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# The Story of Elvis Presley: Using Pair Work with Written Materials to Promote Listening Comprehension

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Perhaps the most important part of any listening comprehension lesson should be the first one, the anticipation phase, which "sets the stage" for the listening activity itself. Some textbook writers have recommended a dictated introduction consisting of a few sentences that tell something about the subject of the (recorded) conversation or monologue to follow (James, Whitley and Bode, 1980). Others have suggested asking learners to read background references first and then to make predictions about the actual contents of the recording (Rost and Lance, 1984). This writer has advocated the use of a written summary that is cut into several strips of paper on which only five to fifteen words are shown: the students work in small groups and each group must reconstruct the summary by piecing the fragments together (Blanche, 1984). A short guided discussion on a related subject could also be a good opener, but it would require a fairly high level of overall linguistic development.

One advantage of the written materials is that they can more easily bring passive knowledge and receptive skills into play, and topics into focus. Yet I feel that their intrinsic effectiveness might be increased if they featured information gaps which could be filled in through pair work. The following is an illustration of what could be done in this respect.

## Materials

1. "Missing information: the life of Elvis Presley" (see figure one) was taken from *Pair Work One*, student-A and student-B books (Peter Watcyn-Jones, Penguin Books, 1984). This pair work exercise would pave the way for the listening comprehension activity.
2. "Elvis Presley—story of a superstar" (see figure two) was taken from *American Streamline! Connections* (Bernard Hartley and Peter Viney, Oxford University Press, 1984). The commercial tape recording of this story (which incorporates more complex language and more detailed information than the written materials previously used) would constitute the listening component proper.

## Procedures

**Prelistening.** The learners work with the written material in pairs and simply follow the directions given at the beginning. The instructor monitors their performance, corrects only the most serious errors by rephrasing some questions/answers as s/he walks around the room, and answers the questions addressed to him/her personally.<sup>1</sup>

**First listening.** The learners are told that they are going to hear a slightly different and longer version of the story they have just read. They are also asked to spot

## Blanche/The Story of Elvis

### Missing information: the life of Elvis Presley

A pop magazine has just started a new series called 'The History of Rock'n'Roll.' Each week it presents a short life-history of a famous rock'n'roll singer. On the opposite page is the life-history of this week's star -- Elvis Presley. Unfortunately, some of the information about him is missing. By asking Student B/Student A questions, fill in the missing information (Student B/Student A also has missing information and will ask you questions).

Before you start, read through the life of Elvis on the opposite page and work out which questions to ask. For example:

PART A

- What was his father's name?
- What sort of job did he get when he left school?
- When did his mother die?

PART B

- When was he born?
- Where did he move to in 1948?
- What happened in 1972?

Full name: Elvis Aaron Presley  
Parents: ..... and Gladys Presley  
Brothers/sisters: Jesse Garon (twin brother)  
 Died at birth

Full name: Elvis Aaron Presley  
Parents: Vernon and Gladys Presley  
Brothers/sisters: Jesse Garon (twin brother)  
 Died .....

Year	Main event(s)
1935	Born in ..... Mississippi, on January 8th.
1942	.....
1948	Moved to Memphis, Tennessee. Started at a new school. His father bought him .....
1953	Left school and got a job as ..... with the Crown Electrical Company. That summer, he went along to Sun Records in Memphis and paid \$4 to record two songs for ..
1954	Saw Phillips, the owner of Sun Records, asked Elvis to record a song called '.....' 20,000 people bought the record.
1955	Met Colonel Tom Parker. He became Elvis's manager.
....	Recorded a song called 'Heartbreak Hotel.' It sold over a million copies.
1957	Made more records -- all of them were big hits. Became known as the 'King of Rock'n' Roll.' He bought..... in Memphis which he called Graceland. Also went to Hollywood to make his first film -- <u>Love Me Tender</u> .
1958	Went into the army and became a soldier in West Germany. On ..... his mother died.
1960	Left the army and went back to Hollywood to make more films.
1967	Got married to Priscilla Beaumont -- a girl he had first met when .....
....	Appeared on a special television show. His daughter, Lisa Marie, was born.
1972	His wife, Priscilla, left him.
....	Elvis and Priscilla got divorced.
1977	Died of a heart attack at the age of ..... on August 16th. He left all his money to .. 80,000 people turned up for his funeral and his records were played on the radio all day.
1978	100 million Elvis LPs were sold. The 'King of Rock'n'Roll' was dead but certainly not forgotten.

