However, the above research, while indicating how ESL reading comprehension may be facilitated, does not deal with strategy instruction. In strategic reading, the student controls strategy use, but in each of these studies student control has been reduced by assigning materials which have been specifically designed to aid comprehension. The students have not been taught how to use strategies when faced with materials that have been written with few built-in comprehension aids, which is the type of reading they will be expected to comprehend in academic programs.

Surprisingly little research been done on what actually happens in ESL classrooms, particularly at the university level. Research suggests that teachers at all levels focus their instruction on the product rather than the process, that they frequently evaluate students on their ability to replicate structure, and that they give limited opportunities for students to produce or elaborate language (Schinke-Llano, 1983; Long and Sato, 1983; Brown, 1986).

For example, Schinke-Llano (1983) found that elementary classroom teachers in the United States who had classes made up of English native speakers and ESL students avoided linguistic interaction with their ESL students. When these teachers did interact with ESL students, the interaction was generally brief and managerial in nature. In total, teacher interactions with ESL students occurred half as much as with native speakers, all of the interactions were briefer, and only a third of the interactions were instructional.

In an observational study, Brown (1986) discovered that the reading instruction in the ESL classes of a large university in the United States was devoted mainly to requiring students to memorize vocabulary items and complete in-class exercises in the required textbooks. Little formal instruction was observed, and no attention was given to strategic reading. Students interviewed in the study commented that they saw little importance in what they were learning and studied only to pass a series of tests necessary to be released from ESL.

Although research has shown that teaching reading strategies facilitates comprehension in native language reading, it is not certain if the use of reading strategies is effective with students who reading in English as their second language. However, although ESL students do face additional problems in reading, such as vocabulary or a lack of background knowledge, that may have less effect on native speakers, every student sometime during schooling deals with specialized reading in which vocabulary and background knowledge is limited. It is just with this type of material that the efficient reader actively uses strategic reading to facilitate comprehension.

If ESL reading instruction emphasizes evaluating students on their facility to recognize structure rather than with their grasp of meaning, and if the students are not provided with opportunities to learn or practice strategic reading techniques, these students are deprived of important options in comprehension. Effective reading in both native and second language calls

for the student to be aware of the processes involved, such as reviewing what one knows about a topic before reading or anticipating what types of information might be important, and to independently apply these processes. Furthermore, if the ESL student has been given no opportunity to integrate effective reading strategies into independent reading nor has been instructed on the importance of these strategies, it is unlikely that strategic reading will occur outside of the reading classroom.

Teaching Strategic Reading in ESL

As described above, the interactive theory of reading contends that reading is a process in which the reader is actively engaged in systematic analysis, prediction, and evaluation. The reader comprehends by relating what is known by the reader to the text being read. This knowledge ranges from the basic fundamentals of vocabulary and language structure, to previous knowledge of a topic, to the metacognitive application of strategies to the reading task. Therefore, instruction that focuses primarily on one area, such as vocabulary and language structure, limits the reader's potential for comprehension. Instruction that is restricted to exercises and discrete item testing as evidence of comprehension instruction is also insufficient.

Since reading comprehension results from an active process, the effective ESL reading program emphasizes reading activities that facilitate this process. The instructor consciously provides explicit instruction of reading skills and strategies, and gives students opportunity for practice. Furthermore, recognizing that reading is not independent of other courses in the ESL curriculum, reading instruction is integrated with writing and other ESL courses, such as English for academic purposes.

Research supports the view that students can be taught comprehension skills and strategies by showing them the nature of reading comprehension, the structure of texts, and the means of organizing and restructuring information. In addition, effective reading instruction shows students how language works, how to recognize reading problems, and how to apply strategies to the reading process.

An ESL reading program should therefore focus on the explicit instruction of the reading process. Process is a way to acquire understanding of content when engaged in reading; for example, conscious application of reading strategies. Students are taught how language works in reading and how to apply this knowledge when attempting to make sense out of a written text. Furthermore, an ESL reading program uses materials that are relevant to learning and practice of reading as an active process.

Effective instructors do not expect students to operate either below or beyond their comprehension potential. This refers to the level wherein the student is able to apply previously acquired skills to the task of developing new skills under the guidance of the instructor and/or the collaboration with more proficient peers. Moreover, students are encouraged to recognize reading problems as they occur and apply appropriate strategies to

resolve these problems. At the broadest level, students are encouraged to approach reading as a method of learning and not as a means of completing assignments and passing quizzes, and finally progress to self-regulated reading activities.

The ESL instructor accepts the responsibility of identifying the students' comprehension potential and focuses instruction within that area. While working with specific materials, the instructor identifies the purpose of reading a given selection and determines that students have also identified and understood the purpose. This is a vital step since it is at this point in the process that a reader decides how to read the text (e.g. rapidly and selectively, slowly and carefully, etc.). The learning procedures are presented so that the students can progress in logical stages, and the instructor monitors student reading activities and informs students of both success and errors.

Within the ESL reading classroom, a variety of practices are available to help the students become strategic readers. To begin with, students can be questioned before a reading assignment to determine the extent of their knowledge of the topic. The instructor can also direct the students to determine the purpose of reading a selection and to plan strategies for meeting the purpose. Moreover, basic ideas within the text are introduced and discussed before a reading assignment.

Before reading, students are given the opportunity to preview reading material, anticipate types of problems, and plan strategies to resolve the problems. While reading, students implement the plan they have devised and consciously make appropriate strategic adjustments (change reading rate, look back, ask another student or the instructor for help, etc.) whenever unanticipated problems arise. Finally, upon completion of a reading activity, the instructor helps the students review and evaluate what they have read.

