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LISTENING IN L2 ROMANIAN: WHY FUNCTION WORDS GO UNNOTICED

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ABSTRACT. ***Listening in L2 Romanian: Why Function Words Go Unnoticed.*** Listening is a crucial but often overlooked component of second language (L2) acquisition. Despite its importance in developing linguistic competence, listening is frequently underemphasized in classroom instruction. This article examines L2 listening through the framework of cognitive linguistics, particularly cognitive grammar, which views language as an extension of general cognitive processes such as perception, memory, and categorization. By integrating insights from John Field's research on input processing and Baddeley's working memory model, we explore how L2 learners prioritize content words over function words in real-time listening. A small-scale empirical study was conducted with 37 students enrolled in a preparatory Romanian language course, using a paused transcription method to assess word recognition accuracy in speech. The findings confirm that L2 learners rely more on content words over function words, which is consistent with previous research in other languages. Notably, within function words, clitic pronouns and certain conjunctions were particularly difficult to recognize, suggesting that semantic schematicity and phonetic reduction play a key role in perceptual challenges. The study also highlights the continued reliance on top-down processing, even among B1-level learners, and the persistent difficulty in automatic segmentation of spoken input. Finally, the article argues for a reassessment of listening instruction, emphasizing explicit training in speech perception, function word recognition, and phonological processing. A balanced approach, combining comprehensible input, explicit instruction, and structured practice, is proposed to enhance L2 learners' ability to process spoken language more effectively.

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REZUMAT. ***Ascultarea în limba română L2: De ce cuvintele funcționale trec neobservate.*** În ciuda rolului esențial în achiziția limbii, receptarea mesajului oral este una dintre cel mai puțin reprezentate activități în predare. Perspectiva adoptată e cea a lingvisticii cognitive, mai precis a gramaticii cognitive, și valorifică o serie de studii dedicate în special decodării și recunoașterii cuvintelor în receptarea mesajului oral (Field 2009, Baddeley 2003). Scopul cercetării este ca, pornind de la un studiu empiric la scară mică, să aflăm în ce măsură vorbitorii de RLS prioritizează cuvintele cu conținut lexical față de cele cu conținut gramatical în ascultare. Metoda utilizată a fost cea a transcrierii cu pauză. Rezultatele confirmă faptul că vorbitorii de L2 se bazează mai mult pe cuvintele cu conținut lexical decât pe cele cu conținut gramatical, ceea ce este în concordanță cu cercetările anterioare pe alte limbi. În special, în cazul cuvintelor funcționale, pronumele și anumite conjuncții au fost dificil de recunoscut, probabil datorită schematismului semantic, formelor reduse din punct de vedere fonetic și poziției neaccentuate. Studiul evidențiază, de asemenea, înclinația spre o procesare vârf-bază, chiar și în rândul cursanților de nivel B1, și dificultățile întâmpinate de aceștia în segmentarea automată a inputului vorbit. În final, articolul pledează pentru o reevaluare a felului în care ascultarea e abordată în predare, subliniind importanța unor activități dedicate explicit decodării și recunoașterii cuvintelor, în special a celor cu conținut gramatical și relațional. O abordare echilibrată, care combină expunerea la input, predarea explicită și exersarea sistematică ar putea spori capacitatea cursanților L2 de a procesa mai eficient limba vorbită.

Cuvinte-cheie: *ascultare L2, segmentare, decodare, cuvinte funcționale, specificitate semantică, schematism semantic, lingvistică cognitivă, româna ca limbă străină*

1. A case for Listening

Even after decades of research, Michael Rost notes, "we may just be scratching the surface of a deep understanding of the fundamental processes and mechanisms that underpin our ability to communicate with members of our own species" (Rost 2011, 1). Listening is both mysterious and complex for reasons that we will detail later, but it is nevertheless essential for language learning, both for L1 and L2 speakers. First, it allows language learners to engage with and process language input, supporting the development of other language skills (Vandergrift and Goh 2012, 4). Then, it is particularly important for the transfer of the knowledge and the abilities developed in the classroom in the outside world. After leaving the classroom, learners expand their language

knowledge through reading and listening. While both are valuable, listening is crucial as it enhances spoken competence by providing syntactic, lexical, phonological, and pragmatic input. Therefore, training learners in listening is essential to support their autonomy in language learning (Field 2008, 5).

