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**A Pragmatic Account of Listenership:
Implications for Foreign/Second Language
Teaching**

Pilar Garcés-Conejos and Patricia Bou-Franch

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A Pragmatic Account of Listenership: Implications for Foreign/Second Language Teaching

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Abstract

In our view, there is a general need to gain insights into what a listener does in linguistic interaction and to provide a comprehensive account of listenership from a pragmatic standpoint. This paper examines listener roles and processes in three aspects of communication: verbal understanding, verbal production and negotiation of meaning.

Traditional views of communication are invariably speaker-centred and based on coding and decoding processes. This paper contains a critical review of these issues which are then related to foreign/second language teaching. Competent non-native speakers of a language should be able to both produce and interpret language correctly. We believe that social and cognitive pragmatic theories (Linguistic Polite-

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ness Theory and Relevance Theory) can be successfully applied to second language production and comprehension. Taking as our starting point Cauldwell's (1998) caution to the effect that we need knowledge of what happens in real communication before thinking of methodologies to teach foreign languages, this paper reviews the three communicative processes of understanding, production and negotiation, and next addresses the main implications for the establishment of a theory-driven teaching methodology.

1. Introduction

In our opinion, there is a general need to gain insights into what a listener does in linguistic interaction and to provide a comprehensive account of listenership. This paper examines listener roles and processes in three aspects of communication: (i) **verbal understanding**, (ii) **verbal production**, and (iii) **negotiation of meaning**. Our starting point is that listeners primarily interpret the language produced by the speaker, but also have a central role in the production and negotiation of meaning. In this sense, we agree with Brown (1995a: 29) that: "It is time for the independently motivated role of the listener to be taken more seriously in models of collaborative communication".

Traditional approaches to communication are deficient in two distinct but related ways: (i) they emphasize the role of the speaker to the neglect of the hearer. Most current models

of communicative competence developed within the field of Applied Linguistics (Bachman, 1990; Canale, 1983; Celce-Murcia et al., 1995) are based on the figure of the speaker and the processes of production. Although comprehension is mentioned here and there, it is taken as a given, and it is not consistently elaborated on. Mainstream pragmatics, with the exception of Relevance Theory (RT henceforth), is also speaker centred; and (ii) these traditional approaches are based on the assumption that communication proceeds –to a lesser or greater degree– on the basis of coding and decoding information.

This paper explores these aspects of communication and relates them to foreign/second language teaching (henceforth, FL/SL). We believe that listenership is part of communicative competence. Thus, an individual will be competent from a communicative point of view if s/he can produce and *interpret* the language correctly, i.e. close to native like standards. In this respect we agree with Foster-Cohen (2000: 77) in that RT can be “..usefully exploited to understand second language comprehension and, perhaps, to understand second language acquisition”. In relating listening to FL/SL teaching we hope to expand Cauldwell’s (1998:2) caution to the effect that we need knowledge of what happens in real communication

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before thinking of methodologies to teach foreign languages: “Once we have a workable description of what happens in fast spontaneous speech, we *then* have to face the problem of methodology” [our emphasis]. Accordingly, this paper first reviews the processes of listening comprehension, production and negotiation of meaning from a theoretical standpoint and next addresses the main implications for the establishment of a teaching methodology.

2. The listener as interpreter

Teaching listenership in FL/SL involves showing students how to deploy their listening skills differently. What does that involve? Most people would take listening in L2 for granted. It is speaking that is problematic. Not surprisingly this has been the belief that has underlain most approaches to FL/SL teaching. With the advent of communicative methodology and the emphasis it places on communication, listening –as 50% of the communication cake –has been receiving more attention from researchers and language teaching professionals (Feyten, 1991: 175). However, listening crucially involves understanding and understanding is a cognitive endeavour. Working with cognitive processes more fully entails research into how the brain works, an area which has always posed insurmountable problems to scholars (Buck, 1992; Dunkel,

1991; Feyten, 1991; Dunkel et al., 1993; Rubin, 1994) although today progress is being made. This fact, together with the belief that listening is something you just pick up, was the main reason why listening became one of the Cinderella areas of second language research and methodology. As Cauldwell has pointed out: “Ten years ago, Anderson and Lynch (1988: 21) noted that there was very little research into listening as a second language. This still seems to be the case” (Cauldwell, 1998: 1).

In recent times, there has been a renewed interest in listening. However, most of the papers and books on listening we have reviewed pose a fundamental problem: they all talk about communication, but they do not define what communication is. Communication involves the adequate production and understanding of messages, the sharing of thoughts (Sperber, 1995), but how is this task accomplished? The production portion has been widely researched; however, the way we understand speech has been either taken for granted or neglected. This same idea is put forth by Feyten (1991: 175): “... we have assumed that foreign language learners *know how* to listen ... and that they are ready for an intensive listening involvement or that this essential skill will develop on its own”. This is a major weakness because teaching listenership primarily

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means teaching how to understand effectively in a second language. One has to be clear about what communication really entails to be able to teach it properly.

