

The Grammar-Listening Connection

An Interview with Stacy Hagen



STACY HAGEN

is author/co-author of numerous textbooks in the areas of listening, grammar, writing, speaking, and pronunciation. In 2004, she became co-author of the Azar-Hagen grammar textbooks and has since worked full-time on the series. Prior to that, she was a classroom teacher for 20 years, and has also been an administrator and teacher-trainer. A love of teaching has led her to YouTube, where she has a channel to help students understand authentic spoken English.

Listening proficiency is essential for second language success, but in the classroom, it has taken a back seat to the teaching of reading, writing, and grammar. In this interview, Stacy Hagen will discuss why listening and grammar are a natural fit, why listening instruction needs to focus more on helping students decode speech, and how by doing this in the *grammar* classroom, we can provide a much richer linguistic environment for our students.

Why do you teach listening in a grammar course?

Although we don't usually associate listening with grammar, the two are actually a natural fit. In order to better appreciate their connection, however, I think it's helpful to first take a look at listening instruction in general.

Listening has long been neglected in second language instruction. David Nunan calls it the Cinderella skill, which I think is apt. But it's puzzling when we consider the following:

- The communication skill we use most is listening.
- Adults may spend 40-50% of their communication time listening.
- Students may receive up to 90% of their in-school information through listening to instructors and each other.

I think, as a profession, we have underestimated how much students need listening instruction to build their proficiency.

Could you elaborate on this?

We've been focused on teaching the more global skills, such as finding the main idea or answering comprehension questions. As John Field says, there has been a bias toward what he calls the "comprehension approach," in which the main task is to

answer questions about a specific piece of text. He argues that by doing so, we're treating listening as a product, rather than a process. We're looking at the answers students give, rather than the process they use to get these answers.

Typically, we give students a few preview questions, and we may also pre-teach vocabulary and highlight relevant grammar. We play the audio one time through and students listen. We play it a second time, checking in with clarification questions, followed by comprehension questions at the end. Once we've completed this, we're on to another similar task.

The idea seems to be that more listening equals better listening. But providing multiple encounters with listening texts isn't teaching listening. As far back as 1986, Susan Sheerin warned that such practices *test* listening.

I think our current model of listening causes a lot of frustration for the learner. Field gives a wonderful analogy for what we ask listeners to do: Imagine an athlete running an obstacle course while the organizer keeps raising the height of the barriers without ever showing the runner how to get over them.

Why do you think we've been so attached to this model?

I agree with Field who says that listening has pretty much been taught the way we teach reading. They're both seen as passive skills (as opposed to speaking and writing), and they both draw upon the comprehension process. But, as he points out, they are also very different.

- Reading has blank spaces between words, but in spoken English, words are connected. Even more challenging is the fact that speakers often drop sounds, blend them, or replace them altogether with other sounds.
- Unlike reading, which has a standardized spelling system, there is a lot of variability in the spoken word. This is particularly noticeable in connected speech.
- The reader can stop at any time and go back to check for understanding. The listener doesn't have this luxury.
- Written language is more carefully ordered than spoken language. In speech, there are hesitations, mispronunciations, rephrasings, and tangents that make more demands upon the listener.

How do you think we should help students get over these hurdles?

I think there's a huge area that has been largely neglected in the classroom: how to help students decode speech. Myriad problems with understanding occur not because students lack vocabulary or general content knowledge; rather, they occur because learners don't know how *known* words sound when they are put together in connected speech.

Susan Bland points out that if we look at any grammar curriculum, we see that many, if not most, of the structures that we teach in grammar courses are function words. These are the unstressed words in a sentence, for example: auxiliary verbs, articles, prepositions, pronouns, conjunctions, and particles.

Function words are very important: they signal the grammar of the sentence, but because they are unstressed, they can be extremely difficult for students to hear in connected speech. Also important to a grammar curriculum are word endings, for example, the plural, verb, comparative, and participial endings.

Field did an interesting study with function words. He found that second language listeners identified function words significantly less accurately than content words. Even among high-level learners, function words were likely to be missed or only approximately matched. One suggestion from this study is that we shift learners' attention from single content words to larger chunks of language. This would mean we spend more time training students to hear function words and word endings. In a typical grammar class, we generally don't teach students how they will most likely encounter these words in spoken language.

A typical example is the verb "will." Every grammar curriculum covers "will" at some point. Students are taught the form and meaning, and are given lots of writing and speaking practice with this structure.

But, when we look at how "will" actually occurs in spoken language, we see that the full form is not so frequent. The contracted form is used much more often. Let me illustrate this with the following exchange between a mother and child.

