STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING AURAL COMPREHENSION TO STUDENTS OF FRENCH IN NIGERIAN COLLEGES OF EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Basing itself on the results of research in psycholinguistics this paper seeks to suggest strategies that could be used as the basis for a systematic approach to the teaching of aural comprehension skills in French in our Colleges of Education. To do this, it first discusses the general nature of language comprehension. It then examines some problems encountered by students and finally ends with such proposals as it considers useful to the teacher.

INTRODUCTION

Language is first and foremost an oral phenomenon. What we call written language is in fact, in spite of its numerous advantages, (e.g. verbum scriptum manet) only an attempt to represent with symbols perceptible to sight the ideas we express in speech. In the school environment language teaching implies developing the four language skills- listening, speaking, reading and writing. In the learning of languages listening comprehension and oral expression precede reading and writing. Carroll (2004:247) argues that in early language acquisition "a child can perceive a distinction that she cannot produce". In other words children acquire listening comprehension before speech production. In adult second language experience, the learner has to first listen to understand what speakers of the language do. Thereafter he can then imitate by speaking. So for the adult too, listening precedes speaking.

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Hence Nwankwo (2010) asserts that "listening indeed is supposed to form the foundation on which other language skills are built".

Nicholas (1988:13) presents listening comprehension as:

> *an active though unobservable language behaviour in which the listener takes the leading role sharing the knowledge of the real world with the speaker.*

From the foregoing definition aural comprehension is essentially the learner's responsibility. But is there nothing the teacher can do to facilitate this onerous task?

Here in Nigeria a limited amount of studies has been done in the area of comprehension (Obah 1985, Lasisi 1984, Lasisi and Falodun 1987, Emenyonu 1993). But these have all concentrated on written comprehension. There is not much study on the teaching of listening comprehension in French. In the classroom situation the methods and processes adopted for the teaching of other aspects (e.g. grammar or literature) do not easily lend themselves to the teaching of aural comprehension. The consequence is often a non-systematic approach to the teaching of this aspect of French.

Basing itself on the results of research in psycholinguistics, this paper seeks to suggest strategies that could be used as the basis for a systematic approach to the teaching of aural comprehension skills in French. To do this it first discusses the general nature of language comprehension. It then examines some problems encountered by students in aural comprehension in French and finally ends with such proposals as it considers useful to the teacher.

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LINGUISTIC INFORMATION PROCESSING

Recent studies in such areas as the brain, memory, attention, inference; encoding and retrieval of information have helped to build up a sizeable amount of knowledge on the process of comprehension. Rumelhart (1993) and Stanovich (1980) cited in Emenyonu (1993) see comprehension as a complex process involving such factors as motivation, familiarity with the text, discourse type and complexity, purpose, prior knowledge, interest etc. These variables can of course be summarized in two major groups of factors: text dependent factors and reader or listener dependent factors. Accordingly many psycholinguists today are agreed on two models of comprehension. To understand a discourse the reader or listener adopts one of two possible procedures: the semasiological or the onomasiological approach. According to the semasiological or text dependent approach, words and expressions in a piece of discourse have inherent meaning of their own and to arrive at the meaning of the discourse the reader or listener must be able to distinguish and discriminate between words and segments to interpret the text. In the onomasiological approach represented, for example, by the schema theory, spoken or written words do not carry any meaning of their own. They are simply cues. The reader or listener uses "the cues provided by the author and one's prior knowledge to infer the author's intended meaning" (Emenyonu 1993:7). He proceeds by anticipating meaning, making propositions and verifying them. The meaning of the text is therefore constructed by the reader or listener. In literary studies this approach finds expression in new criticism which accommodates different readings of the same text. For the practitioners of the approach "the work has no existence in itself" (Booth 1970:39).

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Each of these theories of course only sheds light on a restricted part of the total comprehension process and it is most unlikely that in practical situations anyone seeking to understand a piece of discourse would limit himself exclusively to one of them. However they provide a useful framework within which we can discuss the teaching of listening comprehension.

The two sections that follow discuss some of the problems of students in aural comprehension in French under the headings.

i. Listening comprehension and the French text.

ii. Listening comprehension and the student-listener.

LISTENING COMPREHENSION AND THE FRENCH TEXT

This section glosses over the more familiar problems of pronunciation and perception of the sounds of French and devotes itself only to the prosodic aspect of rhythm. Several studies (Le Blanc 1986, Vanderplank 1986, Tarone 1974 cited in Carette 2001) show that an understanding of the suprasegmentals aids aural comprehension since it aids the process of demarcation and segmentation, enabling the listener to identify the successive units and assign a meaning to the utterance. Aural comprehension in any language implies the ability to break up the utterance into segments, identify, isolate and extract important sounds and information in the flux represented by the utterance. Let us quickly add that it also means listening according to a certain rhythm since each language has a melody and rhythm of its own and this is particularly true of French. It is assumed here that the ordinary Nigerian student learning French has a background in English. As a language English uses word stress. In the normal utterance where nothing is emphasized the word retains its individuality and

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stress irrespective of its position in the utterance. To understand an utterance in English implies giving special attention to the stressed words which of course carry the essence of the message. The position of primary stress is illustrated in the text that follows. The brief text is a translation of the French version discussed immediately after.

