

# COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT FOR INTERMEDIATE FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDENTS VIA VIDEO

Tracy David Terrell

Improving listening comprehension of the intermediate student was the focus of an experimental Spanish course at the University of California, San Diego campus. The aim of the course was to improve the abilities of English-speaking intermediate students to understand the Spanish of the broadcast media. The course and its outcome are described in some detail with the hope that others will experiment with similar courses. Intermediate courses in oral comprehension hold interest for two reasons: (1) current acquisition research and theory accord primary importance to oral comprehension in the acquisition process, and (2) students in the course reported gains in their confidence to interact with native speakers.

One of the commonly accepted goals for foreign language students is the ability to comprehend the target language when it is spoken by native speakers in a normal conversational context. Comprehension of oral language was not a priority for teachers and students of a foreign language in earlier periods of public school education. Traditionally in U. S. public education the ability to read and translate was emphasized as the most important objective of foreign

language study. The audiolingual "revolution" of the 50s and 60s emphasized four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. This new emphasis on oral skills, in conjunction with advances in technology that resulted in language labs, brought about increases in comprehension skills. However, the increases were not great, most likely because language lab material focused on production—on the practice of dialogs and pattern drills. In retrospect this was a strange development, since audio equipment is clearly more suited to the development of listening than speaking skills. Even today, most audio programs for the language lab do not concentrate on oral comprehension. On one hand, it must be admitted that it is not easy to provide the sort of input in the classroom or in the

*Tracy Terrell, now deceased, was Visiting Professor of Linguistics and Visiting Director of the Basic Language Program at the University of California, San Diego from '85 - '86; Professor of Linguistics and Director of the Basic Language Program from '86 - '87; and Professor Emeritus from '90 - '91.*

## Comprehensible Input

language lab that would be necessary to develop intermediate or advanced levels of oral comprehension skills. Natural language learners, who are immersed in the target language culture on a daily basis, typically are able to understand more complex language than they can speak. On the other hand, classroom-trained students have quite low levels of comprehension. Typically they are able to initiate a conversation, but frequently they are unable to understand the native speaker's response.

One problem in advancing comprehension skills arises from the nature of classroom discourse itself: classroom interaction is in fact simpler than discourse outside the classroom. Classroom language is likely to be slower, includes familiar topics, and very often consists of group discussion without the requirements of a normal one-on-one interchange of normal dialog. In addition, only rarely do students have to comprehend dialog between native speakers—a very common situation in the target culture.

It is not that comprehension skills gained from listening to teacher input are without value, but rather that they are different from listening skills acquired by native speakers and "natural" second language learners by virtue of their being exposed to a wider range of listening contexts. Here are some common listening skills utilized by natural learners daily: participating in extended one-on-one dialog, listening to others talking, listening to the radio, listening to television, watching movies, listening to announcements in public places, and so forth. To date it has been almost impossible to provide these sorts of experiences in the classroom. But with new video technology readily available, and relatively inexpensive in...half-inch format, many of the sources of such input are indeed now usable in the classroom. The ideal would be to use video recordings of foreign language media, mainly television and movies, both of which

include a wide variety of listening experiences, to teach listening skills that to now have been attained only through extended residence in the target language culture.

In addition to the intrinsic value of listening skills, Krashen (1; 2) has hypothesized that listening comprehension is the basis on which the acquisition process unfolds. His Input Hypothesis claims that the quality and quantity of output (speech) is crucially dependent on the quality and quantity of comprehensible input learners process. The prevailing view had been that the ability to speak depended exclusively on the opportunities provided to the students to speak. Without question, in order to develop speaking skills one must have opportunities to speak the target language; however, the Input Hypothesis claims that fluency is dependent on prior opportunities to process comprehensible input in the target language. If Krashen is correct, then increased listening skills should also result in increased fluency in speech.

### The Students and the Course

The course was called "Spanish 15: Advanced Listening Skills." Although we used the number 15 to designate a "lower-division" course, the prerequisite was to have completed the equivalent of a second year of college Spanish. In fact, a majority of the thirteen students in the class were Spanish majors, most of whom had taken at least one upper-division course in literature, linguistics, or culture. All students who took the course had learned Spanish exclusively in the classroom: native speakers and students who had lived abroad in a Spanish-speaking country were excluded. In spite of the exclusions, the class was relatively heterogeneous with regard to overall language skills. The students' speaking skills ranged from intermediate-low to intermediate-high. The listening skills were slightly higher, from intermediate-mid to advanced, but

only because the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for listening skills are, in this writer's opinion, too weak. (On this point, see Omaggio, 3.)