In this article, we are going to look at listening (and language in general) through the lenses of cognitive linguistics, more specifically cognitive grammar, which treats language as an integral part of cognition rather than a separate module, since language recruits general cognitive phenomena, such as attention, perception, categorization, memory, from which it cannot be dissociated. According to R. Langaker, the founder of cognitive grammar, a language is a structured inventory of conventional linguistic units, while a unit is a pattern of processing activity that is thoroughly mastered and can thus be carried out more or less automatically (a "cognitive routine'"). A specific structure becomes a linguistic unit through gradual psychological entrenchment and conventionality. It is also important to note that according to this specific view of language, all linguistic units are abstracted from usage events, from actual instances of language use. As a consequence, every usage event "has some impact, however slight, on the linguistic system as currently constituted" (Langaker 2007, 421-463). This sheds a different light on the relevance and the emphasis we should place on practising the actual language activities, reception, production and interaction, rather than on explaining the language system to the students. While dedicating time to explaining and practising various language structures is not wrong per se, teachers are called to find balance in their approach. However, to find balance, one needs to understand first how language in general and language acquisition in particular work.

Although most students consider listening a priority, we notice that, at least in some contexts, this is not entirely reflected in the attention it gets in the actual class setting. "When there is pressure on contact hours, remarks Field, it is often the listening session that is cut. Students are rarely assessed on their listening skills, and the problems of many weak listeners pass undiagnosed" (Field 2009, 1). Despite an increase in classroom listening activities, learners are still largely expected to develop their listening skills independently, with minimal direct guidance from the teacher. Plus, there is an over-emphasis on comprehension tasks, the listening activity taking the form of an anxiety-inducing test rather than an opportunity for training students how to approach listening (Vandergrift and Goh 2012, 4). There are many reasons for this and we will mention here just a few of them.

The very first reason has to do with the fact that the outcomes of a listening activity are mostly unclear to both the students and the teachers involved. There is, as John Field puts it, no shared view "of the *behaviour* that we want them to achieve by the end of the programme" (Field 2009, 120). In order for the

teachers to be able to understand these outcomes and then communicate them to the students, they first need to understand themselves the main difficulties that learners encounter when asked to listen to a spoken text in a second language.

Another thing we need to remember is that, alongside reading, listening is an "invisible" skill. While in the case of speaking and writing, we have a product to assess, for the two receptive skills, all the work happens in the learner's brain. We can of course check comprehension with the help of certain questions, but especially at lower levels, it is not clear if (or to what extent) the accuracy of the answers comes from truly understanding the text or from the learner's ability to draw on general knowledge. We know that it is always a combination of the two, but we remain unsure of how much the text is transparent to the learner at the end of the listening activity. Also, it is perceived as being "passive" because, despite some progress in the field, a good number of teachers still treat listening exercises as practice for exams: they offer students handouts, play the recording twice and then check the answers and possibly clarify some vocabulary issues, at best. This is felt by both the teachers and the students as interrupting the natural flow of communication, it is unnatural, passive and, more importantly, progress is difficult to assess. When it happens (because it does eventually), it seems to be the result of chance, rather than specific practices. This reinforces the traditional view that since in L1 we were taught to speak, read and write, but nobody taught us to listen, things should follow the same course in L2.

Finally, one characteristic of the spoken text is the fact that it unfolds in real-time, which makes it very hard for students to break it down into the appropriate segments. Unlike reading, where we have the visual clues and the text to go back to, in the case of listening, learners find themselves without much support and thus they don't seem "to understand the processes that are involved in learning to listen in a new language" (Vandergrift and Goh 2012, 4, 5). We assume that after the learner gets used to the phonology of the target language, "listening skills from the first language (L1) will transfer themselves to the second (L2) by some process of osmosis" (Field 2009, 1, 2). At least in the case of the Romanian language, or, rather, in the contexts we are familiar with, a relatively short period of time is dedicated to the phonological peculiarities of the language.

2. Stages of listening comprehension

Listening is a multi-faceted process that involves different levels of neurological, linguistic, semantic, and pragmatic processing. A complete understanding of listening must integrate all these levels of processing, as they work together. As far as neurological processing is concerned, we need to

understand the physiological basis of listening, while linguistic processing covers the way in which listeners recognize and interpret speech sounds (speech perception, identifying speech units, such as words, syllables or other prosodic features, through phonotactic knowledge and syntactic parsing). Through semantic processing, listeners derive meaning by appealing to prior knowledge (or schemata), and by making use of various types of inferences to fill the gaps in understanding. Finally, the pragmatic level of processing helps listeners interpret the implied meaning and the speaker's intentions (Rost 2011, 11-95).

