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EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES IN TEACHING LISTENING SKILL

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ABSTRACT

This article is about strategies of teaching listening skill. And about preparing the learners for listening by setting the scene, introducing the characters, pre-teaching vocabulary, checking the answers to this task, playing the recording again if necessary, making the recording, and the tasks, as 'authentic' as possible.

KEYWORDS: *Recording, Practice, Listeners, L1 (Native Speakers)*

INTRODUCTION

Oneaspect of language which is particularly crucial to listening skills is pronunciation, but this receptive sideof pronunciation is still rather neglected in comparison with the productive side. This is perhaps where recordings – recordings of speakers with different accents – in conjunction with transcripts, can be particularly valuable, in providing material for the study of what spoken English actually sounds like: regional variations in vowel sounds, thecompression and reduction of unstressed syllables, elision and assimilation, intonation patterns and soon.

There is a lot to be said for theseapproaches, and they havecertainly been very helpful in spreading aconcern for supporting the development of learners' listening skills, rather than just testing them. But they should not beaccepted unquestioningly, or used to theexclusion of other approaches.

Use plenty of recorded material

Therearecertainly plenty of good reasons for using recordings. It is a way of bringing different voices into theclassroom: maleand female, different ages, different accents, different voice qualities and soon. It means you can present dialogueas well as monologue. If the recording isn't

scripted and rehearsed, it means you've got 'authentic' material – see suggestion 7 below. A recording can be played as many times as you like, and will sound exactly the sameevery time. Thesecan all beadvantages.

But therearealso some disadvantages and limitations. In practice, the rangeof accents on commercially available listening material is fairly narrow. In particular, accents which areclose to British and American standard ones predominate, and non-nativeaccents are neglected, which is a serious shortcoming in view of the fact that most learners of English nowadays are more likely to interact with other 'non-native' speakers than with 'natives'. Ideally, listening work in theclassroom should try toequip learners with the flexibility to deal with a wide rangeof accents.

Recordings are particularly suitable for practicing the kind of listening where the listener has noopportunity to interact with the speaker: listening to the radio, listening to publicannouncements at airports, stations etc., or eavesdropping on strangers' conversations. But this probably only accounts for a small proportion of the listening that most peopleactually do. More typically, listening happens in thecontext of interactions such as conversations and meetings, where both (or all) the participants act both as speakers and as listeners, and, in the listener role, have theopportunity to give feedback to the speaker, or to interrupt the speaker to signal understanding, lack of understanding, need for repetition or reformulation, etc.

This suggests it would be helpful to give learners moreopportunity to listen to 'live' voices – visitors to theclass, if feasible, or, most obviously, the teacher. This, of course, goes against recommendations to 'reduce teacher talking time'. But the teacher's voice is a neglected resource in providing listening practice in which the speaker can continuously monitor the listeners' interest, attention and apparent comprehension, adding any necessary repetitions, reformulations and explanations, and where the listeners can give the speaker signals both non-verbal (e.g. nodding, frowning) and verbal (e.g. "I see", "So, do you mean .....?", "I'm not sure what you mean by .....") – so that the listener is not just a passive, moreor less successful, receiver, but understanding is mutually constructed.

Even for the 'eavesdropping' kind of listening, it would probably be more helpful, and more realistic, to make more useof video recordings rather than purely audioones, since wecan usually see people we're listening to – whether we're listening to them 'live' or on film or television. The visual component provides a wealth of information about the setting, thecharacters and the relationship between them, without which a listener is severely disadvantaged. In fact, by depriving learners of this visual information, we'reactually contributing to their feeling that listening is inordinately difficult.

Furthermore, therecan bea substantial loss of acoustic information in the processes of recording and, especially, playback, and this can alsoadd considerably to the difficulty of listening. Of course, listeners do sometimes need to deal with less-than-ideal acousticconditions, but it seems unfair toadd too much too soon to the difficult task that learners have to face when they start listening toa foreign language.

Prepare the learners for listening by setting the scene, introducing thecharacters, pre-teaching vocabulary etc.

