Developing Listening Skills with Authentic Materials
by Lindsay Miller (2003)

For too long listening has been relegated to a secondary position in the English language teaching classroom. This stems, in part, from the fact that whereas a considerable amount of research has been conducted into reading, writing and speaking--research which has influenced our approaches to teaching language and has also influenced how textbooks have been written (see sidebar)--there has been a lack of research interest into listening. Some of the reasons for this lack of research interest come from the fact that speaking was always considered a more "valuable" skill to focus on in the classroom; that researchers and teachers have often considered that listening was something which could just be "picked up"; and as researchers and teachers had not been taught listening themselves, they saw little need for developing a specific research agenda or approaches to teaching listening.

It is indeed interesting that listening has not received wider attention in the past given that it is the language skill most often used in everyday life. More than forty percent of our daily communication time is spent on listening, thirty-five percent on speaking, sixteen percent on reading, and only nine percent on writing (Burely-Allen 1995).

Although listening has been a relatively neglected skill in terms of research and how it is introduced to language learners, it is now beginning to receive more attention. In the past few years we have seen the publication of several major texts, both practical and theoretical, specifically dealing with listening skills: Mendelson and Rubin 1995; Nunan and Miller 1995; Buck 2000; Rost 2002; Flowerdew and Miller, in press. In conjunction with these books, there is now a greater awareness among teachers that we have to help learners develop their listening skills, rather than rely on the skill developing itself.

The question of how to help learners develop effective listening skills brings attention to the methods we use and the type of materials we introduce our learners to. The aim of all listening lessons should be to allow learners a greater degree of independence when confronted with listening to the foreign language in a real world context, and that means using authentic texts. Authentic texts are any spoken texts which have not been specially prepared for language learners, and they are often delivered via technologies like radio, television/video, and the Internet or CD-ROM.

In the rest of this article I would like to suggest a process for helping learners develop their listening skills, and make suggestions as how this might be achieved with authentic materials.

Pre-, While-, and Post-Listening

One of the main advancements to come out of research into listening strategies was the understanding that listening exercises could be divided into three main parts: Pre-listening, While-listening, Post-listening activities. This format has proved useful in taking the attention off of continually testing listening and has allowed learners to do other things with the information that they listen to. For instance, a teacher can initiate a short discussion with the learners in the pre-listening stage as to what they think of the topic before they listen to the text (activating world and personal knowledge). Then the learners can be asked to use whatever information they
gained from a text to have an extended discussion in a post-listening stage (allowing for more individualization and critical comments to be developed). In between these two stages, learners can be helped to focus on their listening by careful selection of tasks that are meaningful and that cater to developing specific listening skills rather than on constantly measuring performance through test-like exercises.

I will use this established format of pre-, while-, and post-listening activities and make some suggestions as to how they can be used with authentic materials delivered through technological media.

**Radio**

Using real-time radio in class is one of the more easily accessible forms of authentic listening practice we can give our learners. The airwaves are filled with programs twenty-four hours per day, and the low cost of radios means that most language teachers can obtain a radio and take it to class. Radio stations such as BBC World Service (BBC) and Voice of America (VOA) are constantly on-air. Meanwhile, many non-English speaking countries also broadcast some programs, or even have dedicated stations, in English. Although radios are easy to access, they are perhaps the most difficult of aural text for language learners to listen to. The reason for this is that all non-verbal information is missing, information which can aid in helping understand the message, and the learner has to focus on the skill which is most difficult for him or her—listening.

In order to use radio programs with learners, teachers need to select a program at a suitable time for their class and decide on some global listening tasks for the learners. For instance, with an intermediate group of learners about to listen to a radio program on travel we might adopt the following procedure:

- **Stage 1: Pre-Listening Task** Today we are going to listen to a travel program on the radio for ten minutes. Before we listen, who has made a trip recently? Where did you go? What did you see?

  The radio guide tells us in that this program is about Egypt. What do you know about Egypt? What would you like to know about Egypt? What kind of information do you think the presenter will give us?

- **Stage 2: While-Listening Task** While you listen to the program, try to listen for the main things the presenter recommends doing while in Egypt. Don’t try to write anything down, only listen to the program and see how much you can understand.

- **Stage 3: Post-Listening Task** In groups of three have a short discussion about what you heard from the program. Would you like to go to Egypt based on what you just heard? Why or why not?

In using the radio in the way suggested here we allow learners access to native speaker models, something which might be missing from their normal classroom experiences. Also, we place the focus on extensive listening for pleasure and take the emphasis off testing what the learners hear (that is why we ask the learners not to write while they listen).

**TV/Video**
Using television or videos in the classroom allows the learners access to more information when listening. That is, the learners can now see what is happening as well as listen to the text. Non-verbal behavior or paralinguistic features of the spoken text are now available to the learners (compared with radio, that is), so learners can develop their listening skills in a richer language context.

Many language learners watch movies outside of class time, but few of them consider this as an opportunity to develop their listening skills (perhaps because they become used to reading the subtitles of English movies). Going to a movie is considered as entertainment and often "doesn't count" in terms of learning. We can, however, in the language classroom, sensitize our learners to how they can make use of movies to help them develop their second language listening skills. With an elementary-level class of learners we might consider the following out-of-class activity:

· **Stage 1: Pre-Viewing Task** This weekend there is an English movie on TV. Does anyone know what it is? What time is it on? Which channel is it on? Please write the name, time and channel down as this is your homework task.

