

# Listening Methodology:

Top-Down vs. Bottom-Up

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## Introduction

There is an increasing interest to introduce the TOEIC Test (Test of English for International Communication) into the class as part of growing use of really authentic listening comprehension materials, especially at the college level of TEFL, which is also addressing a dire demand rising in business globalization as a common means of mutual communication across the world. As David Crystal put in the *English as a Global Language* (2003), there is no one refuting the 'momentum of growth has become so great that there is nothing likely to stop its continued spread as a global lingua franca,' because that is the case at the moment across the world.

For learners to be able to comprehend spoken English is a *sine qua non* for their global communication and an issue of burning concern at that. In the TOEIC English, especially in its Part II: Question-Response, they can familiarize themselves with listening to an authentic English to learn how to make head or tail of what is going on in the dialogue.

## To Process Top-Down vs. Bottom-Up

Viewed from its authenticity, English language students in general have been taught and possibly exposed to at school, have never failed to lack in its genuineness, i. e. naturalness or actuality they should feel in the real-world use of the language. It had been adapted so far and is often tailored for classroom use or for the sake of instruction in class, so there seems to have been a gap not easily filled up between the language 'learned to use' and the one 'used to learn.'

In order to help them bridge the gap, learners or listeners are recommended to take advantages of their own 'life experience,' that is, their previous knowledge called *content* as well as *textual schemata* (Helgesen in *Issues in learning to listen*, pp. 6-7, 2003), irrespective of experience in their language 1 or language 2. Most of the learners are usually old enough to have acquired some knowledge or some experience through their life, and their prior knowledge/experience helps them guess, predict, or further infer what will come next. This is to process their here-and-now new situation *top-down* so that they may manage to work their way through and virtually, land the likely, plausible meaning of the new situation. With over-reliance on top-down processing, however, the listeners may not

grasp well the specificity of the situation. Therefore, they will in turn require *bottom-up* processing, which should complement what *processing top-down* lacks in enhancing their effective listening comprehension.

In 'schema theory' in reading, it is said that productive comprehension requires both top-down and bottom-up processing and this is to acquire information actively, not passively. This really is true of listening comprehension (L/C).

Language 2 (L 2) learners in general tend to think the theory is true of their own language (L 1), or their mother tongue, because they will not think of applying the theory to their present target language. To speak of L 2 in their learning, especially at their early stage, they tend to think for no reason that L 1 is one thing and L 2 another. Thus, with this in mind, they have formed a preconceived idea that there is hardly any use they can make of L 1 in their process of L 2 learning in any way. But in fact, that is not the case, they just can see nothing between. As a matter of fact, this theory does not refer to any difference between these two Languages 1 and 2. Reflecting upon the varieties of real cases of their own language, as is seen very naturally and not unusually at all in L 1 they can not see why they should not bring them to use in L 2. Why not in L 2? They make no difference in terms of listening comprehension, particularly in its conception, which is the same with the authenticity of their target language. Really paradoxical as it may sound, the more authentic the language sounds, the less unpredictable it becomes. All they need to do is to know what is happening is the same as in Language 1.

### **“User Authenticity” and Class Activity**

Taking into consideration the listening comprehension materials familiar to listeners, a pop priority should be placed upon their authenticity as in 'authenticity of language input; authenticity of task; authenticity of event; authenticity of learner experience' (O'Malley, 1996) from the viewpoints of 'pedagogically vs. real-world-task based.' (Brown and Menasche, TESOL '93, Atlanta). I quote these teaching principles offered by Rost (2002):

1. Language input (texts) should aim for “user authenticity” by:
  - trying to be appropriate to the *current needs* of the learners
  - reflecting *real world usage*.
2. Text should aim to be “genuine” in that they have natural features native speaker usage: speed, rhythm, intonation, pausing, idea density, etc.  
(Helgesen. *ILL*, p. 15, 2003)

As for “user authenticity,” non-native instructors may have to, or would do better to, use the preceding content/textual schemata. In the following question-response problems (from the TOEIC Test/Part II) for learners to answer right after they listen one time only as they do in the real world, not accompanied by anything in writing to read, their performance depends solely upon how appropriately they can process their listening at once

*top-down* and *bottom-up*, availing themselves of every piece of 'knowledge of life experience or situational routines.' Just as in real-life verbal activities, there are neither drills nor practice before answering, which will be sure to spoil a real sense of actuality they are to be exposed to in Language 2. No wonder, it may be with a degree of tension or uneasiness that they are all ears while listening.