Child: Mom, I can't reach the box on the top shelf.

Mom: Ask Dad. He'll get it.

Or she may say: Dad'll get it.

Or perhaps: *Your brother'll get it.*

Or the child may have asked: *Who'll get it for me?*

So, we have “he’ll,” “Dad’ll,” “brother’ll,” “who’ll”; these are the natural, more authentic uses of “will.” Students, however, don’t necessarily hear these words as contractions with “will.” Contractions of *nouns* with “will” are especially difficult to hear. For example, students may think that “Dad’ll” is a completely new word. I think one of the most meaningful and efficient ways to increase understanding is to provide listening instruction at the time students are learning a particular structure.

How do you respond to people who say you are teaching incorrect English or slang?

I hear that from time to time, but it’s important to remember that we are not teaching new speech.

One of my favorite examples related to this issue occurs with the word “something.” Frequently in American English, “something” is reduced to “su’ m,” and the sound before the “m” is actually a glottal stop -- a brief tightening in the throat. If you ask people if they pronounce it this way, most will say “no.” But if you listen, you’ll hear it a lot, especially in the response “Something like that.” I heard this phrase three times the other day, and each occurrence had the glottal stop.

This isn’t something that has just crept up on us in the last couple of decades. Watch movies from the 1940s. You will hear “Dad’ll” and “su’m.” The point of including this type of speech is to equip our students so they can function outside the classroom. In fact, we are providing them with more comprehensible input. Michael Rost says that without understanding input at the right level, any learning simply cannot begin. Jan Hulstijn argues that we need to help students with decoding so that all the elements of the acoustic signal become meaningful units for the listener. And I agree with Magnus Wilson who says the learners’ “ultimate aim is to rely less on contextual guesswork, and more on hearing what was actually said.”

So how do you put this into practice?

In all three levels of the Azar-Hagen grammar series, we have incorporated listening instruction. We teach students to hear common grammatical structures the way they are actually

spoken. At a beginning level in *Basic English Grammar*, we teach obvious reductions like “gonna,” “wanna,” or “hafta.” When we teach negative contractions, we show students that the “t” in the “n’t” ending is often dropped. Just because we’ve told them that “is not” can be contracted to “isn’t” doesn’t mean they will hear it. We show how sounds change when they are combined, for example, in simple questions with “did” and “does.” “Did you” for example, often becomes “Did-ja,” and “Does he” can become “Ze.” “A” and “an” are commonly taught at a beginning level, but the problem for many students is not whether the article should be “a” or “an,” but hearing the article at all. We include practice for these features as well as many others, at the sentence level and in longer contexts.

We continue this approach in *Fundamentals of English Grammar*, but in more challenging contexts. For example, intermediate grammar classes often spend a lot of time on the form and meaning of the present perfect, but one of the biggest problems for students is *hearing* the auxiliaries in connected speech. They learn “She *has studied* for the exam” but will more likely encounter “She’s studied” or “She uz studied.” The dropping of “h” in “have,” “has,” and “had” as well as in pronouns poses significant challenges for students. Endings are another critical area. We expect students to produce the correct plural, comparative, or participial ending, but at this level, a good number of students don’t even hear that an ending is there, much less that there are different endings. As we know, hearing endings can be critical to understanding meaning.

With *Understanding and Using English*, we focus on more advanced grammar like perfect modals, conditionals, and passives, to name a few. We teach patterns, such as reductions that occur with “could have,” “should have,” etc. But we take it to a higher level with extended listening and lecture practice. We work with meaning, of course, but we provide targeted listening practice so students can better handle these advanced structures in everyday, authentic speech.

Do people tell you that listening doesn’t belong in a grammar class?

I haven’t gotten that specific comment, but what I do hear from teachers is that their students do listening elsewhere, for example, in a separate listening/speaking class. My experience

has been that listening/speaking courses tend to follow more of the comprehension model.

Beyond that, we need to take a new look at listening: practice with decoding provides crucial auditory reinforcement. It enhances our students' learning and makes what we teach inside the classroom more comprehensible for our students outside the classroom.

Any final words?

In my YouTube videos, one of the most frequent comments I've gotten is along these lines: "I've been studying English for X number of years, and no one ever told me this." I think as teachers it's helpful to imagine ourselves as students. If we were learning a foreign language and had the opportunity for targeted listening practice, would we be dismissive of it, or would we see such practice as a way to enrich our learning?

To learn more about Stacy Hagen's resources online, visit www.youtube.com/EnglishwithStacy

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