In this article, we will focus on the linguistic and semantic aspects only, but before moving to the actual analysis, a brief description of how the brain processes speech is necessary. As mentioned above, spoken language is continuous, so it is the brain's job to divide speech into meaningful units. In order to do this, listeners apply a set of phonological rules which makes it possible for them to recognize patterns in sounds that help them separate words or phrases. They also rely on various prosodic cues, such as intonation, stress, rhythm, etc. Once they have done this, or rather, while doing this, the brain quickly retrieves possible word meanings from memory, thus trying to gain lexical access. A step further would be organizing words into grammatical structures to make sense of them (syntactic parsing) (Rost 2011, 34-39).

In short, for L2 learners, initially, the ear receives raw acoustic signals, which must be matched to phonemes of the target language. These phonemes are then grouped into syllables and later assembled into words. At a higher level, words often form familiar clusters, corresponding to common phrases or expressions. Beyond word recognition, listeners must also identify two crucial patterns: grammatical structure and intonation (Field 2009, 113).

Similarly, Vandergrift and Goh (2012, 36-56) describe the three stages in listening comprehension: a perception phase (word segmentation), a parsing phase (grouping words into chunks) and a utilization phase (using background knowledge and inference to interpret meaning.). According to their cognitive model, listeners use parallel processing (top-down & bottom-up) to build comprehension and it integrates acoustic processing (hearing sounds), lexical access (recognizing words), syntactic processing (understanding grammar), semantic interpretation (deriving meaning) and pragmatic processing (inferring intent & social meaning).

2.1. Challenges for L2 learners

Several things make listening harder for L2 speakers. First, it is the lack of automaticity (L2 learners process words more slowly), then there is a higher cognitive load (L2 learners must consciously decode words rather than recognize

them instantly) and finally, the variability in speech (accents, speed, and informal speech patterns) makes comprehension even harder for them. Lack of cultural schema may also play an important part.

Also, it is important to note that when learning to listen in a second language, listeners do not start from scratch. They already possess a well-developed listening competence in their first language, where the various cognitive processes involved in comprehension operate well. The challenge in L2 listening is not about acquiring entirely new skills but about adapting existing ones to function effectively in a different linguistic environment. This adaptation requires the listener to suppress some highly automatic routines used in their L1, as these may not always apply to the structure and sound patterns of the second language. The core difficulty for L2 listeners lies in adjusting to the unfamiliar characteristics of the second language, including its phonological system, function words, word forms, grammatical structures, and intonation patterns. These aspects differ from those of the listener's native language and require deliberate adaptation and practice (Field 2009, 112-114).

A key distinction between novice and expert listeners is the degree of automaticity in decoding speech. Expert listeners possess highly automatic decoding routines, enabling them to recognize and match sound patterns to words with speed, accuracy, and confidence. In contrast, novice listeners struggle with decoding, requiring greater mental effort to match sounds to words. This additional cognitive load limits their ability to process overall meaning, as much of their attention is occupied with basic decoding rather than understanding the speaker's message in its entirety (Field 2009, 115). In essence, successful L2 listening development involves refining and automating the decoding process. With targeted practice, learners gradually reduce their reliance on conscious effort, allowing them to process speech more fluently and focus on comprehension rather than struggling with word recognition.

More specifically, among the cognitive factors that influence listening success working memory capacity and processing speed play the most important part. Working memory, as defined by Alan Baddeley, refers to the limited-capacity system responsible for temporarily maintaining and storing information while supporting cognitive processes such as reasoning, learning, and comprehension. It acts as an interface between perception, long-term memory, and action (Baddeley 2003). The model of working memory proposed by Baddeley includes a four-component framework: *the central executive* (the control system that directs attention and manages cognitive processes), *the phonological loop* (a subsystem dedicated to verbal and auditory information), *the visuospatial sketchpad* (which processes visual and spatial information) and the episodic buffer (which serves as a link between working memory and long-term memory) (Baddeley 2000).