2.1. Communication: the code model

In most research work on listening, it is assumed that all writers and readers alike will share a similar construct of what communication is. And when we look in detail at what communication is equated with, it is the code model that emerges. For most scholars (Ur, 1984: 21; Feyten, 1991: 175; O'Malley, Chamot & Küpper, 1989: 418) comprehension seems to be equated with the correct decoding of the message. McErlain's words (1999: 78) are a case in point: "...listening to a language can be defined as the ability to receive and decode oral communication by processing a language sample".

The code model mentioned by Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995) has been the foundation of all communication theories from Aristotle to modern semiotics:

Communication is achieved by encoding a message, which cannot travel, into a signal, which can, and by decoding this signal at the receiving end. Noise along the channel.... can destroy or distort the signal. Otherwise, as long as the devices are in order and identical at both ends, successful communication is guaranteed (Sperber & Wilson, 1995: 4).

According to the code model, two individuals who share the same code should have no problem at communicating successfully provided there are no external distortions in the transmission of the encoded signal. Also the retrieval of the encoded meaning by the decoder should be unproblematic and complete. However, “The sociologically crucial fact that contents get transformed, distorted, lost or suppressed in most social communication cannot be explained in terms of such basic mechanism” (Sperber & Wilson, 1997: 145). It is evident that failures at communication and misunderstandings do occur and that the most we can expect for most utterances “...particularly those which form part of extended discourse, ... is adequate interpretation –adequate as seen from the listener’s point of view rather than from that of the speaker” (Brown, 1995a: 3). In the same line, it is obvious that the very same utterance can be interpreted differently on two different occasions and that two individuals may interpret the same utterance differently in the same context of use.

2.2. The code model and FL/SL methodology

The long establishment of the code model has been felt at many levels and has had a lasting influence on all matters linguistic, among them applied linguistics and FL/SL teaching. A direct outcome of the acceptance and pervasiveness of

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the code model has been reflected in the pre-eminence given to the code and its abstraction –grammar. Thus grammatical correctness and sentence building have traditionally occupied a central part in FL/SL teaching. The grammar upon which teaching was based was the grammar of written language. There are two fundamental problems that derive from this approach:

(i) First and foremost, there are marked differences between the written and spoken varieties of language. We write with sentences but speak in short bursts, like clauses or phrases, called **idea units** (Chafe, 1985). They are about two seconds long and contain the amount of information that a person can hold in short term memory. On the other hand, grammar, as we learn and teach it, is usually restricted to the written language and the sentence level. Spoken language use is invariably less structurally complex than its written counterpart (Carter & McCarthy, 1994). A problem FL/SL students face is that they are not well prepared to handle real interaction because they learn written varieties but listen to and have to make sense of spoken uses. They learn to build correct sentences to express themselves and have to comprehend idea units.

(ii) Also, a code model approach is based on the idea that sentences have meaning. Pragmatics advocates that it is not

sentences but speakers that have meaning (Sperber, 1995; Thomas, 1995). Speaker's meaning and sentence meaning may bear little or no resemblance. However, students try, in a rather sterile process, to make sense of sentence meaning when it is speaker's meaning they should be aiming at.

2.3. Communication: the ostensive-inferential model

The fact that communication is far from being always successful or linear is a reality, which provides definite evidence against the maintaining of the code model as the basis of current communication theories. However, Sperber and Wilson state that the code model is so entrenched in western civilization that it is taken as fact instead of a hypothesis. To account for the complexity of all processes carried out in communication and comprehension the authors propose a new model:

We began this chapter by asking how human beings communicate with one another. Our answer is that they use two quite different modes of communication: coded communication and ostensive-inferential communication. However, the two modes of communication are used in fundamentally different ways. Whereas ostensive-inferential communication can be used on its own, and sometimes is, coded communication is only used as a means of strengthening ostensive-inferential communication... [which] can be defined as follows: ... the communicator produces a stimulus which makes it mutually manifest to communicator and audience

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that the communicator intends by means of this stimulus, to make manifest or more manifest to the audience a set of assumptions {I} (Sperber & Wilson, 1986: 63).

Thus they argue that the code –codified information or propositional content, traditionally considered to be the only basis and means of communication –is subservient to inferential processes: a radical change in perspective that has capital repercussions for all communication-centred studies, and among these, second language research. It is obvious that a model that focuses on propositional content is not well equipped either to account for what is implicated (Grice, 1975) or for what is explicited (Sperber & Wilson, 1986).

RT sees communication as an asymmetrical process similar to ballroom dancing, where one partner leads while the other merely follows. Sperber and Wilson argue that the communicator has to make the correct assumptions about the information the audience can access to achieve comprehension and is, therefore, responsible for avoiding misunderstandings; so all the listener has to do is go ahead with the comprehension process.

We believe that this is not an accurate description of what goes on in communication. Speaker and hearer roles are transient and are continually interchanged among participants in con-

versation. Meanings are negotiated and the hearer, far from taking the final product of a packaged message produced by the speaker, which cannot be modified and only processed in the most effective, relevance rendering manner, is an active figure who guides the speaker in the production process. We develop these ideas more fully in the second part of this paper, which is devoted to the interactive features of listening.

