

The why and how of EFL listening: a case study

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In this presentation, I'm going to talk about my doctoral research in which I investigated, as the title suggests, the why and the how of EFL listening. In other words, I wanted to find out 3 things, which is what I'm going to talk about in the next few minutes: **how listening is taught** by teachers and **developed** by learners, their underlying **beliefs** related to listening and how learners' and teachers' beliefs **interact**.

So I went to a secondary state school in Northern Italy and recruited 4 experienced teachers and each of them participated in the research with one of their classes, for a total of 84 learners aged 16 to 18. I administered a questionnaire, conducted teacher background interviews, then took part in 4 classroom observations which I filmed and based on them, I conducted some video-stimulated recall interviews with the teachers. This was the key part of my study because beliefs were elicited as explanations of practice and not as abstract or decontextualised ideas. Simultaneously, I also conducted interviews with learners.

What did I find? Firstly, in terms of how teachers approach listening in the classroom, there was great **variety** in their approaches. These ranged from highly structured, textbook-based teaching, moving from gist to detail listening, to exam preparation, to completely emergent teaching based on challenging authentic videos and post listening discussions. What was common across the board was that listening was not seen as an end in itself but rather as serving **other purposes**. These purposes could be **language-related**, such as developing speaking or extracting grammatical structures from the audios, or, often, non-language related, as listening was seen as part of an **interdisciplinary approach**, as videos were often used primarily for their content. This calls into question the use of the «comprehension approach label» that we've seen in listening research. In a very influential definition, Field describes listening lessons as being driven by a comprehension approach, that is, an approach based on the use of comprehension questions that continuously tests students instead of focusing on the processes needed for comprehension. In my research, this comprehension approach did not really emerge as a key feature of teaching, because teachers didn't seem to focus overwhelmingly on comprehension, but rather saw listening as part of something bigger that went beyond language. Arguably, on the one hand this may be common in schools, and on the other hand, it may end up neglecting explicit process-based instruction.

But how did the teachers explain their teaching practices? Well, for the most part, their **beliefs** were either related to general **educational purposes**, such as the development of critical thinking, or to the needs of the learners and in particular, to the emotional needs of the learners. Teachers often claimed that listening was anxiety-inducing and they wanted to address this in the classroom, which in some cases led to the simplification of listening activities. And finally, one important finding here is that teachers rarely expressed beliefs that were specific to listening, which may reflect a broader lack of focus on listening in teacher education.

So moving on to the learners, how did they approach listening and what were their beliefs about it? Well, firstly, contrary to some previous studies, learners appeared to enjoy listening. They reported **listening to and watching English materials often outside of the classroom** and they thought listening was important to access what they termed «**real English**» – and here we can see a discrepancy with what they called «school English», a sort of more accurate, grammatically correct and artificial English. In terms of their perceived ability, or self-concept, over **70% of the learners** claimed being able to complete most listening

activities in school – though this percentage decreased to less than 60% in classes where listening activities were seen as more challenging and only authentic sources were used. One key finding from this research was that listening was seen as «**unpredictable**»: in the words of Enrico, one of my interviewees, “**for all [he] knew, it could have been a listening on crocodiles or whatever**”. Learners perceived listening as unpredictable and different from other subjects for which they could study and prepare, so to speak. While the belief about listening as unpredictable was common, however, there was a difference between students with higher self-concept, who thought they could manage their difficulties, and students with lower self-concept, who felt they were prey to this unpredictability. The main difficulties reported by students were related to **words, types of tasks and topics of the listening. Another key difficulty was anxiety**, which as we know, detracts from the attention students can give to the listening task. These feelings were especially problematic when connected to the perception of being assessed – even when the students were not actually being formally **assessed**, which I think is an important finding for a school context. Again, students with higher self-concept felt better equipped to manage this anxiety. Finally, the most used listening **strategies** reported by interviewees were inferencing and selective attention, that is, noticing specific parts of the input. Students who were more often faced with structured or exam preparation listening activities seemed to apply strategies in a more fixed way, while those that did more unstructured tasks, seemed to employ strategies in a more adaptable way.

Finally, how did the teachers and learners beliefs and practices interact? Well, first of all, there was a **mutual influence**, as they interpreted each other’s practices and underlying beliefs, sometimes correctly and sometimes not so much. For example, teachers sometimes overestimated how **difficult listening was for learners** and the impact of the **anxiety** caused by listening, which various learners experienced but thought was manageable. This, however, was a core belief of some teachers, leading them to **modify their teaching** (for example by simplifying tasks). Also, teachers sometimes underestimated the impact of the **type of task** they used in class, like open-ended questions, which learners found really difficult. As for the learners, they also interpreted what teachers did in the classroom, although sometimes they misinterpreted the teachers’ intentions. These potential misinterpretations may impact how students approach listening: for example, a learner reported that listening was «only for the **vocabulary**» and she went looking for specific pieces of vocabulary in the listening rather than listen for general comprehension initially. Thank you for listening and if you want to see these slides or find out about the implications of this study, visit the website. You can use the QR code. I look forward to discussing further in the Q&A. Thank you!