Out of the three components, the one most relevant to language learning is the phonological loop. The phonological loop consists of two sub-components: the phonological store ("Inner Ear"), which holds auditory information for a few seconds before it decays and the articulatory rehearsal process ("Inner Voice") which refreshes the information in the phonological store by subvocal rehearsal (mentally repeating words) and which prevents decay of short-term verbal memory. The way the phonological loop works explains a few key phenomena related to language acquisition: the phonological similarity effect (words that sound similar are harder to remember than those that sound distinct, which suggests that verbal information is stored based on sound rather than meaning), the word length effect (short words are easier to recall than longer words, because longer words take more time to rehearse, leading to greater memory decay) and articulatory suppression (if participants are asked to say an irrelevant sound while trying to memorize words, their verbal memory performance declines, as the articulatory rehearsal process is disrupted, preventing refreshment of information) (Baddeley 2003). So, in the case of foreign language learning, the phonological loop supports new phoneme acquisition, learning and retaining unfamiliar words.

Given the limited capacity of working memory, we should perhaps turn our attention towards the way L2 speakers tackle the spoken text. Research suggests that less experienced L2 listeners primarily rely on individual word recognition as their entry point to understanding speech. Rather than interpreting speech through a broader contextual framework, they often build hypotheses based on isolated words. This fragmented approach indicates that early-stage listening training should focus on word recognition and common lexical chunks, rather than the traditional bottom-up progression from phonemes to larger discourse units such as intonation groups (Field, 2009, 118). By developing a foundation in word recognition, even listeners with a lower proficiency can establish initial footholds in comprehension, enabling them to engage more effectively with spoken input. In order to comprehend speech effectively, listeners draw upon three key sources of information: input (Speech Stream), linguistic knowledge (phonology, vocabulary, and grammar of the language, including word meanings) and context (general knowledge and prior knowledge about the unfolding discourse) (Field 2009, 126).

While all three are essential, the final part of our article is dedicated to a little experiment regarding linguistic input: we want to find out whether learners of Romanian as a second language favour vocabulary over grammar-related words in the process of listening comprehension. The answer to this question is relevant because it will help us identify the true challenges learners encounter when listening to an L2 text, it will offer us some direction in how we plan our

listening activities in class, by taking into consideration those challenges and consequently designing activities that will help learners overcome them. In other words, the next section is a window into what happens in our students' brains, thus making the process of listening comprehension less of an invisible skill.

3. Content or function words?

Before we dive into the practical aspects of the research, one more terminological clarification is needed. According to the view put forward by cognitive grammar, lexicon and grammar form "a continuum consisting solely of symbolic structures". So, both "content" and "function" words are, in fact, "symbolic units", with a phonological and a semantic pole. The two differ from each other in their level of semantic specificity (or schematicity) and symbolic complexity. Lexical items are fixed expressions and have a high degree of semantic and phonological specificity, while the symbolic assemblies that are considered part of grammar, are more schematic (Langacker 2007). Though we treat the two in a unified way, by regarding them as symbolic units, we still think that their variation in terms of specificity or even phonological complexity has an impact on the way listeners process them.

In an article entitled "Bricks or Mortar: Which Parts of the Input Does a Second Language Listener Rely on?", John Field investigates how second language (L2) listeners process spoken language, focusing on whether they rely more on content words (bricks) or function words (mortar) (Field 2008). In fact, this study in particular represents the starting point for our research. We wanted to see if his results could be confirmed in the case of Romanian as a second language. For Field, content words (bricks) are open-class words that carry lexical meaning, such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, while function words (mortar) represent words that signal grammatical relationships, such as prepositions, auxiliary verbs, pronouns, and determiners. The study found that L2 listeners process content words more accurately than function words, even though function words appear more frequently in speech and this was consistent across different L1 backgrounds and proficiency levels. On the other hand, function words are often misheard or ignored. Even at higher levels of English proficiency, L2 learners continued to struggle with function words. This suggests that the difficulty is not just phonetic, but also cognitive since L2 listeners seem to prioritize meaning over grammatical structure. Another factor contributing to this (and this seems to align with Baddeley's 2000 assumption that verbal information is stored based on sound rather than meaning), is the fact that content words are stressed, therefore more perceptually salient, while function

words tend to be unstressed, making them harder to identify. L2 listeners use stressed syllables as anchors, often ignoring weak syllables that are typically associated with function words.

Similarly, Vafaee and Suzuki examine the relative importance of vocabulary knowledge and syntactic knowledge in second language listening ability. According to their findings, vocabulary knowledge had a stronger effect on listening ability than syntactic knowledge (twice as much), and, more specifically, aural vocabulary knowledge was a significant predictor, confirming previous research suggesting that spoken vocabulary size directly influences listening comprehension. While syntactic knowledge significantly contributed to listening ability, its effect size was half that of vocabulary knowledge. Metacognitive knowledge and working memory also had an impact on listening ability, as did listening anxiety (Vafaee and Suzuki 2020).

