

The Gold Suit Connection: A "Real" Listening Comprehension Course

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No matter what the latest ideas on innovative uses of the language laboratory (LL), teachers working in the field can count on the fact that commercial LL materials they purchase will consist of traditional drill or artificial conversations. For those who have left behind the audio-lingual paradigm and are working toward the rationalist mode of facilitating language learning and developing a sense of community among the students, such work in the laboratory is not only meaningless but also damaging in that drills in booths work toward isolating the student from both the teacher and fellow students.

The following materials were not originally designed for the purpose of utilizing a LL; rather, the course was developed in accordance with the overall approach of a particular intensive English program, and the LL was brought in later as the best means to facilitate the implementation. However, the effectiveness and popularity of the course have proven that the LL is an indispensable component of the course and further, that any institution with an LL should consider developing such materials.

General Description of the Course

The materials are now in their fourth year of use as the final listening comprehension course in a two-year intensive English program at Nagoya International College in Japan. The students there are post-high-school level with six years of grammar-translation English education behind them. In the intensive program they study English and related subjects for 20 hours per week; thus, by international standards, their level in the second year of the program would be considered high intermediate to advanced. The materials have also been used experimentally in other programs around Japan with older adult students, mainly high school English teachers and businessmen.

The materials consist of 1) a set of taped, ad-libbed, 2-3 minute conversations by teachers at the school, and 2) a set of five exercises for each conversation which move from general to specific and are done in the LL on an individual study basis. There are two different sets of conversations: one set is a group of unrelated conversations for which a situation was chosen and a spontaneous conversation was recorded (e.g., two people with tickets for the same seat at the theater, a bank customer forgetting a wallet with identification, a true story of a car accident); the other set is a continuing mystery story with 14 conversations, which is called **The Gold Suit Connection**.

Each student receives a copy of the tape and operates his or her own machine in the LL. Exercises are given out one sheet at a time. The job of the teacher is to check the exercises when students bring them up. When the exercise is correct, a new sheet is given; when there is a mistake, the mistake is noted but not corrected, and the student goes back to listen again.

The Story

While developing the first set of conversations based on situations, we realized that student interest would probably be better sustained if there was some connection from lesson to lesson. One of our first conversations had been a discussion between two teachers on what to get a husband-who-has-everything for his birthday, and the decision had been a suit. What if this teacher took the suit to be altered and the tailor secretly sewed something into it, like a map? What if the husband didn't like the suit after all and sold it to another teacher? What if strangers suddenly showed up asking to buy the suit? This was the beginning of **The Gold Suit Connection**, where the teachers in the story played themselves, and the map eventually showed that the "white powder in bags" was hidden in our very own school.

The entire plot was not developed beforehand; rather, each conversation suggested the direction of the next one. Both native and nonnative speakers of English were used. Instructions to the speakers were minimal to encourage as much spontaneity as possible.

The Exercises

For each segment, five exercises were developed that required increasingly specific information. The general format of the exercises is as follows (also see appendix).¹

Section 1: choosing between two alternatives (pictures, single words, or true-false statements), so that a wrong answer indicates the right one. (Stick figures are fine.)

Section 2: sequential ordering of events on the tape (pictures or sentences).

Section 3: questions requiring short answers. The questions do not require detailed information, and short answers are stressed.

¹Credit for the general format of the exercises must be given to Sharon Bode, who was at that time chief instructor

Section 4: definitions of difficult vocabulary on the tape, with the exact word to be filled in by the students. This section is very important. The ability to hunt through the dictionary and find the exact word that was vaguely heard in conversation is a necessary one outside of the classroom, and the practice seems to improve the skill, especially in English, where spelling complicates the issue.

Section 5: a transcript of the conversation with blanks to fill in. The selection of blanks depends on the emphasis of the course. It could be used to illustrate pronunciation principles (for example, in English, the loss of (0) after (s) or (z): **Is this** = (IzIs)), grammar constructions, expressions, or conversational rules. For **The Gold Suit Connection** I selected what I thought were common expressions or grammatical constructions, and in fact many of these expressions and patterns did recur in the tape naturally.

Discussion

While originally developed for use in a particular school, these materials have been extremely popular with teachers and students alike

no matter what situation they have been used in. The consistent feedback from the students is that listening to "real" English is difficult but necessary. In a country where the target language is not spoken outside the classroom, this may be the first "real" language that the students have a chance to listen to. My Japanese students are frequently shocked to discover that they can understand English which is not part of a textbook.

The following points may clarify the idea behind the materials and facilitate development of a similar course.

1. The course was developed with the theory that the best way for our students (who already command a good book knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary) to improve their listening comprehension is simply to do a lot of listening. This idea has proven valid; however, an "explicit" format could be developed by stating a rule (phonetic, grammatical, etc.) before or after the lesson, giving a few examples of the rule, and then creating blanks in Section 5 that illustrate the rule.

2. Forcing the students to try to work out the difficult spots in the tape by themselves (as in Sections 4 and 5) implies at least a basic knowledge of the foreign language. There must be a certain amount of grammatical and situational clues for guessing to be profitable. I do use "real language" for basic students as well, but in quite a different manner.

3. The disadvantage of having a story line is that it requires some acting by the speakers and thus tends to make the language more artificial; however, this disadvantage is outweighed by the advantages. Continuity provides context; the students have the help of more non-aural information to use as background for each new lesson. Also, while the more realistic situations provide the useful expressions that might be heard elsewhere, it is the lessons with the most fantasy that are consistently the most popular (the gang boss and the CIA man shoot each other in the last lesson).

