

Action Research

Implementing Bottom-Up Listening Activities in a Basic French Course

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Listening skills are among the hardest to develop. Implementing Bottom-Up Listening (BUL) strategies I learned during a May 2025 DLIFLC workshop into the Basic French course, I collected students' evaluation of the lessons' usefulness. Into two lessons I incorporated three different BUL activities combined with a production task. Ultimately, this modest action research project found that students viewed these lessons positively. This report describes the context of the two lessons into which BUL activities were incorporated, the BUL activities themselves, and the introductory and production activities sandwiching them. Results of the action research are shared and discussed, highlighting potential factors that may have contributed to students' high scoring of the lessons. Insights for replication of BUL activities by other instructors are shared. Ultimately, BUL activities may prove a powerful tool to sharpen students' listening competencies, but may need supplementing with additional activities targeting comprehension, of which fellow instructors should take heed.

Keywords: *Listening, Bottom-Up Listening Skills, French, Higher Order Thinking*

INTRODUCTION

For DLIFLC, “listening has consistently been recognized as one of the most difficult skills to develop” (Yuasa, 2024, p. 12). Within the scholarship, listening has been called, “neglected and forgotten in the classroom” (Elin, 1972) and “the ignored skill” (Ulum, 2015), leaving some scholars to overtly ask, “Is listening instruction neglected intentionally or incidentally?” (Çakır, 2018, p. 154).

Few articles within the past five years within *Dialog on Language Instruction* have focused on developing students' listening skills. Of them, three should become fundamental reading for

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DLIFLC faculty, for different reasons. First, Yuasa (2024) outlines the difficulties in acquiring listening skills. Their study found that implementing a paused transcription activity, combined with an error analysis, was effective in raising students' self-awareness.

Secondly, Santizo (2019) offered insights on selecting listening materials. They contrasted the skills of reading and listening, demonstrating the mistake made when approaching both skills in the singular way. Thirdly, Khaled (2019) detailed the processes involved in listening. They suggest an approach using a structured preview phase followed by a selective strategic listening phase to refocus attention on the process of listening, rather than only on its products.

Furthermore, three dissertation abstracts printed in *Dialog on Language Instruction* examined listening instruction. Like Khaled's (2019) article, Li's (2019) study concluded that listening should focus less on outcomes, and more on the process, and that instruction must incorporate listening-strategies. This will require a change in teachers' approaches. In another study, Lee (2023) found lexical knowledge to have a robust correlation with listening proficiency. In other words, the larger the learner's vocabulary, the better at listening they are (and the smaller, the worse). Seo (2023) examined the metacognitive strategies of higher- versus lower-performing students, finding that higher performers relied less on translation but on holistic views of texts (audios), and relied more on contextual and discourse clues. They were also better able to handle losing attention during periods of incomprehension. Similarly, Al-Thawahrih's (2022) action research project found that students viewed as beneficial listening strategies taught during SA 7th hour. The four strategies taught were 1) pair sharing of background knowledge on the topic, 2) pre-lessons on effective notetaking, 3) thinking-aloud following listening, and 4) meta-awareness/asking meta-level questions (p. 31). While scholarship has documented the effect of these types of strategies, scholarship has not documented the effect of BULs on student learning nor on students' perceptions of BULs.

Spring 2025 saw the offering of institute-wide workshops on Bottom-Up Listening (BUL) strategies and skills. Morley (2023) explained BUL skills as, "the ability to separate the stream of speech into individual words becomes more important." BULs are distinct from top-down listening, which takes into account the context and background knowledge, etc. This shifting in focus aligns with Khaled's (2019) findings, that most DLIFLC textbooks focused only on students' comprehension or word recognition, offering little to actually improve their listening skills. In May 2025, I attended a BUL workshop. In early June, I experimented with such strategies in my teaching within the Basic French course. This article outlines steps I took as well as students' perceptions of the activities.

