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Using Graphic Organizers as Listening Tools

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Listening was once regarded as a passive skill, but researchers have helped us realize that listening tasks require far more of the listener than we once thought. This makes necessary a more sophisticated way of teaching and testing listening skills. Today there is greater emphasis on using contextualized and authentic listening tasks. However, I have found that with more authentic tasks, new challenges arise.
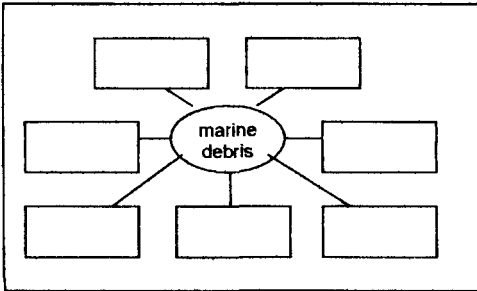
Like many language instructors, I find it useful to plan listening tasks with a process approach consisting of prelistening, listening, and postlistening steps. In a typical prelistening activity, I might give students some necessary background information about setting or content of the text that they will hear. I might also introduce key vocabulary or lead a short discussion on the topic of the passage to help students activate background knowledge that they already possess about the topic. Then, students listen to the actual text. They might be told to take notes or outline what they hear during this step. Finally, I choose from a wide array of possible postlistening tasks ranging from answering questions or summarizing to applying what we have heard to a new situation. As I have begun using more authentic listening tasks, however, I have found that my students require greater support for making sense of what they hear during the listening step. Graphic organizers have been very useful in this regard.

Graphic organizers, also called concept maps, provide a means for organizing information in a visual way. The organizer helps me show my students how the text that they will hear is organized. Graphic organizers come in many varieties. Venn diagrams, which many teachers will remember from their own study of mathematics, are one familiar form of graphic organizer. Organizers are readily available on the Internet and from suppliers of educational materials. However, after experimenting a few times, many instructors will probably find it just as effective, and certainly more economical, to create their own organizers for the materials that their students listen to. Let me illustrate with a passage that I sometimes use, from a 1992 Environmental Protection Agency publication called *Turning the Tide on Trash: A Learning Guide on Marine Debris.*

> Marine debris includes all the objects found in the marine environment, which consists of not only the ocean, but also salt marshes, estuaries, and beaches, that do not naturally occur there. Although items such as tree branches and the bones of land animals
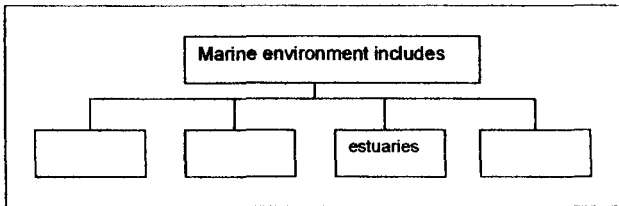
can be considered marine debris, the term generally is reserved for trash, or articles that have been made or used by people and then discarded. The most common categories of marine debris are plastic, glass, rubber, metal, paper, wood, and cloth.

In the listening task for this text, I want my students to focus on the description of a marine environment and the major categories of marine debris. To help them understand the meaning of *marine environment*, I might give them a graphic such as this one. Filling in one of the boxes helps them see what to listen for. I do not need to give a wordy explanation of what to do, which in some environments tempts teachers to revert to first language use rather than giving instruction in the target language.

To help my students listen for the various examples of marine debris or trash, I might show them a graphic organizer like the one below. After they have listened to the passage once or twice, both students and I can see at a glance what information they have understood and what they have not yet understood.

Graphic organizers are widely used in the field of elementary education, but they can be used at any level and are especially useful for English language learners and learners who are more visual than verbal. A lot of information can be shown without requiring many words or lengthy explanations. Graphic organizers have many uses beyond what I have shown here. For example, they can be used in reading lessons to show the structure of a written text. They can be used to plan, or outline, speaking and writing projects, as well.

About the Author

Azzeddine Bencherab currently teaches at University of Saida, Saida Province in Algeria. He has been teaching English for more than twenty years, including three years in Abu Dhabi. His main interests include developing reading and writing courses for mixed ability classes.