
Purposeful Listening for ESL Students

by Yoshihiro Nakamura

In reality, the listener listens with a purpose. He/She may turn on the radio to get weather information or attend a lecture to learn how a micro-computer can be used. No matter what the purpose may be, it affects the listener's speech perception. That is, the listener does not listen for every detail. Instead, the listener listens for meaning that is relevant to a purpose, paying much less attention to or ignoring irrelevant information.

In many ESL classes, however, teachers tend to assign listening exercises with no guidance as to what students are supposed to listen for. Students are expected to understand every detail. The result is that listening comprehension becomes unnecessarily difficult and sometimes even painful for students. Thus, students may give up even before they finish listening to a whole text when they do not understand certain of its words or sentences.

The teacher needs to encourage students to listen for and extract only the most important information. To accomplish this, the teacher must carefully prepare listening exercises which guide the students in their listening tasks. This article is meant to provide some general guidelines for ESL teachers regarding what to consider in the preparation of such listening materials.

Linguistic Factors to be Considered in the Preparation of Listening Exercises

Informal spoken English. Even students who understand classroom English (e.g., teachers' instructions and questions) very well are often unable to understand everyday conversation, radio and TV programs, etc. The main reason for their lack of comprehension stems from their lack of training in informal spoken English. Whether modeled by the teacher or recorded on tape, explicitly and precisely pronounced formal spoken English is what students are usually exposed to.

However, once students step out of the classroom or the language laboratory, they

no longer hear English produced clearly word by word, phrase by phrase, and sentence by sentence. In informal speech,

when the speaker is concentrating on what he is saying, and not how he is saying it, he will tend to articulate in the most efficient manner--he will make articulatory gestures that are sufficient to allow the units of his message to be identified but he will reduce any articulatory gesture whose explicit movement is not necessary to the comprehension of his message (Brown 1977:53).

For instance, "give me" and "want to" may be heard as "gimme" and "wanna" respectively. Students need opportunities to become accustomed to this type of informal spoken English as well as formal English.

Variations in English. Interaction in English takes place not only with native speakers but also between non-native speakers. Students trained only in explicitly pronounced formal English may have difficulty in understanding informal English spoken by native speakers of other languages. Further, the spoken English of speakers from different educational backgrounds and occupations often exhibits numerous idiosyncratic features. Students need to be exposed to these many varieties of English also.

Noise. When students listen to English in the classroom or the language laboratory, the acoustic environment is usually excellent. However, in the real world, learners are often required to understand what is said against background noise. For example, they need to comprehend announcements made at airports or bus/train stations over loud speakers. In many such cases, the sound signal is far from clear and listening becomes extremely difficult for students. It can be argued, then, that students should also be trained to listen in a situation where comprehension is made difficult due to external interference.

Speech Rate. ESL students often claim that they do not understand a spoken message because the speaker speaks too fast. Natural speech rate varies from speaker to speaker with 160-220 words per minute considered to be average. Rates above 220 wpm and below 130 wpm are considered abnormally fast or slow (Rivers 1981:173). Within this range, however, English spoken at different rates of speed (fast speech in particular) should be provided for student practice.

Pedagogical Perspectives

Exercise or Memory Test? Listening activities can be divided into three stages: pre-listening, listening and post-listening. In the ESL classroom, the teacher often puts too great an emphasis on the listening and post-listening stages. Typically, the teacher plays a recorded text for students once or twice. Then students are asked to answer questions verbally or in writing. Questions are such that they cannot be answered without detailed information. As a result, listening exercises are primarily a test of memory. If the purpose of listening exercises is to train students to listen and extract the important information, they should be designed and conducted for that purpose.

Pre-listening. Students need to prepare for listening. As Brown (1978:278) points out, "if an adult native speaker of English switches on the radio in the middle of a talk, he may have to listen for several sentences before he 'gets his ear in', and before he could tell you what was the topic which the speaker was discussing." Thus, it stands to reason that the teacher cannot expect ESL students to instantly comprehend a taped conversation.