Some specific skills that ESL students can effectively use as strategies include skimming, scanning, and previewing. For example, they can shown how to apply skimming techniques to discover the type of information in a selection and to get a sense of the level of difficulty. They may be taught that scanning techniques are used to locate answers to specific questions or discover specific information. In addition, students can be taught to preview a selection before reading in order to predict the audience, purpose, and content of a text.

At the more advanced level, students can be taught how to apply context clues to a text. ESL students particularly need to recognize differences between literal and figurative meanings, determine the meaning of unfamiliar expressions and idioms such as 'beat around the bush', and to recognize situations in which context is inadequate to discover meaning. An important aspect of strategic reading is recognizing when the strategy is not working.

Recognizing the differences between main ideas and supporting details is another important skill, although not necessarily the most important.

Certainly, students should recall the main idea of a selection and be able to restate a main idea in a paraphrase. In this area, writing summaries has been shown to be effective in discovering if the reader can distinguish between main ideas and supporting details.

More important, however, is the ability to infer information that is not explicitly stated in a text. To begin with, students practice distinguishing between explicit facts and inferences, which frequently are not obvious to students. In addition, they are taught to recognize logical fallacies in reasoning that may be found within a text and to discriminate between opinions and facts. Students frequently accept information at face value merely because it is written in a textbook. However, reading comprehension includes not only recall of content, but active evaluation of the information. To improve the students' ability to evaluate what they are reading, the instructor can have students point out relationships such as causes, results, and comparisons or contrasts. In addition, students may practice predicting probable outcomes and describing ideas, assumptions, or events that are implied in a selection.

Finally, students should learn to identify an author's purpose. The instructor can show students how the use of style, tone, and choice of vocabulary indicates purpose, and then have students detect attitudes toward various topics in their assigned reading. In addition, students can practice identifying over-generalizations or sweeping statements as well as cause and effect relations in texts, learn to distinguish between facts and opinions, formulate appropriate conclusions based on what they have read, and specify content to support their conclusions.

Effective teachers make decisions and control their instruction. They evaluate what they are doing and modify their methods as they discover more efficient ways of teaching and learning. They realize that reading instruction requires more than asking for correct answers and completing assignments. The purpose for teaching ESL students reading strategies is to help them understand what reading is and how it works. This includes showing students how to discover answers and how to control their own cognitive processes as they are reading. The focus in strategic reading is on active thinking and evaluation, on conscious awareness, and on realistic application to academic materials. The goal is that by understanding reading and applying strategies, the student becomes an independent and efficient reader.

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INTRODUCING A PROCESS APPROACH IN THE TEACHING OF WRITING IN HONG KONG

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What is a process approach?

Process approaches see writing as a thinking process of discovery and communication. These approaches aim at developing learners' overall writing ability by having them write as 'real writers' moving through a recursive process with a clear communicative purpose and intended reader in mind. Process approaches are soundly based on the communicative approach to learning languages, and on recent linguistic, psychological and educational theory and research.

Using this method, step-by-step writing instructions are developed to guide learners to employ the mental processes of skilled writers who consciously move through a recursive process of generating, organizing, drafting, revising, editing, proof-reading and presenting. Sufficient time and reader feedback are two crucial elements in this process allowing learners to discover how to progressively arrive at what they want to say in writing *through the act of writing itself.*

Is a process approach suitable for Hong Kong learners?

Good writing does not just flow out. It is not a transcription or a recording process. Writing is a thinking process. It is complicated and demanding, especially for EFL inexperienced writers. There are four types of demands made on learners: cognitive demands, linguistic demands, demands made by the communicative context, and the demands of the composing process itself (see Appendix 1).

Research on how skilled writers actually handle these demands while they are writing (both native and non-native writers of English), has shown us this recursive process in action. Further pedagogical research has now shown us that this composing process can be described, taught and learned in the classroom. Learners draft and redraft with conscious attention to the process, and thus learn to write in the same way as skilled writers.

Process approaches also serve the main aim of teaching writing in Hong Kong. As stated in the Hong Kong Syllabus for English (1983:31):

The ultimate aim in the teaching of writing is to enable the students to communicate, to express ideas and opinions, and to record important facts or to convey their thoughts to an intended reader.

What are some common problems in implementing a process approach in a traditional framework?

Below are four of the major difficulties:
(1) Writing is complicated. It takes time and effort to arrive at a competent product.
(2) Learners, by definition, are inexperienced writers with limited knowledge of specific language features and different genres. They also lack sufficient practice in taking a critical attitude towards reading and writing. Consequently, they have difficulty in locating and correcting their errors when revising and editing.
(3) Writing teachers at secondary level have to teach large classes and have a heavy marking load.
(4) Current textbooks, rigid school directives and timetables reinforce a product-oriented testing approach in the composition lesson.

How can a process approach be implemented smoothly in a traditional framework?

Process approaches can be implemented gradually and successfully if modifications and adaptations are made in addressing the above problems as follows:
(1) Build up a shared understanding. It is essential to describe, explain and exemplify the concept of the writing process for learners so that they know what they are expected to do, how to set about it, and why they are doing it.
(2) Integrate the four language skills to fit into the stages of writing without unduly upsetting the timetable and the scheme of work (see Appendix 2).
(3) Design purpose-specific and reader-specific tasks so that learners can draft and redraft with the communicative context in mind (see Appendix 3).
(4) Simplify writing tasks by removing limitations on the number of words and the required language forms, and ensure the familiarity of the subject matter. e.g. 'You are a class librarian. Write five rules for your class library.'
(5) Carry forward each stage in the process and focus on a different aspect of the writing process each lesson. It is very important to focus on meaning before accuracy.
(6) Allow sufficient time for learners to draft and redraft in order to discover and express their meaning appropriately and accurately. Some writing and peer-reading tasks must be done for homework outside the classroom so that learners are ready to move into the next stage.
(7) Provide reader feedback at each stage, e.g. on content after the first draft. Supply peer-reading and rewriting guidelines (see Appendix 3) to show learners how to develop critical reading and revising skills.