2.4. The predictive nature of the listening skill

An understanding of listening in L2 has to start from an understanding of the neural, physiological bases of hearing, common to all, or most, human beings (Feng & Ratman, 2000). These physiological constraints on listening are thus universal and help us gain insight into the organization of social activities such as the turn-taking system for conversation. What we believe interesting from the point of view of the ostensive-inferential model of communication is the fact that human beings can distinguish significantly less than they hear:

In conversational English, the average word... has about five phones, or distinct sounds. Since most of us typically speak at a rate of about 150 words per minute, this means that we are producing 12.5 sounds per second, and, as listeners, we are hearing 12.5 per second. (These computations for other languages show similar results.) As experiments show, however, the human audi-

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tory system cannot distinguish more than two or three sounds per second. Therefore, when we listen to language, we must depend on a sampling of sounds from the stream of speech. Based on this sampling and employing other information to predict likely sounds we can still identify all of the sounds of language as someone speaks to us. (Rost, 1994: 18).

If we can distinguish just 2 or 3 sounds out of the 12.5 that we hear per second that implies that we reconstruct most of the linguistic input that gets to our language module. Since we do this in real time, we must be able to anticipate what the speaker will say. As it were, we are filling in the missing links, therefore employing inferential processes, and context-based information. What is obvious is that our listening abilities have evolved to understand language in connected speech.

The processes which assist us in doing this are (i) **parsing** [i.e. the process of deciding how words are attached to phrases and phrases are attached to clauses... [which] also enables us to anticipate what the speaker is likely to say next and also to fit in missing words (which we did not hear or attend to)]; both (ii) **enriching explicit** information along with (iii) **retrieving implicit** information by means of inferential processing and (iv) **activating** the adequate **schema** [According to schema theorists, we understand a text when we can relate it to our existing schemata (Anderson, 1978)]

What all of these have in common is that they form the foundation for the prediction and anticipation of speaker behaviour on which listeners base their interpretations. The listener's ability to make accurate predictions thus becomes a fundamental tool for effective communication: "If the listener can make a guess as to the sort of thing that is going to be said next, he will be more likely to perceive it and understand it well" (Ur, 1984: 16).

2.5. Prediction and metarepresentation

This predictive ability of communicators fits in with Sperber's (2000), and Wilson's (2000) claim that human communication is essentially metarepresentational. Wilson (2000) defines metarepresentation as the representation of a representation. Sperber (1994) states there are three types of representations: **public** (utterances), **mental** (thoughts) and **abstract** (propositions).

Among the three strands of literature on metarepresentation (*mindreading*, i.e. mental attribution of thoughts, *quotation*, i.e. public reports of speech and thought, and *Gricean pragmatics*, i.e. mental attributions of speaker meanings), it is Gricean pragmatics and later developments such as RT which we are concerned with. Grice was the first to claim that utterance interpretation is a sort of inferential mindreading, developed to

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attribute a higher-order speaker's meaning. He designed his Cooperative Principle and maxims to explain how such attributions are made. One of the problems with Grice's approach was that he underestimated the role of inferential processes in comprehension, since he thought they only applied to implicit meaning. For him, what was said –i.e. explicit meaning– was just decoded. The major role given to inferential processes in communication, both at the explicit and implicit levels, is one of the fundamental advances that RT presents over Grice's paradigm.

Thus inferential, metarepresentational, predictive abilities are the foundation of communication. It is easy to see how communication based on these abilities presupposes a common starting point for communicators that goes beyond the mere sharing of a code. It is the sharing of cultural assumptions that makes comprehension processes easier. Thus, although misunderstandings and pragmatic failure are a matter of fact in L1 communication, it is obvious that our predictive, metarepresentational abilities decrease significantly when we are faced with communication in a second culture, using a second language.

A very common reason for misunderstanding is the difference in background knowledge between speaker and listener. Cul-

tural knowledge, based on our experience of the world in a given cultural context, helps us define our expectations in conversation. This knowledge guides our listening as we participate in conversation.

Another reason for misunderstanding is the result of the speaker's misjudgement of the ability of the listener to comprehend the message based on the number of cues provided. In this respect, it is obvious that native listeners do not present a universal uniformity in terms of their ability to understand everything they hear. Certain types of texts pose more difficulties to some hearers than others. The problem lies with the given type and degree of accessibility of the inferences which need to be drawn in order to make sense of a text. The inferential-based approach to understanding is all-pervading, because as Brown states (1995b: 68): "All users of language must rely on being able to assume that 90+% of what might be stated need not be stated, but will be assumed or can be inferred by listeners".

2.6. Stages of listener development

This should be a more difficult task in L2. This restriction on our accurate, inferential, predictive abilities that we experience as listeners of a FL/SL is a fact that has to be taken into account in teaching methodologies. However, in most ap-

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proaches, the complexity of the listener is downplayed. The listener as interpreter of meaning undergoes in L1 a pragmatic development through successive stages of comprehension. Sperber (1994) points out that the listener starts out with ***naïve optimism***: s/he follows the RT comprehension procedure and s/he accepts the result if it is relevant enough. The listener assumes that the first interpretation to come to mind was the intended one and attributes it as speaker's meaning. The listener assumes that speakers are both competent and benevolent and expects actual relevance. The comprehension process involves as premises only the hearer's contextual resources.

