

## Chapter 2

### Methodology

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### Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to ask at-risk and non at-risk subjects to report on strategies used in a listening comprehension task. Not all strategies are included in the elicitation instrument, but rather eight strategies were identified and selected and the subjects were asked to answer whether they employed the strategy during the completion of a listening task.

### Design - Method and Limitations of Method

After looking at a variety of ways of collecting data such as survey/data feedback, observation, and interviewing, I decided on the interview technique as my main source of data collection. I believe interviews were the most appropriate choice for my research as they allowed a collection of introspective data, and they could be taped and played back later for clarification. These interviews were carried out first with a group of people unrelated to the actual study but sharing similar characteristics. By unrelated I mean that they were not used in the actual study. By similar characteristics I mean that they were students in the DL 200 class (second semester EFL students), at the same class level as the students that were to be used as subjects for the experiment.

Structured and unstructured interviews were piloted (Appendix A).

The results of the interview sessions and relative success or failure of the structured or unstructured type of interview served as the guide for the actual interview procedure performed during the pilot interviews used in my study. The comparison of structured and unstructured interview and the introspective and retrospective methods of

collecting data are detailed in the Review of Literature. As a result of the pilot interviews, I decided on using the structured interview and introspective method for collecting data for my study, as these yielded the most easily distinguishable and most direct results. I used the interviews in a think-aloud context. Students were asked to read information about language learning strategies and make mental notes on their use of strategies before the interview on what strategies they believe they use to comprehend a listening text. Using introspective methodology, I asked subjects to reflect on their learning strategies immediately after the task had been performed, thereby getting the results and responses when they are most fresh in their minds. I consider this introspective as there was only a time difference of minutes between the completion of the listening task and the interview.

#### Subjects

The first group I examined consisted of individuals (students of a second semester beginning intermediate level EFL class at the Universidad de las Americas - Puebla, DL 200), who were recommended by their teacher to a Learning Strategies Training Project for listening skills, having been identified as needing help with spoken English, but who did not enter the Learning Strategies Training Project, either due to the schedule, or because they did not want to enter. The second group (also of second semester EFL DL 200) consisted of students who were not recommended to the Learning Strategies Training Project, and were presumed to not have any known problem with regard to the listening skill.



At-risk students were identified for the Project according to the following criteria:

1. definition of at-risk students as provided by Berthoud (1996) (Appendix C)
2. results of the listening pre-test designed by the director of the Learning Strategies Training Project
3. students' history of English class results in the UDLA-P English program, questionnaire given to all DL 200 students (Appendix D)
4. teacher's opinion of the student's listening ability
5. in some cases the student's self-proclamation of having difficulties with listening

DL 200 is a second semester EFL course in a four year undergraduate degree program at the Universidad de las Americas, Puebla. The course uses a communicative approach in teaching the students EFL. Most students in DL 200 are accustomed to the grammar approach coming from a traditional language learning background, coming mostly from public and private preparatory schools within Mexico. It is a considerable adjustment to begin learning in an environment using a communicative approach where English listening skills are stressed. Most of the students have not had much opportunity to listen to Native spoken English and even less to consider which types of language learning strategies they may be using.

The communicative approach uses authentic materials as much as possible. This means that educators use real life situations or simulated real life situations, in context.

This is done to help the student see the applicability of the language being studied, and to use it in a closer to natural setting. This can be contrasted with traditional classroom grammar learning, which is based mainly on books with grammar based graded exercises, or on spontaneous learning. Spontaneous learning refers "the acquisition of a second language in everyday communication, in a natural fashion, free from systematic guidance" (Klein, 1986, p. 16). This would occur if a person went to a new country, not knowing the language, only learning in social contexts, with no formal training. The relevance of the mentioning the communicative approach to my study is that the listening task worksheet and cassette were also chosen from materials using the communicative approach. The communicative approach relates to spontaneous learning, in that there are more authentic materials or simulated authentic materials used in the communicative approach than in the traditional grammar approach, and also the communicative approach involves more opportunities than the traditional grammar approach to use the target language orally.

