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### **TEACHING LISTENING COMPREHENSION**

**Abstract:** This article is about to name eight factors that make listening difficult, to name and describe six types of classroom listening materials, to give examples of listening materials, to explain how teachers can deal with listening problems in the classroom, to design your own listening exercises.

**Key phrases:** Listening performance; listening materials; redundancy; script dictation; listening problems; listening to tapes.

One of the main reasons for getting students to listen to spoken English is to let them hear different varieties and accents – rather than just the voice of their teacher. In today’s world, they need to be exposed not only to one variety of English (British English, for example) but also to varieties such as American English, Australian English, Caribbean English, etc. Despite the desirability of exposing students to many varieties of English, however, common sense is called for. The number of different varieties will be a matter for the teacher to judge, based on the students’ level, where the classes are taking place etc. But even if they only hear occasional (and very mild) varieties of English which are different from the teacher’s, it will give them a better idea of the world language which English

has become. The main method of exposing students to spoken English is through the use of taped material which can exemplify a wide range of topics.

The second major reason for teaching listening is because it helps students to acquire language subconsciously even if teachers do not draw attention to its special features. Exposure to language is a fundamental requirement for anyone wanting to learn it. Listening to appropriate tapes provide such exposure and students get vital information not only about grammar and vocabulary but also about pronunciation, rhythm, intonation, pitch and stress.

Lastly, just as with reading, students get better at listening the more they do it! Listening is a skill and any help we can give students in performing that skill will help them to be better listeners.

The debate about the use of authentic listening material is just as fierce in listening as it is in reading. If, for example, we play a tape of a political speech to complete beginners, they won't understand a word. You could argue that such a tape would give them a feel for the sound of the language, but beyond that it is difficult to see what they would get out of it. If, on the other hand, we give them a realistic tape of a telephone conversation, they may learn much more about the language – and start to gain confidence as a result.

Listening demands listener's engagement, too. Long tapes on subjects which students are not interested in at all will not only be de-motivating, but students might well 'switch off' – and once they do that it becomes difficult for them to tune back to the tape. Comprehension is lost and the listening becomes valueless.

Everything depends on level, and the kind of tasks that go with a tape. There may well be some authentic material which is usable by beginners such as pre-recorded announcements, telephone messages etc. More difficult material may be appropriate for elementary students provided that the questions they are asked do not demand detailed understanding. Advanced students may benefit from scripted material provided that it is interesting and subtle enough – and provided the tasks that go with it are appropriate for their level.

Since listening to tapes is a way of bringing different kinds of speaking into the classroom, we would want to play different kinds of tape to them, e.g. lectures, announcements, conversations, telephone exchanges, 'plays', news broadcasts, interviews, radio programs, stories read aloud etc.

As teachers are preparing lessons and techniques that are exclusively for teaching listening, a number of special characteristics of spoken language need to be taken into consideration. Students need to pay special attention to these characteristics or factors because they influence the understanding of speech and can even make listening comprehension very difficult. These factors are the following:

1. Clustering: In written language we are conditioned to attend to the sentence as the basic unit of organization. In spoken language we break down speech into smaller groups of words. In teaching listening comprehension, therefore, you need to help students to pick out manageable clusters of words; or they will err in the other direction in trying to attend to every word in an utterance.

2. Redundancy: Spoken language, unlike most written language, has a good deal of redundancy. The next time you're in a conversation, notice the rephrasing, repetitions, elaborations, and little insertions of "I mean" and "you know" here and there. Such redundancy helps the hearer to process meaning by offering more time and extra information. Learners can train themselves to profit from such redundancy by first becoming aware that not every new sentence or phrase will necessarily contain new information and by looking for the signals of redundancy.

3. Reduced forms: While spoken language does indeed contain a good deal of redundancy, it also has many reduced forms. Reduction can be phonological, morphological, syntactic, and pragmatic. These reductions pose significant difficulties especially to classroom learners who may have initially been exposed to the full forms of the English language.

4. Performance variables (hesitation, reformulation, topic change): In spoken language, except for planned discourse (speeches, lectures, etc), hesitations, false starts, pauses, and corrections are common. Native listeners are used from very

young ages to such performance variables whereas they can easily interfere with comprehension in foreign language learners.

Everyday casual speech by native speakers also commonly contains ungrammatical forms. Some of these forms are simple performance slips.

5. Colloquial language: Learners who have been exposed to standard written English and/or "textbook" language sometimes find it surprising and difficult to deal with colloquial language. Idioms, slang, reduced forms, shared cultural knowledge are all manifested at some point in conversations. Colloquialisms appear in both monologues and dialogues.

#### Types of Classroom Listening Materials

1. Reactive: Sometimes you simply want a learner to listen to the surface structure of an utterance for the purpose of repeating it back to you.

While this kind of listening performance requires little meaningful processing, it nevertheless may be legitimate, even though a minor, aspect of an interactive, communicative classroom. This role of a listener as merely a "tape-recorder" must be very limited. The only role that reactive listening can play in an interactive classroom is in brief choral or individual drills that focus on pronunciation.

2. Intensive: Techniques whose only purpose is to focus on components (phonemes, words, intonation, discourse markers, etc) of discourse may be considered to be intensive – as opposed to extensive – in their requirement that students single out certain elements of spoken language. Examples of intensive listening performance include:

- Students listen for cues in certain choral or individual drills.
- The teacher repeats a word or sentence several times to imprint" it in the students' mind.
- The teacher asks students to listen to a sentence or a longer stretch of discourse and to notice a specified element, e.g., intonation, a grammatical structure, etc.

3. Responsive: A significant proportion of classroom listening activity consists of short stretches of teacher language designed to elicit immediate responses. The students' task in such listening is to process the teacher talk immediately and to give an appropriate reply. Examples include:

- Asking questions ("How are you today?" "What did you do last night?").
- Giving commands ("Take out a sheet of paper and a pencil.").
- Seeking clarification ("What was that word you said?").
- Checking comprehension ("So, how many people were in the park?").

Some teachers and students find that listening to tapes is extremely difficult, especially when tapes are fairly long. And yet we may want to use long extracts because they contribute to our overall teaching plan and because the topic is interesting. If the tape is difficult there are a number of things you can do to make it easier.

- Preview vocabulary. Choose a small number of key words that students do not know. Teach them to the students before they listen.

- Use the tape script. In general it may be a good idea for the students to look at the tape script after the first couple of times listening if they are having difficulty in coping with the tape. You could also cut the tape script into paragraphs – or even smaller pieces – which they have to put in the right order as they listen to the tape.

These are just some ideas to make your listening activities more motivating and more successful, especially where there are difficulties.

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