The second stage in comprehension is that of ***cautious optimism***. The listener follows the RT comprehension procedure. Instead of taking the first interpretation s/he finds relevant enough and attributing it to the speaker's meaning, s/he accepts the result if the speaker *might* have thought it would be relevant enough. The listener assumes that speakers are benevolent, but not necessarily competent, and expects an attempt at relevance. A cautiously optimistic hearer can deal with two additional types of case: accidental irrelevance (e.g. slips of the tongue), and accidental relevance (e.g. the first interpretation that seems relevant enough to the hearer is not

the intended one). A cautious optimist evaluates the output of the comprehension procedure allowing for speaker incompetence. The comprehension process involves the attribution of speaker beliefs and intentions as premises.

The third stage is that of ***sophisticated understanding***. The listener follows the RT comprehension procedure. S/he accepts the result if the speaker might have thought the hearer would think it was relevant enough. The listener assumes speakers may be neither competent nor benevolent, and expects purported relevance. A sophisticated understander can deal with lying and attempted deception.

Due to the reduced communicative capabilities of the second language learner, the level of sophistication in understanding which a person masters in his/her L1 is accordingly reduced in L2 (Kasper, 1997). A comprehensive methodology should aim at developing these stages of sophistication in the learner. Since the learner's metarepresentational abilities are reduced along with his/her capacity for interpretation and self-expression, the listener may systematically apply the naïve level of interpretation to the L2 input. At this particular level, the listener does not need to metarepresent the speaker's thoughts and intentions. S/he just takes the first interpretation that comes to mind as the intended one and does not stop to

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consider that the speaker may have meant otherwise. This is one of the most common causes of pragmatic failure (Thomas, 1983).

2.7. Social information and metarepresentation

Up till now, when we have referred to the information the hearer has to interpret we have tacitly assumed that we are referring to factual information. However, every single utterance carries information that is factual in nature along with information which is social in nature, –phatic utterances carry only social information– that is: it is an indication of the way the speaker views the relationship between him/herself and his/her interlocutor. This has been the subject matter of the study of linguistic politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

It is the speaker, if s/he intends to be polite, who metarepresents –according to his/her own sociopragmatic competence– the level of politeness s/he deems appropriate for the situation and s/he believes will also be found appropriate by his/her interlocutor. Accordingly, s/he chooses the types of lexico-syntactic and suprasegmental devices that better convey, and linguistically encode, the social interaction they are enacting

Therefore the FL/SL listener must be able to recognize these social indicators and be able to judge the level of politeness they indicate according to the parameters of the target language and culture, and not those of his or her own language and culture. If s/he does not feel comfortable with the level of politeness chosen by the speaker s/he always has a chance to redirect or negotiate the social standing of the interaction in his/her turn as next speaker, or even in non-floor claiming contributions. We can see that to do this the listener, once again, must be able to anticipate and predict what level of politeness will be appropriate for a given interaction to be able to infer when something is not in order. Metarepresentational, anticipatory abilities are also a fundamental of communication at this level.

Regarding the omnipresence of social factors and filters in both the production and comprehension of language, we would like to point out that although we see Sperber and Wilson's (1986, 1995) approach to communication and understanding as the most comprehensive and insightful of the existing pragmatic frameworks, we find some of their claims and approaches questionable. It is our opinion that RT would substantially benefit from the introduction of *social cognition* –which McCann and Higgins (1990) define as the study of the

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information processes and structures that determine and are determined by knowledge of self and others— among its tenets. Other researchers (Levinson, 1989; Clark, 1992; Walker, 1989) have made similar claims and Sperber and Wilson (1997: 145) argue that,

...It is true that most relevance-theoretic work so far has largely ignored aspects of communication discussed in the sociological literature ... Instead, the focus has been on issues typically discussed in psychology: attention, memory, inference. However, this is ... what seems to us a sound initial research strategy (which is likely to change as the field develops) rather than some silly anti-sociological bias.

The very nature of listening which Rost (1994: 2) defines as involving “... both social and cognitive processes—that is— our relationships with people and the way we structure our internal knowledge” makes it necessary to adopt a multifaceted approach to its study. Thus listening is a case in point for which the *change* in the field of RT that its authors advocate is seen as essential. We view our work as an attempt in that direction by conceiving the social-cognitive aspects involved in listening from a unified perspective.

3. The listener as producer

Interactive listenership, or listener's verbal production, is another neglected area of studies on communication (in first and second language) that is currently receiving increasing attention (Bublitz, 1988; Gardner, 1998; McCarthy, 1998). The view of communication that underlies the code model is so deeply rooted in our culture that it has taken us a long time to come to terms with the idea that listeners also speak. As a consequence, productive listenership has received less attention than it deserves at the level of research and this phenomenon has not entered the teaching syllabus until relatively recently, despite the fact that the communicative language teaching approach has been established for many years.