ACTION PLAN

Problem Statement & Research Questions

Students' difficulties in listening is a chronic, widespread issue across the Institute. Extant DLIFLC scholarship has not explored the impacts of implementing BUL interventions. To fill this gap in

the literature, I undertook the following simple action research project. Action research offers a limited but insightful glimpse into one classroom. This project was approved by my supervisor.

Two questions guided this project:

1. How useful to their learning did students find these activities to be, and
2. How interesting did students find these lessons.

Context & Participants

During weeks 27 and 28 (of the 36-week Basic French program), I designed and implemented the two, fifty-minute lessons detailed in what follows. Each class had seven students, 5 of whom were young American students whose first language (L1) was English, one whose L1 was Spanish, and another whose L1 was Haitian Creole.

According to the schedule, the lessons were to 1) target listening skills, 2) using materials selected “by the professor’s choice,” 3) on the respective topics of “air pollution” and “cooking with charcoal.” Students had not previously studied these topics or related lexicon.

ACTIONS TAKEN

On both occasions, I implemented the lessons with the same section of seven students. I designed both lessons to be completed by the students autonomously using a DOCX file in which I had included images, links, and tasks to be done using four separate audio files I had posted to TEAMS. I instructed students to use their personal headphones so they could listen, individually, as many times as needed.

Lesson 1

On the DOCX provided, students were instructed to work in partners and use their personal headphones for repeated listening (as they saw fit).

Warm-up Activities

Using four images of cities with unhealthy air quality, they first had to guess the cities photographed. Two of the four images were of American cities and were split-shots of before-and-after major environmental legislation and changes (Pittsburgh and Los Angeles). The visible change of these cities’ air quality became important later in the lesson. As students progressed through the DOCX, the answer were provided.

In the second activity, students had to match an image (5) with the corresponding French word (e.g., an image of lungs with “*les poumons*”).

BUL Listening Activity

The third activity required students to listen to the audio provided. The audio file was taken from a general YouTube video on air pollutants, their points of origin, and their impacts on the human body. The audio file lasted 80 seconds, included 217 words when transcribed, and was identified as ILR 2+ by Auto-ILR.

First, students were shown an image taken from a French website that reports the price of fuel types (unleaded gas, diesel gas, ethanol, etc.). Students were asked to listen for which fuel type was mentioned in the text. Both the image and the YouTube video were made for and by French-speakers, meaning they constitute authentic material/realia.

The fourth activity included four paragraphs of transcription in a mixed-up order. Two of the paragraphs had had their spacing removed. In the instructions, I blamed this disorder on Artificial Intelligence to add an element of realism, however flimsy. Both removing all the spacing between words (by the instructor) and putting them back in (by the students) was time consuming. Adding spaces reflected BUL activity #10 Parsing per the handout provided. Once parsed, the two paragraphs, along with the two unjumbled, were ordered properly, providing students with a full transcript of the audio that they had worked to create (edit) through multiple listenings.

An answer key was provided as was a link to the video that they could watch and verify their answers (while seeing the accompanying images).

Production Task

A final production task included a screenshot of a news headline that identified a city in Francophone Africa (N'Djamena, Chad) as the most polluted in the world. It included the image of dusty, polluted air hovering above the city. Students were to write a message to a military leader of that country's governing junta outlining the dangers of air pollution and suggestions for remedying their problem. As an extra tip, I reminded students of the remarkable change that were visible in Pittsburgh and Los Angeles, which they saw earlier in the lesson. They were to post their written work to TEAMS for my review.

All students completed the listening portions, but not all completed the production task, due to time constraints.

Lesson 2

Introducing the Topic

Lesson two was implemented the following week. Addressing the topic of, "cooking with charcoal," I created a DOCX in which I introduced the topic through images, taken from commercial websites, of a grill and a bag of charcoal whose packaging was in French. This is a form of e-realra. Students completed this lesson individually, per my instruction.

Following the introductory images, I provided students a diagram with a few components of a grill labeled in French, constituting vocabulary they had never formally encountered previously, which would be critical for understanding the audios.

BUL Activities

The audio I selected was from a YouTube video from a man explaining various methods to control the temperature when grilling using charcoal. I converted the video into four separate MP3 audio files, each lasting between 30-50 seconds. Each Audio file with which I provided students (A-B-C-D) features one different method of temperature control. The total transcription of all four audios totaled 374 words.

