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## Using Authentic Materials to Develop Listening Skills in Teaching English as a Foreign Language

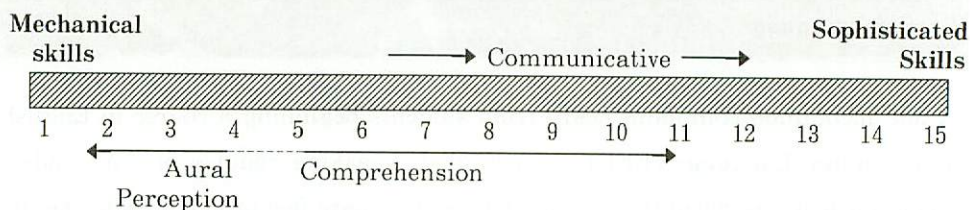
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A not uncommon complaint heard from students beginning a course in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in an English-speaking country is, "We understand our teachers when they speak and we often have few problems with the listening exercises in class, but when we go into a shop or a pub we understand nothing!" Such students are finding that the understanding of spoken English, or of any foreign or second language, involves much more than merely the ability to interpret the individual words used by a native speaker. Moreover, those students who have previously been exposed to controlled listening materials, those accompanying textbooks or used to develop the academic micro-skills necessary for certain examinations, may feel frustrated and demotivated to find that outside the classroom their ability to follow and understand English is limited. In the target language environment the students will gain some experience of the difficulties of dealing with native-speaker discourse; in the classroom the use of authentic spoken materials at all levels, facilitates the development of the skills necessary for this comprehension of normal spoken English.

Authentic listening material can be defined as anything that has not been scripted for the benefit of students learning a foreign language. This includes completely unscripted materials; recorded conversations, interviews or real-life drama and also those texts that are scripted for the native-speaker, either to emulate natural discourse, as in a movie or radio drama, or to convey information, as in an oral presentation or a commentary. Radio, television and some of the

more recent textbooks are all sources of these materials. Where the students have particular needs, for example listening to medical presentations and attending conferences, the student himself may be able to provide his own materials.

Receptive competence, listening and understanding, is a large area which can be sub-divided into a range of micro-skills. It may be appropriate to review these micro-skills before discussing how and which skills can be practised using authentic listening. The different skills lie on a cline, from the purely mechanical to the more sophisticated and intellectual.



1. Recognition of Target Language.
2. Detection of phonemes, words.
3. Recognising phrase, clause, sentence.
4. Recognising cohesive elements and reference.
5. Simple intonation; eg, differentiating sentence and question.
6. Understanding gist.
7. Guessing vocabulary.
8. Skimming; recognising notional/conceptual meaning.
9. Listening for specific information: content and function.
10. Listening for feeling, tone, inference.
11. Listening for conventions: interruption, desire to continue.
12. Transfer from audio to written form.
13. Identifying rhetorical structures, eg, in speeches.
14. Using knowledge to clarify and correct something.
15. Aesthetic appreciation.

Many of these micro-skills may be common to the language of the student, but language learners do not automatically transfer their skills, in listening or speaking or even writing and reading, from the first language to the second.

As teachers, our aim is to train the students to develop these skills in English.

The main source of aural input into a lesson comes from the teacher, but he or she cannot claim to be able to act as a model for all speakers of English nor to provide examples of language in which all or even most of the micro-skills can be developed. According to one writer, authentic spoken materials can only be presented to learners if the necessary technological support is available. For this, the 'technological support' used most extensively is the cassette tape recorder. Although video can also be used, and, indeed, has many advantages, the ease of using the cassette player makes it the first choice. Many of the uses of the classroom tape-recorder can be applied to the language laboratory. A student self-access centre, in which students can borrow and use taped materials to listen to extensively and intensively in their own time, can be a highly effective tool for helping students develop their listening. Authentic listening can also be introduced into the classroom in the form of 'human realia'; visiting native or non-native speakers who will talk to students. Telephones can also be used to bridge the gap between the classroom and the 'real' world.

There are many advantages of using cassette recorder to supplement the voice of the teacher. Sound in the classroom can set the context of language more effectively than merely the written word, pictures or the teacher's voice. The student can be exposed to a limitless range of voices and accents and can hear normal discourse in speech between native speakers and, reflecting the international nature of the English language, amongst non-native speakers. The majority of the listening materials presented to the students are scripted and graded; authentic materials are not.