In their actual class, preceded by the task above of the top-down processing, the learners may have a ten-to-fifteen-minute session of 'guessing and predicting' each meaning of a vocabulary of 10 words given in a game called 'Teacher's Talk' and 'Peer Communication without Language 1.' In the game, they have some practice of *bottom-up processing* approach and are expected to be able to make head or tail at least of what they hear, followed by clarification through 'comprehension input' of grammar/structure & sound points characteristic of so-called simulated authentic English, such features as colloquial, idiomatic expressions, elision, assimilation, sandhi and so on.

Below are sample texts in a tape-script handout: the first 10 Question-Response problems (taken from out of 30 ones regularly set in the TOEIC Test/ Listening Comprehension Part II) can be cited to show how both top-down and bottom-up processing contribute to enhance the listeners' comprehension competence of the simulated "authentic/genuine English" in class. These ten problems are divided into three groups I to III and put in order of authenticity density perceived especially in a response part of each adjacent pair:

#### Sample Texts

##### **Group I:**

24. Is the project proceeding as planned?
  - A. A month at least.
  - B. Every two weeks.
  - C. We are a little behind.
27. When did we fall behind schedule?
  - A. After the computer broke down.
  - B. I can't see the end of the line.
  - C. We never fell down.
30. When does John think you'll get out of the session?
  - A. I think so, too.
  - B. Probably about 4 o'clock.
  - C. He won't learn anything.

##### **Group II:**

21. Why don't we go have something to eat after the meeting?
  - A. I don't have any more.
  - B. That would be very nice.
  - C. Because I met him before.
25. How about joining us for dinner?
  - A. I'd like to very much.
  - B. I'm already a member.
  - C. I didn't want it.
28. Would you like some iced tea?
  - A. Yes, I like it.

- B. No, I don't ski.
  - C. Thank you, I would.
29. How did you like the new auto exhibit?
- A. At the museum.
  - B. It was excellent.
  - C. By looking at it.

### Group III

22. Marie usually keeps the accounts, doesn't she?
- A. She will leave it at the cleaner's.
  - B. She is an accurate booker.
  - C. There's a store in the warehouse.
23. Can we sign the papers without our lawyers here?
- A. We better wait for them.
  - B. No, they aren't.
  - C. At eleven o'clock.
26. Would you like the demonstration of the product?
- A. Yes, I'd like to very much..
  - B. Yes, if it's not too much trouble.
  - C. Yes, they are available now.

(from TOEIC Test sample by ETS (3 CIC 2, 1982), Part II: QQ 21-30)

N. B.: As is seen in each question-response problem of the group category above, about the same arrangement can be made out of the typical 10 problems taken from the other five TOEIC Test books of Barron's, Prentice Hall's, Longman's, Kaplan's and Oxford's respectively. See in the attached supplements (i), (ii), (iii), (iv) and (v) for reference.

## To Analyze the Activity

### A. Top-down vs. bottom-up processing

In order for the preceding schema theory to be activated, learners need to be provided with sufficient background information and knowledge which enables them to successfully predict or infer a flow of events until they can attain the solution of each problem. Irrespective of their L 1 or L 2, their knowledge schemata can be monitored and activated to decode or integrate and to analyze or synthesize in the course of processing what they have heard before they can draw conclusions, make inferences and reach their final best answer successfully.