The course met twice per week for 2 hours each session. It met for either 100 minutes with no break or for 110 minutes with a 10 minute break, depending on what oral texts were being used. The 2-hour session was scheduled so that a complete feature-length movie could be shown during class. The class met for 10 weeks and the students received 4 quarter units of elective lower-division credit. Since this was an experimental class, units did not count toward the Spanish major.

The requirements for the course included attendance for the 40 hours of class instruction plus 60 hours of outside-of-class listening time. The 60 extra hours were in the form of video (taped from local Spanish-language television) and live television viewing for those students who had access to Spanish-language television at their place of residence. All video material was taped from live television broadcasts for later playback and then erased at the end of forty-five days in order to conform with copyright laws. This is inconvenient, to say the least, and at the present time we are working on putting together a collection of video materials without copyright problems. There are a number of good video programs available for purchase as well as subscription television materials broadcast by satellite. However, in order to keep the collection up to date, it will always be necessary to tape programs directly off the air. The wide availability of Spanish channels on cable in many cities makes this task much easier for Spanish teachers. Video equipment for the use of PAL/SECAM materials recorded in France or Germany is more expensive, but easily obtainable. A limited number of oral texts were used: (1) movies without subtitles, (2) an entire soap opera (*telenovela*) of about 60

hours, (3) news, (4) documentaries, (5) game shows, (6) variety shows, and (7) commercials.

There were four general types of class activities: (1) discussion of "key words:" vocabulary from the oral text (video) to be viewed, (2) class viewing of oral texts, (3) oral followup summaries and discussion of the text viewed in class or as homework, usually in pairs first, then as a whole group, and (4) work on listening skills/techniques with the oral text. Types 2 and 3 are not controversial: the viewing of a text in class provides the opportunity of immediate interest in oral discussion in the target language. Types 1 and 4 require some additional justification.

When learners are faced with the task of comprehending an oral text, there are three factors that determine their ability to make sense of the input: (1) their choice of listening strategies, (2) their knowledge of the target language vocabulary and structure used in the input, and (3) the speed at which they are able to process the input utterances. The intermediate students, unlike beginners, needed little instruction in listening strategies, since most reported that even before taking the class they used key words and context guess at global meaning. Their knowledge of Spanish structure was adequate, although it is impossible to know how often they used grammatical markers and structures in comprehension, since most grammar is redundant in communicative context.

What was clearly inadequate was their knowledge of common Spanish vocabulary. Words used in oral texts such as news broadcasts are not necessarily found in written texts frequently used in Spanish courses. Nor did the students recognize everyday household words such as *diapers*, *cabinet*, *scrub*, *trash*, so common in television commercials. In addition, words common

## Comprehensible Input

to soap operas were mostly unknown to the students: *to deceive, to betray, to make jealous, inheritance, stepmother*. It is interesting that the number of this sort of words was relatively limited, and after the first twenty episodes or so with fifteen to twenty new key words per half-hour episode, the number of new words dropped dramatically to four or five new words per episode.

For most of the oral texts the instructor prepared a list of vocabulary words and expressions that were crucial to understanding the text. There was no attempt to include all new words in the oral text. Students reported that from one-fourth to one-half of the words in a given list were unfamiliar to them. The lists contained the Spanish word or expression, the English equivalent, and an illustrative sentence, usually taken directly from the oral text. Length ranged from about seventy-five words for a typical movie to two or three for a commercial. A news segment might yield three or four new words. Vocabulary discussion usually lasted from 10 to 15 minutes per class. Vocabulary quizzes were administered once every two weeks and consisted of words from the previous lists, which were to be defined and/or used in a sentence in a way that illustrated their meaning.

Although the single most important barrier to comprehension was lack of comprehension of individual key vocabulary items in the input, slow processing speed was clearly a problem. This problem is identifiable in the following way. Play a short oral text of 15 to 60 seconds, say a commercial, to the students. Stop the video at various points and ask the students to produce exactly what they have heard. The usual reaction the first time is that they didn't understand the part of the text you want them to repeat. Replay it for them and request an exact repetition. In some cases, they will now hear words they can repeat, but do not understand—this is the vocabulary problem

mentioned above. In other cases, they will recognize all of the words in the utterance and after hearing it once or twice again, they will be able to do an exact repetition. This latter problem is one of process speed: they know the words and structures individually, but are not able to process them at normal broadcast speed.