In contrasting these three systems, traditional grammar learning, communicative approach, and spontaneous learning, it appears that communicative approach is somewhat of a combination between the traditional grammar and the spontaneous learning. In support of the communicative approach, Wong Fillmore (1991, as cited in Bialystok, 1991) says that "in interactions where the [target language] is used, the learners have to participate at some level, since the quality of their participation plays a crucial role in getting speakers to use the language in special ways that make the speech samples from these contacts usable as language-learning data" (p. 53).



### Materials

The regular materials used in class by all DL 200 (second semester EFL) students include a collection of readings, specially chosen to correspond in functions, situations, vocabulary and level of difficulty, with the units in their student book and workbook. The textbooks are from the Atlas series, namely ATLAS 2: Learning-centered communication, by David Nunan and are accompanied by a teacher tape which is used daily in the classroom.

The materials used for this study included: an audiocassette with the listening task (the recorded exercise was played three times), a listening task worksheet (Appendix E, includes transcript of recorded listening task and the worksheet), a pre-interview sheet of information about strategies (Appendix F) written in Spanish, a list of interview questions to be asked of the participants (Appendix G), and a participant background questionnaire (Appendix H) to collect information to be used to identify possible variables in the study. All of these items were used by the subjects in the testing procedure. The cassette was played three times as this is standard practice in the classroom and the students are accustomed to listening to their exercises on cassette three times.

The materials for the recorded listening task and the corresponding listening task worksheet were taken from a collection of activities chosen for the Learning Strategies Training Project. These activities were chosen because they closely correspond with the types of tasks, vocabulary, topics and level of proficiency of the units in the textbook. The activity I chose to use in my study, corresponded to unit 4 of Atlas 2, which was

the unit the participants were studying at the time of the interviews. None of the participants had heard the recording previously in any of their classes at the UDLA-P.

### Pilot Interviews

Several pilot interviews were conducted using DL 200 students (for example, see Appendix A), and using a structured and also non-structured type of interview technique. Students were in some cases asked direct questions about strategy use, and in other cases were asked just to describe what they do in strategy use in general. The structured interview was found to be the most successful, yielding the most detailed and comprehensible results.

Subsequently more pilot interviews were conducted, using the structured interview procedure, and a variety of listening exercises, all accompanied by a worksheet to be completed. The taped worksheet which was ultimately selected for the actual think-aloud interviews of the study was chosen because reading was minimal (Appendix E). By having fewer written cues, the participants depended mainly on their listening strategies.

The results from the pilot interviews could not be examined statistically or qualitatively nor coded, as they were compiled using a variety of methods. With no common basis to compare them on, it was impossible to draw comparative conclusions. I tried to identify trends and commonalities among the data in order to determine the questions which were finally chosen.

### Procedure

Students did not need long term, formal classroom training in the language learning strategy self-report process in order to be able to answer the questions asked during the structured interview procedure. Though there is evidence in the literature that students can benefit from strategy training, no-where does it mention that students need prolonged training in order to be assessed on their strategy use, except for very refined techniques. They simply needed to have a general understanding of what language learning strategies are, and to be conscious of which ones they were using.

In order to achieve this, they were provided with the pre-interview information sheet written in Spanish (Appendix F) before the interview, in order to get them thinking about which strategies they used and in what situations. It included questions they could ask themselves regarding which strategies they were using to learn English, particularly related to listening, and also included some general information about language learning strategies. While waiting to participate in the listening exercise and interview, they were asked to make mental notes on which strategies they thought they were using for listening.

The questions asked of students in the pre-interview information sheet (Appendix F) were not the same as the questions asked during the interview, as I did not want students to have prepared answers before being interviewed. The questions asked on the pre-interview information sheet were more general. The pre-interview information sheet resulted from showing various drafts to professors and students and getting their feedback on the nature, wording, and completeness of the information.