As can be seen in each of the preceding categorized groups, more decoding of lexical and grammatical forms are involved in Group I, and more or less idiomatic and formal or formulaic responses demanded in Group II. Each question type in these first two groups, particularly in GI, requires more 'local' or 'direct' understanding and responses to what the listeners hear. The processing skills used to get the correct answer are mostly based upon bottom-up processing. The listeners' comprehension of the text is rather vocabulary-bound and dependent upon their knowledge of linguistic structure they encounter there in what is said. Therefore, they must be provided with a 'local' understanding of the text before they can answer correctly. See Question 27 in GI or Question 28 in GII.

In Q 27, it is dependent upon their knowledge about how to answer the question beginning with 'When?' and about each meaning of words, along with their understanding of the linguistic structure used here whether they can make it in the question. Q 28 is not the same at all in any respect as in Q 27. Here in Q 28, 'Would you like...?' is not as a question which would be all right if the listeners gave an answer of 'Yes or No.' Instead, they are being asked about 'How they like?' However, these two questions have something in common. They both demand their pre-existing, local knowledge of specific details in the text. Some are about words, language structure/grammar, etc. and others about how to respond in a sentence pattern. They are all 'local,' all of them acquired by the bottom-up processing.

Unlike in Groups I & II, the problems in G III can not be answered as easily or directly until the content or message being transferred can be appropriately grasped by the listeners. They must be able to use the context or 'global' understanding of the text while listening. Their answers/responses should be content-based, or rather individually-created statement. Hence, they are not necessarily based upon patterned or set forms of the language expressions. Learners may sometimes hear '*features of spoken discourse such as false starts, fillers, involuntary repetitions or redundancy* (Tsui and Fullilove, 1998),' unfortunately, though not as often seen in texts used in class as desired. This is why L 2 in class tends to be called 'less authentic/genuine.'

Seen in Q 23 in GIII, the listeners may expect a response of 'Yes or No,' but such an automatic, formulaic response is usually understood. Instead, in the real world, they are demanded to respond or express themselves as they think fit to, by guessing from context, or their 'global' understanding of the text through top-down processing in order to decode language heard. Aided by their previous knowledge/experience, whether in L 1 or L 2 as was discussed earlier, their comprehension or interpretation of spoken words as a whole in the situation will be needed. Based upon their understanding, they would have to negotiate the meaning of English they hear, which could bring them '*to create plausible expectations of what they are about to hear* (Tsui and Fullilove, 1998).' Skilled listeners will be better able to cope with problems such as encountered in GIII, as rapidly and accurately as possible.

## **B. Levels of listening comprehension and its difficulty**

As far as the TOEIC English and its teaching & learning go in the classroom, it is 'authentic input' that must be placed as the top priority. That is to say, it is the essence or key of 'genuineness'. Genuineness refers to features of colloquial style of 'real-time' planning, more here-and-now orientation or 'lack of planning,' which characterize everyday spoken discourse.

There are sure to be those who may believe that 'authentic input' is too difficult for students to handle or next to impossible for them to be taught. However, by 'chunking' the input into manageable segments and providing selective stress on its specific factors or some gradability of authenticity especially for the beginners, instructors can utilize the preceding materials available at hand in ways that are useful as well as productive to learners at all levels. Therefore, what is relevant material, i.e. 'the right stuff,' and what is central or the kernel to all progress in their language learning needs to be identified.

## 1) Students at university/college as adult learners:

They are almost all false beginners, all aware of the fact that situated language is the basis of natural, real-time language use. They are old enough to know that comprehension of this situated authentic language is the target of virtually all language learners. They also know what has been lacking so far in their traditional/conventional language instruction. The lack of realism, just a stress on a piece of education, not coping with the authenticity in the virtual world, has got them disillusioned with the language education at school or even at college/university. Unfortunately, it really does lack actual-world relevance.

Language input should aim to be 'genuine', i. e. involving features naturally occurring language with and between native speakers: speed, rhythm, intonation, pausing, idea density, etc. (Rost, 2002).

## 2) Lexical and phonological processing:

The listener's prior knowledge/experience related to real-world people, place and actions is accessed through 'phonological tagging (Ross, 2002)' of the language that is heard, and the phonological code of the L 2 has been studied in the context of word recognition (often called 'word-spotting').

