
Book Review: Rost, M. & Wilson, J. J. (2013). *Active listening*. Harlow, UK: Pearson Education (ISBN 978-1-4082-9685-1)

Tony Ó Braonáin

Auckland Institute of Studies, New Zealand

This publication, a theoretical and practical guide, by two well-known names in the field of teaching listening to language students is a welcome addition to the field. While targeted specifically at language teachers, the book also has broader and fundamental applications to teaching and learning in general, especially with regard to international students studying non-language based courses in English (more of which later).

Language teachers will find much of immediate, ready-to-go use in the 50 classroom recipes or activities included in the book. Each activity indicates aims, appropriate levels of language proficiency, timings, URLs for source material ideas, simple task sheets and classroom procedures. Usefully, the volume also has a dedicated website where audio materials for 14 of the activities can be downloaded in MP3 format.

There is a helpful reference section in the back of the book for those wishing to delve deeper into listening's place in the learning process, and the authors also provide a short glossary in the end material that will be of particular use to non-language specialist readers.

The book is divided into four parts. The short first part of the book outlines research findings for each of five "frames" or ways of approaching the phenomenon of listening. It also addresses the practical implications that the research findings have for teaching. Each frame focuses on a particular approach to the process of active listening: the Affective Frame, the Top Down Frame, the Bottom Up Frame, the Interactive Frame, and the Autonomous Frame.

Part II consists of ten illustrative or representative activities for each of the five frames. This is the meat of the material, and it is the section of the book which will be of most practical and immediate use to classroom language teachers.

Diverging momentarily from the book's linear organisation, Part IV is a call to practising teachers to conduct their own action research on the basis of issues arising from trying out the materials and ideas in this book, thus developing their own appreciation of the intricacies of the listening process, and simultaneously enriching the listening experiences of their students.

The remaining Part III is an exploration of six issues which are broadly linked under the banner of curriculum. Issue 5 in Part III (Adapting the listening curriculum to different student populations, p. 259) provides an opportunity to examine an issue raised in the first paragraph of this review: non-language based courses, and specifically the position and importance of listening in a Business English class.

In today's increasingly international student market, subject teachers or lecturers in English-speaking countries or in global educational institutions where English is the language of instruction may either be L1 English speakers or L2 speakers with varying degrees of fluency. L1 English-speaking lecturers especially may come from a background in teaching native English-speaking students, and can sometimes struggle with the dual burden of servicing the demands of both content and language in their classes. For students, language proficiency is a core enabling skill, but its absence or weakness sets up roadblocks to content delivery and mastery, creating frustration and stress in both student and lecturer. With this difficulty in mind, lecturers who are non-language specialists can benefit from the findings and suggestions in Rost and Wilson's book.

Part 1 of the book is only 18 pages long, yet it contains much food for thought, and of particular help to reflective, struggling lecturers might be the section focusing on the Bottom Up frame. There seem to be three interconnected factors at work in listening problems experienced by students. Two of those factors, the lecturer's speech rate and the features of connected speech, can contribute to a fair amount of students' listening problems. Students may have quite a large vocabulary repertoire of individual words or chunks, and

they can successfully apply this competency in the skill of reading, yet those same students may struggle and fail to recognise the self-same items in their spoken form. Further complicating matters for the student is the tendency of spoken word boundaries to be fluid and meld into one another. *First of all* being misperceived as *festival* is one example the authors give in this regard.

Speed of delivery is another issue that it may be useful for lecturers to bear in mind. The authors state that a normal speaking rate for native speakers is about 180 words per minute, yet highly competent and fluent L2 listeners reach their peak of comprehension at around 130 words per minute. Because students experiencing difficulties in lectures are often not in, or even near, that highly competent bracket, the relentlessness of a lecturer's verbal bombardment and the fog it creates around the intake of content matter has serious repercussion for struggling students.

A third and final point is tied in with speed of delivery. The authors raise the issue of the P-400 effect, where listeners experience an auditory hiccup typically 400 milliseconds after an unfamiliar item is encountered. This can happen to all speakers in all languages, yet the situation of L2 listeners is especially precarious. The listening blip means that they have to play catch-up, and while, individually, this may not mangle the overall message, these blips rarely occur singly for the struggling student, and the cumulative effect may cause a total breakdown in communication and understanding.

Active Listening, then, while it has proven to be stimulating to this reviewer, and will surely also be so to language teachers in general, some of whose functions are to prepare students for tertiary study and to ensure that their language abilities are up to scratch, may also be of benefit to anyone in the general field of education, especially those who deal with students who are studying in an L2.