

Teaching Listening

Using Radio Ambulante in the Spanish Language Classroom

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Presented by Barbara Sawhill

"When you think about it, the way we have approached communication -- by focusing on the speaker-- is really upside down, Unless you listen first, you have no way of knowing what to say. Effective communication begins with listening, not speaking." -- David Nunan, "Listening in Language Learning"

Why Focus on Listening?

Listening is the very first skill employed by the L2 learner when she enters the classroom. Her very first hours in the language and dedicated to acquiring the sounds and the meanings of language through listening. Our students tell us that they need to develop their listening in order to be effective communicators in the target language.

In order to know what to say, and how to respond, they first need to know how to listen.

And yet, in the L2 classroom, teachers tend to devote very little time to teaching listening actively. Why is this?

For one, many teachers assume that listening is a passive skill that students "will just get" if we give them large amounts of input. The problem here is that the type of listening is not the type of listening that our students want to learn. They want to be active participants in the listening. Active listening is a form of active interpretation; the listener is constantly interpreting messages in relation to the surrounding context of the message, while also working to formulate an appropriate response.

Far too often the type of listening activities we employ are comprehension-checking exercises. Here students are put in the awkward role of eavesdropper with little ability to ask for adjustment, clarification, or contextual cues, all of which are tasks that need to happen as a part of effective listening and effective communicating in the second language.

Effective listening is hard work. In a conversation, the listener that carries 80% of

the responsibility for effective communication. The burden on the listener grows when listening in a second or third language.

L2 students can acquire listening proficiency over time, but often it is at a pace that is much slower than what they desire or need in the real world. Learning to listen, and listen well, requires time and patience.

I approach this topic as the teacher of a college-level Spanish Conversation and Communication class for over 10 years. Students in this course want to improve their speaking abilities for study, work, travel, or activism in the Spanish-speaking world or within Spanish speaking communities. They also worry that their listening skills are inadequate to allow them to comprehend efficiently and effectively. Why? Because no prior L2 teacher had built the space in the curriculum or helped them to develop the strategies needed to learn how to listen effectively in a second language.

"Listening is the Cinderella skill is second language learning. All too often it has been overlooked by its elder sister, speaking. For most people being able to claim knowledge of a second language means being able to speak and write in that language. Listening and reading are therefore secondary skills --means to other ends, rather than ends in themselves." -- ibid.

Creating a Community of Practice

Radio Ambulante is a Spanish-language radio program that tells uniquely Latin American stories. These stories can be incorporated into the L2 classroom in a variety of ways and at a variety of learning levels. Likewise, these stories interconnect with other stories, ideas, news articles, images, and movies in remarkable and thought provoking ways.

If you teach Spanish and would be interested in working with other teachers to create and share teaching resources using Radio Ambulante, please contact me!



Authentic audio for your classroom

Official Radio Ambulante Sites

- In [Spanish](#)
- In [English](#)
- [Facebook](#)
- [Twitter](#)

Audio Subscription Links

- [iTunes](#)
- [SoundCloud](#)
- [Stitcher](#)
- [ivoox](#)
- Transcriptions [also available](#).

RA in the Press

- Premio de Gabriel García Márquez del Periodismo, [Winner in the category of Innovation](#)
- [This is Radio: This is Daniel Alarcón](#) by Transom.org
- [El País de Colombia](#)
- [Sounding Out!](#)
- More links available [on the RA website](#)

Teaching Strategies

Get started with Radio Ambulante in your own classroom.

Personalize the Listening Experience

- **Give learners a choice.** Materials should be based on a wide range of authentic texts, including both monologues and dialogues.
- Learners should be given the opportunity to **progressively structure their listening** to build competence (e.g. listening to a text several times, working through increasingly challenging texts).
- **Make instructional goals explicit** to the learner: Learners should know what they are listening for and why.
- Give learners an opportunity to **apply their own background knowledge and experience** into the listening activity.
- Encourage learners to **develop a reflective attitude** to listening and to develop skills in self-monitoring and self assessment (e.g. what worked? what didn't?).

Building a Toolkit

- Strategies are not one size fits all. **Encourage experimentation**, trial and error. Most importantly, model this for your students.
- Help students create listening journals with private reflections that **chronicle listening accomplishment and failures**.
- Provide listening opportunities in contexts other than L2 audio. **Have students create and listen to sound** to be shared: music, ambient sound, small radio stories.
- **Talk to colleagues** in ESL, Music, Theatre (especially Improv), Dance, and others about how they encourage listening. It's not just language teachers who deal with these issues!

Further Reading

Teaching Listening (Languages)

1. Teaching language in context (2nd Edition), by Alice Omaggio Hadley, Heinle and Heinle, 1993.
2. Tips for teaching listening: a practical approach (1st Edition), by Jack C. Richards and Ann Burns. Pearson Education ESL, October 2011.
3. Methodology in language teaching: an anthology of current practice, edited by Jack C. Richards and Willy A. Renandya. Cambridge University Press, April 2002.

Teaching Listening (Other Disciplines)

1. Listening: Principles, Attitudes, and Skills (4th Edition), by Judi Brownwell. Allyn & Bacon, 2008.
2. Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice, by Pauline Oliveros. NE:iUniverse, 2005.
3. Anthology of essays on Deep Listening, foreword by Pauline Oliveros, edited by Monique Buzzarté and Tom Bickley. Deep Listening Publications, 2012.
4. Listening: a framework for teaching across differences, by Katherine Schultz. Teachers College Press, 2003.
5. The Zen of Listening, by Rebecca Shafir. Quest Books, 2003.
6. The Wisdom of Listening, by Mark Brady. Wisdom Publications, 2005.

Professional Organizations

1. The Deep Listening Institute: <http://deeplisting.org/site>
2. International Listening Association: <http://www.listen.org>

About the Presenter



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Barbara has been working for Oberlin College, a small liberal arts college in the cornfields of Ohio, since 1998. In addition to teaching Spanish, she runs a somewhat unconventional language center. Prior to this adventure in higher ed she taught high school Spanish and loved it. She wishes she had more time in her life to play with her dogs, write, read, swim, and watch the Red Sox.

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