Students were gathered into a small room in groups of approximately 6 and they were asked to read the pre-interview information sheet and complete the background questionnaire if they had not already done so. Then they were given a number of 1 to 68 and a letter of A or B depending on which group they fell into (A at-risk, B non at-risk). They heard the cassette for the listening exercise three times consecutively (transcript in Appendix E), and then they were interviewed individually using the nine questions previously mentioned. The students were asked to read the questions one at a time to themselves, then respond with the number of the question, yes or no to the question and provide any additional information they might have after each question. I only spoke during this answer period to clarify any confusions or answer questions the student had. Most people did not ask for any clarification. These interviews were recorded on a cassette which was to be used later for coding the data. The interviews took two days to complete. Each listening and interview session lasted approximately 35 minutes for each group of six students. Subjects were interviewed privately in a quiet room with only myself present. They were not interviewed in front of their peers.

The interviews were recorded on audio-cassette and the tapescripts were coded by six trained coders (see subheading Coding Data in this section), who identified and categorized the various language learning strategies reported by the subjects. In addition, the background information variables of age and gender were analyzed with the results.

Interview questions asked were as follows:

1. Did you encounter any words in the listening/recorded text that you were unfamiliar with?
2. Did you use any kinds of strategies that you are aware of for dealing with those unknown words?
3. Did you try to compare the word to a similar sounding word in Spanish (use cognates)? Which words?
4. Did you try to listen to the words or sentences surrounding the unknown word to get the meaning of the word in context?
5. Did you try to listen to the words or sentences surrounding the unknown word to try to get the general meaning of the recorded text in context?
6. Did you make inferences of word meaning or text meaning based on the title of the exercise?
7. Did you use the accompanying illustration to aid your listening comprehension?
8. Did you try to identify the grammatical category (i.e. noun, verb, adjective) to get the meaning of the unknown word?
9. What other strategies did you use?

Though vocabulary seems to be the focus of the questions asked to gain results on strategy use, this is done under the assumption that students strive to gain meaning of vocabulary in order to understand the meaning of a context as a whole.

The nine interview questions were translated into Spanish (Appendix G) and given to the students during the interviews on cards to be read one at a time. It should be noted that question 1 and 2 do not refer to strategies but rather are questions to open up the dialogue on strategy use during the interview. Question 9 also does not refer to a particular strategy, but the results of the answers to question 9 yielded two strategies not previously considered which were categorized as 10 (pays special attention to areas of text not well understood) and 11 (repeats cassette several times to gain meaning of the text). The original 6 questions, before 10 and 11 resulted, were the compilation of the questions asked during the pilot interviews, which yielded the most direct and categorizable results. They were also the most commonly occurring strategies mentioned during the pilot interviews.

#### Coding Data

The coders, as Masters students in the Applied Linguistics program, and as teachers, have had some exposure to language learning strategies. However I also gave them a brief explanation and description of language learning strategies in order to assure that all had the same awareness of strategies so as to understand what strategies are and what to listen for when coding the interviews. I trained the coders by providing them first with a procedure sheet outlining how I would proceed with their training (Appendix L).

First I asked the coders to read the sheet called "Información Para los Temas Previo a las Entrevistas" (Appendix F). Then they read and completed the participant background questionnaire (Appendix H). I explained to them that they would be given a



recorded listening task worksheet (Appendix E), and asked them to listen to the accompanying listening task cassette three times. I instructed them to complete the recorded listening task worksheet while listening to the cassette, and to hand it back to me. I told them they would be having an interview with me, one at a time, where I would ask them some questions about strategies they used during the completion of the recorded listening task worksheet. I asked them not to talk during the listening task, and not to discuss the activity until after all the interviews were completed. Finally, they listened to the listening task three times and completed the worksheet.

In the next phase of the training, I took each individual coder into a another room one at a time and asked them the same questions which had been asked of the actual participants in the study. I recorded their interviews.

