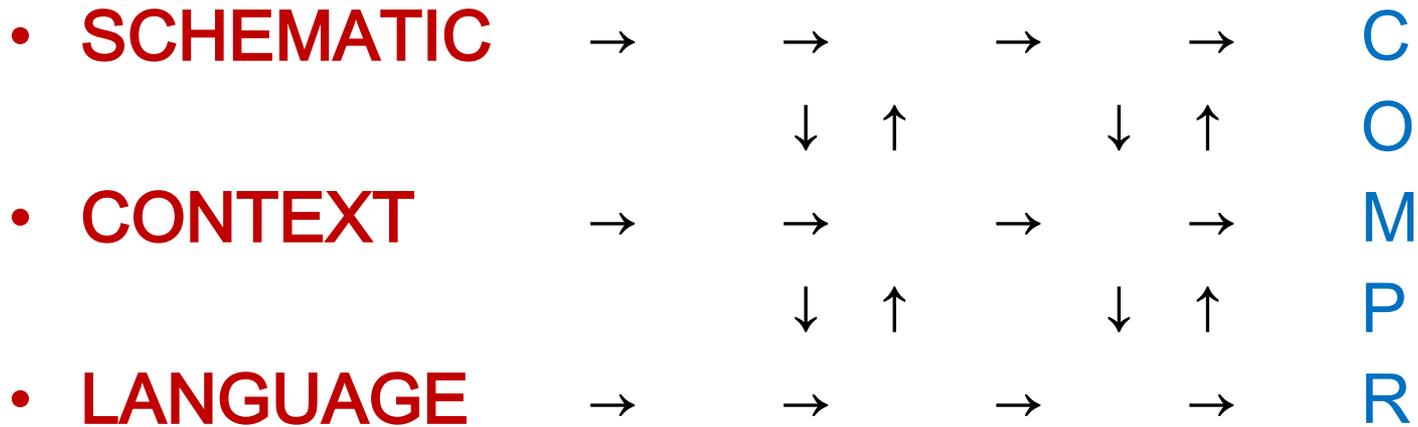
**Assistant:** *(gesturing towards the items that he has already checked through)* “What is British Game, sir?”

**Me:** “Ah, right... um well, rabbit, pheasant, venison – that sort of thing”

**Assistant:** “Thank you, sir”

# Parallel processing

“TOP”



“BOTTOM”

# **A Spanish example**

TV news programme in Asturias, Spain

Male newsreader

Backdrop: Photograph of young woman

Newsreader: “... *lanzadora de jabalina*”

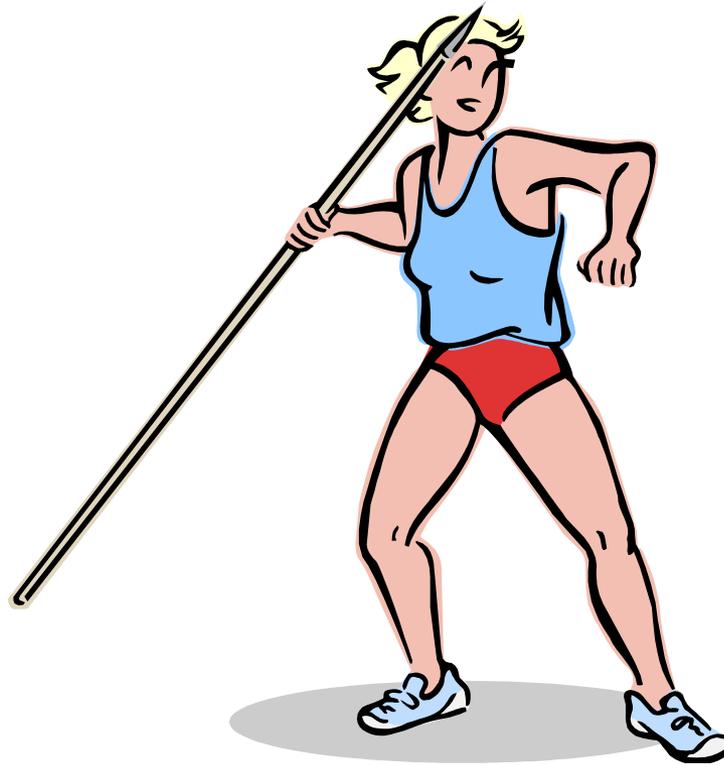
*My language knowledge*

- *lanzar* = to throw
- *-adora* = agentive (someone who..)
- *jabalí* = wild boar
- *-ína* = diminutive

