

Talking on Tape: The Audio Cassette as an Aid to Oral Skills Improvement

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ESL specialists have long recognized the desirability of using automated aids to further in-class objectives. Traditionally the language laboratory with commercially prepared tapes and records has been the key avenue of instructional extension, seconded, perhaps, by newer technological tools in recent years.¹ However, in some programs, the personal audio cassette is contributing to the acquisitional process also. The purpose of this discussion is to explore the range of projects and assignments that can be adapted to a personal taping procedure. When used judiciously and imaginatively, it can provide a unique and productive source of pedagogical support.

The format which a teacher may follow in utilizing a personal taping method is roughly this:² The student purchases an ordinary audio cassette of good quality. S/he records specified oral exercises and assignments as homework and submits the results to the teacher for monitoring. The teacher listens to the tape and records a brief appraisal of the student's work onto the same tape and returns it to the student for review.

Categories of Tasks

The diversity of exercises that can be managed by such a strategy is essentially unlimited, but I have outlined three broad categories of tasks with a partial list of examples below. I have used the technique and related suggestions to help students perfect oral and aural competence. But many of the same tasks could on occasion lend enrichment to a grammar class, a reading class, or a class treating cross-cultural affairs.

I. Guided Tasks

This category of suggestions generally progresses from simple to more complex exercises. The assignments vary in terms of the amount of structure provided and the grammatical level of solicited responses (i.e. word-level, phrase-level or connected discourse). Most texts devoted to oral skills improvement will already include some of the more elementary types of tasks, but a teacher may wish to supplement textbook materials with routines directed towards learners' special requirements (see Fig. 1, on page 10).

I.0 Drill routines

- word lists
- minimal word pairs
- target phrases
- sentence manipulation exercises

I.1 Oral readings

- a. Excerpts from newspapers, textbooks, journals or magazines in learners' fields of interest
- b. Excerpts from novels or short stories
- c. Poems
- d. Limericks

II. Semi-Guided Tasks

These are primarily oral readings as were some in the first category. But these

selections present more challenge in that learners must elaborate the readings somewhat with either creative commentary or editing. Sample instructions that might be given are the following:

- a. Read a paragraph or short article, and summarize its main points in your own words.
- b. Sing your favorite English language song, and tell what the song is about.
- c. Read a dialogue, short skit or play, or a comic strip with another classmate or two, but edit it to your personal situation (a joint project).

III. Unstructured Tasks

These projects, while being the most technically demanding for learners, are nonetheless the most stimulating to prepare and the most exciting to audit. Items in this category will tap learners' observational abilities and analytic talents along with their oral-aural proficiencies.

III.0 Describe one of the following using no more than brief notes as a guide:

- a. a process (such as cooking rice, donning a turban, warding off an adversary, or finding one's way to your present address)
- b. a familiar person such as a classmate or teacher
- c. a landmark in your current locale or native country

III.1 Recite one of the following, and comment on the importance of the form in your culture:

- a joke
- a riddle
- a children's story or rhyme

III.2 Recite one of the following from your native culture and comment on its universal message:

- a fable
- a proverb
- a song
- b or c from I.1 above

III.3 Conduct a quick survey with members of the target culture on a topic of curiosity (such as why some people do or don't vote, stop smoking, go to church, ride bicycles, etc.). Tell what you concluded.

Advantages of Personalized Taping

The fundamental appeal of personalized taping is probably its potential for improvisation. If, for example, a classroom lesson deals with the pros and cons of American fast food restaurants, a logical follow-up exercise might be to have students tape a talk on their knowledge of such restaurants in their native countries or their experiences with them in the western world. But if the teaching session is taking place during the summer and several of the students are Moslems, these students might appreciate the option of doing an exercise on abstinence and their experiences with observing Ramadan in the West or, conversely, the adjustments non-Moslems must make during Ramadan while living in the East.

Another attraction of the procedure is that it is inexpensive, the cost of a cassette being minimal. It is furthermore convenient since students can usually record cassettes in the laboratory on commercial equipment or at home on personal equipment if they own a recorder. But no matter where they record, they will always have the choice of saving

their audited tapes for future reference or erasing them for immediate reuse.