Speech perception and word recognition are the bottom-processes in listening. If the listener is not skilled enough in the preceding processing, he or she will rely more exclusively on the top-down processing, that is, semantic expectations and generalizations. These semantic factors contributing to EFLLs (English-as-Foreign-Language Learners) cannot be emphasized too much at the very moment.

## Conclusion

On reflection upon the listening comprehension class, the genuine English, particularly its speed and prosody, can make the students unusually wide-awake and also sensitize them to what is authentic of the language unlike before. Further, to their instructor's relief, fewer and fewer of them say that the language they hear in the TOEIC Test is not a true, genuine one but a false, pedagogical one, artificially rendered for their class use only.

Even if authentic texts and listening tests based on them are more and more presented in class, however, the English language is always limited somehow and it can never be the same as in the real world. Thus, the learners and the test candidates must be alerted to the fact that, in reality, they hear people talk to each other not only in words, but also listen to *a series of complex, nonverbal, contexting communication without the use of words* (Hall, 1990). It follows then that their task is not merely to translate one language to another. Actually, *in juxtaposition to words (ibid.)*, they may have to negotiate the nonverbal communication whether or not in their target language, so that they may grasp the right meaning. By so doing, by all means, they would be well-advised to avail themselves of whatever has been so far brought into their interactions as language learners and language users with their natural environment, even if in L 1 or possibly in L 2.

Whether through processing top-down or bottom-up, in their listening comprehension, it cannot be stressed too much that the learners be reminded of the very importance of communications in L 2. This need is nowhere more strongly felt than in one of the consequences of globalization. For all this trend in their backdrop, it is needless to say that they go beyond their own culture in order to be globalized and socialized. Within culture, immersed in it, they can enhance their L/C competence, can't they? I wonder if we can transcend our culture, and what good it does at all. Instead, it will be more practical and rewarding to know that we have something essential in common as an organism on the globe, which seems to enable us to globally better understand each other in a language at first. For still further understanding beyond individual cultures, 'the task is far from simple, yet understanding ourselves and the world we have created - and which in turn creates us - is perhaps the single most important task facing mankind today (Hall, 1989).' However, this is not the subject here we put forward.

Last but not least, it does not seem easy to draw a definite boundary between categorized Groups I-III. In Group I and Group III, some responses may belong in both, the former part of the exchange in G I sounding direct, while the latter does in G III. Eventually, each sentence of this type will demand the listener's own interpretation of the language used in it. His/her idiosyncratic response, answer or just a statement will be asked for. Appropriateness is required against each backdrop of the text.

Would I go too far, if I should recapitulate *authenticity* of English and its very significance in FLA, for a test taker of the TOEIC Test L/C Part II?

Language is not seen as input, but as a tool for getting other things done. The focus is not on the way symbolic systems are acquired, and grammatical and lexical paradigms are used to encode reality, but on the way language practices are organized within members of a community of language users. As novice members learn from more expert members how to use language accurately and appropriately, they enact social relationships and other socio-cultural phenomena that will make them into expert members. (Kramsch, 2002).

In order to manage to be productive with their communications in the real world, the L 2 learners should never fail to be exposed to 'the exquisite negotiation of meaning that is necessary for successful communication in social contexts, and this negotiation is considered to be central to a communicative curriculum (Kramsch, 2002)'.

Supplement (i) (from Barron's *The TOEIC Test/Model Test 5* Part II QQ 21-30)

**Group I** (3 instances out of 10):

21. Where were you waiting?
  - A. I was waiting on the corner.
  - B. I weigh the same as you.
  - C. Because it was raining.
24. When did you finish the project?
  - A. Late last night.
  - B. The slide was projected on the screen.

- C. The horse finished the race.
29. Which newspaper do you read?
- A. The magazine is at the newsstand..
- B. I already read that book..
- C. I only read the morning papers

**Group II** (1/10):

23. Why don't you join us for dinner?
- A. I didn't join the club until December.
- B. Thank you. I'd love to.
- C. These coins are thinner.