3.1. Participants and procedure

This is a rather small-scale study that recruited 37 students enrolled in the preparatory year at Babeş-Bolyai University. The participants began their language course in October and followed an intensive language learning programme of 25 hours weekly. At the time when they were asked to participate in this research they had completed their A2 module and they were almost halfway through their B1 module. It is important to note that they had various linguistic backgrounds (Arabic, English, Ukrainian, Farsi, Turkish, Turkmen, French, English, Italian), but the influence of L1 on their performance was not analysed for the purpose of this article. Previous studies have shown that L1 was not a significant factor in students' ability to recognize function words, but further research dedicated to investigating L1 impact on word recognition in Romanian is needed. In a focus group, they were asked to name the aspects they found the most difficult when listening in Romanian. Among the things they mentioned the most were "pronunciation", "accent", "speaking too fast" or words being "similar to others", which created confusion. Only one mentioned grammar among the factors that influenced their listening ability, and one said that context (or lack of) can have an impact on comprehension. It seems as if learners consider decoding and correctly identifying words in the speech stream the most difficult part of listening.

The method used here is that of paused transcription: participants listened to a recording that had brief pauses inserted at certain intervals. During the short pauses, they had to write down the last few words (five or six). The material consisted of two recordings, a travel vlog and an interview with a student, and they included 18 such pauses and a number of 97 words, divided

approximately equally between function words (48) and content words (49). We included verbs, nouns and adjectives in the category of content words, while pronouns, conjunctions and prepositions were considered functors. Although, as mentioned above, we cannot draw a sharp line between the two, we used as primary criteria for this division the level of semantic specificity/schematicity. So, while prepositions, conjunctions or auxiliary verbs are semantically more schematic, nouns, verbs and adjectives have a much higher degree of semantic specificity. Also, function words tend to be not only symbolically noncomplex, but also much shorter (often consisting of one syllable).

3.2. Results and interpretation

The results of the study confirm the fact that content words seem to play a more important role in listening than function words (58.7003% vs. 42.004%) (Table 1), so with a marked difference between the two (a 16.696% gap). So how can we explain the gap? First of all, the results confirm the conclusion of previous studies: L2 listeners focus on meaning rather than grammatical structure and seem to struggle with function words even at a B1 level, despite the high frequency of these words in speech. Because most function words are symbolically noncomplex and short, the inability to recognize them can be caused by poor word segmentation, by difficulty in decoding, in the perception phase. However, we believe that the difficulty of accurately identifying function words cannot be placed simply at a phonetic level, but it has to do also with their semantic specificity. As numbers will show, even within the category of content or function words, there are considerable differences among sub-categories. We believe that their level of schematicity and specificity determines the level of accuracy in recognition.

Thus, out of all function words, pronouns have the lowest level of recognition, 32.046% overall. If however, we eliminate the relative pronoun "care", the percentage drops to 25.405%, the lowest of all categories analysed. In the subgroup of pronouns, there were several personal and reflexive pronouns, especially unstressed, preposed forms of these pronouns. The plethora of personal pronouns in Romanian, especially the Accusative and Dative forms, are often difficult to learn by L2 speakers and the results seem to confirm this, as listeners struggle to even hear or recognize them in speech. The explanation comes partially from the fact that they form one-syllable words ("ne", "le", "-o", "îl"), in unstressed positions, and are easy to ignore, but also from their high degree of semantic schematicity. Also, perhaps listeners find the clitic doubling redundant. The clarity or emphasis that they bring, at this level of language competence, is more of a subtlety that comes later. The high error rate in clitic

pronoun recognition aligns with Baddeley's (2012) model, suggesting that limited phonological working memory capacity may hinder processing of less salient lexical items.

Conjunctions come next with a higher level of accurate recognition. However, we notice that within this subcategory, again, not all conjunctions are created equal. Conjunctions such as "și" (and) or "iar" (but), are considerably more semantically specific than the conjunction "să" (used to introduce verbs in the subjunctive). While the number of accurate answers for this category overall amounts to almost 43%, the percentage drops to 34.459% for the conjunction "să", despite its high level of frequency in Romanian and the extensive time dedicated to teaching the structure in class. The explanation comes almost certainly from its high level of semantic schematicity, which makes it easier to miss in speech.

