

CONTROLLING THE TEACHER: A Listening Exercise

by I. S. P. Nation

Teaching listening often becomes testing listening because the spoken word is so transitory that it is gone before we can help our learners to perceive and comprehend it. The use of tape recorders gives learners some control over what they hear because they can stop the tape or play it back when they need to. The exercise described here is an attempt to turn the teacher into a flexible and intelligent tape recorder so that the learners gain control of the listening material. When the learners have this control, listening exercises can become learning exercises. Let us look first at an example of the exercise and then examine its features, possibilities, and benefits.

An Example of Controlled Listening

The teacher makes sure that the learners know the following sentences and if necessary writes them on the blackboard so that they can be seen during the exercise.

Stop please.

Please say the last word (sentence/
paragraph) again.

Speak more slowly please.

What was the word in front of *king*?

What is the meaning of *convince*?

How do you spell *apply*?

Then he tells the learners that he is going to read a passage aloud for them to listen to. He tells them that after they listen to the passage he will check their answers to some questions about the passage. The teacher gives the learners copies of the questions or writes the questions on the blackboard. He also tells the learners that at any time during the reading of the passage they can ask him to stop, read more slowly, repeat, go back to the beginning, spell a word, explain the meaning of a word, or read more quickly. Then, the learners look at the questions and

listen. But, the teacher deliberately reads the first two sentences of the passage too quickly for the learners to follow. Then he stops and looks at the learners for instructions. When the teacher finally reaches the end of the passage and the learners have no further instructions for him, he asks the learners for the answers to the questions.

The purpose of the exercise is for the learners to take control of the delivery of the information. They do this by telling the teacher what to do—to slow down, repeat, explain and so on. In this way the exercise becomes a true learning exercise and not an excuse for a test. The most difficult part of the exercise for the teacher is encouraging the learners to control his presentation of the passage. The teacher can use several ways to force the learners to give him instructions.

I. The teacher deliberately reads too slowly, or too quickly.

II. After every sentence, two sentences, or paragraph, the teacher stops reading, and looks at the learners for further instructions.

III. The teacher asks certain learners questions like "Did you understand all of that?" "Do you want me to repeat?" "Can you answer the first seven questions now?" If the learners answer that they do not understand or that they want the teacher to repeat, then the teacher says "Well, please tell me what to do," and waits until the learners tell him.

IV. The learners know what questions they will have to answer when the teacher finishes reading and when they have no more instructions for him. So, this encourages the learners to ask the teacher to repeat, spell, explain and so on, so that they can answer the questions in the test. Encouraging the learners to control the teacher's reading is an amusing activity, but it is also extremely important.

Basically the exercise has these steps:

1. The teacher tells the learners what the test will be.
2. The teacher reads the material while the learners control the reading by asking the teacher to slow down, repeat, go back to the beginning, reread the part containing the answer to question 10, and so on.
3. When the teacher finishes the reading and there are no more instructions from the learners, the learners are tested. In the illustration given above, the test consists of the teacher checking the answers in the questions.

Now, let us look at the ways in which this exercise can be varied.

Variations

The teacher can read the passage several times, each time with a different purpose and thus with the learners seeking different information. The use of comprehension questions has already been discussed. The following variation draws attention to vocabulary. The teacher tells the learners that when he finishes reading the passage to them they will be asked a question like "What is the word that comes after *Copenhagen* in this sentence from the passage 'a man in Copenhagen advertised for a wife?'" The learners have to write the word correctly. Before they are given this test, the learners listen to the passage and ask the teacher to repeat or spell words. In fact they need to ask the teacher questions on the same pattern as those that will occur in the test, "What is the word after/in front of _____?" Although the learners know the type of test, they do not know what particular words will be tested. So, they should control the teacher's reading of the passage so that they are able to identify every word in the passage. The teacher can make this more demanding by telling the learners that if they ask him questions like "What is the word in front of _____?" he will just repeat the sentence containing the word, but they can also ask yes/no questions like "Is the last letter *t*?" "Is it plural or singular?" "Does it have five letters?" "Does it have the same

meaning as *argue*?" The learners can also ask yes/no questions like these during the test if they need to.

