Oral Intelligibility and Listening

Laufer (1990): Problems of L1 and L2 processing vocabulary

Difficulties same type for both groups in comprehending synoforms, with the following hierarchy:

I. Identical stems, but different suffixes (e.g., discriminating/discriminatory)

II. Synoforms with vocalic differences (e.g., cost/coast)

III. Prefix differences among synoforms (e.g., consumption/presumption)

IV. Synoforms with consonantal differences (e.g., price/prize)

Analysis--most common problems all influenced by sound system:

A. Problems I and III all involve syllables that do not receive primary stress (schwa or secondary) and are easier to mishear.

B. Problems I and IV involve vowel or consonant sound confusion.

From Teaching Pronunciation, Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin, 2002
Implications of Laufer Study

1. Pronunciation plays a critical role in bottom up, word level processing and should be taught along side listening.

2. Stress perception, processing, and production, now largely ignored in ESL classes, needs have more attention, as this was the most frequent difficulty.

3. A role remains for contextualized minimal pair work to diagnose vocalic and consonantal perception/production problems.
How Native Speakers Process Aural Input  
*(Top Down and Bottom Up)*

Adapted from *Learning Strategies in Second Language Acquisition*, O’Malley and Chamot and *Teaching Pronunciation*, Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin,

Three stages of comprehension:

I. Perceptual--listener focusing on oral text:  
   A. Attending first to stress and intonation, placing pattern in short term memory  
   B. Attending to stressed vowels  
   C. Retaining sounds in echoic, short-term memory

II. Parsing--words and messages are used to construct meaningful propositional abstractions of the original message
   A. Temporarily retained stress/intonation used to construct **metrical templates** to fit utterance
      E.g., "He can't possibly be serious!" =  
      da da **DA**idi di **DA**idi  
   B. Segment incoming stream of speech by picking out words that correspond to stressed vowels and their adjacent consonants
      E.g., "He can't possibly be serious!"

III. Utilization--relating mental representations of the perceived oral text to existing knowledge, or schema
   A. Listener seeks a phrase--with grammar and meaning--from long term memory compatible with the metrical template identified and the words identified in parsing stage
Additional Hurdles NNS Must Overcome
As They Attempt To Process Like NS

1. Lack of cultural background knowledge

2. Limited perceptual knowledge of sound system, stress, rhythm

3. Limited ability to produce intelligible oral speech

4. Tendency to transfer rules and features of L1 system to English

5. Limited knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary

Result: Miscomprehension often has multiple sources on both word and phrase-level
E.g., hearing "down the reed" for "Donna Reed" because:
   a.
   b.
   c.

E.g., hearing "more stuff and barrel" for "lock, stock, and barrel"
   a.
   b.
Implications of NNS Hurdles and NS Processing on TESL

ESL teachers must help students learn and acquire the ability to:

1. Discern and produce intonation units

2. Recognize and produce stressed/unstressed elements and stress-timed nature of English rhythm

3. Segment speech and comprehend linking

4. Determine full forms underlying reduced speech

5. Use Top Down as well as Bottom Up Processing Skills

6. Become strategic listeners
Criteria for Creating or Selecting Listening Comprehension Materials and Activities
(from Penny Ur and others)

Listening activities should approximate the reality and nature of actual oral/aural discourse, and thus:

1. Listening should have a purpose and context

2. Listener should be asked to formulate a response

3. Visuals and nonverbal cues should accompany the listening activity

4. Listening activities should be made of brief segments
   Exception: longer passages for advanced, EAP or ESP

5. Informal speech of greater value (based on frequency) to L2 than formal speech (speeches and lectures). Qualities of informal speech:

6. Activities should be doable, likely to lead to success--comprehensible

7. Instructor must provide immediate feedback

8. Listening should be integrated with other skills--as far as possible
Phrase-level Segmentation

Intonation units: prosodic phrases or thought groups—the chunks of talk into which spoken English is divided.

Intonation units correspond to phrases, clauses, longer utterances.

Signals that mark the end of an intonation unit:

I. A unified pitch contour
   a. “Alfred,” said the boss, “is sick.”
      First contour  second contour  third contour
   b. Alfred said, “The boss is sick.”
      First contour  Second contour

II. A lengthening of the unit-final syllable
   a. Alfred s’d th’ boss ‘s sick
   b. Alfr’d said  The boss ‘s sick

III. A pause
   a. two pauses
   b. one pause

IV. An acceleration in producing the unit-initial syllables, usually manifested by linking and reductions
   a. saidthe  issick
   b. Alfr’d’s’d  Theboss