Out of all function words, prepositions have the highest recognition rate, well above the category overall: 50.990%. This is again consistent with our expectations, given the fact that prepositions tend to be more semantically specific: "pe" (on), "la" (at), "pentru" (for), "în" (in), etc. The particle "a" that marks the infinitive, considered a segmental morpheme of a prepositional origin, represents a special case because it is desemanticized. There are very few occurrences in the texts, so it is hard to draw any definite conclusions for now, but it is still worth noting that it registers the lowest rate of accuracy. More research is needed to confirm this, but it is consistent with the rest of the results: the lower the semantic specificity, the more difficult for the word to be recognised by listeners. Predictably, when part of a familiar collocation such as "pe jos" ("on foot"), the percentage of accurate recognition was very high.

Moving on to content words, the results here are even more striking. According to Langaker 2007, symbolic units can be divided into two main categories: *things* (a thing being a bounded region in the same domain of conceptual space) and *relations* (relational expressions that profile the interconnections among conceived entities). A noun, by this definition, would be a symbolic structure that designates a thing, while adjectives, adverbs and verbs designate relations. If we analyse the results, we notice that nouns tend to be recognised to a much greater extent than members of the other categories 70.981%, followed by adjectives, verbs and adverbs. Adverbs come last, with only 45.410%, again due to their higher semantic schematicity.

This is consistent with findings coming from electrophysiological, neuropsychological, and neuroimaging studies, which note that nouns and verbs activate overlapping but functionally distinct areas in the brain, depending on meaning, task complexity, and linguistic structure. Thus, nouns and verbs differ in processing speed and complexity: studies show that nouns are processed faster

than verbs in isolated word recognition tasks. Also, in sentence-level processing, verbs impose greater syntactic and morphological demands, requiring integration with surrounding words. Also, interestingly, verb processing is more impaired in Broca's aphasia (frontal damage), possibly due to its higher cognitive demands. Broca's area is known to be in charge of grammar and syntax (Vigliocco et al. 2011). This suggests that cognitive grammar categorization of verbs as "relations" is accurate and explains why they are more difficult to process than nouns. It is perhaps worth noticing that in the case of certain high frequency verbs (for example *a avea* "to have"), students identified it correctly, but obviously focused on content, since they wrote down a variety of forms from the grammatical paradigm of the verb (different tenses, moods, inflections).

Accuracy in function words (overall)	**Accuracy in content words (overall)**
42.004%	**58.7003%**
Pronouns (overall)	Noun (overall)
32.046%	70.981%
Pronouns (without care)	Adjective (overall)
25.405%	55.945%
Conjunctions (overall)	Adjective (pronoun)
42.972	55.405
The conjunction "să"	Verb (overall)
34.459%	51.158%
Prepositions (overall)	Adverb (overall)
50.990%	45.410%

Table 1

The results seem to confirm Field's findings that function words are perceptually weaker due to their unstressed nature in connected speech and are significantly more difficult to recognize by L2 listeners.

3.3. Applications for teaching

One of the findings of this article is that L2 learners pay considerably more attention to content words than function words, and this remains true even for intermediate-level learners. In the first stages of language learning, they most likely approximate the meaning of a paragraph starting from a few content words that they grasp. Then, they use top-down processing to fill in the gap. The fact that they continue to do this even at higher levels may also be a

sign that directed, intentional listening activities are necessary to increase the accuracy of function word recognition, with a focus on the more semantically schematic ones such as clitic pronouns or certain complementisers or conjunctions. One may argue that if comprehension is achieved despite the listeners' ability to spot these words, then there is no need to draw their attention towards them.

Ever since Krashen's Monitor Model and comprehensible input hypothesis, we have been aware of the importance of input processing for language acquisition in general. His research marked an important switch in language teaching from structure-based approaches to approaches that place emphasis on meaning. According to Krashen, learners make a lot of progress simply by being exposed to comprehensible input (the i+1 model, where i is the student's level, while +1 is the new language to be acquired) (Krashen 1985). Though we think most of his conclusions are accurate, we still think that in order for students to progress faster, they benefit from guided instruction. Several theories and models in language acquisition confirm this: Richard Schmidt's noticing hypothesis, according to which nothing is learned unless it is first noticed (Schmidt 2001), Pienemann's processability theory (Pienemann 2003) and especially Bill VanPatten's input processing theory (VanPatten 2004).