**Group III** (6/10):

22. Which shop sells children's books?
- A. The library has lots of books.
- B. There's a children's bookstore in the shopping center.
- C. I read books to my children.
25. What are your plans for this afternoon?
- A. The plane leaves at noon.
- B. I think I'll play golf.
- C. The planning meeting was yesterday.
26. Excuse me. Is this the express train?
- A. Express mail is a one-day service.
- B. You may leave the room.
- C. No, it's across the platform.
27. Who delivered the package?
- A. The house keeper packed the bags.
- B. A messenger brought it this morning
- C. She won't tell her age.
28. How will we get to the airport?
- A. The plane is late.
- B. They met us at the airport.
- C. We'll take a taxi.
30. When will you return?
- A. I'll be back after lunch.
- B. She returned the book
- C. Take the first right turn.

Supplement (ii): (from *Prentice Hall's The TOEIC Test/Practice Test 5 Part II QQ 21-30*)

**Group I** (6/10):

21. (Woman) Who's in charge in this office?  
(Man B) (A) Mr. Phillips, our manager.  
(B) Every afternoon.  
(C) About two hundred dollars.
23. (Woman) Why are you studying French?  
(Man A) (A) My brother's family lives there.  
(B) For no reason except that I enjoy it.  
(C) Because I just got up.
24. (Woman) How much can this trailer hold?  
(Man B) (A) It's two meters deep.



- (B) About 15 metric tons.  
 (C) No. We bought it in January.
25. (Man B) How often do you wax your car?  
 (Man A) (A) At noon.  
 (B) Only in the evening.  
 (C) Once a month, except in winter.
27. (Man B) Which company do you think we'll finally go with?  
 (Woman) (A) To Melbourne.  
 (B) It's growing very fast.  
 (C) Star Enterprises, I'd say.
29. (Man B) Did you hear that our program was canceled?  
 (Woman) (A) No, I've never been there.  
 (B) Yes, and I'm very disappointed.  
 (C) I'm sure she'll be a good manager.

**Group II (2/10):**

26. (Man B) Could you please take these papers to Mr. Jones?  
 (Woman) (A) We've already met, thank you.  
 (B) She'll meet you at the entrance.  
 (C) Yes, right away. Is there anything else?
28. (Man B) Hi, June. This is Tom. Are you busy?  
 (Woman) (A) Yes, I am. Can I call you back later?  
 (B) We won't be able to finish it until September.  
 (C) No. I haven't been asked.

**Group III (2/10):**

22. (Woman) What did you name your daughter?  
 (Man B) (A) She'll meet us at around noon.  
 (B) We call her Elaine Marie.  
 (C) She was born on Wednesday.
30. (Man B) Do you really think the matter will come to a vote?  
 (Woman) (A) Next Sunday.  
 (B) Everybody says it will.  
 (C) Yes, if the weather is good.

Supplement (iii): (from *Longman's The TOEIC Test (Advanced Course)*/Practice Test 2 Part II  
 QQ 21-30)

**Group I (3/10):**

25. Where does the executive committee meet?  
 (A) In one month.  
 (B) At regular intervals.  
 (C) In the conference room.
27. Why are the shades drawn?  
 (A) Since it was too long.  
 (B) Because I don't like the sun.  
 (C) The windows are open.
29. Where was Dr. Siddiqui born?  
 (A) The keys are on the table.  
 (B) Her nurse bored.  
 (C) He was born in England.

**Group II (2/10):**

21. Why don't we eat Chinese food tonight?  
 (A) The Chinese have an ancient culture.  
 (B) That sounds like a good idea.  
 (C) Because we're out of fuel.
28. May I use your phone?  
 (A) Yes, go ahead.  
 (B) International calls have to go through the operator.  
 (C) She's used to that system.