Using authentic speech in the classroom can, however, present a number of problems. These include speed of delivery; the discourse may be too fast: ungraded material; some of the language used by the speakers may be beyond what we believe to be the ability of the students perhaps because we, as teachers, have not yet taught it: redundancy and repetition; in which the speakers may repeat themselves or use language that would seem to carry no information in the context of the conversation: lack of structure; students may be nonplused by the

realisation that, unlike some of the characters in their textbooks, native English speakers do not always speak in discrete, grammatically consistent units: 'incorrect' grammar; again students may be surprised to find that the accuracy that has been demanded of them for so long is not used by the native speakers on the tape, and that the teacher is presenting them with models of 'bad' English. The fact that these problems can occur in recorded materials reflects the difficulties that students will encounter when they try to use English outside the classroom, and to ignore them is do the students a disservice. These problems of presentation in the classroom can be minimised or eliminated by careful selection of the task and the length of the listening passage. In any situation a listener's expectations are important and before a listening activity the task should be clearly defined, and understanding checked; as one would do with any kind of listening exercise. The level of the students will also affect the way that such materials used. At beginner and elementary levels there are fewer uses of such materials but they still have a place in the classroom and not merely for the more mechanical elements of receptive competence.

Authentic speech, presented initially in small units, can help students get used to decoding language: that is, breaking an utterance down into constituent words. A speaker may say, for example, "I like it's eyes" but a student may recognise something that only approximates to this, like "I lie kit's size." This can be done at all levels; recognising words in a stream of speech is one area where even native-speakers have difficulties when encountering unfamiliar accents or emotinally charged speech.

In the teaching of stress and intonation patterns, authentic materials are particularly useful. It has been said that there is a possibility that speakers of English are more tolerant of foreigner talk than speakers of some other languages, but this tolerance does not extend to misuse of these prosodic elements when the speech is structurally correct. At lower levels students can listen to determine if an utterance is a question or a statement. Students can be made aware of and taught to listen for stressed words and thus begin to understand the relationship between sentence stress and meaning in English.

An awareness of stress and its use to highlight information carrying words can be used to teach vocabulary at higher levels. For example students listening to a description or discussion can guess the meaning of a new word by the way it is used in the overall context of the listening text. At higher levels this can be extended to demonstrate how native speakers borrow words from context to use in another or use as metaphors or to show how certain words collocate. Using authentic examples of the use of stress to highlight information carrying vocabulary is expedient when teaching certain study skills; listening to presentations is one which is particularly important in my current teaching position.

Rarely are the bland, de-contextualised utterances common to some of the recorded materials used for older textbooks and examinations found in authentic speech. Elements such as emotion and politeness are generally marked in English by intonation, whereas in Japanese by the use of particles or adverbials and different paralinguistic elements. At any level, the students should be sensitised to and taught to recognise this use; if they are to be able communicate appropriately in English, then awareness and understanding of these elements is important. Use of register, too, can be demonstrated very effectively with authentic listening texts.

Authentic speech is particularly useful in helping students listen for specific information. Even in a short piece a speaker will use repetition and redundancy but the student should be told to focus on the functional intent of the utterance: eg. how to get to the bank, whether the speaker likes something, whether the speaker has had a certain experience, etc. This can be done at any level, but at lower levels the listening passage should be much shorter.

By focusing on intonation students can be taught to listen for gist—the general, overall meaning of an utterance. The speaker's level of language may be higher than the student can comfortably cope with, but he can still infer something of the speaker's meaning. Activities can be used in which students discern, for example, the speaker's general opinion of a subject. Similarly, from intonation and other prosodic elements the students can determine whether the speaker believes in or approves of the subject; students become aware of the speaker's attitude

through non-linguistic features. Students can practise developing a global understanding of authentic discussion or narrative at even lower intermediate levels by selecting a relatively simple task; for example, by putting a corresponding series of pictures in the correct order.

An important element of normal listening is to confirm one's expectations; an aspect which emphasises the importance of context in listening. Context is usually set with pre-listening activities or the use of pictures but video materials are ideal for this. Activities in which the students listen to native speakers to find concurrence with their predictions, or answers to questions they have initiated themselves practise this listening micro-skill. This is particularly stimulating when the subject is relevant to the students or when listeners and the speaker differ, and the native speaker is the one obviously wrong. Recordings of native speaking children have proved especially effective, and entertaining, for the latter exercise. Understanding context, however, is often a matter of cultural interpretation and authentic listening materials can be used to demonstrate the different cultural assumptions made by students and native-speakers.

For more advanced students the authentic speech can be used to guess the functional meaning of an utterance. Students may realise that a comment on the temperature of the room, for example, is actually a request for some thermostatic-controlling action on the part of the person being addressed. Strong context and visual cues are needed for this which video can provide more effectively.

