



# Teaching Top-down processing

Jack C. Richards considers exercises and activities teachers can use to teach top-down processing, and how they can combine the teaching of top-down and bottom-up processing in the same lesson.

## **Exercises that require top-down processing develop the learner's ability to do the following**

- Use key words to construct the schema of a discourse
- Infer the setting for a text
- Infer the role of the participants and their goals
- Infer causes or effects
- Infer unstated details of a situation
- Anticipate questions related to the topic or situation

## **The following activities develop top-down listening skills**

- Students generate a set of questions they expect to hear about a topic, then listen to see if they are answered.
- Students generate a list of things they already know about a topic and things they would like to learn more about, then listen and compare.
- Students read one speaker's part in a conversation, predict the other speaker's part, then listen and compare.
- Students read a list of key points to be covered in a talk, then listen to see which ones are mentioned.
- Students listen to part of a story, complete the story ending, then listen and compare endings.
- Students read news headlines, guess what happened, then listen to the full news items and compare.

## **Combining bottom-up and top-down listening in a listening lesson**

In real-world listening, both bottom-up and top-down processing generally occur together. The extent to which one or the other dominates depends on the listener's familiarity with the topic and content of a text, the density of information in a text, the text type, and the listener's



purpose in listening. For example, an experienced cook might listen to a radio chef describing a recipe for cooking chicken to compare the chef's recipe with her own. She has a precise schema to apply to the task and listens to register similarities and differences.

She makes more use of top-down processing. However, a novice cook listening to the same program might listen with much greater attention, trying to identify each step in order to write down the recipe. Here, far more bottom-up processing is needed.

A typical lesson in current teaching materials involves a three-part sequence, consisting of pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening, and contains activities that link bottom-up and top-down listening (Field, 1998). The pre-listening phase prepares students for both top-down and bottom-up processing, through activities involving activating prior knowledge, making predictions, and reviewing key vocabulary. The while-listening phase focuses on comprehension through exercises that require selective listening, gist listening, sequencing, etc.

The post-listening phase typically involves a response to comprehension and may require students to give opinions about a topic. However, it can also include a bottom-up focus if the teacher and the listeners examine the texts or parts of the text in detail, focusing on sections that students could not follow. This may involve a microanalysis of sections of the text to enable students to recognize such features as blends, reduced words, ellipsis, and other features of spoken discourse that they were unable to process or recognize.

Richards, J (2016) Teaching Top-down processing. 06/10. recup  
<https://www.cambridge.org/elt/blog/2016/01/13/teaching-listening-4-teaching-top-processing/>