8) Change the teacher's role from an evaluator or a judge of language accuracy to that of a facilitator, assistant, consultant and reader. Find a good aspect of the writing first, and praise it.
9) Grade the product or final draft according to how much progress learners have made from first ideas in planning to final accuracy in the product. Encourage learners to value and keep every page they write during this process.

What strategies and techniques are used in a process approach?

The strategies and techniques used to implement this approach are based on the stages of the composing process. They include reading, talking and writing about written language, the process of composing, and the learning process itself. Activities include the following:
—class, group and paired discussion
—drawing
—fast/free writing
—brain-storming
—listing
—reading well-formed prose
—peer-reading (reading, critiquing, and commenting on each other's writing)
—reading one's own writing aloud
—doing rewriting exercises (e.g. sentence combining)
—doing editing exercises (common error detection and correction)
—one-to-one conferences with the teacher
—presenting the whole series of drafts (see Appendix 2)

Such activities can be used flexibly to suit both teaching styles and learner needs.

What research has been done in Hong Kong?

Research on the effectiveness of a process approach has been carried out in Hong Kong by a native speaker with a small class at tertiary level (Stewart, 1986), and also by a non-native speaker with a large class at junior secondary level (Cheung, 1989). In both cases, these approaches were superimposed onto a traditional framework (timetable, syllabus, coursebook, class size, etc.). The above suggested adaptations were employed flexibly in response to the unique characteristics of their own classes.

The first study was carried out in a small class at tertiary level with a parallel class using a more traditional approach as a comparison. Differences in text and discourse structure, and in learner attitudes towards writing, were measured over a period of 15 weeks.

In the Experimental class, there was a significant increase in the information load of their content, and improvements in both language structures and discourse concerns (e.g. awareness of purpose and audience). Such

gains were not present in the writing of the Comparison class. In contrast also were learner self-perceptions and attitudes towards writing. By the end of the course, those in the Experimental class were able to conceptualise changes in their writing procedures, and relate these to both improved performance and greater self-confidence in their ability to successfully carry out a writing task.

The two classes' final examination papers were also studied to discover whether writing done under timed examination conditions (without peer or teacher feedback) was also superior. This was shown to be the case with the writing of the Experimental class having a higher level of discourse appropriacy and text accuracy.

In summary, the Experimental learners made measurable gains in their written products, and changed their attitudes towards writing from negative reluctance and fear, to positive self-perceptions about their progress towards competence.

The result of the second study also showed that a process approach was both meaningful and rewarding. From a EFL class of 40 Form 1 learners, 3 subjects with different language abilities were selected for detailed study. This action research was carried out in 13 weeks. All 3 subjects improved the quality of their writing across drafts with a higher level of reader considerations and a stronger sense of writing purpose. To achieve this, the subjects independently employed all types of rewriting (deletions, substitutions, additions, rearrangements and spelling) at content and surface level to rewrite with confidence. They finally arrived at a final product which satisfied themselves.

All subjects considered that a process approach helped them to rewrite better. It was also found that rewriting instruction (rewriting guidelines, peer reading, reader comments) between drafts was necessary for unskilled EFL writers to become involved in and to benefit from a process approach. Rewriting instruction was also a time-saving method for a teacher of a large class to give specific feedback to every learners. On the whole, the EFL class progressively adjusted to the process and followed it smoothly. The class enjoyed writing in English more and the teacher enjoyed reading learners' drafts more than before. They expected and wanted this process approach to continue in learning how to write.
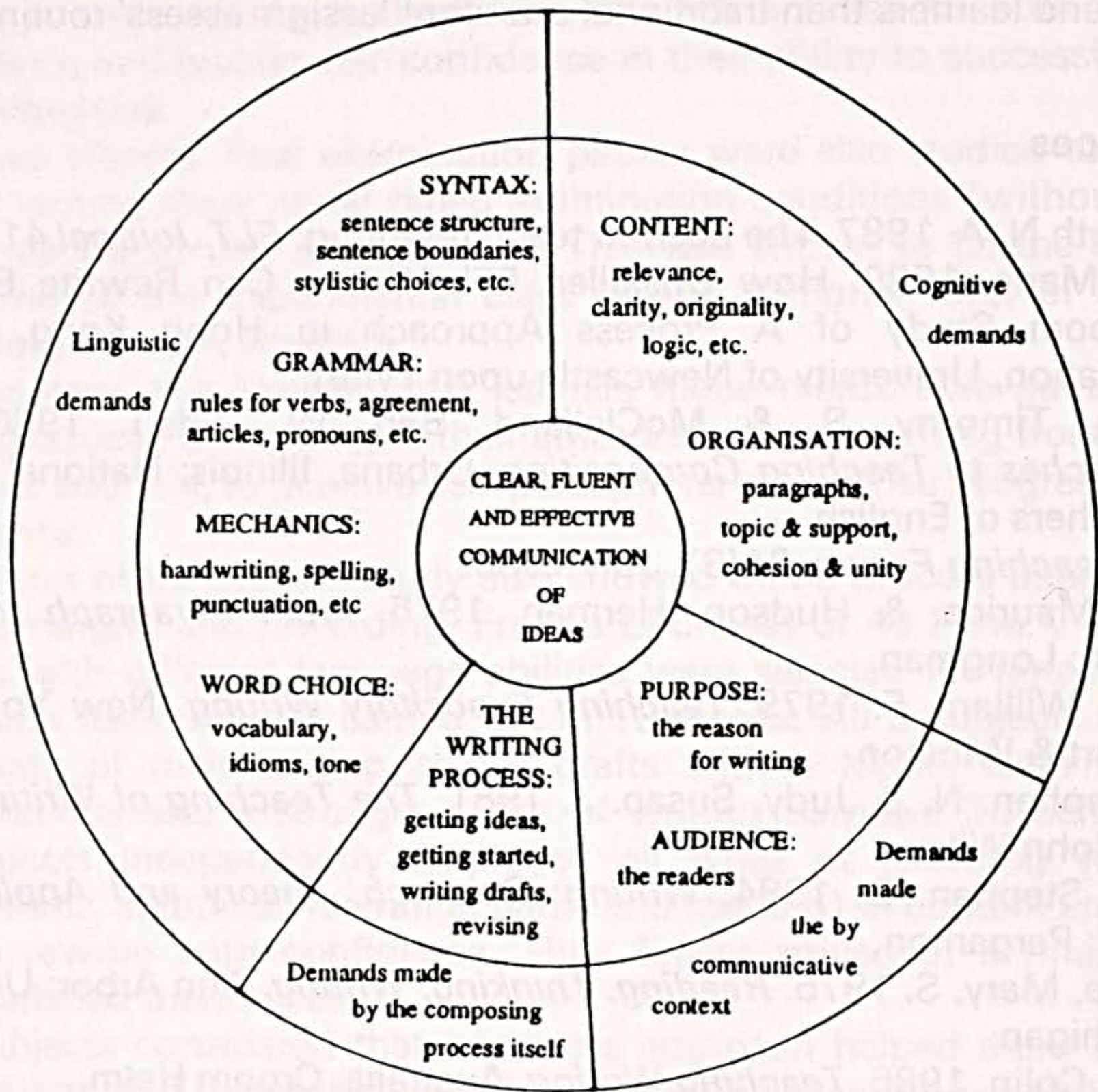
Conclusion