The two problems are related; if they hear many words they do not recognize, they become confused and process speed slows down. If they are unable to process what they actually know fast enough, they are unable to use known language and context to guess at the meaning of items they do not know. If both vocabulary and process speed are weak, the input becomes a blur of target language with only a very few comprehensible parts, and frequently they are not able to process enough of the input to comprehend even the main points. The cure for slow process speed is simply practice and experience with more input. In the case of this group (intermediate-high, for the most part), most students reported dramatic increases in process speed after 30 to 50 hours of input, although most did not really begin to feel comfortable with the oral texts until the end of the quarter, after about 100 hours of input. From 100 to 200 hours of broadcast media input is necessary for intermediates to reach advanced levels of listening comprehension.

## Results

In order to have an informal measure of the progress made by the students in Spanish 15, a listening exam was put together that consisted of four video texts and eighteen questions. The oral texts included parts from two different *telenovelas*, a movie, and a news broadcast. The questions required a written response. For example, the second question was *¿Cuánto durmió Jesús?* Answer: *casi nada*. The test took approximately 15 minutes to administer. It was administered

to three groups twice: once at the beginning of the quarter and once at the end. The groups were the experimental group (the Spanish 15 class), the control non-natives (all Spanish majors, but non-natives), and the control native group (all Spanish majors, native speakers, most of whom were born and raised in the United States). The natives were chosen to give validity to the listening test itself as well as to measure the difference between hearing the material once and then repeated. There were 18 total points possible on the exams. The results of all tests are given in Figures 1 and 2. <sup>1</sup>

The mean increase between the pre-test and post-test for both control groups was 4. This increase could have been due to a real increase in listening comprehension skills due to experiences during the quarter. However, since the native speakers also show an increase in the mean of 4 this increase is most likely due to the repetition of the same exam. The mean increase of the experimental group was exactly twice that of both control groups. Furthermore, the data show that the comprehension level of the experimental group at the beginning of the course was only slightly above that of the non-native speaker control group, while at the

Table 1  
Raw Scores

Experimental (N = 10)			Control Non-natives (N = 11)			Control Natives (N = 9)		
Name	Pre	Post	Name	Pre	Post	Name	Pre	Post
F	7	13	O	11	15.5	A	15	18
W	7	15	W	0	6.5	P	12	15
L	9	15	H	7	8	B	10	17
H	1	11.5	L	1	3.5	P	17	18
N	6	14.5	B	5	7	M	15	18
Y	7	18	W	3	9.5	M	17	17
Z	5	12	A	2	10	P	16	18
S	8	14	S	1	6.5	F	9	14
K	8	14	B	4	6.5	B	9	18
O	1	13	G	6	4			
			S	5	11			
Mean	6	14	Mean	4	8	Mean	13	17

Table 2  
Comparison of Groups

	Pre-test	Post-test	Mean Increase
<i>Experimental</i>	6	14	8
<i>Control non-natives</i>	4	8	4
<i>Control natives</i>	13	17	4

## Comprehensible Input

end of the course it was almost the same as the native speaker group the first time they took the exam.<sup>2</sup>

The data indicate that listening comprehension training with video materials for intermediate students gives them experiences that cannot be duplicated in traditional classrooms limited to instructor-student interaction. In addition to increases in the ability to comprehend the target language as used in the media, students report three other gains: (1) a lowering of inhibitions to engage a native speaker in conversation, (2) a greater ability to understand native speakers in real conversations, and (3) an enhanced ability to speak. Although the data do not prove the last claim, such improvements were reported informally by most of the students and they are consistent with the predictions made by Krashen's Input Hypothesis.

### Student Testimonials

Here are some excerpts from typical student comments:

**GW:** When watching TV I could understand what was happening from observing the situation, but my comprehension of the spoken word was probably only about 40 percent. Now I would say that my comprehension is about 75 to 100 percent. Since taking this course, I feel much more at ease with native speakers.

**CN:** When I began this class I could understand very, very little of what I watched on TV.... I couldn't understand a *telenovela* really at all. I couldn't separate the words in a newscast. Now I can follow dialogs and pick out separate words that I don't understand rather than hearing whole sentences without separating the words and understanding nothing. I can

listen to the news and understand a lot of it easily. Most commercials I can understand completely.

**LH:** I usually was able to understand the main idea of something, but the details were vague. Now things are so much easier that I find myself tuning unimportant parts out. Before I couldn't find the unimportant parts.