'wait for me 'then I 'won't be 'long I will 'bring you 'what you 'asked for.

In French the case is different. In the ordinary utterance without emphasis, individual words loose their stress .s which is now carried forward to the end of the rhythmic group. A typically French prosodic phenomenon, a rhythmic group is a group of words which represent one idea. In this example taken from Leon (1969:65), the rhythmic group is marked off by a slash and the stressed syllable at the end of each indicated by capitals.

Attendez-moi DONC/Je ne serai pas LONG/ et je vous apporter
AI/ ce que vous m'avez demanDE

This certainly implies a radical departure from English. Consequently, it could impair listening comprehension especially for beginners.

Another common problem usually encountered by students is that of speed. Students at all levels find the recorded texts used for aural comprehension too fast. They perceive a flux of acoustic signals without being able to assign a meaning to them. From time to time though, they hear words which they can identify. However the frequency of occurrence of such words makes it difficult to interpret what they hear. Yet when the same text is written down, they easily understand it. This problem is not unrelated to the earlier one on rhythm and perception of French sounds.

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LISTENING COMPREHENSION AND THE STUDENT LISTENER

According to Carrette (2001) non-native learners in a foreign language have a tendency to seek to understand every bit in an utterance or discourse. Our students of French adopt a semasiological approach, seeking to understand every word in the belief that this is the way to arrive at the meaning of the discourse. However experience shows that not only is this unnecessary, it is even undesirable.

In other cases, carrying over methods which they apply to other school subjects, some students have expressed doubts as to whether they understand an aural text simply because they are not able to recall all the details or because they are not able to translate the French text into English the language in which they think.

Adopting the onomasiological approach, T. de Douhet (1996) compares a listener to a piece of discourse in a foreign language to a tourist who arrives in a city whose plan he does not know. To be able to find his way and move around, he does not need to know every street and every building. Essentially what he needs are certain structures, certain landmarks in relation to which he can place every other thing. In an utterance certain words are usually more "visible" more important, easier to detect and carry more meaning than others. They are usually the content words as against the function words. These are the mots clés of French. They are the landmarks around which the listener builds meaning. According to McDonough (1981:48) there is evidence that when people try to interpret French sentences they hear, they sometimes look for these mots clés and work out their possible meanings and then look for function words which signal appropriate syntactic relations between them. Teaching must

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therefore take into account the primordial importance of these mots clés in the construction of meaning.

Another source of difficulty for learners is the fact they often handle every text in an identical manner. For them listening comprehension is a monolithic activity always to be approached in the same way. Experience however shows that the approach necessarily has to vary in accordance with the nature and purpose of the text and the objective of the lesson. In the face of these difficulties the teacher certainly has an important role to play.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The proposals that follow aim at helping him to adopt a more systematic approach to the teaching of listening comprehension skills.

- It is necessary right from the beginning to get students used to French sounds and to the rhythm of the language. There are very many practical activities that could be used for this purpose. For example, after the first few lessons, the teacher can play back extracts from conversations in different languages and ask the students to identify which ones are French.

  A second stage of this procedure would be to get them to repeat French sentences with the appropriate rhythm even when they do not yet understand such sentences. Choral responses would be better than individual answers since this can help the more timid ones. The teacher could even lead the class by movements of the hand much the same way as a choirmaster conducts his choir. After all it is all about melody.

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For absolute beginners the teacher can give a list of words. He then reads or plays a text in which the words are used and asks the students to take note each time they hear such words.

- As for the speed of the aural comprehension texts, some didacticians have suggested that such texts be recorded at slower speeds. However since they are normally recorded at the normal speed at which the language is spoken or even sometimes at a slower pace, we suggest that the usual speed be retained and visual aids that could help improve comprehension be introduced alongside them. The teacher could also repeat the more difficult parts of the text but at the normal speed. The direct contact, facial expressions and gesticulations of the teacher could help improve comprehension.
- One basic reaction which many students show especially at the intermediate level is the lack of self-confidence. A first step would therefore be to get the student-listeners psychologically prepared for the exercise. For aural comprehension they do not need to understand or even clearly hear every word or expression. To convince them of this, a possible strategy would be to play back, in a manner similar to the cloze procedure, a text in which some words or expressions have been replaced by noise. That they can correctly answer the questions means that they do not have to understand individually every word before they can make meaning of the discourse. This would indeed reassure them of their ability to face listening comprehension with confidence. This strategy has the second advantage that it helps to compensate for our students' weaknesses in the grammatical and lexical aspects of the language.