Interactive or productive listenership involves the listener in both listener responses and the negotiation of meaning in interaction. Despite the importance of this productive aspect of listeners, it has often passed unnoticed by second language researchers. As Celce-Murcia & Olshtain (2000) point out, even recent books on discourse analysis for language teachers neglect this aspect of communication. In the following sections, we intend to establish a theoretical framework for productive listenership from which to address methodological issues in FL/SL teaching.

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3.1. Listener responses

In real-world reciprocal encounters, listeners play an important role with respect to verbal production since their responses are crucial for the development and unfolding of social interaction. Listeners have been traditionally viewed as the interactionally passive participants, in the sense of never initiating interactions. However, this is not the real picture: in any service-encounter situation, for example, the participant who seeks information is the one who initiates the interaction and also the one who may do most of the listening – this participant may be, as often as not, a non-native speaker/listener of the language.

The interactionally passive nature and the social role of a classroom learner constitute the main traits of the non-native speaker of most research in FL/SL interaction. But non-native speaker/listeners are not always passive and may participate in interactions outside the language classroom. In fact, foreign language interaction is a common reality in the world today outside classrooms so any serious attempt to understand these interactions, then, must account for this reality and avoid representing learners as passive individuals.

3.2. Listeners and social, dialogical communication

Undoubtedly, in actual dialogical communication, speakers are hearer-oriented and hearers are speaker-oriented (Bublitz, 1988; among others). Although Brown (1995a) rightly emphasizes the distinct personalities and points of view of speakers and hearers in interaction, dialogical communication is clearly a social arrangement jointly accomplished by participants.

In dealing with dialogical communication we must bear in mind two important related facts. The first is that speaking and listening roles change constantly and the same participant moves from one role to the other. The second is that the pair speaker-hearer does not have a one-to-one correspondence to the pair producer-interpreter. In interaction, the speaker both produces and interprets messages while the listener interprets and also produces messages. These ideas constitute what is known as *dialogical dynamism* (Gallardo-Paúls, 1996). In relevance-theoretical terms, in dialogical communication the communicator engages in ostension and inference and the audience in inference and ostension.

We view communication as a sociocognitive phenomenon in which the mutually oriented speaking and listening abilities have evolved together and accommodated each other to

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make social dialogical communication possible (Rost, 1994). This can be observed in analyses of spoken language, full of signals from speaker to hearer about how to interpret the message, and from the hearer to the speaker indicating (lack of) comprehension.

Some aspects of dialogical communication such as turn-taking and listeners' responses have been postulated as conversational universals (Goffman, 1981). However, interactive listenership can pose additional difficulties for the L2 listener. On the one hand, learners must be familiar with colloquial uses of the language, with comprehension-guiding prosodic features and with contextually appropriate responsive behaviour and, on the other, listening within dialogical communication is a complex process in which "it is not enough just to understand what the other participants are saying; very often we use the time they are talking not only to listen but also to start formulating our own reply, and to watch out for an opportunity to cut in with it" (Ur, 1984: 167).

3.3. Functions of listener responses

Listener responses have cognitive, social and discourse-regulatory functions. As regards the ***cognitive*** function of responses, they aim to let the speaker know whether the listener is processing new information and making appropriate

inferences while the speaker is talking; in RT terms, the cognitive function of listener responses is to signal whether the assumption in the speaker's utterance has been combined with other information known to the listener and, following the path of least effort, has achieved relevance: the listener, then, lets the speaker know of the state of the interpretation process. As we have argued, communication relies heavily on the individual's metarepresentational, anticipatory and predicting abilities. These abilities allow listeners to make inferences and produce short verbal messages in real time, at the speed with which the speaker is talking.

Listener responses have another major role: modelling speakers' contribution as it unfolds. Speakers have the task of assessing hearer's knowledge and their interpersonal relation and of deciding the information load and the degree of politeness of their utterances so that the listener can infer social and factual meanings relevantly. But, as we said before, speakers and hearers have different personalities, goals and purposes and speakers' predictions about hearers' factual and social communicative needs/abilities may not coincide with hearer's actual needs/abilities. Through listener responses, then, the hearer not only signals understanding of factual information, or lack thereof, but also agreement or disagreement with the

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degree of politeness communicated in the previous speaker's contribution. Since speakers monitor the ways in which their messages are taken, listeners are in a privileged position to guide conversations through their responses.

The **social** function of listener responses has been related to their signalling (lack of) involvement, affect and/or interest (Schegloff, 1982; Kasper, 1986; White, 1997; Stubbe, 1998; McCarthy, 1998). Within the framework of linguistic politeness, Brown & Levinson (1987) view the use of listeners' short responses, repetitions and more extended supportive responses as satisfying the interlocutor's positive face needs.

However, any social approach must take into account the notion of appropriateness. Face needs must be attended to in a contextually appropriate manner (Fraser, 1990; Garcés-Conejos, 1991), and listener responses may function variably to express solidarity, deference or to maintain hierarchy in different contexts, according to the different face needs of the participants (Scollon & Scollon, 1995).