The next activity asked students to listen to Audio A, for which I had prepared a “Gapped Sentences with Multiple Choice” (BUL Activity #9). Students were to complete each blank by choosing the correct word spoken from one of four written choices. Students completed the same type of activity for Audio B. Because this type of activity was less cognitively taxing than the next activity, I designed the lesson to begin with the easier and progress to more challenging tasks.

For Audios C and D, students completed a “Spot the Intruder” (BUL Activity #8) activity. Students had the full transcript of each audio file, into which I had inserted additional one word/ phrase per line. The task was for students to listen to the audio, spot the unnecessary, inserted word/s, and cross them out.

Possessing now corrected, complete transcripts for all four audios, students finally had to match the name of the method for cooking with charcoal (“create heat pockets,” “use a controller,” etc.) method with the text/ audio (Audio/ Text A-B-C-D).

An answer key was provided, as was a link to the YouTube video to watch the man demonstrating his grilling methods.

Production Task

Using paper I provided, students were directed to make a drawing of each method described in the video, labeling the important components of the grill in French. Although not military in nature, the task required students’ higher order thinking skills, according to Bloom’s taxonomy (application and creation).

Knowing my students enjoy competition, I collected their drawings and displayed them while quickly verifying their overall correctness. For each drawing, I asked them to score it orally out of five stars. Three drawings emerged as the best, so in a second round of voting-by-hand-raising, two of the final three ended with a tied score (counting my one vote). The atmosphere as enjoyable but also productive linguistically.

All students completed all components; however not all drawings (and labeling) were completed.

DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

After both lessons, I asked for students’ anonymous feedback. On a quarter sheet of paper, I asked students to rate the lesson out of a possible five stars according to their perceptions of usefulness for their learning (first) and interest (second). I indicated that comments were welcomed, too. Instructions were given orally and written into the DOCX files. I then collected students’ feedback forms, faced down and shuffled the pile. I analyzed data by first averaging their scoring. I organized comments by the score given, and present them verbatim below. I then analyzed all comments by deducing the major themes to which comments pointed. One student’s comments could be recognized as containing multiple themes. These themes are also presented in a separate table.

FINDINGS

On both occasions, all students provided one overall score, rather than two separate scores for usefulness and interest. I had not envisioned them doing so. Given how tired they seemed at this point in the program, I decided not to burden them by asking them to redo their scoring.

Findings: Lesson 1

Results averaged 4.3/5.0, excluding one unscored response (n=6). See Table 1 for all comments.

Table 1

Comments Made about Lesson 1 by Score

Score	Comment 1	Comment 2	Comment 3
5	“very real and useful”	“Good activity! Could use more questions on understanding.”	“I really appreciate things related to BBQ’s”
4	“I learned a lot. I liked listening with subtitles.”	NA	NA
3	“I don’t feel like I learned much from this lesson. I like the subject but I think that presentation could have been improved. Maybe there is too much vocabulary that I still cannot understand.”	NA	NA
2	NA	NA	NA
1	NA	NA	NA
unscored	“good activity” (smiley face)	NA	NA

Findings: Lesson 2

Results were an average of 4.5, again excluding one unscored response (n=6). See Table 2.

Table 2
Comments Made about Lesson 2 by Score

Score	Comment 1	Comment 2	Comment 3
5	(no comment left)	(no comment left)	(no comment left)
4	"I like the lesson thanks to my team. I don't really like the subject."	"good material and good exercises. I also think a sprinkle of multiple choice is always good too."	"I thought that this exercise was fun, but it felt a little rushed. I like how there were some parts with partners and some parts of individual work. The subject was interesting and it was good to be exposed to new vocabulary. Maybe having the vocabulary broken down in less of a jumble would help."
3	NA	NA	NA
2	NA	NA	NA
1	NA	NA	NA
unscored	"I like the topic. I learned a lot, especially good vocab"	NA	NA

Findings: Emerging Themes

From both lessons combined, eight themes emerged from the comments. They are presented in descending order of frequency in Table 3. Most commonly, students perceived these lessons and their topics positively.