# Una lanzadora de jabalina



# Jabalina



# Resolving problems in conversation

In two-way listening:

- negotiation of meaning (conversational repair)

Speakers make adjustments of

- input
- interaction
- information

# Adjustments of input

## Grammar

- shorter and less complex utterances
- increased use of present tense

## Vocabulary

- use of more common vocabulary
- avoidance of idioms
- repetition of nouns, rather than using pronouns

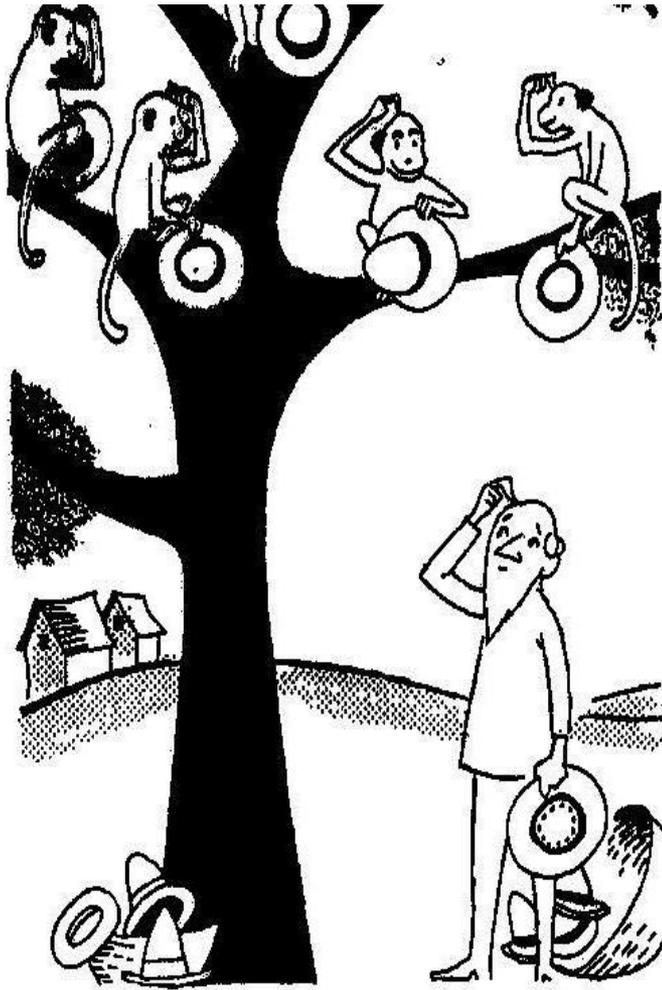
# Adjustments of input

## **Pronunciation**

- slower and clearer articulation
- greater stress differentiation
- wider pitch range