Year	Main event(s)
1935	Born in Tupelo, Mississippi, on .....
1942	Got a guitar from his father for his birthday.
1948	Moved to ..... Tennessee. Started at a new school.
....	Left school and got a job as a driver with the Crown Electrical Company. That summer, he went along to Sun Records in Memphis and paid \$..... to record two songs for his mother's birthday.
1954	Saw Phillips, the owner of Sun Records, asked Elvis to record a song called 'That's All Right.' ..... people bought the record.
1955	Met Colonel ..... He became Elvis's manager.
1956	Recorded a song called 'Heartbreak Hotel.' It sold over a million copies.
1957	Made more records -- all of them were big hits. Became known as the 'King of Rock'n'Roll.' He bought a big house in Memphis which he called Graceland. Also went to ..... to make his first film -- <u>Love Me Tender</u> .
1958	Went into the Army and became a soldier in West Germany. On August 16th, his mother died.
....	Left the army and went back to Hollywood to make more films.
1967	Got married to Priscilla Beaumont -- a girl he had first met when he was a soldier in West Germany.
1968	Appeared on a special television show. His daughter, ....., was born.
1972	.....
1973	Elvis and Priscilla got divorced.
....	Died of a heart attack at the age of 42 on August 16th. He left all his money to his daughter. .... people turned up for his funeral and his records were played on the radio all day.
1978	100 million Elvis LPs were sold. The 'King of Rock'n'Roll' was dead but certainly not forgotten.

Figure 1.

## Elvis Presley -- story of a superstar

When Elvis Presley died on August 16, 1977, radio and television programs all over the world were interrupted to give the news of his death. President Carter was asked to declare a day of national mourning. Carter said: "Elvis Presley changed the face of American popular culture... He was unique and irreplaceable." Eighty thousand people attended his funeral. The streets were jammed with cars, and Elvis Presley movies were shown on television, and his records were played on the radio all day. In the year after his death, 100 million Presley albums were sold.

Elvis Presley was born on January 8, 1935, in Tupelo, Mississippi. His twin brother, Jesse Garon, died at birth. His parents were very poor and Elvis never had music lessons, but he was surrounded by music from an early age. His parents were very religious, and Elvis regularly sang at church services. In 1948, when he was thirteen, his family moved to Memphis, Tennessee. He left school in 1953 and got a job as a truck driver. In the summer of 1953 Elvis paid \$4 and recorded two songs for his mother's birthday at Sam Phillips's Sun Records studio. Sam Phillips heard Elvis and asked him to record That's All Right in July 1954. 20,000 copies were sold, mainly in and around Memphis. He made five more records for Sun, and in July 1955 he met Colonel Tom Parker, who became his manager in November. Parker sold Elvis's contract to RCA records. Sun Records got \$35,000 and Elvis got \$5,000. With the money he bought a pink Cadillac for his mother. On January 10, 1956, Elvis recorded Heartbreak Hotel, and a million copies were sold. In the next fourteen months he made another fourteen records, and they were all big hits. In 1956 he also made his first movie in Hollywood.

In March 1958, Elvis had to join the army. When his hair was cut thousands of women cried. He spent the next two years in Germany, where he met Priscilla Beaulieu, who became his wife eight years later on May 1, 1967. In 1960 he left the army and went to Hollywood where he made several movies during the next few years.

By 1968 many people had become tired of Elvis. He hadn't performed live since 1960. But he recorded a new album, From Elvis in Memphis, and appeared in a TV special. He became popular again, and went to Las Vegas, where he was paid \$750,000 for four weeks. In 1972 his wife left him, and they were divorced in October 1973. He died of a heart attack. He had been working too hard and eating and drinking too much for several years. He left all his money to his only daughter, Lisa Marie Presley. She became one of the richest people in the world when she was only nine years old.

as much new or different information as they can while listening to the tape.<sup>2</sup>

**First discussion.** In small groups, the students discuss perceived differences between the written version and the recorded version of Elvis's story. One person in each group announces the results of their discussion to the whole class.

**Optional listening.** At this stage, the teacher could direct the students' attention to some important points that might have been missed. For instance, s/he could write a couple of statements on the board, play the tape one more time and ask the class to tell him/her whether these statements were true or false (e.g., Elvis's parents were very religious: true; in 1953, Elvis got a job as a taxi driver: false).

**Second (or third) listening.** The tapescript is broken up into three parts: A, B and C. These segments are about the same length and are interspersed with an approximately equal number of blanks to be filled in. The class is divided into three or more groups and the students in each group get only one part of the script. Then the tape is played again.

**Second discussion.** The learners in each group compare their work and fill in some more blanks.

**Third (or fourth) listening.** Now the learners try to bridge the remaining information gaps.

**Third Discussion.** A, B and C students compare notes a second time within

their respective group. If there are still some blanks which haven't been filled in correctly, the teacher writes the corresponding answers on the board—but doesn't write them in any order. S/he asks the class where each word belongs, and then collects the written material.

**Written reconstruction.** Here comes the fun part! The students form A-B-C triads and start paraphrasing (rather than reproducing) the whole script together.

**Loud reading.** A male or female spokesman is chosen in each triad. Two or three spokesmen will be called upon to read out the story they have helped to reconstruct. The instructor will point out the discrepancies between the students' accounts, if any. This will also be a good time for him/her to correct some errors if error correction is desired. The students will hand in their papers at the end of the reading phase.