This makes a lot of sense, particularly because it helps tocompensate for the lack of a visual element, and because when we listen, we normally have some prior knowledge, expectations and

predictions about what we're going to hear. In other words, it helps listeners toestablish a 'schema' which they can use to interpret what they hear. On theother hand, though, therearealsooccasions when we start listening without the benefit of such a schema, and have to patch together our understanding of what we're listening toas we goalong. For instance, we might switch the radioon at random and hear something that sounds kind of interesting, although it isn't immediately apparent exactly what's going on. Or we might ask someonea question and receivean answer socompletely at odds with our expectations that wecan't immediately interpret what we're being told. It would seem useful to prepare learners to deal with this kind of situation. In theclassroom, this might mean letting them listen for a short time without any preparation, then asking questions like "Who / Whereare the people?", "What are they talking about?", "What are they doing?", etc., then letting them hear a bit more beforeasking the same questions again, and soon; the purposeof the questions, then, is to help them piece together their understanding bit by bit, on the basis of the gradually accumulating evidenceof what they hear.

Before the learners listen, set a listening task which directs them toan overall 'gist' understanding of the passage.

The ideaof this is to support and direct learners' listening, and thecomments about preparation for listening under 2 aboveare relevant here. Also, gist understanding doesn't necessarily precede detailed understanding; the 'gist' sometimes only emerges from a prior understanding of details. Teachers often tell learners that they don't have to understand everything, just the main points or the key words, but it could beargued that you sometimes need to understand everything in order to know what the main points or key words are! And in any case learners, as listeners, might find a different interest in listening from what the teacher or materials writer thinks is the 'gist'.

Check theanswers to this task, playing the recording again if necessary.

Re-playing a recording – perhaps several times – is fineas a pedagogic device. But remember that outside theclassroom people sometimes only haveoneopportunity to hear something, and have to be satisfied with whatever understanding they can glean from that singleexposure. On other occasions, they can request a repeat listening from a live speaker, but with theexpectation that the speaker will not merely repeat, but clarify, paraphraseand simplify.

Set a further task, or tasks, which direct learners toa more detailed understanding.

As with any teacher-imposed or materials-imposed task, there is a risk of disrespecting the learners' own motivation and interest in what they're listening to. Very often, they will beable tocome up with their own listening tasks – and very often these will be to do with language rather than content (see 7 below).

Only use the typescript (if there is one!) as a last resort.

In L1(first language; native language) listening, it's unusual to read a transcript of what we listen to - whether before, during or after listening. And clearly learners need to gain experienceand confidence in listening without the support of the written word. But this is a gradual process, and there's no reason why that process shouldn't include, especially in theearly stages:

- listening once, then using a transcript toclarify points of confusion before listening again.

- reading before listening, toestablish understanding of content, before listening to what that content actually sounds like.
- reading and listening simultaneously, tracking the relationship between the spoken and written forms of the language.

Make the recording, and the tasks, as 'authentic' as possible.

The notion of 'authenticity' is acomplex oneand has been widely commented on from various points of view. Some points that seem relevant here include the following:
• A recorded (or written) text loses its authenticity when it's exported out of thecontext in which it was created. For example, aconversation in a restaurant may beauthentic for the participants in that conversation, but not for a group of language learners listening to it in aclassroom thousands of miles away and years later.

- Authentic recorded material is particularly likely to suffer from poor recording quality.
- Even if the technical quality is fine, it may be tooculture-bound for learners, or simply not interesting.
- Even with very careful preparation and unambitious listening tasks, some learners may perceiveauthentic recordings to be inordinately difficult, and this can havea devastating effect on confidence.
- Tasks that simulateout-of-classroom listening activities may not necessarily seem very relevant or motivating to learners. If you are in Britain or Canada for example, and you are weighing up a number of alternativeactivities for thecoming weekend, then listening toa weather forecast, paying attention to theoutlook for your particular region and making plans accordingly is a real listening activity. But if you're in China, you might not feel fully enthusiasticabout imagining yourself into that scenario. You might think it is more interesting to listen out for the tense forms and modals used to describeacurrent weather situation and make predictions; this could actually bea more truly authentic task for someone who's listening as part of the process of learning thelanguage. In other words, it might be more interesting to pay attention to language rather than content.

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