It should also be noted that we perceive partly in terms of what we want and expect to hear. Even before we listen, we have certain knowledge of who is going to talk, with whom, about what topic, and in what situation. Therefore, students need to be provided with such information prior to actually listening. For instance, if the teacher is going to play a taped lecture on the latest developments in the treatment of cancer, it may be necessary to tell stu-

dents what the topic is, who the speaker is, and more importantly what information students are to extract. The teacher may have to provide a list of medical terms with which students are not familiar and explain what these terms mean. Without such preparation, students cannot be expected to listen effectively.

Listening. At this stage, students complete a given task while listening, not after listening. In this manner, students do not have to jot down and/or try to remember every detail. Instead, they can concentrate on listening and getting the important information which is relevant to the task. After all, isn't that what we do in real life when we listen? If we need every detail

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on a topic, we refer to books, reports, etc. Why should students be expected to understand and remember every detail when they listen?

Post-listening. The post-listening stage should be an open forum between the teacher and students. For both the teacher and students, this is the time to discuss as openly as possible what has not been completed, what has been done incorrectly, and why. Further, the teacher should consider what remains for students to learn in order to improve their listening skills. Students should be encouraged to express freely what they think they need to be taught. They may even come up with useful ideas for future listening exercises.

Task-based Listening Comprehension Exercises

One of the best ways to make listening purposeful is to include tasks in the exercises. In this task-based approach, students are required not only to understand messages

but also to work out and accomplish given tasks.

Commonly used exercises involve matching or sequencing a set of pictures. Although somewhat contrived and unrealistic, these activities can still provide meaningful listening practice. For instance, the teacher gives students pictures of two apples, five apples, six oranges and three oranges. Then the teacher says "Tom bought six oranges and two apples." Students are required to pick out corresponding pictures. Another activity is to give students a set of pictures. Then the teacher reads a short story. The student's task is to sequence the pictures in accordance with the story.

Other familiar exercises are to draw a map or a picture as instructed, or to locate things and people (e.g., finding a hidden diamond or a thief at large in a maze). In any case, the important point is that students are required to complete given tasks while listening rather than after listening.

It was earlier noted that students need to practice listening to announcements made over speakers at airports and bus or train stations. In order to get authentic materials, the teacher should try to record actual announcements made at such places. If it is not possible to do this, the teacher may have to simulate announcements-including background noise. Littlewood (1981:72) presents a good example of how to structure this type of exercise:

Destination	Time of Departure	Platform	Calling at
Bristol	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	8	_____
_____	13:17	_____	_____

Students listen to a series of station announcements and fill in the missing information about train schedules.

Various types of recorded materials from TV and radio broadcasts are also valuable. For instance, news programs usually report sports results. The teacher can play a pre-recorded news broadcast and have students note the important information. For example,

Sport	Teams	Score
Baseball	_____	_____
Volleyball	Japan - U.S.A.	10-15
_____	_____	_____
Soccer	_____	_____

The teacher can also utilize conversations taped from various talk shows. These programs are very useful because they exhibit informal English spoken by different people and cover a wide variety of topics. They can also serve as take-off points for task-oriented listening exercises.

Dictation, note-taking and listening for pleasure are other valuable listening exercises. They are not discussed here, however, since most teachers are already familiar with them.

Final Remark

Listening has been considered a passive skill. This notion has misled many classroom practitioners to think that students will improve their listening skill naturally if they are merely exposed to spoken language. However, current studies on listening comprehension suggest that listening is an active skill and students need to be trained to listen actively. Therefore, the teacher is required, more than ever, to consider what is involved in the process of listening comprehension, what is necessary to develop students' listening skills, and how they might be developed effectively in an actual classroom setting. The task-based approach to listening comprehension is one way this can be done.

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