

An Interview with John Field

TRANSCRIPT

AL This is Anna Linthe from Cambridge University Press and I'm here talking to John Field who's the author of *Listening in the Language Classroom*, which won the 2008 Ben Warren Prize for its innovative approach to the teaching of listening. So first of all congratulations on winning the Ben Warren prize.

JF Thank you.

AL How did you feel when you found out that your book had won?

JF I was absolutely gobsmacked actually. I was absolutely delighted, because it's a mark of approval from colleagues in the profession. You know, it's not a purely academic prize; it suggests that the book isn't just viewed as sound but also as useful, and I quite like the fact that it was the ELT profession that had given me the prize rather than, you know, a typical book panel.

AL Your book advocates a process approach to teaching listening – how did you come to the conclusion that this is a better way to teach listening than the comprehension approach?

JF Well, that's quite a long story. It goes back to my time as a teacher I imagine when I found it very very frustrating to give students more and more and more listening practice with more and more and more texts and to find that there were very few perceptible signs that their listening had improved. And indeed, probably if their listening was improving it was improving outside when they were in contact with speakers of the language, rather than necessarily with me as a teacher. But I think perhaps even more importantly, it was an awareness of the frustration of the students, because they would try very very hard to develop this difficult skill and, however much they listened, they didn't necessarily seem to become better listeners. And so I began to think about ways in which we

might actually try to tackle the process of listening rather than just test them on whether they had roughly understood a text. And I got very interested in the psychology of listening, and this seemed to me to provide quite a sound basis for looking at the kind of processes that learners use when they're trying to make sense of a passage and it seemed to me that, if we used those processes, we would actually have the basis for a syllabus. We would have some rather clearer goals for teaching listening than just giving them a text and giving them another text and giving them another text and checking to see if they got the comprehension questions right or wrong.

AL Your book offers teachers suggestions for listening tasks which they can do with their students to help them become expert listeners. Have you got any tips for learners who want to practice listening outside of the classroom.

JF I do think that, of all the skills, listening is the one that is very very important for learners to practice on their own. And there's a very good reason for that which is that people vary enormously in terms of the way they develop second language listening skills. And in a class you really can't cater for your own particular needs as a listener. Whereas, if you're working on your own, what you can do and should be encouraged to do is to pick out parts of the recording that you find difficult and to listen to them over and over. And the important thing I think is not to give listeners— just to push listeners into a listening centre, give them a few comprehension questions or possibly give them a tape script. Because they need to be trained to do this, to work on their own. And I think they probably need first of all to be encouraged to break small pieces of a recording into words, to give them some sort of confidence that they're getting through to the form of the recording, before we start asking rather ambitious questions of them, you know, what the text is about. once they get the hang of playing and replaying and mining a text for the words that it contains, then they get a great deal more confident about working on their own. And you can actually introduce into a listening centre all the kinds of tasks that I've actually suggested for the classroom. You know, so long as students are aware of the purpose of the tasks.

AL And how do you think the teaching of listening will develop in the future?

JF Well I think it's quite an exciting time and it's not entirely— well there is so much new technology but it's not entirely clear where it's all going. But I think that certainly we are going to have to move increasingly to video. There is a lot of new evidence that visual information is very very closely integrated into auditory information when people are listening, whether in their first language or in a foreign language. And it seems to me unrealistic to carry on with the dear old audio recording when so much video is available, on the Internet particularly. I think a second opportunity is offered by the fact that there is so much material available on the Internet that students increasingly can be encouraged to work at home, to work outside the classroom. Increasingly they can be exposed to passages, some of which they might even want to choose for themselves. And increasingly teachers are able to set listening homework simply by referring them to a particular website. I think that offers enormous opportunities for the kind of practice I was just talking about where students are encouraged to work on their own and to try to deal with their own difficulties.

AL OK, well thank you very much for talking to us.

JF Pleasure.