In VanPatten's view, input processing refers to the way learners process linguistic input to extract meaning and function. It involves perceiving (auditory recognition of a sound), noticing (consciously registering a form), and making form-meaning connections. An important distinction for him is the input-intake distinction: input is all the language that a learner is exposed to, while intake is the portion of the input that gets processed and made available for further learning. As we have seen from the results of our research, not all input becomes intake, as learners filter and prioritize certain linguistic elements while ignoring others. VanPatten presents several key principles that govern how learners prioritize meaning over form when processing input: *the primacy of meaning principle* (learners process input for meaning before processing it for form), *the primacy of content words principle* (learners first process content words before function words), *the lexical preference principle* (when both a lexical item and grammatical marker encode the same meaning, learners rely on lexical items), *the preference for nonredundancy principle* (learners prioritize grammatical markers that are not redundant with lexical meaning), *the meaning-before-nonmeaning principle* (learners process meaningful forms before non-meaningful ones), *the availability of resources principle* (if processing meaning is too demanding, learners will ignore grammatical forms), and *the sentence location principle* (learners tend to process items in sentence-initial position before medial or final positions) (VanPatten 2004, 5-33).

There have been several attempts to investigate the effects of input on language learning, from extensive exposure to certain language forms (input flood method), to highlighting language features in enriched texts (enhanced input method) and finally to processing instruction (students are asked to process a text, without appealing to prior knowledge or context and relying solely on the language). (Lightbown and Spada 2017, 162-164). Though these comprehension-based approaches do indeed show that students make important progress when exposed to language, other researchers see comprehension-based activities as "an excellent way to begin learning and as a supplement to other kinds of learning for more advanced students" (Lightbown and Spada 2017, 165).

Similarly, a combined approach is suggested by Catherine J. Doughty in *Effects of Instruction on Learning a Second Language*. She examines how instruction influences learning outcomes and notes that while instruction can accelerate certain aspects of language acquisition and seems to be highly effective in the short term, "explicitly learned knowledge is indeed forgotten unless the feature is subsequently encountered in the input for a period of time" (Doughty 2004, 198-199).

In conclusion, a balanced approach would be useful, with some explicit instruction and enough exposure to input, as well as enough focus on both form and meaning. While comprehension of the general or global meaning of a text (or even of detailed information) may not depend on successfully decoding and understanding every function word, some targeted listening activities may improve both listening skills (by helping students avoid misunderstandings or even facilitating access to the more subtle and nuanced shades of meaning) and speaking and writing. By repeated exposure to language input, students learn that certain patterns are more probable than others, learn to anticipate and, finally, manage to use those patterns in speech.

Here are some practical suggestions on how we could improve students' listening abilities when it comes to word segmentation and function word recognition:

a. Switch from testing listening to teaching listening

Traditional listening lessons often test comprehension rather than train listening skills. Learners listen to an audio recording, answer comprehension questions, and receive feedback, but they are not explicitly taught how to process spoken input better. Teachers should incorporate activities that train decoding skills, rather than just assessing understanding. There are several ways of doing this. Micro-listening tasks may be useful, by focusing on individual phonemes, function words, and weak syllables rather than full-sentence comprehension. Dictation and transcription, although largely viewed as old-fashioned, can help

students practice decoding. Also, especially as a warm-up activity we can use word recognition drills: we play fast-paced speech and have students write/underline words they hear to train their segmentation skills.

b. Prioritize word recognition

Since L2 learners struggle to identify words in connected speech, due to weak segmentation skills, we could focus on helping them become more efficient at recognizing words and lexical chunks in fast, natural speech. Typical activities include chunking practice (have students listen to a sentence and mark word boundaries), minimal pair exercises (train students to distinguish similar sounds, such as [a], [ă] [î]) and listening to naturally fast speech to gradually expose learners to authentic speech rates.

c. Train function word recognition explicitly

As we have seen, L2 learners over-rely on content words and pay less attention to function words, which can sometimes lead to misinterpretation. To avoid this, we can design focused listening tasks that draw attention to function words, such as function word gap-fills (remove function words from transcripts and have students predict missing elements), contrastive listening (play two similar sentences that differ only in function words and have students identify the difference), stress and rhythm exercises (teach how function words are unstressed and reduced in fast speech).

d. Provide more exposure to natural speech

Natural speech is perceived as very difficult by students due to certain phonetic alterations and fast delivery. An increased exposure to authentic connected speech, using materials featuring real-life conversational speech (which should be level appropriate) instead of scripted audio would be beneficial and so would be activities that highlight weak forms or focus on intonation patterns.