Making changes in classroom methodology and attitudes towards writing takes time and effort. It is important for interested teachers to be both patient and quietly persistent in demonstrating and explaining what is meant by 'drafting'. Teachers need to become more aware of their learners' needs, and to trust their own professional judgement in incorporating the principles and the methodology of a process approach. Above all, teachers need to become familiar with the writing process themselves. Through writing, they gain valuable insights into what they are trying to teach.

Process approaches do not provide a magic formula—writing is revealed as a very complex process indeed—but classroom research indicates that they are more soundly based, more motivating, and more rewarding for both teachers and learners than traditional one-shot 'assign-assess' routines.

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Appendix 1 The demands made on EFL learners in producing a piece of writing

SYNTAX:
sentence structure,
sentence boundaries,
stylistic choices, etc.

CONTENT:
relevance,
clarity, originality,
logic, etc.

Cognitive
demands

Linguistic
demands

GRAMMAR:
rules for verbs, agreement,
articles, pronouns, etc.

ORGANISATION:
paragraphs,
topic & support,
cohesion & unity

CLEAR, FLUENT
AND EFFECTIVE
COMMUNICATION
OF
IDEAS

MECHANICS:
handwriting, spelling,
punctuation, etc

WORD CHOICE:
vocabulary,
idioms, tone

THE
WRITING
PROCESS:
getting ideas,
getting started,
writing drafts,
revising

PURPOSE:
the reason
for writing

AUDIENCE:
the readers

Demands
made
the by
communicative
context

Demands made
by the composing
process itself

(Adapted and modified from Raimes, 1983)

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Appendix 2 Suggested adaptations for carrying out a process approach in the traditional framework of secondary schools

Time allocation	Writing Stages	Strategies & techniques
listening/ETV/ comprehension (2 to 3 lessons)	Pre-writing (ideas writing purpose audience development organization)	brain-storming listing drawing mapping fast-writing reading passages discussing
composition/oral (1 to 2 lessons)	Drafting	discussing fast-writing peer-reading *start drafting at school & finish at home
oral/correction (1 to 2 lessons)	Revising	one-to-one conferences rewriting guidelines rewriting exercises peer-reading *start revising at school & finish at home
G.E. (1 lesson)	Editing & Proof-reading	editing exercises grammar exercises
(0 to 1 lesson)	Presenting	the entire series of drafts peer-reading

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Appendix 3 Writing task and rewriting guidelines

Title: A letter about your perfect routines to Dr. Crazy
Readers: Dr. Crazy and newspaper readers
Purpose: Use your humour and imagination to describe your perfect
               routine to Dr. Cr. Crazy for his psychology corner to make
               people laugh.
Organization: In time of day

Rewriting guidelines

Your classmate's draft is different from yours! In what way? Use the
following guidelines to compare your draft with the other's draft. Which
one do you like more?
1.   Do you smile or laugh when you are reading it?
2.   Do the first one or two sentences arouse your interest in reading it?
3.   Underline the adjectives and adverbs. Can these words help you to 'see'
       his/her routine?
4.   Circle the time markers. Do you know the order of the routine clearly?
5.   Do you know why s/he likes such a routine? Ask him/her if you do not
       know.

