# Interactive Listening

## by James Baxter

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how subscription to an English as an International Language (EIL) approach leads to a re-appraisal and reformulation of teaching materials, with the particular area discussed here being listening comprehension.

## I. The EIL Approach

What is English as an International Language? What does it mean to speak English internationally? Put succinctly, 'EIL' refers to the use of English by people of different nations in order to communicate with one another. EIL is not a prescription for how English should be used, and the roots of the EIL approach are in descriptive statements about how English functions in today's world. A further characteristic of the approach is that it is reformative. The initial impetus for this approach is found in the realization that the concepts of 'EFL' and 'ESL' are inadequate in and of themselves to capture the facts of English-language use around the world. (Smith, 1978:5; for a critique of 'EFL' and 'ESL', see Baxter, 1980) The EFL and ESL characterizations of English-language use share the common element of predicting who the interactors in a situation will be. In an EFL situation, one interactor is always a native speaker. In an ESL situation, the interactors may be non-native speakers of the same national membership (e.g., India), or in a similar intranational setting, one interactor may be a native speaker. However, when a person has the ability to speak (or write) English internationally, there is no preconceived idea as to who the potential interactor(s) in a communicative exchange will be, whether in terms of nationality, linguistic background or cultural background. Whereas in EFL and ESL specific varieties of English and specific cultures can be dealt with, it is clear that in the teaching of EIL (TEIL) the goal cannot be knowledge of the details of a given variety or culture, or even numbers of these. Students must somehow be prepared to operate with English in unknown situations which are characterized by variation in linguistic and cultural behavior. Diversity in the forms of English around the world is a fact. So is, however, the remarkable ability which human beings have to adjust to changed conditions, to novel environments—in short, to deal with diversity. Central to the EIL approach are these realities of diversity and adaptation.

The EIL approach thus claims to reflect the international functions of English with greater accuracy than either EFL or ESL. The following statements together constitute the core of the approach:

(1) **English is an international language.** Full recognition is given the fact that other languages also function internationally and that this is a desirable situation. Of these languages, however, it is English which is used most frequently in its international functions.

(2) **'EIL' refers to functions of English, not to any given form of the language.** EIL is thus conceptually distinct from BASIC English. It also differs from Esperanto in not being an artificial language and in not asserting the belief that widespread adoption of a common tongue will lead to global harmony. In fact, EIL places in the forefront the reality that from a sharing of commonalities such as grammar, lexis and phonology (the linguistic trivium), communication does not automatically flow. EIL provides the means of perceiving that enhanced world communication is possible only through recognizing all those areas of behavior which are *not* shared across national or cultural lines.

Furthermore, EIL is not an instance of ESP (English for Specific Purposes). It is not, for example, the proposal of a specific linguistic corpus for diplomats or international businesspersons.

(3) EIL situations are frequent and can be classified in terms of the interactors involved:

(L2 ←——→ L1)

(international)

(L2 ←——→ L2)

(international)

(L1 ←——→ L1)

(Smith, 1978:10)

Thus, one type of EIL situation is one in which native or L1 speakers of English who come from different national and cultural backgrounds are involved.

(4) There are many varieties of English, including native and non-native varieties. EIL situations can be defined as situations of inter-varietal communication.

(5) Communication is a social act, an act of sharing. (See Cherry, 1978:esp. ch. 1 and pp. 325ff.) Corollaries:

—English does not "belong" to any one group of people.

—The use of English is always culture-bound, but the English language is not bound to any specific culture or political system.

—There is a process of mutual adjustment amongst interactors in an EIL situation.

(6) Attitudes held by interactors in an EIL situation can either facilitate or hinder communication, i.e., attitudes are communicatively functional.

## II. TEIL: listening comprehension

The above set of statements carries extensive implications for language teaching materials. Let us attempt to explicate the implications for the area of listening comprehension.

To begin, let us consider a passage from Colin Cherry:

> If the listener's speech habits, clause structures, and so on are similar to to those of the speaker, there may be little difficulty; however, if they differ widely, owing to such things as education, age, experience, specialized knowledge, use of vernacular, then the listener may experience difficulty in "following" and understanding.

> *An extreme case is that of listening to a foreigner who is not fluent in his second language.* As emphasized already, communication is essentially a matter of sharing—of shared linguistic habits and concepts. It is unhelpful to shout at foreigners, or at the deaf —their need is for us to articulate more clearly and to pause longer at clause endings. (Cherry, 1978:325; emphasis added)

Cherry's "extreme case" may not be the extreme at all, for not infrequently it is the non-native speaker who wonders whether or not native speakers are deaf! The extreme case could just as well be a Cockney cabbie and an Alabaman tourist. Or it could be two non-native speakers negotiating a business contract in English. From an EIL perspective, none of these is an extreme case—they are all uses of English in international situations.