e. Encourage active listening and self-monitoring to improve metacognition

Teaching learners metacognitive strategies will help them monitor their listening process and improve comprehension. First, students are asked to give their pre-listening predictions, then they are exposed for the first time to the input. After the first listening, students are encouraged to do some self-monitoring and to reflect on which words they missed and why. They may work individually or may discuss with a partner what they understood and what they missed and perhaps identify why that happened. Pause-and-guess exercises (stop a recording mid-sentence and ask students to predict the next word) may

also be useful during this first phase. Then they are exposed to listening the second time. This second listening will be dedicated to monitoring and fixing the problems identified. The listeners check the points where there was disagreement, correct them, and add additional details. Then, a whole-class discussion takes place, in which all participants contribute to reconstructing the text and reviewing the most important details; attention is drawn to how students understood certain words, pieces of information, and parts of the text. In the final verification stage, students listen for the third time, while focusing on the information discussed with the entire class in the previous stage. This third listening may be accompanied by a transcription of the text (Vandergrift 2004). This approach allows both teachers and students to identify problems, to understand what the sources of the problems are and to tackle them effectively.

4. Conclusions

The results of our small scale experiment point to the fact that explicit training in speech perception for instructors is certainly important, since background knowledge, topic familiarity, or conversational context will not compensate for difficulties in recognizing spoken words. Additionally, research on L2 listening has historically prioritized the study of contextual cues over the examination of how learners decode the speech signal itself. This has contributed to the widespread notion that "context saves the day" (Field 2009, 127), a belief that, while partially true, overlooks the reality that effective listening must also involve *precise* phonetic and lexical processing.

This study was an attempt to look closely at L2 Romanian speakers' word recognition skills, more specifically, to determine whether they favour content words rather than function words and to what extent. As expected, the results revealed differences between the two types of words, with L2 listeners struggling more with function words despite their high frequency in speech. Moreover, the numbers showed that the level of accuracy in word recognition varies even within the same category: prepositions have a higher recognition rate than conjunctions and certain subcategories (the conjunction "să", the infinitive particle "a", pronominal clitics), mostly due to their semantic specificity/ schematicity. The more schematic a category is, the harder it is to recognize. As for content words, nouns had the highest recognition rate (70.981%), which is in line with the findings of several studies from neuroscience that show nouns are easier to process than relational categories, such as verbs. Adverbs achieved the lowest level of recognition due to a higher semantic schematicity.

The results highlight the need for targeted instruction in word recognition, with a focus on function words in general and, more specifically, the more problematic ones or the ones that are harder to grasp. More generally, we believe additional research is needed in order to identify the specific challenges L2 Romanian listeners encounter at various stages of cognitive processing, whether it is speech perception, syntactic parsing or semantic processing. When both teachers and students are aware of what the sources of the difficulties are, they can come up with better solutions. We have suggested several activities to use in classroom practice to improve word recognition and we think more time should be dedicated to them than we currently do in standard instruction. The fact this specific group of students was well into their B1 level suggests that difficulties with decoding and word recognition are preserved even at higher levels of language competence. The fact that, initially, students rely so heavily on context and background knowledge (which is also something that teachers typically encourage) may sometimes prevent them from paying attention to certain language structures.

Future research should examine whether explicit instruction in function word recognition leads to measurable improvements in listening comprehension over time. Additionally, cross-linguistic comparisons with learners from different L1 backgrounds could provide further insights into phonological processing in L2 acquisition.

A combination of explicit instruction, targeted practice and, very importantly, extensive exposure to input may be the right approach when it comes to listening. With the rapid growth in technology, English has become even more of a lingua franca in the last few decades. Most of us spend a few hours on various platforms daily and the content we are exposed to is overwhelmingly in English. For example, the most used language on TikTok is English with 10.3 billion hashtag views, followed by Chinese with only 2.4 billion, which is a huge gap. According to some sources, 66% of all content available on YouTube is in English. Overall, it seems that certainly more than half of all web content is in English (compare almost 60% to less than 6% for the next language in ranking). This puts L2 speakers of Romanian at a disadvantage, as they are flooded with input in English while trying to learn a new language. Although the content that is freely available in Romanian on social media platforms has increased lately, we believe that designing and developing resources for extensive listening in Romanian would bring important benefits to learners.

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