At higher levels, students can be asked to focus on the conventions used by native speakers in discourse: hesitation devices and end of 'discourse unit' markers, either linguistic or paralinguistic. Students can be made aware of information markers, rephrasing techniques and other conventions which occur in normal speech but rarely in scripted materials; for example, "what I would like to say", "I mean", "to put it another way". These devices signaling paraphrase, hesitation, deviation from the main subject etc. frequently occur in conversations but are particularly important for students who will be listening to presentations or conducting business in English.

The area of accents is one which seems to receive little attention in the EFL class, excepting discussion of a few differences between educated British and American pronunciation. There are many more accents throughout the English-speaking world, and within each English-speaking community, and anybody using English will certainly come across some them. Authentic materials can be used to expose students to a much wider range of accents and voices than those used by actors recruited by textbook publishers. In the classroom a teacher cannot hope to cover all the varieties of English that any student may come across; what he or she can do is try to give the students familiarity with the main accents: American, British and Australian English. The Self-Access section of the school is the appropriate place for helping students familiarise themselves with accents, and examples of speakers using a range of accents should be kept on file. Learners with experience in listening to and understanding a number of different accents will be better able to cope with further ones than those who have heard only one or two.

From listening to recorded conversations and presentations students can be asked to infer many things from vocabulary, tone and intonation and register. But the uses of taped material are limited in comparison with the other technological medium, the video cassette player.

Despite the many advantages of audio-taped materials there are some disadvantages: it can be quite stressful and some students here in Japan choose to sit with their eyes closed to concentrate on the material; a hardly natural response and one that reinforces the 'eavesdropping' nature of its use. The use of video can go some way to alleviating these drawbacks, but most importantly it provides a clear visual context for language.

In video, the speakers are no longer disembodied but the focus of attention both aurally and visually. The students are supplied with all the nonlinguistic and environmental cues essential for natural discourse. Nearly all activities using authentic speech are enhanced by this extra-dimension to understanding. However, if the aim is to focus the students attention on one of the listening micro-skills, such as normal, unemotional sentence stress, then this extra input

can be distracting.

Time spent on listening activities in the classroom, is limited so students should be encouraged to make use of the Self-Access Section, for both videos and audio tapes. Tapes in such a resource can help language learners with all the above listening skills, and customised tapes can be produced. For example, in the Medical College hospital where I work, a large number of doctors go to attend conferences in other parts of the world, and the language of these conferences is English. Materials are being developed for visiting the USA, Australia or other countries, along with a section of taped presentations or reports relating to the medical subjects that the doctors will discuss or hear presented at the conferences attended; many of the materials will come from the doctors themselves.

The telephone is another means by which authentic listening can be brought into the classroom, with the advantage of it being truly interactive. In Japan it is possible to ask information of hotels and other services in English, although for the Japanese student this must seem a little unnatural. In contrast, when teaching in continental Europe, it is not prohibitively expensive to call London to make enquiries of hotels, language schools, car-rental companies, etc.

The use of technology in the classroom, or in the self-access centre, is indispensable to expose the students to a range of different sources of input, styles of conversation and accent, but there are occasions when authentic speech can be exploited without the use of such aids. Conversation, in small groups or individually, while monitoring student activities and the presentation of information give students some experience of authentic listening; even story-telling by the teacher, with a natural speed of delivery, is more interesting and useful than such a narrative would be on tape. The teacher can illustrate meaning by gesture and hold the student's attention with movement and eye-contact in a way that cannot be done on a tape-recording.

In the environment of the target language culture, in America, Britain, Australia etc, there are many opportunities for students to listen to English speakers, native or otherwise, and the teacher's use of recorded materials is an attempt to

simulate some of these, as well focusing on micro-skills. When teaching in the student's own country, an excellent means for giving students authentic listening is to invite visiting speakers. Those without experience of teaching are preferred as they are less inclined to use the modified language that teachers invariably use. In my current position I am able to find non-Japanese doctors who work in the hospital attached to the college and who are willing to talk in English to the students. The doctors can address the students in a short presentation or be interviewed. In the latter case I have the students divide into small groups, and ask the doctor about one subject, such as common medical problems in the doctor's country ( the information is later shared with the rest of the class as the groups are reorganised ). Most of the doctors do not use themselves use English as a native tongue and so it is not only interesting but also highly motivating as it demonstrates to the Japanese students the international nature of English; as doctors the students will be as likely to use English with other non-native speakers as with native speakers.

The use of authentic listening materials is important as a supplement to scripted materials to give students an awareness of the problems of listening to natural discourse in English. Their use is becoming more recognised by the producers of text books and teaching materials. The seeming difficulties in presentation should not deter the teacher from using them in the classroom; greater consideration should be given to how they are exploited, with particular regard to setting context, defining the task and limiting the amount of material, than with scripted listening texts. Students should have access to authentic listening materials in a Self-Access tape library and should be encouraged to use them.

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