SECOND LANGUAGE LISTENING COMPREHENSION AND SEGMENTAL CONTRASTS IN DIFFERENT DEGREES OF CONTEXT

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Introduction

In the last decade, the view that teachers should try to get their students to focus less on acoustic/phonetic information during listening comprehension exercises has become more and more widespread. Gillian Brown's works on listening comprehension, 'Listening to Spoken English' (1977) and 'Listening Comprehension' (1978), have played a leading role in spreading this view. Although Brown (1978:63) acknowledges the necessity of exercises involving the discrimination of minimal pairs, her message regarding the teaching of EFL has been interpreted to the effect that work on segmental information is useful but getting your students 'to identify stressed syllables and make intelligent guesses about the content of this information, is absolutely essential' (Brown, 1977:52). One sees this interpretation very clearly in a major state-of-the-art article on listening comprehension by Dirven and Oakeshott-Taylor when they comment after discussing Brown's approach:

> In view of the fact that segmental information in the acoustic signal may well be of limited scope and reliability, it is of the greatest importance that the learner's attention is directed to non-segmental information.
>
> (Dirven and Oakeshott-Taylor, 1984:333)

In her works, Brown emphasised the points which she felt were lacking in the teaching of listening comprehension. This is only natural; after all, there is little value in bringing out a publication in order to urge people to do things they are already doing. However, the manner in which she made her points predisposed readers to the interpretation of her message described in the preceding paragraph. For example, the following assertion clearly implies that phonemic contrasts between vowels are relatively unimportant in L2 listening comprehension:

> 'The student who is exposed to a sentence in context does not have to worry too much about "what vowel" he hears. He has to recognize a *word* and a word that is possible in that context. It is very rare in real life to be in doubt whether *the sheriff was shot through the heart* or whether *he was shot through the hat*, whether *John bit the dog* or *John beat the dog*. Clearly an ability to distinguish these vowels will help in the selection of the suitable word but the context will usually make this selection reasonably straightforward.'
>
> (Brown, 1977:161)

This claim by Brown that contextual clues would enable L2 learners to resolve difficulties at a segmental level was the stimulus for the experiment which I shall describe in the rest of this paper. Brown's position has already been attacked by Abbott (1986:302), with regard to pronunciation, as falling foul of the 'single error' fallacy. That is to say, the assumption that there is only a single error in each utterance or else one error continually repeated.[1] However, little evidence has been produced concerning the appropriateness of her remarks regarding L2 speech comprehension. The experiment described below was set up to check whether English phonemes which have been identified through contrastive analysis as being difficult for the learners to perceive lead to problems with the recognition of words containing those phonemes in varying degrees of *linguistic context*.[2] As I was in Italy at the time, I decided to test the following hypotheses:

1. The learners would recognise English words containing vowels that have near equivalents in Italian more easily than words containing vowels which have no near equivalent.
2. The differences mentioned in (1) would be greater when the degree of context was reduced and would be reduced when the context was increased.

Methods and procedure

Subjects

The subjects were 42 Italian University students studying for a degree in Modern Languages and Literature. As regards proficiency in English, they were of late elementary and early intermediate level. All the subjects were between the ages of 19 and 23. 38 of the subjects were females and 4 were males. All the subjects came from the south of Tuscany and spoke a regional variation of Italian which was close to standard Italian.

The phonological segments and the words containing them

/ɛ/ and /iː/ were chosen to represent shared vowels which have near equivalents in Italian.

/ʌ/ and /ɜː/ were chosen to represent new vowels as neither of them play a contrastive role in Italian phonology.

These categories are consistent with recent contrastive descriptions of the phonological systems of RP and Italian (Fiorentino colto) by Canepari (1979), D'Eugenio (1984) and Payne (1984).

All the target vowels were in stressed syllables and in the first syllable of words of more than one syllable. The words containing the target vowels were controlled as to the frequency with which they appeared in the subjects' courses, their similarity to Italian words, their grammatical class and the number of syllables. The controls were made by matching pairs of words. One half of the pair was a word containing a shared vowel and the other half

was a word containing a new vowel. These matched pairs will be referred to as 'paired target words' in the following description of the factors involved in establishing the different degrees of context.

Degrees of context

Two degrees of context, low and high, were established. In the low context condition, there were strong syntactic cues as to the word class of the target words but only minimal semantic clues to the identity of the target. For example, in 2 of the tests there was the following item:
He went to the shop to buy some ....

The extralinguistic context provided by the test format, that is the blank space of two inches in which to write a response, acts as a constraint against the possibility that the sentence will continue with 'of' + an adjectival or noun phrase + relative clause. For example, a continuation such as '... of the beautiful red and gold socks he had seen in the window that morning' would be unlikely, given the size of the space in which to write the response. From the linguistic context the subjects could expect either a noun or an adjective. However, the noun could be any one of a vast class of things which can be bought in shops. It is hardly any easier to predict from the context which adjective, if any, is likely to appear. In all of the low context items, there were strong syntactic constraints as to the type of word but only weak semantic clues as to the lexical set to which the word belonged. With regard to the example cited above, the subjects heard 'sheets' and 'shirts' in 2 different tests.

In the high context condition, the listener had strong syntactic and semantic clues to the target word's identity. The linguistic context indicated both the grammatical word class of the target and primed the subjects as to the lexical set to which it belonged. The following item provides an example of the manner in which high context constrains the subjects' predictions regarding the type of words which were likely to be missing from the text:
The thieves only seemed interested in her jewellery. They took her .... and went out as silently as they had come in.

The syntactic clues indicate that the first missing word is going to be either an adjective or a noun. The initial sentence raises the possibility that the missing word/s will be associated with jewellery. An investigation of contextual contributions to word-recognition processes by Blank and Foss (1978) indicated that *the this* type of prior context would facilitate the recognition of the words which could be associated with *jewellery*. In the above instance, *necklace* was presented to the subjects.

The paired target words were controlled as to the context they appeared in. With regard to the low context items, they both appeared in exactly the same linguistic context. In the high context condition, the bilateral context was controlled taking into account the findings of research by Aborn et al (1959) and Porter (1983) concerning the effect of quantity of context on the ability to make linguistic predictions.

From the above, it can be seen that the items belonged to one of the following categories:

(1) NEW LOW   (new vowels—low context)
(2) NEW HIGH   (new vowels—high context)
(3) SHARED LOW   (shared vowels—low context)
(4) SHARED HIGH   (shared vowels—high context)

There were ten test items in each category.