**Group III (5/10):**

22. How often does this commuter train arrive?  
 (A) Every twelve minutes.  
 (B) Not on Sundays.  
 (C) Arrivals to the left.
23. Are there four of you in your party?  
 (A) Yes, the party begins at four.  
 (B) No, they're here.  
 (C) No, there are only three.
24. What are you doing with that folder?  
 (A) In one month.  
 (B) It usually goes on top.  
 (C) In the conference room.
26. Who is going to fix the leak?  
 (A) He likes the heat  
 (B) The plumber will.  
 (C) They're arriving this week.
30. When are we going to eat?  
 (A) I'm not going with you.  
 (B) We'll probably eat around six.  
 (C) The meeting is at eight.

Supplement (iv): (from *Kaplan's The TOEIC Test/Practice Test Part II QQ 21-30*)

**Group I (2/10):**

Number 21 Do you have an additional pair of bookends?

- (A) Yes, this pear is delicious.  
 (B) Yes, I have some spare time.  
 (C) Yes, I have an extra pair.

Number 29 Who will be taking notes at the meeting?

- (A) The receptionist sent a note about the meeting.  
 (B) I'll be taking the day off.  
 (C) Mr. Lorenzo's secretary will do it.

**Group II (1/10):**

Number 30 What would you like to drink with your meal?

- (A) I believe I'll have some iced tea.  
 (B) Could I have a piece of Chocolate cake, please?  
 (C) I'd prefer a table next to the window, if possible.

**Group III (7/10):**

Number 22 Are gratuities already added in, or are they separate?

- (A) They're included in the price.  
(B) You can pack whatever you like.  
(C) Yes, the price includes all meals.
- Number 23 Why do you want to advertise in the trade publications?  
(A) No, let's skip the trade show this year.  
(B) A lot of our trade is done overseas.  
(C) It's a good way to attract customers.
- Number 24 What are the arrangements for publicizing the General's visit?  
(A) We've arranged a hotel room.  
(B) The television station is sending a reporter.  
(C) All public buildings are open to visitors.
- Number 25 You've had experience with this particular software, haven't you?  
(A) No, I'm not familiar with it at all.  
(B) Men's wear is located on the second floor.  
(C) Yes, I think it's very expensive.
- Number 26 Why didn't she attend the medical conference yesterday?  
(A) There was a conflict in her schedule.  
(B) She will attend to it immediately.  
(C) There wasn't any medicine in here.
- Number 27 When will payroll be finished?  
(A) We get paid every two weeks.  
(B) I had the last roll with my coffee.  
(C) I hope to have everything done by Wednesday.
- Number 28 Did you send an invitation to Mr. Maxwell?  
(A) No, I registered late.  
(B) Yes, he was on my list.  
(C) No, it is on backorder.

Supplement (v): (from *OXFORD The TOEIC Test/Practice Test 3 Part II QQ 21-30*)

**Group I** (3/10):

21. Where is the phone?  
(A) I'm applying for a loan.  
(B) It's on the desk.  
(C) We can run there.
23. Where is the embassy?  
(A) It's behind the parking lot.  
(B) The ambassador is upstairs.  
(C) I've been there myself.
26. Why not form a partnership with them?  
(A) I don't know them well enough.  
(B) They're already married.  
(C) My partner is out of town.

**Group II** (1/10):

22. May I help you?  
(A) May is always pleasant here.

- (B) I can't help it.
- (C) Yes, I'd appreciate that.

**Group III (7/10):**

24. Have you spoken with the travel agent yet?
  - (A) No, I prefer to travel by jet.
  - (B) She spoke of you often.
  - (C) Yes, and she's made the reservation.
25. Should we take the train or the bus?
  - (A) The train is more convenient.
  - (B) You really should.
  - (C) I waited for you at the bus stop.
27. When is your client coming?
  - (A) He'll stay overnight.
  - (B) He's coming for a whole week.
  - (C) We're expecting her any minute.
28. Do you have any small change?
  - (A) We only have medium and large sizes.
  - (B) Yes, here are some coins.
  - (C) No, there are quite a few changes.
29. How is Mr. Bernnet doing?
  - (A) Much better, I'm told.
  - (B) We've been so busy.
  - (C) He's been doing the payroll.
30. Was our committee chosen for the award?
  - (A) Unfortunately, it wasn't.
  - (B) We chose not to attend.
  - (C) He won the vote.

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