A final advantage is related to affective concerns. Since both student taping and teacher feedback are handled on an individualized basis, the technique can be a boon to the learner who feels self-conscious using the target language in class or anxious when using it in a laboratory booth. Of course, such persons could not prolong the move from private taping to "live" performance indefinitely. But the technique may offer welcomed breathing space while the learner gains confidence.

Potential Problems and Their Solutions

The strengths of the method far outweigh any problems I have encountered, but I mention a few conceivable difficulties. An obvious one is the lag between learner production and teacher monitoring. Whether learners need to be commended or cautioned for their efforts, neither action can be instantaneous.

Another problem is the considerable time demand placed on the teacher for the purpose of auditing the tapes. This requirement need not become excessive, however, if the taping activity is interspersed with other types of supplemental work such as written exercises or background reading for class discussions. Varying the procedure with different homework formats will also help offset the possibility of the procedure becoming tedious for the students.

Something else the teacher will need to do to keep the workload manageable is establish a streamlined recordkeeping system so as to keep track of learners' progress. The one I have devised should serve as an example.

I have a straightforward Homework Assignment Sheet which I reproduce in large quantity (cf. Fig. 1). At the top of the sheet is a space for filling in the week number or date on which the assignment is made and

the date upon which it is due. Below that is a place for filling in the student's name. Beneath the student's name is space for adding page and exercise numbers of regular textbook-generated oral work and following that, room to include instructions for teacher-initiated tasks. If I choose to give a single assignment to an entire class, I merely write the directions on the board and let the students fill in that portion of the information. But I make a copy of each week's sheets before giving them out.

The space remaining at the bottom of the copy is reserved for teachers' comments on students' work (cf. Fig. 2). All annotated copies remain on file for the balance of the teaching session as they will prove useful at final evaluation time.

About the Author

Norma A. Register has MA degrees in TEFL and linguistics and is currently completing a doctorate in linguistics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She has taught English at New Mexico Highlands University-Las Vegas and for the Program in ESL at UW. She and UW colleagues have used the method she describes. Some publications include work in The English Record and LASSO Journal.

References

¹ A position paper by De Napoli, A.J. and Lyons, K. (1983). Technology and foreign language education, *Language Association Bulletin* 35, 5-7. (From *Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts*, 1985, 19, No. 8500290) describes a variety of technological aids now being used in language teaching including the microcomputer and video tape.

² For a slightly different approach to the use of the individual audio cassette, see Acton, W. (1984). Changing fossilized pronunciation. *TESOL Quarterly* 18, 71-85.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT SHEET

DATE/WEEK NO. 9DUE DATE 3-15NAME Ahmed A.

I. Record the following exercises from Evans and Lee as directed:

No. 3, pp. 108-9 and No. 5, pp. 112-13, 11-20
only

II. In addition, complete the following:

A. Review Section IV, p. 84 of E&L. Record these
word pairs:

(1)

(2)

a. sing sink

e. linger linker

b. hang Hank

f. anger anchor

c. dung dunk

g. hunger bunker

d. Kong konk

h. longer conquer

B. See board for reading exercise.

Fig. 1 Homework Assignment Sheet

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT SHEET

DATE/WEEK NO. 9DUE DATE 3-15NAME Ahmed A.

I. Record the following exercises from Evans and Lee as directed:

No. 3, pp. 108-9 and No. 5, pp. 112-13, 11-20
only

II. In addition, complete the following:

A. Review Section II, p. 84 of E&L. Record these
word pairs:

(1)

(2)

a. sing sink

e. linger linker

b. hang Hank

f. anger anchor

c. dung dunk

g. hunger bunker

d. Kong konk

h. longer conquer

B. See board for reading exercise.

3/17: Continued problems with long and short vowel distinctions;
e.g. [frst] vs. [fist] (#4/108) and [sɜk] vs. [sɪk] (#7/109).

Low back vowels still give firm problems: [ɒ] vs. [low] (#12/113)

Velar nasal distinctions improve with slower pace though not
consistently: A.Z.E, ɛ and ɜ were noticeably distorted as was
"prices sink..." in his reading on Economic Forecasting.
His intonation and phrase rhythm were very good overall.

Fig. 2. Homework Assignment Sheet With Teacher Comments