Meaning building

Here are some generative activity-types to help students develop their meaning-building processes by focussing on specific information, meaning in context, the main points/detail, the main point and inference.

i. specific information

The activity below is one both teachers and students are familiar with. It helps risk-avoiders and lower level learners direct their attention - something they have problems doing - the stream of speech passes them by and they are still struggling to understand what's already gone. Reading-before-listening also offers some scaffolding and pointers to the content of what's to come.
The questions and options shouldn't be linguistically opaque - this will only increase the listener's cognitive load. When devising these activities to accompany authentic texts, the difficulty level of the text can be mediated by the task – that's to say, if the wording of options closely mirrors that in the text. In the audio script in the left-hand column, underlined and bolded words show how what's said relates to the answers for questions 1 and 2. Students could guess the answers before listening to check.
The activity below was written with the subsequent activity *Meaning in context* in mind.

Listen to the next part of the interview and complete the answers to questions 1-4. Compare and discuss in groups.

1 What does Dan say about travelling in the Amazon jungle? It's better to travel …

    a overland.   b. by plane.   c. as a group.

2 When Dan and his family arrived, how did the Pirahã react? They

    a were friendly.
    b wanted presents.
    c asked him lots of questions.

3 How did the Pirahã react to Dan learning their language? They

    a thought he was silly.
    b were surprised he understood them
    c thought it was interesting.

4 What travelling experiences had Dan had before he went to the Amazon? He'd travelled

    a from Southern California to Mexico.
    b a lot in Southern California.
    c around Mexico.

Work closely with the audio-script to weight-up difficulty-level

1.
P: What's it like travelling in that part of the world?
D: It can be challenging. It's gotten **easier** over the years with the advent of float **planes** or the easier availability of float **planes,** but, er, it would take us, in the early days, with **the family**, it was a week to two week **boat** trip to get in to the tribe, a very difficult situation as it required carrying large amounts of supplies for the family **overland** through the jungle.

2.
P: You mentioned there that the Pirahã were unusual in that they didn't want any material gifts or input from the outside world. What about human input? Were they … did they **welcome** you and your little tribe arriving?
D: They were **very friendly**, surprisingly so. I didn't know what to expect but they were **extremely friendly** ….

Here's a listening activity based on the same section of text as the previous one. It requires a deeper level of understanding.

ii. Meaning in context

Listen again and put the phrases a – d in the order your hear them. What do they mean? Find them in the audio script and compare with a partner.

    a   a highly-trained parrot

    b   in the early days

    c   a really tough expedition

    d   your little tribe

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The phrases in options a-d stood out in the audio script because, although students might understand them in one context, they might not get intended speaker meaning in this particular context.
As students would be better equipped to understand figurative language use in context if they had a general understanding of the main ideas in the text, both activities i and ii were designed in tandem; item a relates to the topic of question 3 above, item b to question 1, item c to 4 and item d to 2.
The first activity in exercise ii simply asks students to decode and sequence the phrases. Teachers could give more support by modelling the phrases and pointing out features of connected speech before listening.
Directing students to the audio script to find and work out the meaning of phrases like these can raise awareness to the way in which a speaker might use language figuratively, and retrieve meaning.

Non-expert listeners are faced with problems of directing attention as they are usually pre-occupied decoding and tracing links between adjacent utterances. This makes it difficult for them to follow the line of argument of a speaker or speakers by identifying main points or detail.

iii. The main points / detail

Listen to the next part of the interview. Put a - c in the order you hear them. Compare with a partner.

Students read …	The speaker says …
a. The language doesn't have words for numbers or colours.	**no numbers / no colour words**
b. Dan was the first person to translate the Pirahã language.	**first person** / **translate** / l**anguage**
c. The Pirahã are very primitive but happy.	**most primitive / extremely satisfied / pleased** [27]

Identifying the main points requires that the listener decides which piece of information is important, and which is to ignored. In this exercise, students are actually presented with the main points (a-c), which they are required to sequence. The text in red shows exactly what listeners need to understand in the audio in order to do the activity.

This exercise implicitly helps listeners discriminate between the main and subsidiary points, and students could highlight the information they needed to understand in the full audio-script. As students become more proficient, and depending on the difficulty of the text, the cues could be less similar to words actually spoken.

Interestingly, students will probably stop listening after they've identified the first two points, a wash-back (and logical) process from testing strategies. Doing so in a 'teaching' rather than 'testing' context lessens listening exposure, and so we would want to build in something to pre-empt it. You could always tell students (especially the risk-takers) that they will be asked about the exact speaker's words for each point at the end.

In the next activity, students are given practice in moving away from understanding every word in order to identify the main point. This entails understanding how isolated points contribute to the overall message and so helps the risk-avoiders. It can also help such listeners ignore false starts, hesitation and repetition.

iv. The main point

Work with a partner and guess which option (a-c) completes the short summary of what Dan says in the final part of the interview. Listen and check.

When Dan visits the Pirahã,

a he gives them presents *and* they ask for news from other parts of Brazil.

b he gives them presents *and* the tribe talk about what they've been doing.

c they talk about what the tribe's been doing *and* the tribe want to know about America. [28]

The wording of options a-c, the number of propositions in each on and proximity of one to another contributes to the overall difficulty level of the activity. Each option contains two propositions, but there are only 4 propositions in total. The fewer the propositions, the less the cognitive overload placed upon the listener's memory, but this should be balanced so that the risk-takers are required to concentrate on more of the text to arrive at the correct answer.

In this particular activity, the answer (b) is a more concrete realisation what is inferred by the speaker, that the tribe are essentially inward looking. Once students are more competent and confident in identifying the main point in a listening text, they would be ready to deal more effectively with inference type activities.