From EFS 693B Week 2 Notes

Three types of dedicated listening practice (in addition to listening in everyday settings for learning and entertainment)

We've talked about three types of listening activities: practice for comprehending more effectively, practice for building language knowledge, and practice for improving language processing. This week we'll focus on practice for comprehending more effectively.

Most of the time you listen, your goal is to understand. However, depending on the situation, you may need to understand very well or just get the basic idea. Sometimes you are listening for specific information (for example, listening to a weather report if you're planning an outdoor activity the next day), sometimes you're trying to pick out key ideas and the information that supports them (as in a lecture), sometimes you're trying to be entertained (listening to a TV show or movie), and there are many other situations, each with their own objectives. And once you understand something at whatever the desired level is, how much of that understanding do you need to retain in some form so that you can make use of it later? And how do you interpret that information and integrate it into what you already know? In most cases you're trying to do one or more of the following:

- Getting the basic meaning (preparing, using context, maintaining focus, dealing with lapses)

- Retaining important points (note taking & short-term memory)

- Interpreting and integrating (reflecting, judging, linking to existing knowledge and understanding)

You can improve in each of these areas by doing listening activities that focus on them.

Getting the basic meaning. We've already seen that preparing for listening is an important first step, so most of the time when you're listening to improve comprehension, you want to prepare appropriately, activating background information and making predictions about what you might hear. If you practice pre-listening regularly, you're more likely to transfer that valuable strategy to your everyday life. Preparing also makes it more likely that you will pay attention to the context, including visual information, and make use of that information to help you keep track of what you're hearing. Other problems with getting the basic meaning include keeping up with the speed of the speaker, staying focused (not letting your mind

wander), and linking the specifics of what you're hearing to the "bigger picture" so that you are able to distinguish the main points from the details, the facts from the opinions, and so on. Finally, if you get lost or distracted, you need to be able to return without losing too much of the information. During listening practice, you can focus your attention on these needs. For example, pausing recorded material at regular intervals or anytime you feel yourself losing concentration or getting lost is a good way to get back on track.

Retaining important points. As you listen and build your understanding of a spoken text (lecture, presentation, conversation, story, or whatever), it's important to be able to retain and recall key parts of it that will help you remember the rest. It doesn't help to say you "understood everything" if you don't remember it a few minutes later. In academic or professional settings, taking notes is often the most effective way of doing this. Taking notes is not a natural activity for humans, but an acquired skill. This is especially true in a second language because it's especially hard to interpret and write down ideas while trying to stay focused on what the speaker is saying. Like all skills, you get better if you practice it, so take notes--good notes--whenever you can. Another good skill to develop is to quickly summarize material as soon as you've heard it, using your short term memory to help you internalize the information before you lose it. This is especially important in situations where taking notes is impossible or might be considered impolite (such as at a social gathering). A good practice activity for this is to listen to a clip or a part of a longer text (less than five minutes) and pause and summarize it orally or in writing before continuing. This also gives some good practice in producing English. Interestingly, if you know you're going to have to do this, you seem to pay closer attention, so it's a good motivator too.

Interpreting and integrating. We are not just tape recorders. When we listen even in our native languages, we are constantly judging what we hear, deciding how true or convincing it is, how interesting or useful it is, how it connects with what we already know. When listening in a second language, it's sometimes difficult to do this effectively, and as a result, what is heard is only remembered partially if at all. Although it's hard to do this when you're listening to live material, with recorded material it's easier to gain the time to reflect. Use the pause button regularly, not just to be sure you understand, but to savor and critically evaluate what is coming in.

Cognitive resource limitations. In addition to the preceding, an important concept to be aware of as you practice is your cognitive resource limitations. Basically, this refers to the increasingly well-documented observation that the human brain is not good at focusing attention on more than one or two things at a time. In your native language, processing is automatic, so it's easier to notice a single new word or phrase, to interpret, and to recall details. Not so in a second language: when new words or idioms are encountered, or the speed or accent make it difficult to process what you

hear rapidly, or the information itself is new or abstract, your brain takes longer to process the information and even with more time may do it incorrectly. Current learning theory suggests trying to avoid or control cognitive overload. That means taking advantage of comprehension tools when needed (text support, slower speed, pausing, etc.), selecting material for practice that is usually not too far beyond your ability to understand easily, and working with familiar topics of interest so that you can bring in your existing knowledge to aid comprehension. It also means building up the other areas we'll be discussing over the next two weeks--language knowledge (especially vocabulary) and processing ability--so that these become more unconscious and automatic over time as they are in your native language. If you're having trouble understanding well, especially the second or third time through a piece, it may be because you're just asking your brain to do more than it reasonably can.