Table 3
Themes Emerging from Written Comments

Theme: The lesson...	number of comments
...was generally good / fun.	4
...’s topic was appreciated.	4
...was useful/ realistic.	2
...could have been strengthened with the addition of comprehension questions.	2
...’s vocabulary was appreciated.	2
...’s topic was not appreciated.	1
...’s format of blending individual work and partner work was appreciated.	1
... could have been strengthened with explicit vocabulary instruction.	1

DISCUSSION

Based on the results from this project, students appreciated the BUL activities. BUL activities go against the “orthodox way of teaching listening” in which students merely listen and answer comprehension questions (Khaled, 2024). BUL activities address students’ difficulties in recognizing the blurred boundaries between words and gaining familiarity with elisions and variations that occur when words, learned in isolation, are strung together in longer discourse (Yuasa, 2024). Two students expressed a desire for comprehension questions. This underscores that BUL activities focus exclusively on decoding words, which constitutes only half of the listening comprehension process: the other being meaning building (Khalid, 2019).

If only comparing students’ scoring of the two lessons, students preferred Activities 8 and 9 (Spot the Intruder, Gapped Sentences) rather than 10 (Parsing). This suggests that there is value in offering a combination of BUL activities, rather than just one. In the future then, I would continue to utilize two rather than one BUL activity but also experiment with coupling them with an explicit check of their comprehension before initiating a production task. Ideally, the production task should involve a military-context that require students’ higher-order thinking.

Finally, I suspect that the students enjoyed these BUL activities and lessons partly due to their novelty, merely introducing new types of activities into the classroom. Specifically, these lessons decentered the instructor and permitted students to work at their own pace and autonomously. Research with DLIFLC learners found them to perceive “learner autonomy as a process of empowering learners to take control of learning, which was helpful in the language classroom” (Rana, 2019, p. 87). Adding variety to a long language course seems under-appreciated in the scholarship.

For instructors eager to experiment in the classroom, BUL activities take time and preparation. Particularly, parsing activities take time to design, and, from the students' side, to complete. Notwithstanding, the effort was clearly appreciated by students according to the positive feedback. Busy instructors must be mindful of the time required in creating such material and strive to create lessons that can be utilized more than one time or by various instructors whenever possible.

BUL activities could be a potent addition if combined with recognized strategies of previewing and sharing background knowledge, pre-lesson tips on notetaking, think-alouds, and meta-awareness raising (Al-Thawahrih, 2022, p. 31). Even stronger, it could be coupled with explicit vocabulary instruction, given the causal relationship between proficient listening and vocabulary size (Lee, 2023).

Action research offers insights about one group of participants, the findings which cannot necessarily be extrapolated to all students. Findings do however suggest the need for additional investigations within and across languages.

Some next steps would be to replicate this type of project across DLIFLC, with larger samples and with greater precision. Findings would provide a clearer picture of students' perception of BUL strategies. More meticulously planned investigations would be needed to explore empirically the impact of BUL activities on students' listening performance. Nonetheless, it is paramount that we value students' perceptions of their learning since as they possess the most agency within their learning.

CONCLUSION

Developing learners' listening skills in a target language remains among the most challenging of tasks for DLIFLC faculty. This modest action research project, conducted with intermediate-level learners of French in the Basic program, demonstrated that "Bottom-Up Listening Strategies" were viewed positively by students. While this modest project cannot pinpoint causation, it did suggest that students appreciated this type of activity, as well as the change that it offered from "orthodox" listening lessons. Notwithstanding, one student reminded us that correctly parsing an audio's words on one hand and then comprehending those words on the other remain related by distinct skills. This suggests that combining BUL with a comprehension check, followed by a higher-order-thinking production activity, would make for an effective lesson. Overall, this report demonstrates that BUL activities are useful in our context: they encourage learners to approach listening from different angles and can enlarge the instructor's pedagogical toolkit.

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