## **Non-verbal**

- longer pauses
- more gestures
- increased use of facial expression



# Avoiding idioms

**Native listener** - 'and so finally the penny dropped'

**Advanced listener** - 'and then it dawned on him'

**Intermediate listener** - 'and then **he realised**'

**Elementary listener** - 'and then + **he thought** +  
**and he realised** (*long pause*) + + **it was easy**'

# Adjustments of interaction

## **Confirmation check**

L makes sure they've understood what S means

## **Comprehension check**

S makes sure that L has understood

## **Clarification request**

L asks S to explain or rephrase

## **Repetition**

L or S repeats their own or the other's words

# Adjustments of interaction

## Reformulation

S rephrases the content of what they have said

## Completion

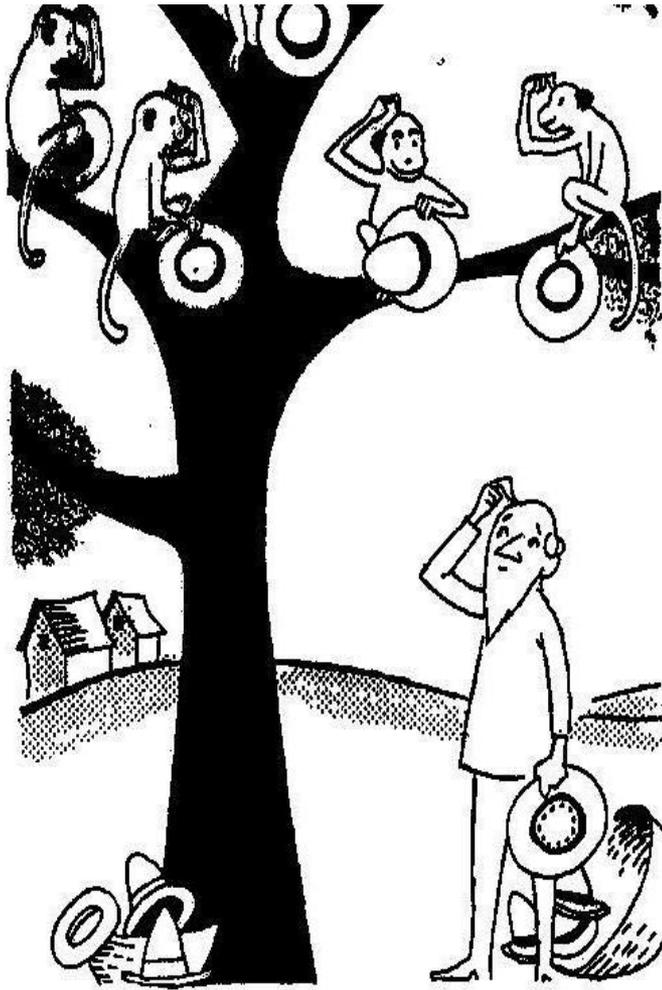
L completes S's utterance

## Backtracking

S returns to a point in the conversation, up to which they believe that L has understood

# Adjustments of information choice

- More descriptive details
- More explicit logical links
- Filling in of assumed gaps in listener's socio-cultural knowledge



# Assumed socio-cultural gaps

**Native** - 'this was rather puzzling + so he takes off his hat and scratches his head'

**Advanced** - 'and he takes off his hat and scratches his head + in confusion'

**Intermediate** - 'well the man doesn't know what to do + he's very puzzled + and so he scratches his head **which means I don't know what to do**'

**Elementary** - 'the old man is + very puzzled and worried about + how to get his hats + from the monkeys (*pause*) and he takes off his hat and scratches his head + **as people often do + when they feel puzzled**

# International students' conversation: Combined adjustments

**Isabel:** I was telling one of my friends + 'yeah we have all the streets full of orange trees' and + he asked me + 'but don't you eat the oranges?' + 'no they're very bitter it's impossible they're + really bitter' and +

**Yuko:** it must be wild one + + wild orange tree + + + **wild?**

**Khalid:** **huh?**

**Isabel:** **wild?**

**Yuko:** yes so nobody tries to eat them + the oranges from +  
uh + +

**Isabel:** **the street?**

**Yuko:** the street yes

**Isabel:** no no + but do you know why do you use that orange for?

**Yuko:** for marmalade

**Khalid:** what?

**Yuko:** marmalade + sweet sort of jam

**Isabel:** yeah but for the + + queens of England but not for us + we don't use it at home + + just to throw to each other

**Khalid:** threw?

**Yuko:** *(laughs)*

**Isabel:** yeah it's true + at Christmas I was having a party with my friend + + just a dinner very quiet + and suddenly + + we went in the + balcony