The recordings

The passages were recorded on cassette tapes by a male RP speaker using a Prinz STR 8080 stereo radio cassette recorder with an external microphone.

Administration of the tests

The 42 subjects who took the test were divided into 4 different groups which corresponded to their class groups throughout the year. The items I have described comprised a sub-test in a series of 9 tests. The items were dispersed among items dealing with the effects of assimilation and glottalisation and strong and weak forms in 4 different tests. In addition, there were a number of 'filler' items. Half of the subjects heard the items in one order and the other half heard them in reverse sequence.

In all 9 tests, the subjects received the test papers and the supervisor read through the instructions at the top of each test paper. Then, the subjects were told to read the entire test paper carefully and ask about anything that was unclear in either the instructions or the English vocabulary. For each test, the supervisor had a list of the words which might have been problematic for the subjects. If the subjects did not ask for clarification of any of the words on the list, the supervisor checked that the words were known by asking the subjects for an Italian equivalent to the word. The supervisors emphasised the importance of noting in the appropriate place on the answer sheet whatever was understood even if it was only one letter.

The passages were played back to the groups in an open classroom using a Prinz STR 8080 stereo radio cassette recorder with a 2-way 4 speaker system. The sound signal was distinct in all parts of the classroom. The supervisors paused the tape after each item and waited until all the subjects had finished writing before playing the next item.

Results

In order to avoid having to repeat the rather unwieldy expression 'the target words containing the new/shared vowels' throughout the following, I will use 'new/shared vowels' as a short form for the entire phrase.

The results of the tests indicated that segmental problems, as predicted by contrastive analysis, caused word recognition problems even when context strongly constrained the number of possible word candidates. This can be seen from the mean scores for the four different categories in Table 1.

Table 1

Mean scores of the 42 subjects for the 4 categories

	VOWEL	
CONTEXT	NEW	SHARED
LOW	6.0	7.0
HIGH	6.4	8.0

If Brown's claims were true about context being used to resolve problems on the segmental level, we would expect the categories to be ranked in the following manner in terms of mean number of successful responses:

SHARED HIGH/NEW HIGH > SHARED LOW/NEW LOW

Instead, we find the following rank order:

SHARED HIGH > SHARED LOW > NEW HIGH > NEW LOW

The scores were analysed within a 2 (low × high context) × 2 (new × shared vowels) ANOVA (see Table 2). The context × vowel interaction was not found to be significant but the F values for both factors were found to be significant: context ($F = 3.864$; $p < 0.05$); vowel ($F = 14.129$; $p < .0005$).
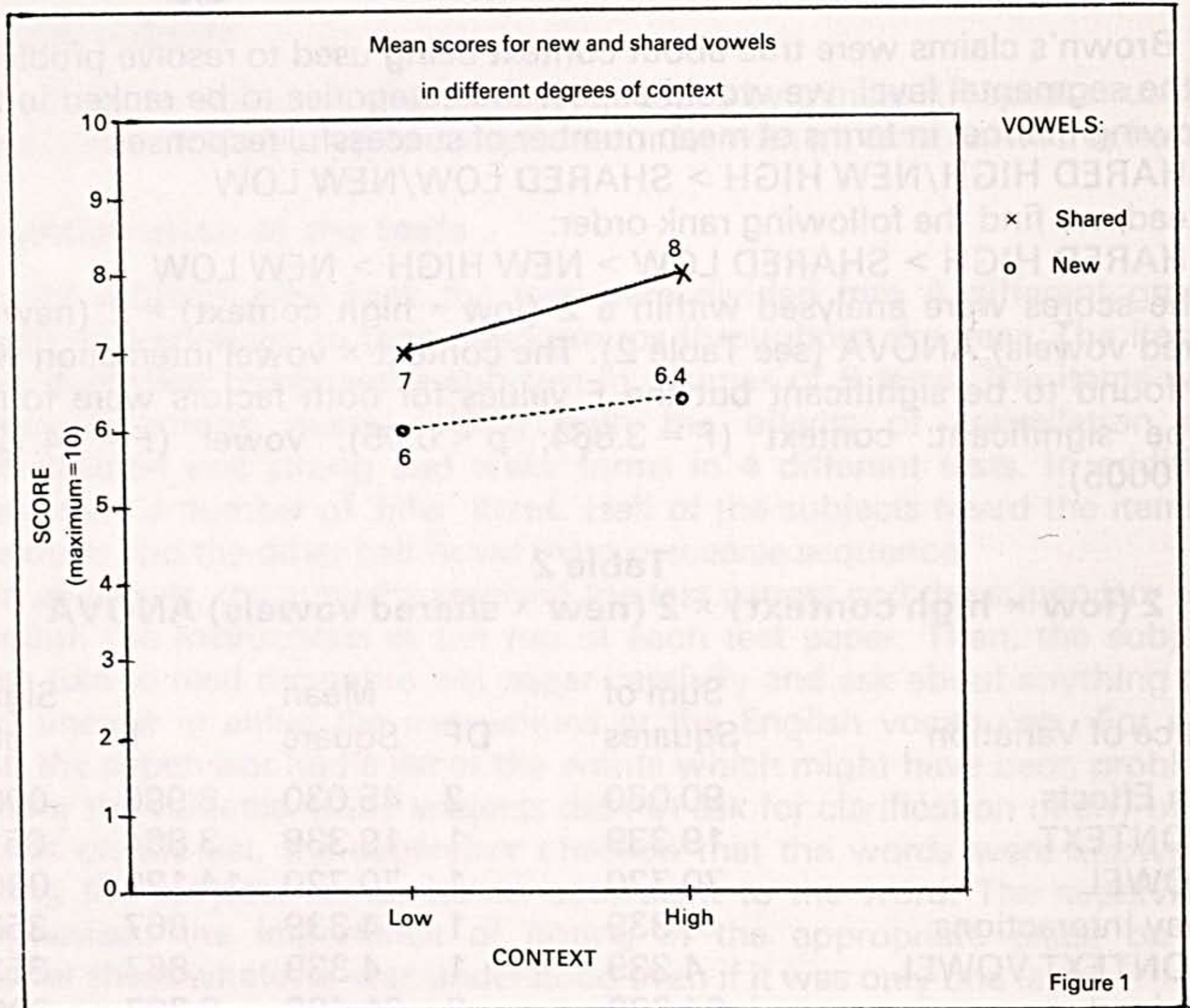
Table 2