Cherry continues:

> If a listener's verbal habits, including clause structures, are not similar to those of the speaker, it may be necessary for him to "switch off" his attention at times, so as to create his own pauses as he needs them for his cognitive activity (extraction of meaning). He may then lose the thread of the conversation (1978:325-326)

Notice that the listener here could be any speaker of English, native or non-native. The problem of variation exists for both types of speaker. The listener reaction of "switching off" is not an uncommon one, and in addition to the causes given by Cherry, the source of such a reaction is often an attitudinal one.

Rivers and Temperley (1978:153) point out that in spite of considerable diversity within American English, native speakers, through experience, adjust to variation in grammar, lexis and pronunciation. They state that students of a foreign language, on the other hand, "may be baffled by a particular item they 'know', but do not recognize in its variant form." Extending these observations, for both native and non-native speakers of English the problem of variation often involves non-recognition

of a known item, e.g., a word, intonation pattern, or discoursal function, which would be readily comprehended in some other variety of English.

Samonte (1980:75) speaks of "the characteristic vernacularized local varieties of Filipino English, which show the marks of the influences of the native languages." In such varieties, the phonological identity of lexical items may be affected. For example, a speaker of Filipino English whose first language is Pampango will have difficulty in managing the distribution of word-initial /h/, a difficulty also found with French speakers of English. To cite another example, the word 'table' will have various realizations according to the mother tongue of the Filipino speaker, e.g., [ter'bel], ['teɪnb əl], ['teɪɲbɔl].[1] The identity of a word may undergo further variation in connected speech. Speakers of English from Hong Kong who also speak Cantonese have a distribution of the glottal stop in their spoken English which is very different from, for instance, American English, e.g., 'bad weather', [bæʔweˈðɪə]. From the point of view of EIL, such examples point to the need to prepare students to understand spoken English in face-to-face inter-varietal situations.

Of course, variation is not limited to word identity, and is also found at the level of prosody. If asked, "Can you turn off the light when you leave?", a person who speaks English French-ly might employ a group-final stress and rising intonation in replying, "Yes, I can," creating something like a contrastive focus on the modal. An American speaker could take this to mean, "Of course I'll turn it off. Do you think I'm stupid?", with prosodic variation leading in this case to misinterpretation of attitude.

Variation at the level of discoursal meaning is difficult to deal with, and as the variation is not always obvious to the interactors, it can represent a serious obstacle to communication. Consider an example in which a Japanese invites an American to his home for dinner. The Japanese seeks to express a certain degree of politeness and formality through the discoursal function of self-deprecation. (Naotsuka,

1978:23) Seated in front of a well-laden table, the Japanese says, "Sorry that we have nothing to serve you." (Naotsuka, 1978:9) Even if the American grasps the function realized by this utterance, he still may not know how to respond. Should he remain silent? Would, "Oh, that's quite all right," or "Well, all this food looks delicious to me!" be appropriate? The example is a hackneyed one, but it makes the point that one of the greatest difficulties in cross-cultural, inter-varietal communication is the ability to convey to your interlocutor, through an appropriate response, the message that you have understood correctly. Listening comprehension in EIL situations includes this ability to provide feedback.

Listening comprehension in an EIL situation is a matter of continual adjustment. Yet how is it that interactors adjust

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to one another? How do they comprehend one another *in spite of* variation? We could say that they simply "listen carefully," "listen hard," or "concentrate their effort in listening." The underlying ideas here are that listening can be a matter of degree, and that greater or lesser effort can be invested. Such insights help, but it must be remembered that tension, fatigue and anxiety induced by increased effort in listening can negatively affect comprehension. (Rivers, 1968:135, 140; Rivers and Temperley, 1978:83, 86.)

To reiterate briefly, variation in the English used by interactors in international situations is inevitable. The pedagogical goal thus becomes one of producing in students a range of skills of adaptation, many of which fall under the rubric of listening comprehension. It has been im-

plied that listening comprehension goes beyond a receptive process, for an addressee must provide the speaker with feedback and must be able to verify that any interpretation reached does in fact conform to the speaker's intended meaning. The addressee needs to be able to ask for clarification and for repetition; the addressee needs to be able to counter lexical variation with, "What does that mean?"; he or she needs to be able to formulate a paraphrase and ask, "Is that what you mean?" In short, from an EIL perspective, listening comprehension is an aspect of the mutual interaction of participants in a communicative situation. We should thus speak of *interactive listening*.