These responses may also be non-supportive or challenging. Lack of support can be intentional or unintentional (especially among FL/SL participants). While the former can be viewed in terms of rudeness or face-attack, the latter would constitute cases of sociopragmatic failure (Kasper, 1990).

The ***discourse-regulatory*** function of responses concerns their contextually appropriate selection by which listeners ratify the distribution of speaking-hearing roles and therefore contribute to the shaping of text; a text that conforms to the culture-bound expectations or mental (meta)representations that participants have of each other and of the situation on different occasions.

The different functions of listener responses highlight the fact that listening is part of a cooperative activity. However, cultural patterns vary and L2 listeners may experience difficulty not only in understanding but also in choosing socially appropriate linguistic means to respond in a particular context. Furthermore, much listening practice focuses on factual understanding to the neglect of phatic responses (supportive and unsupportive), so important in dialogical interaction (Ridgway, 2000).

3.4. Formal/structural description of listener responses

Dialogical listening consists, to a certain extent, of deciding on what our linguistic options for responding to the speaker are. However, there is no general agreement in the conversational literature about the range of resources available to listeners, mainly due to different conceptions of the nature of turns, turn-taking systems and/or participant roles (Yngve,

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1970; Duncan, 1972; Schegloff, 1982; Gardner, 1998; Bublitz, 1988; McCarthy, 1998; Stubbe, 1998; White, 1989; Maynard, 1990; Tottie, 1991). Listener responses include linguistic and non-linguistic utterances produced in response to speakers' talk without claiming the speaking turn. However, we are aware that the changing roles of participants in an interaction makes it difficult to establish clearly defined participant categories. Clearly, listener responses blur the line between speaking and hearing roles.

This study adopts Stubbe's (1998) classification of listener responses and the way she relates these to notions of involvement and affect because we consider her division of response tokens as the most useful for the type of description and explanation that FL/SL learners and teachers need; furthermore, it can aptly contribute to the design of teaching methodologies. Verbal production by listeners, then, includes:

- (i) affect-neutral minimal responses such as *mm*, *uhuh*, *yeah* etc.;
- (ii) supportive minimal responses that express an increasing degree of involvement and positive affect; and
- (iii) cooperative overlaps, which signal high involvement or solidarity and which refer to "brief interjections, sentence completions, echoes and repetitions, through to more extended

segments of simultaneous speech which may include paraphrases, comments, elaborations, questions and feedback on feedback” (Stubbe, 1998: 266-267).

Non-verbal listener responses such as head nods or facial expressions must also be taken into account.

Finally, listener responses are not always supportive and can be used to avoid participation, to pretend to listen or to signal disagreement or doubt. Knowledge of these non-supportive functions is as important for language learners as knowledge of supportive functions.

4. Listeners and the negotiation of meaning

Negotiating meaning is a natural social process subservient to individual cognitive processes of comprehension. This process is related to the optimisation of the relevance of information, to the extent that this information improves the individual’s representation of the world. Insofar as this is a natural process, it does not need to be taught anew.

4.1. The negotiation of meaning in second language research

However, non-native listeners are more likely to have comprehension problems. In second language research the ne-

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gotiation of meaning has been explored in a series of works known as input modification studies (see Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991 and Wagner, 1996 for reviews). These modifications, or strategies for the negotiation of meaning, refer to the processes (non/native) speakers engage in so as to achieve understanding and include comprehension checks, clarification requests, repetitions, treating topics briefly, etc.

The main problem of these studies is that they stem from a view of communication based on the code model, in which the native speaker is often seen as sole responsible for modifying his/her contribution in order to make it accessible to the non-native interlocutor, who would not otherwise understand the input and, therefore, would not learn (Garcés-Conejos, 2001). Moreover, the code-based input approach reduces communication, comprehension and the target of teaching/acquisition to linguistic material. We propose to view the negotiation of meaning as a natural process not limited to linguistic material. For us, the negotiation of meaning is at the heart of the propagation of cultural representations (Sperber, 1996) and it is not only linguistic but also includes cultural meanings that are negotiated and that, therefore, necessarily emerge as teaching/learning objectives.

4.2. Linguistic options for negotiating meaning

In negotiating meaning, the listener has a whole array of linguistic choices at his/her disposal; these are constrained by the cognitive load of understanding and agreement with speaker's social meanings and by the need to be situationally appropriate.

Listeners' social actions in interaction are crucial for subsequent talk. However, although constantly checking that we understand factual and social meanings minimises the risk of misunderstanding, it does not remove it. Consequently, teaching listeners to successfully cope with communicative problems in different contexts should form the basis for enhancing learners' participation in interaction.

5. Teaching listenership: Methodological proposal

As a general method to be used for teaching the three main aspects of the communication process in which listeners participate (verbal understanding and production, and the negotiation of meaning), we advocate a direct/explicit approach (Richards, 1990). This involves awareness-raising of the processes of listenership and providing the learners with specific input for oral skills.

