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# **The Voice of America: Moving ESL Students Toward Listening Success**

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With the continuous development of China's economic and political reforms and the present policy of opening China's doors to the outside world, studying English is becoming more and more important and popular, especially in the colleges and universities of China. Presently as teachers and students pay more attention to developing the skill of listening in English studies and with the facilities for teaching listening becoming updated, students' ability in listening is greatly improving.

The textbooks popularly used for listening courses in the colleges and universities throughout the country have generally been successfully compiled and are applicable. But using only a textbook is not sufficient in an EFL context. Some extra listening material should be chosen and used in coordination with the textbook in order to provide more opportunities for training and improving students' listening ability. Such supportive listening material, easily obtainable in an EFL as well as an ESL environment, are radio programs. However, effective application of this readily available resource is not easy. It requires careful analysis and planning. A teacher should not simply record the news in English from the radio, take it to class, and play it again and again for the students' so-called listening privilege regardless of student comprehension and interest. The right choice of programs and the appropriate use of them in class is extremely important for the successful application of radio news in English listening skills development.

Among the many English radio programs broadcast the world over, the Voice of America (VOA) is a good selection based upon its wide spectrum of authentic listening materials. This program not only enables students to hear the most natural and idiomatic American English, but also helps them gain more knowledge about practically every facet of human activity. Some of the programs of VOA are broadcast in "special English"—English especially designed for listeners who study English as a second language. It is delivered at a slower rate (about 90 words per minute) and has a smaller vocabulary (about 1,500 basic words with a small number of technical terms) than does regular news which contains sentences of simple grammatical structure, and presents a variety of programs including "News," "Words and Their Stories," and "Science Reports."

The "News" is the main part of the program. It has two distinguishing features: 1) up-to-the-minute, and 2) short and pithy. It reports the latest happenings in the world, and each news item often consists of only three to five grammatically simple sentences. Students who have received some systematic training in listening for a certain period of time—say a year at the college or university level—will not find it very difficult to follow this program, thus allowing the application of the news program to motivate listening comprehension development. How many news items can be dealt with during each class period may depend on how well the students can comprehend the news and how long each news item is. Before class, the teacher should list the words or phrases in the news that the students may not be familiar with and explain them in English to help the students better understand the news. After listening twice, when the students have gotten the general idea of the content, the teacher asks questions s/he has prepared in advance for the students to answer according to what they have heard. The teacher may also ask the students to organize the news facts according to time and to retell the news orally in English in order to enhance their speaking ability in the listening class.

After a period of training with the news program, students may benefit from the other programs on VOA, such as "Words and Their Stories," another Special English program, which explains the origins of some words and phrases in English based on scientific studies or folk etymology and which helps the listeners understand the English language and remember these words and phrases. Yet another English program, the "Science Report," introduces listeners to the latest developments and discoveries in modern science and technology and helps them update their knowledge in simple and easy-to-follow English. Though some words in the reports may sound entirely new to the students, they will be able to understand the meaning of the words after they comprehend the reports with the help of their teacher, at the same time enlarging their vocabulary and increasing their understanding of the changing world around them.

In the process of support and training, it is essential that the teacher give directions to the students whenever needed in order to ensure effective listening in the class. Sometimes some students cannot understand a news story, not because they are poor in listening, but because they are not familiar with the content of the news. To remedy this, the teacher should ask the students to read magazines and newspapers in English, or even in the native language, and to frequently listen to the radio or watch TV so as to broaden their scope of knowledge and enlarge their vocabulary. In so doing, they will be able to understand the radio programs more easily.

Furthermore, from the early stages of such listening training, the teacher should not only clarify language points, but also help the students learn about special features of English news and understand related skills in comprehending news stories. For example,

the students might be given some idea about how a typical news item is composed and tell them that the leading sentence (the first sentence) of a news item conventionally contains all the significant facts—the who, what, when, where, and occasionally the why and how, with each succeeding sentence being less significant than the preceding.

It is advisable that, at different learning stages, the training be conducted in the form of intensive and extensive listening. Intensive listening, to be conducted at the early stage of the training, consists of catching the general idea of a news story, correctly answering the questions raised by the teacher, and being able to understand and repeat each sentence. Care must be taken in the intensive listening stage, however, not to wrongly lead the students into putting their listening emphasis on individual words or sentences instead of the main idea of the news. In the extensive stage students should be able to retell the news story in their own words. They can retell the news once together as a class, with everyone orally contributing main ideas and details of the news story in an organized fashion. Then they can retell the news stories in groups of two or three. Finally, they can each write down the news story individually for their instructor.

After having gained some experience in listening to the Special English program, the students will have both a stronger desire and a better ability to challenge the VOA's more advanced Standard English program, a program delivered at normal speed with a larger vocabulary and more complicated grammatical structures, whereby similar learning strategies are applied. Once a student can follow this program, s/he will have little difficulty in understanding other English programs on radio stations throughout the world and can thus comprehend up-to-date knowledge, impossible to gather from dated textbooks, but readily available from English radio programs such as Voice of America!

### About the Authors

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