## III. Interactive listening

Theoretical work already carried out in EFL/ESL, classroom materials presently in use, and relevant research in business communication will serve as a foundation upon which to build a pedagogy of interactive listening.

Aitken (1979:175) refers to constructivist models of speech perception. According to such models, the listener constructs an internal signal which parallels the utterance heard. There is then a process of matching the internal signal and the speaker's signal, with a matching of understood meaning and intended meaning.

This concept of 'match' is a valuable one. With it we can describe the common EIL situation in which one hears someone speaking, is certain that there is indeed an intended meaning, but does not understand. Rather than "switching off" ("That person can't speak English! I can't understand a word he's saying!"), one should realize that what has occurred is a mis-match. This realization would be the result of an attitudinal stance, the expectation that such mis-matches *will* occur. Native speakers of English are especially open to the danger of expecting that a match will be obtained in every case.

The skills employed in the listening comprehension process are generally classified in terms of a hierarchy. (Chamot, 1977:75) Typically, the lowest level skill is the discrimination of sounds and the highest level skill is the ability to make inferences about the message, the social situation, or the speaker's attitudes. Rivers and Temperley (1978:75) give three stages in the process of construction of a message, seen as stages of perception: (1) perception of a systematic message, (2) imposition of a structure according to grammatical knowledge of the language, (3) recirculating, selecting, recoding for long-term memory storage. It is interesting to note that most descriptions of listening comprehension concentrate on this type of perceptual process, thus depicting listening as a wholly receptive process. Aitken (1979:175-176), after listing skills such as the guessing of lexical meaning, handling of syntax, following discoursal structure, and recognizing speaker attitudes, goes on to say,

A good listener can achieve these understandings with reasonable ease and fluency. He does not need to stall the speaker with frequent clarification questions or requests for repetitions to refresh his short term memory.

To convey to students this perception of the good listener would be to do them a disservice, for *good listening* certainly includes anything which will lead to optimal comprehension, to a successful match. An EIL situation will be characterized by the listener asking for clarification, · for repetition when variation is such that basic word identity is not obtained, and in general by considerable negotiation for meaning.

Much of the theory and most of the materials in EFL/ESL have been based on a native-speaker model, so that listening comprehension and the component skills have been derived from situations of minimal variation. Materials have typically embodied a dialogue form, yet the interactors in such a supposed dialogue have no difficulty in understanding each other. The student is thus given a misleading idea of what is involved in listening.

An American company, Sperry, recently placed a two-page advertisement in *The New Yorker* (March 10, 1980:80-81), with the heading, "Knowing How to Listen Takes More than Two Good Ears":

The fact is, there's a lot more to listening than hearing.

After we hear something, we must interpret it. Evaluate it. And finally, respond to it. That's listening.

And it's during this complex process that we run into all kinds of trouble. For example:

We prejudge—sometimes even disregard—a speaker based on his delivery or appearance.

We let personal ideas, emotions or prejudices distort what a person has to say.

We tune-out subjects we consider too difficult or uninteresting.

Several accepted facts in business communication are brought together here: listening can be improved; listening involves more than perception of an acoustic signal; the process includes response on the part of the listener; attitudes, affective factors, and failure to stay with the speaker all can function to block comprehension.

In the field of business communication, it is becoming a commonplace that communication is the act of the recipient, that communication takes place when the message is *received.* (Kikoski, 1980:126; Randsepp, 1979:14) Frequently found in the literature are self-rating scales—"Are You a Good Listener?", and guidelines for improving listening competency (e.g., Vining and Yrle, 1980). These guidelines overlap to some extent with the skills listed in the EFL/ESL listening skills hierarchies, but there are also important skills which have been ignored in the English-language classroom and which are vital in EIL situation. For instance:

—Allow the speaker to express his or her thoughts without interrupting.

—Do not "switch off" because of a high degree of variation, because the message may seem boring, or because of attitudinal reasons.

—Ignore distractions.

—Express genuine interest in the other person's conversation.

(cf. Vining and Yrle, 1980)

Guidelines such as these point to means of reaching understanding in the face of what

may seem to be too great a degree of variation in English. If in a situation of intervarietal communication, listen—do not cut short the other person. (Asking for repetition or clarification is not interruption. It is a carrying forward of the process of interpretation.) Listen—do not let attitudes, fatigue or prejudices block you. Listen—ignore distractions. (Variation in accent is a distraction, and should be ignored insofar as it is not the focus of the exchange.)