· **Stage 2: While-Viewing Task** I would like you to watch the movie this weekend, or try to watch as much as you can. Focus on listening to the movie instead of reading the subtitles. Try to collect the following information: kind of movie (comedy, romance, action, horror), names of the main characters (male, female, animal), where does the movie take place (inside, outside, on land, at sea, country), what is the main idea in the movie?

· **Stage 3: Post-Viewing Task (the next lesson)** Who watched the movie last weekend? What can you tell us about it? This generic format can be repeated as many times as you like, and once learners have developed the habit of watching and listening to English language movies with some kind of focus, they will get used to this type of exposure to listening for pleasure, and you may then move on to more critical post-viewing tasks-- e.g., Do you think we should go to war with each other (after viewing a war movie).

**The Internet/CD-ROM**

There has been a rapid increase in the development of Internet facilities and CD-ROMs. This has been prompted, partly, by the more powerful computers we have these days and has been partly driven by the users' demands for more interesting and innovative applications of the technology. We are able to direct our learners to sites on the Internet where they can practice their listening as long as they have access to the appropriate computer hardware.

There are several benefits computer software has over radio or television. For instance, many CD-ROMs now have glossaries and online scripts, so that when problems are encountered, the learners can get online help. In addition to this, many younger learners wish to learn or use their computer skills nowadays, so the prospect of developing computer skills along with developing their language skills may seem attractive to these learners. With an advanced group of learners we might consider having extended critical and creative discussion about the news:

· **Stage 1: Pre-Listening Task** Tomorrow in class we will have some discussion about what's in the news. In order to do this I would like you do access at least two of the following websites: http://www.bbc.co.uk, http://www.avoa.gov or http://npr.org (National Public Radio)
and listen to different versions of the main stories.

Once you are in the website you can choose audio or video presentations. You can also look for related items. Just surf around until you feel you have collected enough information for our discussion in class.

· **Stage 2: While-Listening Task** Students may either work at home or in a computer lab at school to collect the information they require.

· **Stage 3: Post-Listening Task (the next class)** First I would like you to sit in groups according to one of the websites you visited. So let’s have a group of BBC listeners/viewers, one of VOA, and one of NPR to begin with. In your groups discuss what the main news stories were. Only exchange information at this stage. Now change groups and have one person for each website in groups of three. Explain to the other members in your group the main stories in the order they were presented on the Web. Then discuss your reaction to these stories. Consider how important you think the item is, what angle the broadcast company took when presenting the stories, and what this story means to you personally. This use of the Internet and computer technology integrates several authentic activities for the learners and widens the scope of developing listening skills. In addition to this, learners are now given more autonomy over their language learning and the links between classroom and real-world learning becomes more obvious to them.

**Richer Learning Experiences**

With the increased awareness of the need to help second-language learners develop effective listening skills and with the greater availability of technology nowadays, teachers are able to explore more creative ways of teaching listening in and out of the class using authentic materials. Once we begin to explore the possibilities, a few of which are outlined here, we offer a richer language learning experience for our learners and create good listeners into the bargain.

**The Question of Authenticity**

When preparing learners for academic listening, English language teachers often choose to use a textbook with a title like Academic listening: preparing students for lectures. Such textbooks are widely used on pre-sessional courses, and many students and their teachers diligently work their way through the textbook in the belief that they are preparing for the real thing. However, my colleague John Flowerdew and I conducted an investigation of an authentic economics and finance lecture (Flowerdew and Miller, 1997). We found that what academic listening textbooks prepared learners for was very different from the "real thing." We transcribed and analyzed a lecture discourse and then compared it to a selection of academic listening textbooks, this is what we found:

1. The authentic lecture was structured at the micro-level of discourse. There were lots of uses of "and," "so," "but," many pauses, and filled pauses with the use of "ah" and "er." On the other hand, textbook lectures had complete clauses and fewer pauses.

2. The authentic lecture discourse contained many false starts, redundancies and repetitions.
None of these show up in English language teaching (ELT) textbooks.

3. The lecturer made use of a variety of extra linguistic features such as body movements and kinesics. Textbook texts are usually only audio recorded so such cues are missing.

4. In the real lecture the lecturer made an attempt to establish a rapport with the students; he a) tried to make the lecture non-threatening and empathized with the students, b) personalized many of his references, and c) checked that the students were following the lecture as he delivered it. The impersonal nature of an audio text cannot simulate any of these features.

5. As the authentic lecture lasted for two hours, the lecturer made use of a narrative thread to hold his talk together, that is, he told a story and continually returned to the theme of the story. ELT textbooks, on the other hand, rarely have recordings of more than a few minutes and cannot sustain any narrative thread.

6. The lecturer made use of macro-markers to signpost his way through the talk and to refer to future lectures, e.g., "Last week we saw how..." "In next week's lecture I am going to move on to...” In this way he structured the lecture around the series of talks he was going to give to the students. Textbooks cannot do this as most of their texts are stand-alone lectures.

7. The lecturer made use of a variety of visual aids during his talk including the white board, overhead transparencies and pre-lecture reading text. None of these were used in the textbooks analyzed. This detailed lecture analysis illustrates that authentic texts should also be used when helping learners prepare for listening to lectures. By only using specially scripted text, learners may miss important features of spoken academic discourse and develop listening skills which will be of little use to them in the real lecture context.

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References