2 (low × high context) × 2 (new × shared vowels) ANOVA

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Signif of F
Main Effects	90.060	2	45.030	8.996	.0005
CONTEXT	19.339	1	19.339	3.864	.051
VOWEL	70.720	1	70.720	14.129	.0005
2-way Interactions	4.339	1	4.339	.867	.353
CONTEXT VOWEL	4.339	1	4.339	.867	.353
Explained	94.399	3	31.466	6.287	.0005
Residual	820.881	164	5.005		
Total	915.280	167	5.481		

Post-hoc t-tests showed that the scores for the shared vowels were significantly higher than those for the new vowels ($t = 4.53$; $p < .0005$). From comparing the overall means (see Table 3) it also appears that the difference is substantial, the advantage for the shared vowels being in the order of 13%. The high context scores were also significantly better than the low context scores ($t = 3.39$; $p < .002$). However, the difference between the mean scores for high and low context items, being slightly less than 7%, is not so great as that between the new and shared vowels.

Table 3
Overall means for all items, the 2 degrees of context and the 2 categories of vowel

ALL ITEMS	CONTEXT		VOWEL	
	LOW	HIGH	NEW	SHARED
6.85	6.51	7.19	6.20	7.50

Mean scores for new and shared vowels
in different degrees of context

VOWELS:
× Shared
o New

SCORE (maximum=10)

8
7
6.4
6

Low   High

CONTEXT

Figure 1

This indicates that the type of vowel is a more powerful influence upon the responses than degree of context. This impression is reinforced by the data in Table 1 which shows how the subjects responded to the different types of vowel in the different degrees of context.

Figure 1 displays the information from Table 1 in graph form. It can be seen that the scores for the new vowels are lower than those for the shared vowels. These results support hypothesis (1). However, the difference between the scores of the items containing new and shared vowels increases as the context increases. This is in complete contrast with what was predicted by hypothesis (2). These findings indicate that difficulties associated with an unfamiliar segmental feature, that is, a new phoneme, diminished the amount of benefit the subjects were able to derive from the additional contextual clues as to the identity of the words in question.

Further analysis of the data provided more support for the hypothesis that, at this level of language learning, difficulties caused by unfamiliar segmental features outweigh the assistance which learners can derive from enriched linguistic contexts. For example, it can be seen that the mean score for the shared vowels in the low context condition (7.0) is in fact higher than the score for the new vowels in the high context condition (6.4). This difference was tested *a posteriori* using the paired-samples t-test procedure and found to be highly significant (t = 2.47; p < .009). Clearly the difference is not as substantial as that between the high context shared vowels (8.0) and the high context new vowels (6.4). However, it is slightly larger than the difference between the mean scores for the low context new vowels (6.0) and the high context new vowels.

Discussion

Before considering the implications of the above findings, some of the limitations of the experimental procedure will be discussed. Firstly, the size of the sample, 42 subjects, would make one hesitant about making strong claims on the basis of this experiment alone. In addition, the fact that the subjects had only linguistic context, with hardly any extralinguistic clues as to what was being said, emphasises the need for caution in interpreting these results. Furthermore, the type of task used to assess the subjects' listening comprehension, transcription, may well require a mode of listening which is particularly dependent on bottom-up sources of information. This would lead to a distortion of the results if it were the case. However, given that none of these qualifications have been substantiated, they do not invalidate the evidence derived from the experiment although they do serve to put it in its proper perspective. If one regards L2 speech comprehension as an extremely vast dark limbo, the above findings are like having a pocket torch to shed some light on one particular zone of darkness.

With such a small amount of light in such a vast area, the following discussion is, of necessity, speculative in the extreme. However, it is now apparent that Brown's claim that

'The student who is exposed to a sentence in context does not have to worry too much about "what vowel' he hears."

is not true in the case of the subjects in this study.

As noted above, this study focused on the subjects' ability to make use of linguistic context and that this is the type of context which is most accessible to the majority of EFL learners during their listening comprehension exercises. In view of this, and as a counterbalance to the preceding qualifications concerning the design of this study, it is worth bearing in mind that the linguistic context the subjects had accessible to them in the experiment was far more transparent than it would ever be in real life. For example, in the high context condition, the subjects were fully aware of the bilateral context before they heard the target words. In addition, the time pressure on the subjects was considerably less in the experiment than it would be in most normal circumstances.

Given these optimal conditions for accessing the information provided by the enriched contexts, the subjects showed that they could use this top-down source of information only with the shared vowels. With the new vowels, the difference in the degrees of context made only a minor difference to the subjects' identification of the target words. In contrast to Brown's claim that EFL learners can use context to resolve problems which may arise from the misidentification of vowel phonemes, the results indicated that unfamiliar vowel phonemes can prevent such learners from utilising contextual clues to a word's identity. Although, as noted above, the evidence provided by this experiment needs to be treated with caution, so too do recommendations given to teachers of EFL by other researchers in the area of L2 listening comprehension. For instance, Voss (1984:122) concludes an excellent research study with the following words

'... the advice [to EFL learners] would have to be not "to listen more carefully", i.e. to identify, but to make a greater effort to understand, i.e. to hypothesise.'