**BL:** I could understand really well in classroom situations but in conversations with people (with me listening rather than as an active participant) I was usually only able to understand about half of what was happening. Now...I feel that I can understand Spanish a lot better. I feel that I might even be getting over my fear of speaking.

**RO:** When I entered this class I understood...what was said after several times through. Sometimes I didn't even understand what you (the instructor) were saying. Now I can usually understand what is going on and get the gist of what they are saying and often understand all or most of it.

**JS:** At the beginning of class I could understand more of the type of Spanish that one would typically hear in a class at school. Now I find that I can understand a lot more not only of spoken Spanish but written Spanish as well. The same is true when I sit down to write something in Spanish. My spoken Spanish has improved and I can understand Spanish speakers better. I still don't understand everything, but I do understand much more. I can understand most of the ideas...I can now, and probably will, watch Spanish TV and understand it.

**LF:** I feel my comprehension of Spanish has increased a lot. I've especially

noticed that it takes much less effort for me to understand.

YL: When I began this class, I couldn't understand the [video] tapes...where a higher level...of vocabulary was used. Now my understanding runs from fairly good to almost understanding all that is said. Also I have learned to pay really good attention to what is being said.

MG: I comprehend Spanish very well now. I feel more confident when I turn on Spanish TV. It seems when I was watching the commercials lately, I understood almost everything.

LK: When I spoke with my Mexican or Argentinean friends I always understood them because they spoke to me so that I would. But when they spoke to one another, it always seemed like some other new foreign language. I can see my comprehension has increased immensely. I also noticed an improvement in my reading comprehension, which is very nice. I can understand the whole idea of the sections...before I would concentrate on certain words and worry about understanding them, but now I listen to the whole idea.

LZ: After taking this course I understand what is being said on the Spanish programs with much less difficulty...It is enjoyable for me to watch the Spanish programs now. It is also easier for me to understand my professor in one class.

Although video courses such as the one described here require a large amount of advance preparation time, they are, for students without experience living in the target language culture, the only way to move students from an intermediate level to an

advanced level in listening skills.

### Notes

1. Only 10 of the 13 students enrolled took both the pre- and post-tests.
2. Tests were not run on the data because of the low number of students involved in the experiment. However, from the limited data available and the comments by the students themselves, it is clear that the improvement in listening skills was dramatic.

### References

1. Krashen, Stephen. *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon, 1982.
2. \_\_\_\_\_. *The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications*. London: Longman, 1987.
3. Omaggio, Alice C. *Teaching Language in Context: Proficiency-Oriented Instruction*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle, 1986.

*This article originally appeared in Defining the Essentials for the Foreign Language Classroom, 1989. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company. It is reprinted here with permission.*

# THE UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS



## WELCOMES IALL '93

**A** visit to the University of Kansas is pleasant any time of year. But its gently rolling hills, abundant flowers, shrubs and manicured lawns make it especially pleasing during the spring and summer months.

The campus is located atop Mount Oread, also called the Hill, a tree-covered overlook studded by limestone buildings with red-tiled roofs. Although the distinctive university skyline can be seen for miles, the University of Kansas is regarded by some as one of the nation's best kept secrets.

The main campus of 26,436 students is located in Lawrence, a growing community that has retained its small-town character. The city offers eclectic boutique shopping in an historic downtown and a variety of restaurants and entertainment.

The Watkins Community Museum is one of 17 city structures on the National Historic Register. A restored 19th Century opera house is another downtown landmark.

Back on the Hill, the Museum of Natural History is ranked as one of the top tourist attractions in the state. KU's Spencer Museum of Art is unsurpassed as a university art museum. It houses a 21,000 piece collection and art library. The university schedules outstanding offerings of music, theatre and dance. In intercollegiate athletics, the Kansas Jayhawks compete in the Big-Eight Conference.

Membership in the prestigious Association of American Universities provides national recognition for the breadth and quality of research and teaching at the University of Kansas. KU is 15th among public universities in

number of freshmen National Merit scholars enrolled in fall 1989, the most recent year for which figures are available.

Easily accessible, the campus is only 50 minutes from Kansas City's Mid-Continent International airport. And the amenities of the metropolitan area including jazz, barbecue, shopping, museums, concerts and sporting events are nearby.

Convinced you should see KU? Plan to attend the 1993 meeting of the International Association for Learning Laboratories. Discover the University of Kansas for yourself!