**Khalid:** hmhm

**Isabel:** somebody throw at us an orange

**Yuko:** hah!

**Isabel:** it went *(makes sound effect)* POOSH! to the wall

**Khalid:** is that traditional way to + + celebrate something or what?

**Isabel:** no

**Khalid:** just to + + annoy?

**Isabel:** to bother us  
*(laughter)*

# Why is listening important for international students?

Access to

- academic knowledge
- informal language learning in the university community

# Access to academic knowledge

*Test of English at Matriculation*

Vocabulary, Listening, Reading and Writing

Study of TEAM's validity (1994)

- 291 students on taught Masters programmes
- Predictive validity: compared **TEAM** (and other) scores with **academic outcome** a year later

# TEAM as predictor

- Overall correlation between TEAM and academic outcome: 0.32 ( $p < 0.01$ )
- Approx. 10% of variance in degree performance explained by English ability
- (International, large-scale tests: IELTS and TOEFL = approx. 0.35)

# TEAM Listening scores

- Of the four TEAM sections, only Listening was statistically significant: 0.31 ( $p < 0.01$ )
- Why Listening and not the other skills?

# Possible reasons

- Likely to be indirect: poor listening skills in Semester 1 cannot be compensated for by reading
- Psychological effects of poor listening: loss of confidence, anxiety, self-comparison with other students
- Poor listening = barrier → isolation

# Access to informal language learning

- Potential for learning, rather than actual
- Many ISs report finding it difficult to establish friendships
- Conflict between social roles of 'student' and 'language learner'

# The 'good language learner'

*“(Learners should) practice saying ‘huh?’, echoing parts of sentences they do not understand... They should be told to use ‘uh-uh’, or whatever fillers they can, to show they really are trying. If the learner gets to recycle the same topic several times with the same or different native speakers, he will then have the vocabulary... He can recycle the topic again with another person and pay attention to his syntax... he should be taught not to give up in any contact with a native speaker”*

(Hatch 1978: 134)

*“one gets the picture of a very well-defined social role, when one imagines the learner: assiduously... repeating bits of the previous utterance, blocking out interruptions by saying uh-uh,... sticking like glue to unfortunate natives who said hello...*

*The picture that emerges is that of **an utter pest**. And this the learner, unless he's an unusually callous or charming person, is likely to be acutely aware of.”*

(Harder 1980: 269)

# Japanese undergraduate

*“But I am the only foreign student so I can’t ask very much”*

# ILSE project

## **Informal Listening and Speaking Encounters**

email survey of Edinburgh postgraduates

- types of listening and speaking practice they engaged in
- their advice for incoming students

# Self-assessed progress in listening

Group	I have made...	Total (n=105)
A	... <b>less</b> progress than I expected	54
B	... <b>as much</b> progress as I expected	41
C	... <b>more</b> progress than I expected	10

# Assessed progress and time spent daily

Group (progress)	No. of students	Listening [mins]	Talking [mins]	Overall [mins]
A (less)	54	86	65	151
B (as much)	41	91	94	185
C (more)	10	64	<b>127</b>	191

# Interviews

- Interviewees:  
ex-students from in-session Listening course;  
pre- and post-course listening scores  
8 invited (3 Low, 2 Middle, 3 High)

# Cuban PhD student

*“Try to be involved, don't isolate yourself. When I arrived here I felt quite rejected because my English was not very clear as I would like it to be. But... the best way to improve your English is to speak freely with people even if your English is not very good. People here are sensitive when they realise you are not a native. They help you. They don't correct you, but they pay attention and they make an effort to understand you...”*

# Chinese MSc student

*“In China is a famous philosophy ‘Speak loudly, speak clearly and speak quickly’. So just learn by heart all the papers. If you have good oral English, listening is not a problem. If I recite all the papers in New Concept English, so it's no problem listening.”*

# Implications

Need to:

- Persuade international students that informal conversation is more than “Just talking”
- Encourage students to listen out for **potential learning points** in informal conversation

Example: “A bottle of”

**A  
B  
O  
U  
T  
  
L  
O  
V  
E**

# **Internationalisation: Listening to students at Edinburgh**

- What do they say about their experience of listening to lectures?
- What is their advice to lecturers on making teaching more effective?