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- At the more advanced stages, teaching of listening skills should include training in recognizing and identifying the different types of oral discourse-exposés, documentatires, informations, interviews, etc. First, listening to each of them involves a different type of exercise. Secondly the type and quality of information to be understood and retained varies from one type of discourse to another. The training should include an analysis of the usual structure of the different types of discourse which students have to listen to, so that they can know where to look for useful indices for comprehension.
- According to the Onomasiological approach a very important factor in comprehension is the ability to use cues to anticipate meaning and make propositions. In real life situations people use information derived from what they hear earlier in a speech to interpret what they hear later. In the words of Mendlsohn & Rubin (1995:35)

> *"while listening learners must comprehend the text by retaining information in memory, integrate it with what follows, and continually adjust their understanding of what they hear in the light of prior knowledge and incoming information"*

Part of the listener's strategy is to use various signals, sometimes called discourse markers, which speakers make to give unity, organization and coherence to the speech, in order to interpret the whole oral discourse. Exactly what these signals are depends on the nature of the speech. In an academic discourse for example they could be such words or expressions as d'abord, ensuite, passons au point suivant, par exemple, en somme, pour conclure etc. The teacher using various texts should train students in the identification of discourse markers for different types of oral discourse.

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- Bransford and Johnson (1972) cited in McDonough (1981) have demonstrated the great difficulty involved in listening to a connected discourse when the listener has no guide as to what type of information are going to be of value in constructing interpretation. This of course recalls Ausubel's idea of 'advance organizers'. These are cues and clues which give the listener an initial idea of what the discourse is all about. In teaching listening comprehension, teachers should always provide advance organizers which will help the students follow the oral text they are about to listen to. For our students of French; this could take the form of a word list, especially of new and difficult words or expressions, a short text or discussion on the topic to be listened to.
- As earlier indicated listening comprehension is not just one uniform activity. There are different types. We can talk of the following: "écoute detaillée in which there are details to retain. This is learning. Secondly we have "écoute globale" which demands just a general understanding of the discourse. The third type, "écoute de veille" does not involve much comprehension; the listener is just looking for particular words or ideas. Finally there is "écoute ludique", listening for entertainment and amusement. All these make different demands on students and the teacher must sensitize them to the different types ever before the listening exercise.
- Apart from the more obvious considerations like level of difficulty, other factors have to be taken into account. Such factors include the cultural content of the texts we use for aural comprehension. Each language is necessarily the vehicle of a particular culture. The recorded texts we use for listening comprehension will of course contain

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references to French culture. We expect to see, for example, allusions to french cities and monuments, french cuisine and the french way of life in general. For Atchade (2004):

> *"we cannot study a language without talking into account the cultural aspects of the people who use the given language as native speakers".*

These cultural elements can indeed constitute obstacles for our students who are not familiar with them. The teacher must therefore provide sufficient background information on them before introducing the listening text.

- Outside the classroom, students should be encouraged to listen to radio broadcasts in French even when they think they cannot understand. These broadcasts take the form of news, announcements, discussions and gradually the students will begin to pick words and ideas. Where possible they can listen to the same news first in English and then in French. Some radio stations are much easier to follow. We recommend Africa Numéro Un, Libreville.
- So far, this paper may have inadvertently created the impression that language learning is a compartmentalized activity in which each of the skills belongs to a closed compartment and must be practiced by itself. On the contrary, language acquisition is an integrated activity in which each skill supports and promotes the other. It is therefore suggested that listening skill can also be advanced by encouraging students to read appropriate materials in French.
- As in other aspects of language teaching, evaluation is very important. For the evaluation of listening comprehension many activities have been suggested dictation,

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dramatization, role playing etc. As the class advances, however, it will become necessary to make students react orally to a text they have listened to. In a kind of "prise de parole" each student must express himself orally with the teacher acting as facilitator/moderator.

CONCLUSION

Each language teaching methodology is based on a certain theory of language. The so called direct methods used in our colleges a few decades ago were based on the structuralist behaviourism of Bloomfield. More recently the communicative approach promoted by the Centre for French Teaching and Documentation (CFTD) in Nigeria implies a movement away from structuralism to functionalism. But whatever be the approach there is a definite consensus that language is essentially an oral phenomenon meant to serve first and foremost as a means of communication. Listening comprehension constitutes the very basis of language acquisition. This therefore explains its importance in our teaching programme.

Aural comprehension has been presented as essentially the learner's task. However the teacher has the primary responsibility of guiding him through this difficult assignment. This paper has therefore sought to present what, in our view, the teacher could do to facilitate the learner's task.

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