Although few teaching materials embody listening comprehension as outlined in the preceding, much valuable work has been done in the area of spoken English, much of it by Gillian Brown (1977;1978). She deals only with variation within native-speaker English, however, and her objectives are biased, e.g., "it is a very reasonable minimum to expect foreign students who hope to follow courses in this country [Great Britain] to understand" (1977:11) —biased, that is, from the point of view of TEIL. There is also the problem of her taking an extended form of RP as her basic model. By so doing, she defines certain phonetic citation forms of words as constants. However, as revealed earlier by the examples of Filipino English, if one considers all the varieties of English, there are no constants.

There is also O'Neil and Scott (1974), a popular listening comprehension course. Consisting of actual taped interviews, it includes examples of the type of variation found within British English. Yet again the question arises, can familiarity with variation within one general form such as British English be adequate preparation for communication with speakers who use different varieties of English?

*Listening in the Real World* (Rost and Stratton, 1978), by avoiding stilted, scripted material, gives students the chance to hear examples of the types of connected speech phenomena which occur in actual spoken English. Kameen (1979), in his review, says that this is a good course for acquainting international students who plan to come to the U.S. with the connected speech phenomena of informal American English. He concludes (p. 115), "A supplemental text such as this can help our students develop both the skills and the con-

fidence necessary for more efficient Listening in the Real World." Does the "Real World" include non-native speakers, e.g., the international students themselves, who spend no little time speaking to one another in English? Does it include the ethnic groups in the U.S. who may not speak General American English, yet with whom foreign students may well have contact?

There is one example which can be cited as being a program for teaching interactive EIL listening comprehension. This is *Developing Awareness Skills for Interethnic Communication* (Gumperz and Roberts, 1978).[2] This is cited here because it embodies most of the points discussed in the preceding. There is the perceptual level, with British managers being taught to identify prosodic and stress features of Indian English. Attitudinal factors are central. And although the trainees are limited to British and Indian speakers, the objective is broader cross-cultural communication, not limited to specific groups. The underlying philosophy is that there is no set of rules, no specific description, which can lead to successful cross-cultural, inter-varietal communication.

> Every piece of good communication depends upon the response and feedback which participants elicit from each other in the course of the conversation itself and so every speaker has to develop his own strategies for interpreting and responding appropriately. (Gumperz and Roberts, 1978:3)

Three steps for improved communication are suggested which, taken together, constitute a set of expectations needed for comprehension in an EIL situation:

1. Perception—"I can perceive that our communication has not been entirely successful."
2. Acceptance—"I can accept that you do not intend to convey wrong or confusing information or wrong attitudes."
3. Repair—"I can find ways of explicitly sorting out where the communication has gone wrong." (p. 3)

By combining these three steps, the listening comprehension skills as described

in EFL/ESL, and the types of skills seen as valuable in business communication, we arrive at a reasonably clear image of interactive listening in the context of EIL. The key concepts in interactive listening are diversity and adaptation: the diversity which will be encountered by the users of English in international situations, and the adaptive stance which they will need if they are to succeed. Given these notions, step *3* above should be modified. The step is not one of repair, for 'break down/repair' is not the best metaphor to describe what takes place in an EIL situation. There should be the perception that variation may have impeded communication, that a match between speaker meaning and listener understanding has not yet been achieved. There should be an attitude of acceptance of fellow participants' English and of their desire to successfully communicate. Following these two steps should be a third, not of repair, but of accepting, as listener, the responsibility for participating in a manner which will lead to communication. Step *3* could be called, 'Listening': "I will continue to listen to you and will interact with you so that, together, we will communicate."

It is at the level of this third step that we need further research and better materials. For if our students are going to use their English in today's world, we must help them to acquire the skills of interactive listening.

[1]Examples of Filipino English are from Aurora Samonte's presentation at the conference on English for international and intranational purposes, East-West Center, April, 1978.

[2]See also the related film, *Crosstalk*, Twitchin, 1979; and background material and notes for the film, Gumperz et. al., 1979.

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## Addresses Change

TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) has moved its headquarters. The new address and telephone number are 202 D.C. Transit Building, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. 20057, (202) 625-4569.

CAL (Center for Applied Linguistics) has also changed its location. The new address and telephone number are 3520 Prospect Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20007, (202) 298-9292.