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The purpose of an awareness-raising programme is to encourage students to use their metacognitive knowledge, i.e. “... the relatively stable knowledge human thinkers have about their own cognitive processes and those of others” (Wenden, 1998: 516) and their metapragmatic abilities. Since both metacognitive knowledge and metapragmatic abilities are largely universal, they can be easily stated and transferred.

As regards the predictive nature of listenership, it is useful to posit the related notions of schemata and genre as tools to restrict interpretation and production choices and for the creation of expectations both in terms of content and form.

The notion of listenership itself delimits the predictions of forms, since it only pertains to oral communication. In this respect, the teaching of specific oral input becomes fundamental to the enhancement of learner participation in the three communicative processes of listenership (Dörnyei & Thurell, 1994). McCarthy & Carter (1995) propose the three I’s (Illustration, Interaction, Induction) methodology to enhance the learning of the peculiarities of spoken grammar from a discourse perspective.

5.1. *Teaching listening comprehension*

The incorporation of RT to FL/SL teaching methodologies is useful, especially at the understanding level. For Sperber and Wilson, the search for relevance is an exceptionless generalization that guides human comprehension processes. Therefore, this is a universal trait that can be invoked when making students aware of the way they go about understanding utterances. What will vary will be the premises used in deriving the different contextual implications and, of course, the contexts selected for the processing of the utterances in the search for optimal relevance. These will depend on the individual cognitive environments of participants, in which cultural, social and factual information will play a major role. Students should be made aware of the pervasiveness of inferential processes and of the fact that most of the meanings they will retrieve are not encoded in the linguistic structures they use.

For students to know what they should focus their attention on in their search for relevant information, the teacher should be clear about the objectives of the course/tasks; this is where the research on metacognitive knowledge, language learning and RT find common ground. To discriminate what is relevant for their language learning process, students are required to access consciously their metacognitive knowledge in order to

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(i) monitor their learning process so that they can adequately transfer skills and strategies that may help them in their endeavour and (ii) be aware of possible obstacles that may hinder their successfully achieving the desired objectives.

Awareness-raising activities to promote listening comprehension should stress the importance of activating the listener's metapragmatic knowledge regarding the different stages of pragmatic development (naïve, cautious and sophisticated understanding) s/he has already undergone in his/her L1. As we pointed out, the level of development of the FL/SL listener is usually circumscribed to the naïve stage of understanding, where metarepresentation is not an issue. This constitutes a major locus of pragmatic failure. Teachers can make use of video clips in which selected scenes from movies illustrate the transition from naïve to cautious optimism.

Closely related to the predictive nature of the interpretative process is the notion of schema. The culturally specific nature of schemata should make it immediately obvious that their activation poses problems in FL/SL interaction due to the differences in culture framing that we encounter. (Carrell, 1983, 1987; Long, 1989; Shakir & Farghal, 1991; Weissenreider, 1987). Since we anticipate and metarepresent most of the meanings we come across and we do this, partly, on the ba-

sis of the schema we have activated to make sense of what is going on, it should be of capital importance that learners be made aware of the existence of schemata and how they work. Thus schema building activities should be developed to teach students how to rely on what they already know when interpreting new information and to see how they may unconsciously apply their own cultural parameters to interpret reality. Krashen (1996) proposes a very useful activity, *narrow listening*, which can be used as a schema-building task.

5.2. Teaching listener responses

The teaching of listener responses has been largely overlooked in foreign language pedagogy due to the lack of agreement among researchers about what to include as response tokens and to the diverse variety of factors that affect their use. However, there are recent proposals to include them as part of communicative language teaching programmes (Field, 1998; Gardner, 1998; McCarthy, 1998).

Gardner (1998) has proved their pervasiveness in oral interaction since he has found that more than a thousand backchannels can appear in an hour of talk; for this reason, he argues that “a learner who is unable to use these items, both in their scope and their limitations is at a disadvantage that may be at least as serious as not being able to use, for example, the ar-

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ticle system, or prepositions”. Besides, teachers and learners must also be aware of the negative consequences that miscommunication at the level of production and interpretation of listener responses can have for the presentation of self and perception of other: differences in meaning may be ascribed to differences in attitude or personality (Stubbe, 1998).

Throughout this paper we have stressed the socio-cognitive and interactional motivation for producing verbal responses and it is these communicative (cognitive, social and discourse-regulatory) reasons that students should be made aware of through a process of metacognitive awareness directed by the teacher. Responses of this type have been claimed to be universal and so listeners should have few problems in consciously accessing their knowledge of these communicative items, monitor their use in their first and second language as well as their L2 learning, and finally facilitate positive transfer of the appropriate strategies.

Within the framework of different genres, cultural schema-building activities could be developed that would focus on variation in the production and interpretation of listener responses. As Stubbe (1998: 259) points out, “whether the intended meaning is an expression of indifference, understanding or enthusiastic interest must ultimately be interpreted

according to the context and the assumptions made by the participants”, and these vary widely in different cultures and languages. Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos (2002) propose a methodology for teaching linguistic politeness based on comparison and discussion of different spoken texts: through the discussion of the texts, learners become aware of contextual variation and develop their sociopragmatic competence as L2 listeners (Bou-Franch, 2001).