# The basic issue

*“I am a non-native speaker student... In fact, the language problem might be a problem just for me. But the University is likely to increase foreigner students by about 30%, maybe”*

# International students' perceptions of lectures

## ISPOL

- Data collected in autumn 2011
- PGs and UGs who had taken TEAM
- 126 replies

# Common advice to lecturers

1. Tell students when you prefer questions
2. Control your speed of speaking
3. Use visuals such as PowerPoint
4. Exploit different modes of communication: speech, writing, image and body language
5. Guide students' notetaking

6. Check students' comprehension by asking questions
7. Create a relaxed atmosphere
8. Look out for signs that students are having difficulty following you
9. Introduce variety into the lecture
10. Encourage students to ask questions
11. Adapt examples to students' background knowledge
12. Use clear 'signposting'

## Advice ranked in first place (n = 126)

<b>Advice</b>	<b>Ranked first</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<i>Control your speed of speaking</i>	27	21.4
<i>Create a relaxed atmosphere</i>	15	11.9
<i>Exploit all four modes of communication</i>	14	11.1
<i>Adapt your examples</i>	12	9.5

# Speed of speaking

*“Because almost students use English as first language, the teacher not notice the speak speed, it is hard for me to understand the exactly what he/she said...”*

# Speed of speaking

*“As a non-native English speaker, I really wish lecturers can slow a little bit down their speed. And when talking about the important knowledge points, they can repeat and emphasize them. At the beginning of the semester it would be good if lecturers controlled the speed of the speaking”*

## Advice items ranked 1, 2 or 3 (n = 126)

<b>Advice</b>	<b>Frequency of selection</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<i>Control your speed of speaking</i>	52	41.3
<i>Look out for signs of difficulty</i>	46	36.5
<i>Adapt examples for your audience</i>	39	30.9
<i>Create a relaxed atmosphere</i>	35	27.8

# Look out for signs of difficulty



# Adapting examples

*“I would like to say lecturers may pay more attention on the culture diversity in the classes, especially when they are giving examples”*

*“If the lecturers would like to give some examples that might be unfamiliar to Asian students, they had better explain more about it beforehand, because of culture difference”*

# Relaxed atmosphere

*“Lecturers should be humorous to create a relaxed atmosphere for the students”*

*“Please do not always tell jokes that are only understood by British people or Europeans, because not everyone could understand, or even catch your jokes”*

## Question from a student

Dear sir:

I heard this sentence in a lecture and I don't know what it's meaning. The sentence is

**"If a man is standing in the middle of the forest speaking and there is no woman around to hear him... is he still wrong?"**

What's the meaning and why all the students laugh?

# Other issues mentioned by students

- Timing
- Supplementary materials
- Use of language (vocabulary, intonation)
- Assumptions of shared knowledge

# Supplementary materials

*“Before the lecture, the lecturer could send the slides to students or post it on web, so that we could preview the content of the lecture”*

*“If possible for teachers to give the reading material or reference before the every lecture, that will do much help for me, because I could be familiar with the new words and get a background of the knowledge”*

# Assumptions of shared knowledge

*“Do not assume that all students have the same background on the subject matter”*

*“I suppose lecturers should introduce the background of some important technique or concept. Then we will probably more quickly keep this knowledge in memory”*

# Conclusion

## ISPOL pointers:

- Speak slower
- Keep an eye out for signs of listening 'distress'
- Ensure examples are accessible
- Create opportunities for students' questions

# Ways of increasing lecture accessibility

- Cover less ground in lectures
- Move some lecture material on-line
- Allow 'question pauses' (2-3 mins)

‘No amount of meticulous planning, careful delivery and explicit signalling can guarantee the comprehensibility of a lecture, and more needs to be done, through lecturer training programmes, to suggest ways of dealing with comprehension problems when they arise’

- Cover less ground in lectures
- +
- Move some lecture material on-line
- +
- Allow 'question pauses' (2-3 mins)

**= promote 'academic conversation'**



**Any questions?**

[A.J.Lynch@ed.ac.uk](mailto:A.J.Lynch@ed.ac.uk)