It is worth considering why Voss should come to a conclusion which contrasts so strongly with the implications of my findings especially as his study was so well conducted. I would suggest that the conflict is due to the differences in the levels of proficiency in English of Voss's subjects and my subjects. My subjects had less exposure to English than Voss's subjects. His subjects were apparently around Cambridge Proficiency level whereas my subjects were below Cambridge First Certificate level. Clearly, segmental differences between L1 and L2 phonological systems will be less of a problem for advanced learners for the simple reason that 'new' phonemes will not be that new to them as they will have been exposed to them to a far greater extent than intermediate level learners. The conflict between Voss's conclusions and those derived from my experiment can be resolved by positing the existence of a threshold level in language acquisition. Below this level, attending to the sound form of speech pays dividends as a learning strategy but above it the same focus of attention hinders the operation of potentially successful top-down comprehension strategies.

My findings also raise some interesting points concerning the view that teachers should encourage their learners to predict/hypothesise about the likely message they will hear and sample the stream of speech to check their hypothesis. Such an approach is not going to be very useful for less advanced learners of English as, when they sample the speech signal, they will hear signals that they have no expectation of, i.e. new phonemes.[3] This conflict between expectations and the nature of the L2 sound signal will push the learners to listen far more intently to the acoustic signal as they quite literally will not be able to believe their ears. The probability of such a conflict occurring appears to have been overlooked by proponents of the 'hypothesise-and-sample-the-stream-of-speech' approach to developing listening comprehension. Such an approach operates on the assumption that a listener's expectations of message content are paramount in the comprehension process whilst expectations of the message form are

inconsequential. My date clearly suggests that this assumption requires thorough scrutiny and, until it has been substantiated with L2 listeners, teachers should be wary of its efficacy.

Learners' expectations concerning the sounds they will sample are based on their previous experience of meaningful sounds in the stream of speech. New phonemes will not be meaningful for the learners until they have become familiar with the multitudinous realisations of the new phoneme in different contexts in the L2 stream of speech and have developed a gestalt for it.[4] On these grounds, it can be argued that rather than try and prevent less advanced learners of English listening intently to the acoustic signal, teachers should work with the learners' tendency to do this. In this way, the learners would probably become familiar with the realisations of the new phonemes more rapidly than if the teacher were making them feel guilty about listening intensely. Furthermore, I would suggest that most learners are quite normally lazy and intelligent and that they begin accessing top-down sources of information as soon as they find it pays dividends in the comprehension process. Attempting to make learners activate top-down sources of information when the bottom-up sources of information are dense with unrecognisable segments probably only pays dividends in the confusion process.

By way of conclusion, I would like to summarise the points I have raised whilst speculating on the implications of my findings. The notion that focusing on the acoustic signal is a bad thing in itself, as it prevents L2 learners from utilising more successful top-down sources of information, needs to be tempered somewhat. Whilst it may be a bad thing for relatively proficient L2 learners to attend to closely to the acoustic signal, it could well be a useful learning strategy for students of English who have had relatively little exposure to the language. There may well be a threshold level beyond which close attention to the acoustic realisation of the speech signal is a hindrance but prior to which it is a necessity if speech comprehension is too be more than marginally successful.

Beginners through to early intermediate FLE learners may well benefit from being allowed to attend closely to the speech signal when they are doing exercises which require them to comprehend the meaning of what is being said.[5] Such exercises would help the learners become familiar with the pecularities of the signals associated with English segmental features in natural speech. This in turn would enable the learners, at a later stage in the L2 acquisition process, to check the degree of fit between the incoming signal and the hypotheses they formulate on the basis of contextual information, their knowledge of the world and the prior linguistic context.

NOTES

1.   In fact, Brown's ideas with regard to the role of phonetics in pronunciation teaching have been rigorously criticised by Roach (1987). In his paper, Roach details the 'prejudices and folk-myths put about by trendy methodologists of the 1980s' which have contributed to the demise of phonetics-based pronunciation teaching in the EFL classroom in recent years. His comments are indicative of the heat generated by the issue.

2. Brown herself (1977:156 ff.) is aware that, unfortunately, aside from 'well-equipped establishments' this is the main type of context which most L2 listeners have accessible during listening comprehension exercises.

3. The nature of the operational units in speech perception has yet to be satisfactorily established (see Cutler and Norris, 1979:118–119 and Cutler, 1986). It seems likely that the size of the operative units varies in inverse relationship to the predictability of the message as well as the ease with which the units can be recognised (see Leontiev, 1975; Healy and Cutting, 1976). That is to say, if the message is highly predictable and the sound signal unambiguous, listeners will be able to use larger operational units than would otherwise be the case. Conversely, when the message is less predictable and the signal more ambiguous, listeners will be more dependent on bottom-up sources of information in their search for a reasonable interpretation of the message.

4. Leontiev (1981:36–37) asserts that the formation of a 'phonetic word-type', i.e. a gestalt for a spoken word, in an L2 is based upon a 'probing' procedure carried out by the articulatory organs. This leads him to claim that 'In order to hear correctly in the future, we must start by uttering the sound of the phonetic word.' This is, of course, an archetypical chicken-and-egg argument and has generated a great deal of discussion amongst researchers involved in L1 speech perception (see Studdert-Kennedy, 1976:254–255; Lieberman and Blumstein, 1988:147ff.) with no conclusive evidence being produced to settle the argument. Besides which, it is by no means certain that words are invariably the operative units of speech perception (see note (2) above. Although the outcome of this debate is of tremendous importance to teachers of EFL, it is of only tangential significance to the issues investigated in this paper.

5. Pimsleur et al (1977) and Tauroza (1984) show how the stream of speech can segmented into units which would allow less advanced learners to use authentic materials without being overwhelmed.

Acknowledgements

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