

Unedited Speech:

DEVELOPING LISTENING COMPREHENSION IN BEGINNERS

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INTRODUCTION

Often we find ourselves overhearing a conversation in a foreign language in a restaurant, an airport, or other public places. There seems to be a natural tendency to be curious about an interchange in an unknown language and we listen for cues such as intonation, pauses, and length of sentences that might indicate something of the nature of the dialogue. It is enjoyable when someone who is familiar with the language confirms our guesses about who the speakers are, their topic of discussion, and the relationships of the conversants. Methodologists have suggested that systematic practice in listening comprehension be made a more important part of second language acquisition (Postovsky 1974; Benson and Hjelt 1978; and Minn 1976) yet enhancing the learner's ability to hypothesize about the content of actual native conversations is not generally a part of formal foreign language instruction.

Listening comprehension activities on audio tapes normally contain edited speech which accentuates grammatical and lexical items, or contained dialogue. In the following sections I describe the content and use of an audio tape which from the onset develops and increases rapidly the student's ability to listen to an unknown tongue and surmise facts about its topic, character, and milieu.

The Activity

From the first day of class and frequently thereafter students listen to a three to five-minute audio tape voice by native informants speaking in real life, everyday situations such as informal discussion, buying something, or requesting information. Before the first playing, students are told that they will hear an actual taping of two native speakers in the target language and that they should simply relax and listen to the sounds, pauses, and intonation. After the tape is heard the students then see a series of written questions on a transparency, chalk board, or hand-out and listen again to see if they can guess the answers. The inquiry is integrative in nature as demonstrated by the sample items listed below:

1. Who sounds more . . .

kind, sympathetic, authoritarian, angry, annoyed, confident, detached, educated, impatient quarrelsome surprised happy, serious, young, etc.

2. Do you think the conversation is . . .
- | | | | |
|------------|-----------|-----------------|---------------------|
| a. serious | a. casual | a. structured | a. at the beginning |
| b. jovial | b. formal | b. unstructured | b. at the middle |
| | | | c. at the end |
3. The relationship between the speakers most likely is . . .
- | | | |
|-------------------------|----------------------|------|
| a. student to counselor | a. doctor to patient | etc. |
| b. student to parent | b. doctor to nurse | |
| c. student to friend | c. doctor to doctor | |
4. Does the taped segment sound more like a(n) . . .
narrative, joke, greeting, introduction, excuse, leave taking, compliment, complaint, argument, persuasion, etc.
5. The topic most likely focuses on . . .
politics, religion, family matters, love, art, music, sports, etc.
6. My impression is that of the two speakers . . .
- I like _____ better
 - I trust _____ more
 - I prefer to do business with _____
 - I want to spend an afternoon in a cafe with _____
 - I would hire _____ for a job
- etc.

The tape is played a third time while students formulate answers to the questions. The class members then reveal their ideas in a small group activity or through class discussion.

Rationale

Listening to actual taped interchanges from the onset of instruction on a daily or frequent basis offers numerous advantages for the language learner.

1. Due to the built in redundancy, false starts, pauses, intonation, and repetitions inherent in natural speech (Rivers 1976), the student is able to capture a surprising amount of meaning from the material even though he may ignore many of the particulars.

2. The exercise decreases the anxiety the learner often experiences in the real world when listening to native speakers engaged in normal conversation.

3. As the student answers the follow-up questions he derives an immediate feeling of confidence and success that can be cultivated on succeeding days.

4. The learner begins to attune his ear to new sounds, rhythms, and intonations.

5. He is taught from the onset to listen to the target language in a relaxed way allowing the mind to work efficiently in deciphering material.

6. The exercise forces the student to attend directly to the underlying meaning or message rather than first confront words and phrases individually.

7. The activity parallels a real life foreign language situation.

8. The procedure draws upon the affective domain thereby increasing pleasure in learning and efficiency in memory (Stevick 1976;, Christensen 1975;, and Moskowitz 1978).

Similarly, from the viewpoint of the teacher or director of a language laboratory:

1. The tapes are relatively inexpensive to produce.

2. The exercises take little time to prepare. One simply obtains the taped segments and then writes out appropriate questions.

3. The interchanges can be recorded wherever native speakers congregate and participants need not prepare for the recording.

4. The tapes have a great flexibility of use. For example:

a. The same tape can be used more than once by simply changing the questions to focus on alternate constructs.

b. As students progress in listening comprehension the questions can be made more challenging and/or the conversations made to include three or four speakers.

c. For variety, the instructions and questions can be given as homework or a lab assignment to be followed by discussion in class.

d. The tapes can be checked out by students after an activity in class and listened to at home for reinforcement.

5. Where budgets and equipment are available similar videotaped exercises involving questions on nonverbal communication can be developed.

Pointers for Making or Obtaining Tapes

Quality tapes, recorder and microphone must be used and care must be exercised during the taping of each conversation. Sensitive lavalier microphones are ideal because informants quickly forget their presence and are less likely to be self-conscious. Native speakers should be encouraged to simply interact with each other rather than follow an interview format. Tapes can be made in public places — ticket counters, stores, airports, parks — and in varied situations including business transactions, neighborhood gossip, family talk, and parties. Although more participants may be used, two is the ideal number for learners to follow initially. Using a male and female informant increases the probability that students will

distinguish between the speakers and be able to identify more easily their respective role, state of mind, and/or purpose.

As an alternate source of materials, taped conversations of native speakers can be obtained and copied from sociolinguists, phoneticians, etc. in a nearby university. Often professionals have a large supply of tapes and would be happy that their recordings serve needs beyond their own research purposes. The quality of tapes is likely to be excellent and two or three ninety minute cassettes may provide as many as fifteen short exercises.

V. Conclusion

The barrage in recent years of innovations using media in the foreign language classroom has overshadowed the usefulness of the simple audio tape in developing the student's ability to understand the spoken word. By following the procedure suggested above, one can create exercises that nurture skills in listening comprehension which are not developed by other means in the language learning program.

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