Five coders plus myself coded the data onto coding sheets (Appendix J). The coding sheets were transferred to the computer onto a replica of Appendix J, using Microsoft Excel (Appendix K). Three of the coders were native speakers of Spanish and three were native speakers of English. All are bilingual in Spanish and English, and all have training in Applied Linguistics. All are Masters students at the Universidad de las Americas Puebla. The coders first participated in a replica of the actual interview session, where they did the exercise exactly as the students in the actual study did, listening to the cassette and participating in the interview procedure.

I had the coders code their own interview responses, and we agreed that there were no discrepancies amongst coders when coding their own. Next we began coding the interviews of the actual study participants. As any discrepancies arose amongst the

coders, when categorizing the actual participant responses, we discussed how to resolve each individual dilemma, until we were able to establish a workable pace, and only had to stop the cassette on a few occasions in order to repeat. I asked the coders to note in the margin any extra comments given by the study participants. The coders were given a sheet with the interview questions made into statements (Appendix M) which was to help them interpret the answers given by the students in the interview. I do not believe that transferring the questions into statements is any more biased than translating the interview questions from Spanish to English. Coders found the statements helpful.

Each question corresponded with a possible answer on the answer sheet, nine possible answers in total. It was found after a short time, that two categories, not previously considered, were the most frequently occurring. We established the codes RC for repeats cassette or asks to have the cassette repeated, and PA for pays closer attention to unclear parts in subsequent listening sessions, which were to be included in the margin notes. These codes became strategy categories 10 and 11 in the results (originally there were 9).

Before coders began the coding, I explained to them about the procedure they had just been through (the replica of the listening task cassette and worksheet), the purpose and hypothesis of my thesis, and what I was expecting in terms of results of the data. I do not believe that by telling the coders my hypothesis that the results of the coding were affected. In addition, it was impossible to tell, even for myself, the trend the results were showing. This could only be seen after tabulating the answers on the computer. Primarily the coders needed to code the responses based on yes or no



answers and any answers which were elaborated on by the interviewees were discussed amongst the coders. The discussion involved deciphering what the student actually said, not what they meant by what they said. In this way, the coders were not looking for specific answers, but rather were interpreting what they heard in terms of language. In addition, the interviewees only responded with the question number and not A or B, not identifying themselves as at-risk or non at-risk, therefore the coders could not have known which group a respondent belonged to.

### Coding Process

As we began coding, it became apparent that there were two strategies mentioned by the students (strategies 10 and 11) in the answer to question nine which had not been taken into consideration in the original interview questions. These were: student pays closer attention in successive repetitions of the cassette (RC), and student remembers previously difficult parts and tries to associate them with the material being listened to for a second and third time, listening particularly closely to that section (PA). If a student answered yes to question nine ("What other strategies did you use?"), and claimed to be using another strategy addressed previously by one of the other questions, we counted the answer to number nine as a "no", if that same strategy was worth an affirmative answer in one of the other questions. For example, if a student, when answering question nine, said that he had used the title to aid him or her in comprehending the text, but had also answered "yes" to the question which addressed this same strategy, then the answer was not counted as affirmative twice, rather only once. If the student said "yes" to question nine, but was listing a new strategy not



addressed by the other questions, we counted number nine answer as "yes", and noted the strategy. The result of this type of answer was strategies number 10 and 11 (see Results, Chapter 3).

There were times when listening to the cassette where the answers were difficult to hear or understand, but if the native Spanish speakers agreed on the answers they had heard, then we agreed amongst ourselves to accept their answer as correct. The entire coding procedure took approximately 4 hours to complete.

The coding sheets were compiled on the computer in Microsoft Excel and tabulated to be able to formulate totals and averages to be used in comparisons to compare at-risk students with non at-risk, to be shown in the next chapter.

Finally, T-tests were performed (Appendix Q), comparing the statistical difference between at-risk and non at-risk learners, females and males, younger and older students.