



## Book review

***Phonology for Listening: Teaching the Stream of Speech*, R. Cauldwell. Speech in Action, Birmingham, UK (2013). 332 pp.**

In the engagingly argued and convincingly exemplified discussion in this book, Richard Cauldwell takes the reader through key issues in the teaching of listening comprehension, some of which he acknowledges other scholars (e.g., [Brown, 1990](#); [Field, 2008](#)) have addressed but which still need to find a wider audience in terms of what actually goes on in many classrooms. As the title suggests, the focus is on the 'sound substance' of what is said and how teachers and learners can engage more closely with it. Cauldwell also offers some very viable ways ahead for those teachers who find themselves in harmony with his arguments and wish to refocus some of their listening teaching.

The book is structured in four main sections with five chapters each.

- Part 1: The window on speech framework
- Part 2: Describing spontaneous speech
- Part 3: Accents, identity and emotion in speech
- Part 4: Teaching Listening

Each part has a full Reference list and each chapter has activities for the readers to try, often based on listening to existing recordings or making their own recordings of speech and reflecting on its content and fabric. A particularly useful feature (essential in fact to underpinning the detailed explanations and arguments) is the downloadable sound-files containing extracts which are cross-referred to sub-sections in each chapter.

As can be seen from the above outline, the book covers an immense amount of ground from phonological descriptions to methodological advice, taking in discussion of how to pin down the key features of different accents on the way.

The issues that this book revisits concern, firstly, the sources and selection of spoken language that learners are given to listen to and, secondly, the opportunities that teachers offer to learners to engage with what are for them the real difficulties in hearing much of what is being said when genuine English is encountered. With regard to the chosen models of language, Cauldwell makes the same distinction as Brown did in the first (1977) edition of 'Listening to Spoken English' between slow, careful speech as a legitimate reference-point for the teaching of pronunciation and the hurly-burly of rapid spontaneous speech which, although particularly rebarbative to non-native listeners in English, represents what they often actually need to cope with as listeners. With regard to the second issue, he argues passionately for the need for teachers to provide the learners with adequate structured experiences which will give them the tools and knowledge to cope with what he calls the 'sound substance' of what they hear. Suggestions are set out in Part 4, on Teaching Listening, but the author's pedagogical concern and *nous* is evident even in the sections more concerned with the technical descriptions of language. Throughout the book he calls the reader's attention to 'the plight of the listener' carried tellingly in the testimony of two learners, Ying and Anna.

Ying's lament provides the 'hook' for the earlier parts of the book – she feels that she knows many words but fails to 'catch' them in rapid speech. Parts 1 and 2 of the book give lucid, engaging and well-exemplified explanations of why this should be. I particularly appreciated the author's use of metaphor and of vivid terms such as 'squeeze zones' in his account of how the 'sound shapes' of words in rapid spontaneous speech may differ so much from citation forms. The transcription conventions and analysis approach used are rooted in the Birmingham system with some tweaks and shifts of emphasis (all explained). This system has the benefit of being highly transparent, (or at least it was found so by my MA students even in their early uses of it) as well as reflecting Cauldwell's own training and research background.

In Part 4 'Anna's Anger' comes to the fore in its frustration at the scant and superficial use that her teachers seemed to make of listening materials once the 'global comprehension stage' had been covered.

'I've hated the use of the material. I've ... answered three silly questions...then someone tells me patronisingly (it IS bloody patronising) that the rest doesn't matter. Well, it does if I want to learn the language!'

There seem to be a number of reasons why teachers may underuse listening material in this way. Firstly, by conviction; in some interpretations of CLT over-scrutiny of the fabric of language was felt to be counterproductive. This surely has been well

countered in more recent work concerning the value of reflecting on learning and ‘noticing’. Cauldwell argues strongly against ‘the over-reliance on osmosis’ (p. 6) or the idea that more and more practice and exposure will somehow fix things and is clear in his support of reflection and noticing.

A second reason could be classroom convenience. While it is not the case that no teaching materials have attempted to support teachers in helping learners with the ‘sound substance’ and noticing through scrutiny and reflection, in the age of tapes (and even CDs) it was often technically and practically difficult in class to return reliably to the right section of a listening text, let alone to isolate a troublesome string of segments. Cauldwell shares his expertise in digital technology as a solution to this problem, pitched at a level that most readers could cope with. His suggestions here seem not only useful but very accessible. I, for example, was able to download and start using the suggested free recording and editing facility (Audacity) within minutes.

The final and crucial reason for which teachers may underplay the concern with the sound substance of spoken English may often be connected with their own level of technical knowledge of the fabric of the language. To support such a scrutiny and reflection with any confidence teachers require a solid technical grasp of the phonology of the language they are teaching rather than only a confident user’s grasp. That needs to be developed through well-guided experience with the phenomena as well as understanding the propositions and arguments in a phonology handbook. This book, with its clear line of discussion and its astute use by the author of what digital technology has to offer, both to exemplify and expand his own discussions and to support the teaching of listening, is well set up to help many readers on the path.

## References

- Brown, G. (1990). *Listening to spoken English* (2nd ed.). Harlow: Longman.  
Field, J. (2008). *Listening in the language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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