Second language research has placed a special focus on the notion of genre related to interactive listening in conversational and academic genres (Lynch, 1995; Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Raphan, 1996; McErlain, 1999). Through text comparisons, learners can inductively arrive at their own conclusions about the use of linguistic tokens of listener responses and how they contribute to the social and cognitive shaping of interaction. The benefits of confronting learners with good transcripts of attractive (attention-getting and sustaining) authentic material are thus highlighted (Celce-Murcia, 1995). An alternative to the comparison of transcripts of spoken dialogues is found in the use of video clips from different genres (Thompson & Rubin, 1996). Students should be trained to analyse the orientation of linguistic responses towards the expression of solidarity, deference and hierarchy (Scollon & Scollon, 1995).

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This task, most importantly, develops their pragmatic awareness and promotes learning independence and autonomy. By exploiting students' own capacity to analyse and observe the world around them and by increasing their metapragmatic knowledge, learners become ethnographers, observers who better understand the fit between speaking and listening to a language and who can spot the cross-cultural variation in the use of these responses according to different sociological parameters. "By recognizing cultural preferences for conversation styles, we can compensate for differences and understand a range of new people, ideas and experiences" (Rost, 1994: 104).

5.3. Teaching interactive listening and the negotiation of meaning

As regards the processes involved in negotiation, teachers and textbooks should pay attention to regulatory procedures in oral discourse as they relate to turn-taking, turn-yielding, uptaking, interrupting and topic-shifting and provide specific input, since exposure to teacher talk is not enough to learn and use conversational competence in non-educational settings (Kasper, 1986).

Useful exercises that promote the use of different reception and interactional strategies can be found in Rost & Ross

(1991), Dörnyei & Thurrell (1991) or Vandergrift (1997). Rost & Ross (1991) propose a sociocognitive model to account for choice of receptive strategy in which listeners who perceive comprehension problems decide the use of a strategy according to their proficiency level and to the social context of the interaction.

We propose that students become familiar with the steps in the comprehension process outlined in the beginning sections of this work, where understanding and misunderstanding may arise. We believe that beginner and (pre-)intermediate listeners would benefit from having a range of linguistic expressions that can be used to achieve understanding at the level of perception and hearing (e.g. I didn't hear that, could you repeat?), at the level of recovering explicatures (e.g. who is this 'she' you're talking about?, what does that mean? You say it's too late, but too late for what?) and implicatures (do you mean that ...? Was he implying that ...?). Linguistic competence permitting, learners should also pay attention to how to deal with miscommunication adequately in professional, academic and other genres.

Learners' linguistic choices in dealing with conversational trouble imply the performance of face threatening acts and are subject to interlocutors' evaluations of themselves as in-

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dividuals, rather than of their performance. However, when learner's knowledge of the foreign code is severely limited, their face is, so to speak, hyper-protected. As Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos (1994) note, the learning process can be taken as a token of solidarity since it implies an interest in the foreign language and culture which, in a way, compensates for other deficiencies. Nonetheless, students should not rely too heavily on this hyper-protection since it decreases as knowledge of the foreign language increases. In relation to signalling misunderstanding appropriately, Lynch (1995: 178-79) suggests giving students video recordings of repair sequences as a means of raising "their awareness of the types of communicative behaviour that they should aim to achieve or avoid".

6. Conclusion

In this paper we have explored what a listener does in verbal interaction with the aim of deriving implications for FL/SL teaching. We have provided a cultural and sociocognitive account of the communicative processes in which listeners engage –i.e. verbal understanding, production and the negotiation of meaning –and have discussed ways in which cognitive and social pragmatics interact. The sociocognitive phenomenon of listenership is an important part of communicative

competence, one which has been neglected in both theoretical and applied linguistic research.

It is our contention that models of communicative competence should be clear about what communication entails and should consider the importance of the inferential processes that underlie ostensive inferential communication, and the major role of metarepresentational abilities in factual and social dialogical communication.

The explicit/direct approach to the teaching of the different aspects of listenership that derive from our conception of communication and communicative competence hinges on the importance of developing learners' metacognitive knowledge and metapragmatic abilities with a view to making the processes involved in listenership explicit and stable. This facilitates positive transfer of L1 knowledge and strategies to L2 dialogical communication.

Furthermore, we have argued in favour of the pedagogical usefulness of the notion of genre as a way of helping learners to activate appropriate cultural schemata and thus restrict possible interpretations and allowable contributions, thereby playing an important role in awareness-raising tasks. The importance of the notion of genre in recognizing, understanding and tolerating cultural variation has also been highlighted.

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Another important aspect of the explicit/direct approach to the teaching of listening is to provide students with specific oral input. Students should become familiar with genre-sensitive descriptions of spoken grammar from a discourse perspective.

In order to promote learner autonomy teachers should equip learners with the means to facilitate learning once classroom teaching has come to an end. The general aim of our methodological proposal is to make language learners develop a more reflective and self-directed approach to learning their new language.

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