**Speaking out.** Finally, the students tell each other the story of Elvis Presley. To make it more challenging, the teacher could ask them to get into different groups again. Within each group a C person would begin with the A portion of the script, an A person would go on with the B part and a C person would conclude with the last part.

**Follow-up procedures.** As the learners are reading or telling their version of the reconstructed story, their speech can be recorded. If this procedure is followed, the instructor will have a complete practice tape which the learners will be able to use later

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*(continued from page 48)*

for self-monitoring purposes. Likewise, writing or speaking about the life-history of a Japanese "superstar" such as Seiko Matsuda or Yukiko Okada would be a welcome addition to the above activities.

### Conclusion

I feel that several advantages of using pair work with written materials to promote listening comprehension need to be underscored. One of them is that it allows learners to combine linguistic manipulation with a gradual, "gist" understanding of the spoken language: not only are these learners well prepared to deal with recorded speech, but grammar or vocabulary parameter can also be included in the written materials. In the case of the Elvis Presley story, the initial pair work seemed to reflect a structural emphasis on WH-questions and time relations. This particular feature could easily have been enhanced after the first listening by having the students formulate a given number of WH-questions aimed at gathering sequential pieces of information that were missing in the prelistening phase (e.g., What did President Carter say shortly after Elvis died? Why was Elvis attracted to music before his father bought him a guitar?).

Another advantage of working with written materials prior to a listening activity is that authentic language can actually be simplified without losing its genuineness. Elvis's story clearly shows what could be accomplished with a television commercial, a complete news broadcast, or even a movie. I myself have started using simplified language in written form for pair work exercises that are designed to make students ready to watch scenes from movies with the

sound on after (1) viewing these scenes with the sound off and (2) doing the pair work.

But, in my opinion, the biggest advantage of doing such pair work exercises is that it dramatically increases the amount of comprehensible input which learners become able to process. According to Krashen (1985), this is precisely what learners need in order to acquire the language more rapidly.

As the core component of a listening comprehension activity, the story of Elvis Presley has served my purposes very well in classes for Japanese adults and in demonstration lessons for Japanese teachers of English. The entire exercise keeps lower intermediate students busy for approximately 90 minutes (upper intermediate students will complete the various tasks in about an hour, advanced learners or teachers in 45 minutes or less). As a teaching demonstration tool, this story has helped me make the point that good language instruction does not depend so much on imagination and clever contextualizations as on a fundamental understanding of the processes involved in second language acquisition.

### Notes

1. If the learners are all lower advanced or advanced students, the written material could be collected at the end of the prelistening activity. This would make the whole exercise much more challenging but perhaps less focussed on specific differences between the written version and the tape-recorded version of Elvis's story. Lower intermediate, intermediate, and even upper intermediate students should probably use their written pair work as a guide during the first two or three listening activities.

Alternatively, the pair work material could be collected at the end of the prelistening phase, and learners could then be asked to reconstruct the written version of the story in pairs. This would help the less advanced students, but would make the entire exercise much longer and less focussed on listening *per se*.

2. The new or different information is as follows:

1. When Elvis Presley died, radio and television programs all over the world were interrupted to give the news of his death.

2. President Carter's statement: "Elvis Presley changed the face of American popular culture . . . He was unique and irreplaceable."

3. The streets were jammed with cars.

4. Elvis Presley movies were shown on television all day.

5. His parents were very poor and very religious.

6. He never had music lessons, but he was surrounded by music from an early age.

7. Elvis regularly sang at church services.

8. In 1953, he got a job as a truck driver.

9. Twenty thousand copies of "That's All Right" were sold, *mainly in and around Memphis*.

10. Elvis made five more records for Sun.

11. *In July 1955* he met Colonel Tom Parker, who became his manager *in November*.

12. Parker sold Elvis' contract to RCA Records. Sun Records got \$35,000 and Elvis got \$5,000.

13. Elvis bought a pink Cadillac for his mother (with the \$5,000).

14. *On January 10, 1956*, Elvis recorded "Heartbreak Hotel."

15. In the next fourteen months he made another fourteen records.

16. His hair was cut and thousands of women cried.

17. He married Priscilla *Beaulieu* (not Beaumont) on *May 1, 1967*.

18. By 1968 many people had become tired of Elvis.

19. He hadn't performed live since 1960.

20. But he recorded a new album, "From Elvis in Memphis," and became popular again.

21. He went to Las Vegas, where he was paid \$750,000 for four weeks.

22. He had been working too hard and eating and drinking too much for several years.

If the students can spot more than 33% (one third) of this information after the first listening, and more than 66% (two thirds) of it after one or two listenings, they are doing a good job. However, the teacher should keep in mind that some of the above items are more important than others. For example, the fact that "Elvis was surrounded by music from an early age (#6) and the sale of his Sun Records contract to RCA Records (#12) both played a crucial part in his career.

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