

Helping students to listen better

A long time ago, I was sharing a class with another teacher who I didn't know very well, but who seemed very organised and competent. One of the students came up to me after class one day and asked me for advice. This other teacher had told her she needed to improve her skills of listening to audio media. I was somewhat taken aback, I must admit, as this student seemed to me to be one of our better students. Not for the first time - and almost certainly not for the last! - I felt somewhat inadequate as a teacher. Not only had I failed to identify this problem, but I also had no idea about what to offer as a solution! I think I suggested she just listened to more tapes. In retrospect, this seems rather pathetic and not really that helpful. What kind of tapes? How many more? And even at the time, this didn't really seem like teaching - teaching surely involved giving techniques, explanations and so on.

Perhaps you've had a similar feeling. Perhaps your students have had their feelings of inadequacy exposed during a listening class. At more than a few conferences, I have heard speakers talk about the cassette player as if it were some kind of instrument of torture. The teacher says: "We're now going to do a listening" and out comes the box; students then groan and cower in the corner as if this thing will emit life-threatening sonic waves - rather than just English.

But maybe there is something wrong with the phrase *do a listening*. It seems a touch too easy, perhaps. I once had a teacher on a teacher-training course who had quite a lot of experience, but was actually struggling on the course a bit. She said it would all be sorted the next day - she was going to *do a listening*. "Great!" I told her, and then asked what the *aim* of the lesson would be. "Um", she faltered, "Err . . . well, to just do a listening, I suppose."

All too often, doing - or enduring - a listening is what teachers believe should be done simply because it's in the book. We may well feel we should be 'doing listenings,' but how often do we ever sit down and query why it is we do them and what the function of them is?

There are those who would say that when we *do* a listening, we are teaching listening skills. But what are these skills and how do we 'do' them? Such advocates of skills-based teaching might point to lists of 'sub-skills', such as the following, taken from CEF:

- **listening for gist**
- **listening for specific information**
- **listening for detailed understanding**
- **listening for implications**

- **listening as a member of a live audience**
- **listening to audio media**

But what do these skills involve exactly and how do we *do* them? How do we improve students' abilities to do them? How do we actually go about teaching them? Is simply doing a gist task or doing a task where students listen for specific information enough? As we have already seen elsewhere, the dominant mode of thinking about this kind of thing has been the *schema theory*, which stresses *top-down processing*. However, what this theory fails to take into account, when talking about listening, is the fact that where failure generally occurs is

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where we either don't know a word or we can't hear it. Part of the reason listening is difficult for students is that sometimes they simply don't know the words they are hearing. On top of that, words which they may know sound different in different contexts and get all bunched up in a stream of speech. This, in turn, can lead to difficulties for students when trying to hear genuinely new words. They often can't distinguish them amidst the general mass of sound they are hearing.

So how can we help students from this perspective of listening? The first - and most important - thing to do is to simply teach more language! Almost as importantly, though, we need to teach the sounds of the language. We need to repeat them and we need to repeat new words within typical sentences. We need to constantly show how words within sentences change the way they sound, depending on the other words around them. At lower levels, this means lots of work on sounds, words and sentences; plenty of drilling and gap-filled conversations. At higher levels, it means things like working on intonation, elision, weak forms, sentence stress and so on.

There is also a real issue about what kind of things students listen to in class. Obviously, in the long run, students will need to be able to listen to all manner of different things, but in the language classroom, where the main goal of learning is communication, conversations need to form the bulk of the listening material. Conversations often follow predictable patterns, and have fairly generic openings and endings, all of which makes them easier for students to process. As such, when thinking about choosing a coursebook, it is important to look at the tapescripts. You should be asking the following kinds of questions:

- How many of the listening texts are conversations?
- How natural-sounding are they?
- Is there any repetition of conversation types or exchanges or gambits?
- Is this replicated in other levels of the series?

These questions can be asked of **all** levels. Conversations at Elementary level may be shorter, contain simpler vocabulary and follow more regular and patterned progress, but can still sound like the kind of conversations people typically have.

Outside of the classroom, our reason for listening is partly determined by what we ourselves say as well as by what we are able to hear and understand. This aspect of listening is almost completely absent when we use a recording in the classroom. In such circumstances, making the context of the conversation clear to students and then setting any task **before** students listen gives sufficient purpose to listen. Having said that, perhaps the simplest, most normal and fairest task to set students when they listen the first time is that most general of tasks: *Listen and see what you can hear*. This task reflects the vague nature of most purposes for listening, but more importantly also reflects the true nature of what students need to be able to do when they listen - hear! It is also fair, because there is no completely correct answer. Students hear what they hear. Some may only hear a few words, others much more.

After students have listened to a recording, it's always best to get them to compare what they heard in pairs or threes before going through any answers and giving feedback. The reason for doing this is that it is the natural thing to do. Students will often be unsure whether or not they have understood, and thus asking someone else what they understood is natural, as is then going through the process of constructing the meaning of what was heard to the best of your ability. For a foreign language learner whose natural state is often not hearing

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everything, this is a useful skill to develop. For a lexical teacher, it is also useful. Students rarely, if ever, hear grammar. When you do feedback with the whole class, you can elicit collocations or expressions that the students heard. Always be positive in response - say things like, “it sounds similar,” or “it’s close” - and then you can get students to think if those words normally go together. You could then say what was said on the recording yourself or play it again and repeat the process - with students comparing in pairs and with the whole class.

Other similar tasks could be:

Listen and find out what they talk about.
Listen and find out what happened.

Note that while these tasks are open, they do also suggest that a slightly more complete answer is required.

In all of these cases, how much the students can understand will depend on the language they already know.

An excellent exercise that focuses on both listening **and** language is gap-filling a listening text and then playing the recording for students to fill in. Again, get students to compare their ideas before you go through the answers together. As you write the answers up on the board, after having elicited them from the class, you can mark linking, stress and any pronunciation features, whilst also drilling each chunk.

Sometimes, once students have done a general gist-oriented kind of listening task, play the recording once more, but this time let the students look back at the tapescript.

This is not cheating - it's helping students notice the language that, in the long run, will help them to listen more effectively. In this sense, of course, most language exercises, but particularly those which contextualise language within dialogues, will have the side-effect of helping to develop listening skills, even if students don't actually listen to these exercises, but read them.

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