

TEACHING *HOW* TO LISTEN

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Abstract: *In this article, I argue that the more conventional way of handling listening is not the most efficient. Instead of audio recordings, I would recommend the use of video as it allows teachers to familiarize learners with various strategies that will assist them in becoming competent listeners.*

Keywords: *listening comprehension, strategies, extralinguistic and paralinguistic signals, video file.*

1. LISTENING ACTIVITIES SHOULD TEACH, NOT TEST

Teaching students how to become competent listeners is an arduous task. One might argue that such a declaratory statement is anachronistic, rather echoing the language teacher of the 60's and 70's, when the tape recorders and language laboratories were inexistent, and the methodology was still in its infancy. Indeed, nowadays listening materials are no longer a hard commodity to find, and there is a whole literature to resort to. But do they actually teach learners *how* to listen? This question resonates with me personally. There is nothing more discouraging for a language teacher like myself than to be met with the blank stares of some of my students (lower - intermediate and above) when directing a feedback listening session. The reason?

The conventional way of handling listening comprehension consists of listening to a dialogue / report / passage in conjunction with a set of activities (ranging from overall to detailed comprehension). In fact, students are not taught how to tackle the piece of listening: they are not trained in using strategies, but rather "tested" (let's face it: how many times, in a real life situation, have we been in the position of listening to someone for a minute and try to retain five pieces of information?). I am not suggesting that there is no value to this "test - retest" approach, which would prove

useful, for instance, in the context of a listening examination. But if the ultimate purpose of studying a foreign language is to communicate in a real life situation, shouldn't we also bear in mind how listening takes place in the real world and tailor our teaching methods and materials accordingly?

2. WHAT REAL LISTENING IS ALL ABOUT

For answers on teaching *how* to listen I turned to David J. Mendelsohn, the author of *Learning to Listen: A Strategy - Based Approach for the Second - Language Learner*. In his book, Mendelsohn cites a comprehensive definition of listening in the first language given by O'Malley, Chamot and Kupper, which I shall use as a starting point in my line of argument:

Listening comprehension is an active and conscious process in which the listener constructs meaning by using cues (extralinguistic, paralinguistic, and lexical) from contextual information and from existing knowledge, while relying upon multiple strategic resources to fulfill the task requirements.

To illustrate these abstract ideas, I would like to give an example:

One morning, you are called to your superior's office without having been informed on the reason. As you enter the office, you are greeted with a grumpy tone of voice and a

frowning expression. On your superior's desk, you recognize your handwritten report.

Before you even have the chance to listen to what your superior has to say, your brain will have been invaded with a wealth of information which is processed in a trice: your superior is angry with you (use of paralinguistic signals: the frown and the tone of voice) because of your report (use of extralinguistic / environmental clues: the report you saw on the desk) which is probably poorly conceived (link to your existing world of knowledge: the deadline was very tight and so you did not have sufficient time to include all the required information). At this stage, your brain anticipates (use of strategy: hypothesis formation) that you are about to be reprimanded. And while listening to your superior's words, you will, in fact, either validate or modify this prediction.

The importance of hypothesis formation in the listening process cannot be understated. Unfortunately, in the more artificial medium of audio recording, this is facilitated by means of a warm up activity directed by the teacher. But how can this stage be achieved in a manner that is closer to reality, so as not to sacrifice any of the contextual clues? The answer: *the video file*.

3. ADVOCATING FOR THE VIDEO FILE AND THE TEACHING OF LISTENING STRATEGIES

Drawing the learners' attention to the extralinguistic and paralinguistic signals while watching a video (ideally, three-minute long) with the sound off will assist them in determining the setting (*where* and *when*), the interpersonal relationship between the speakers (*who*), and the topic (*what* and *why*), thus enhancing the chances of successful hypothesis formation. Furthermore, a video permits training in recognizing and

interpreting the linguistic signals, such as the primary sentence stress, which is instrumental in ascertaining the main idea of what is being listened to. This is only possible when the stress / unstress is natural (in audio recordings words are too clearly enunciated, and the delivery is unnaturally slow causing learners to give equal attention to all parts of a listening passage). Learners should also be taught how to cope with the special features of spoken English and how they relate to imparting meaning. Such features are the *fast speech rules* (short forms, deletion of sound segments, abandoned half sentences, hesitation phenomena, repetition, empty verbal fillers), which, unfortunately, are carefully edited out of audio recordings. Full listening comprehension also relies on recognition and interpretation of discourse markers, which tell learners what the logical relation between utterances is. In addition to all these, learners should be made aware that the same string of words can mean a number of different things depending on the circumstances under which they are said.

All of the above mentioned points on strategy training and the advantages of the video over the recording suggest that listening can and should be approached in a more efficient way. Teaching learners how to best make use of both the lexical and non-lexical signals in second – language listening is not so much a matter of teaching them new strategies. It is more a question of causing them to transfer what they do quite naturally in their mother tongue into the second language.

REFERENCES

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