The test at the end of the controlled listening exercise can be:

1. a recognition and spelling test of words in the passage (as described above).
2. a multiple-choice or translation test of some of the vocabulary in the passage.
3. a sentence-repetition test where individual learners repeat sentences from the passage after the teacher says them.
4. a question and answer test (as described above).
5. a dictation test of part of the passage.
6. a sentence analysis test where the teacher says a sentence and the learners write the subject and verb.
7. a cloze test where the learners are given part of the passage with words missing.
8. a summary of the main ideas in the passage.

By having several different tests the teacher can gradually take the learners deeper and deeper into the passage. Each test requires a new controlled reading by the teacher with learners seeking different types of information. For example, for the first reading the teacher gives the learners two or three questions that just ask for the main ideas in the passage. Then the teacher reads the passage while the learners control him. When all the learners think that they have all the answers, the teacher then tests them by asking for the answers. Then the teacher gives the learners a list of more detailed questions. He reads the passage again while the learners give him instructions. Then he checks their answers. Then the teacher tells the learners that they will have to spell and give the meaning of some of the words in the passage. The teacher does not tell the learners which words will be tested. Then he reads the passage again while the learners control him and he tests them on certain words. Exercises on word recognition should probably follow rather than precede comprehension questions, so that the learners are used to looking for meaning even when they cannot catch some of the vocabulary.

The tests are easier for the learners if

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they have all the questions in front of them while the teacher reads the passage. A very simple but useful exercise is for the teacher to give the learners a list of about ten words that are in the passage. The learners listen to the passage as the teacher reads it and they tick the words when they recognize them. It is important to realize that doing the test is not the main aim of the exercise. The

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teacher's aim is to get the learners to listen carefully and to control his reading of the passage so that the difficult parts become clear. The test functions as a guide and motivator for the learners.

The teacher can check the answers that the learners make in each test in this way. Each learner is given a number. The teacher says, "Question 1, number four." The person who is number four answers the question and then chooses the number of the person, let us say number six, to answer the next question. Number six answers the question and then chooses the next person by saying a number. Learners enjoy this activity because they can call on a friend (or enemy) to answer the next question. As the numbers are called the teacher writes them on the blackboard so that the learners can see which numbers have not been called. In this way each learner will have a turn to give his answer to one of the questions. If a learner makes a wrong answer or is unable to answer, that learner calls someone else's number so that that learner will answer for

him. This technique of using numbers becomes even more amusing if the numbers are written on cards which are distributed to the learners so that the learners do not know each other's number. The use of numbers removes part of the direct threat involved when the teacher calls on a learner to answer. It also keeps an element of the unexpected. (This technique can be used in many different types of language exercises.)

It is interesting to compare a controlled listening exercise with a similar exercise on tape in the language laboratory, although the controlled listening exercise is not a replacement for similar work in the laboratory. The language laboratory has the advantage of giving each learner individual freedom to stop and play back. The disadvantage of the controlled listening exercise in the classroom is that if five different learners have a different difficulty, the teacher must stop and repeat, explain etc. five times. The controlled listening exercise, however, has the advantage of providing more help and flexibility. Instead of being limited to pause and reply, the learner can also speed up or slow down, ask for an explanation, spelling and even written help.

Controlled listening has the following benefits:

1. The learners are not passive. They must ask questions and take an active part in the lesson to ensure that they get the necessary information. Hopefully this attitude to learning will transfer to other parts of the English lesson and to other subjects.
2. The exercise provides the opportunity for repeated attention to spoken language. This attention is purposeful and highly motivated.
3. The learners can give their attention to what they find difficult. Thus they can make efficient use of their learning time.

Controlled listening is an attempt to put some of the control of learning where it is needed — with the learners. When the learners have control, they can suit the pace, repetition, and explanation of material to their own requirements. In this way, listening becomes a learning activity.