4. A variety of situations and language styles was planned into the story. A coffee shop, the teachers' lounge, an employer-employee discussion, and so on, showed the same people speaking formally and informally. A "recap" lesson in the middle had one teacher retelling the story to her friends, providing both a plot and a lot of indirect speech patterns (He said that . . .).

5. Nonnative speakers were used with the theory that it is good for the students to hear teachers of their own nationality communicating in English, for the most part with fewer mistakes than the native speakers. The reaction of the students was interesting: they said they could not stand listening to "that horrible pronunciation," and they thought they had less trouble understanding the native speakers.

6. The teacher must perform the delicate task of making the students listen to the tape as many times as necessary without letting them become so totally frustrated that a block is created and the student literally becomes incapable of hearing the tape, therefore, it is a case-by-case decision whether to give a hint before sending a student back to listen, and which hint to give. For a Section 5 hint, a teacher might tell how many

words should go into the blank, or give the first letter of a missing word, or suggest that the word might be guessed from the grammar, or give a clue to the meaning. These hints are parceled out. Students are sent back to listen as many as 7 or 8 times. The teacher might wonder whether this is facilitating anything or is simply torture, but the triumphant expression on the face of a student who hears a word on the eighth try proves that the results is worth the effort. There is another advantage of language acquired by such energies: it is not easily forgotten.

7. The advantages of individual study are obvious, but teachers usually worry about the possibility of students copying answers from each other. In the particular program in which it is used, inter-student cooperation and sharing answers are encouraged in all daily class exercises. Mistakes are encouraged as part of the "game." By the time students reach the last semester, most of them have realized that there is more enjoyment in trying to do the task than in copying someone else's answers. This is not to say that no copying goes on; in the middle of the semester, a reminder is usually in order, along with an explanation of why it is better to compare answers rather than copy them. Once the students understand, they are very good about cooperating.

8. The lessons take an average of 2-3 hours of class time. An extra sheet of exercises is usually required by the students for homework. Natural peer pressure to keep up with the group causes intense activity during class time. There is occasional communication between booths and quite a bit of one-to-one communication between student and teacher.

9. It would be convenient if such materials were produced commercially; however, the interest level would be somewhat reduced simply because it had turned into a textbook. The materials are simple to develop, and whether they are used in a regular course or for self-study, every LL would profit from having a set.

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THE GOLD SUIT CONNECTION

Lesson 6-X Section 1

Introduction: Patrick pays Nancy for the suit and takes it home to show Donna.

Instructions: For each number, mark the picture which shows what happened in the tape, either Picture A or Picture B.
(Supply your own cut out photos, visuals, or stick figures for patterns A and B.)

A	B
Sequence 1:	Sequence 1:
Sequence 2:	Sequence 2:

Lesson 6-X

Section 2

Instructions: Put the following statements in order from 1 to 6.

1. Donna finds a piece of paper.
2. Donna notices a lump in the back.
3. Patrick tries on the suit again.
4. They decide it's a floor plan.
5. Patrick is wearing the suit.
6. Patrick decides to show it to Charley.

Lesson 6-X

Section 3

Instructions: Answer the questions with short, natural answers. An asterisk (*) means the answer must be guessed from the rest of the situation, but is not given directly in the story.

1. How do the pants fit Patrick?
2. Does the suit look really terrible?
3. What do they find in the suit?
4. What's on the paper?
5. Is the piece of paper a pattern?
6. Does Patrick know why this paper is in the suit?
7. What does Patrick intend to do with the piece of paper?
- *8. Who is Donna?
- *9. Who do you think put the paper in the suit?
- *10. Why do you think Nancy's house was robbed?

Lesson 6-X

Section 4

Instructions: Fill in the blanks with words from the tape.

1. If you lengthen clothing by lowering the bottom edge, you _____
2. Something covered with irregular bumps is _____.
3. A mistake made when manufacturing an item of clothing can also be called a _____.
4. A layer of material sewn to the inside of an item of clothing is a _____.
5. Something that is supposed to be straight, but isn't, is _____.
6. If you decorate material with needlework, you _____ it.
7. A map showing the arrangement of rooms on the floor of a building is called the _____.
8. If you think about something until you understand it, you _____.
9. If you tell someone to remember something, you _____ him to do it.

Lesson 6-X
Section 5

Kinda = Kind of

1. Patrick: So, _____?
2. Donna: Well, _____
3. Patrick: How do you like the way the pants fit?
4. Donna: Well . . . they're short.
5. Patrick: I know, _____
6. Donna: Yeah. It's not too bad. Maybe we could let the hem down a little. _____
7. Patrick: _____?
8. Donna: Yeah . . . it's kinda lumpy right here.
9. Patrick: I know, I noticed something in it, let me take it off . . . just a second. Maybe it's a, um, fault, or something.
10. Donna: I think the lining's crooked or something.
11. Patrick: _____ Here.
Oh look, it's just cheap lining, look, stick your hand under there, _____
12. Donna: I think there's something in there. Look.
13. Patrick: What is it?
14. Donna: _____
15. Patrick: Oh, it's a piece of a pattern or something, what's on there?
16. Donna: _____ . . . I don't know what it is.
17. Patrick: It's like kanji, and squares . . .
18. Donna: It's all embroidered, _____ . . .
19. Patrick: . . . some kind of, some kind of floor plan. Strange paper, _____, and it's uh, like a floor plan. It's not part of the pattern. _____
20. Donna: Yeah, maybe Charley'll know. _____
21. Patrick: No, _____ Charley'll probably, he can, he can figure it out. Charley can figure anything out, don't you think?
22. Donna: _____
23. Patrick: Yeah. Remind me to take that to work with me tomorrow morning, okay? _____
24. Donna: Yeah. _____

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