

Helping ESL Students Adapt to Authentic Listening Situations

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Learners and teachers give listening greater emphasis now than in the past (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005), though frustrated learners traveling in English speaking countries have always recognized the importance of L2 listening. Given global travel and Internet connections, L2 listening outside the classroom will only gain in importance. Listening after class ends presents challenges and opportunities. Having to start listening in the middle of a conversation or broadcast is a challenge for learners; pursuing their own interests presents an opportunity for L2 listeners. This article describes techniques I have used to help learners meet the challenge of listening from the middle and take advantage of the opportunity to listen thematically (Madden, 2002b). These techniques helped my intermediate adult learners in a university-based intensive English program in the United States. The techniques can be used with learners over a range of ages, languages, and proficiency levels. First, I'll provide a rationale for the techniques, and then describe the techniques themselves.

Rationale

We usually know why we are listening, and we usually have some idea of what we are likely to hear, as Ur noted (1984). Our reasons and expectations help us understand the words we hear. This relationship between expectations and words is central to listening. Listening comprehension is the result of the interaction between “bottom-up” and “top-down” listening skills. Bottom-up skills involve “decoding” – constructing a message from sounds, words, and phrases. Top-down skills involve using background knowledge to make inferences about what the speaker intended. Good L1 listeners have fast, automatic, bottom-up skills. L2 listeners rely on top-down skills to supplement their less developed bottom-up listening. In class, we provide listening lessons with before-, during- and after-listening elements to allow learners to use their top-down skills and to develop their bottom-up skills (Rost, 2002; Flowerdew & Miller, 2005; Ur, 1984; Saricoban, 1999; Tsui & Fullilove, 1998; Tyler, 2001).

The goal of listening instruction is to prepare students to understand actual speech in order to communicate in English. Rost (2002) states that L2 listeners must learn to cope with “genuine” speech and “authentic” listening situations. That is, listeners must be able to understand natural English speech to meet their own needs as members of the English-speaking community (pp. 123-123). However, learners find that many aspects of authentic listening situations are not under their control. To meet that challenge, teachers provide L2 listeners with strategy training (Mendelsohn, 1994, 1995). L2 listeners may have to start listening from the middle of a conversation, having to attune to the conversation while simultaneously trying to understand it. A listening lesson can be adapted to teach learners how to cope with that situation. In other real-world contexts, learners have on-going L1 conversations with friends, or follow issues or programs that interest them. Offering students guidance for similar, thematic listening in the L2 can help them pursue their listening interests in English outside the classroom.

Listening from the Middle

Listening from the middle is a strategy-training activity based on the ideas of Mendelsohn (1994, 1995), and Anderson and Lynch (1988). Mendelsohn (1994) described how he helped his students hypothesize by listening to an audio recording of the middle of a medical procedure – part of a larger discussion about inferences (1994, pp. 104-115). In my class, I used course materials for a similar end. The goal of the current activity is to give learners strategies for starting to listen in the middle of a conversation by quickly making inferences about the “setting, mood, interpersonal relationships, and topic” (Mendelsohn, 1994). See also Anderson & Lynch (1988), Mendelsohn (1995), Brown (1990, in Mendelsohn, 1995), and White (1998).

Listening from the middle involves 15-25 minutes of listening, note taking, and class discussion.

Listening Text

Use a recorded text, and start with a portion from the middle, rather than at the beginning. Listening from the middle is an adaptation of pre-listening activities designed to preview a text by playing a portion of it, discussing it, and making predictions. I used the audio recordings from my course texts because the difficulty level reasonably matched the needs of my students. For a discussion of issues relating to input, see Rost (2002).

Procedure

1. Introduce the activity. The class could share times when they have had to start listening in the middle of a conversation or broadcast in their first or second languages. Explain that the class will be working on how to listen from the middle. Explain the importance about knowing about the listening time and place, the speakers, their feelings, what kind of speech they are engaged in, what the topic is, and why someone might want to listen.
2. Tell the students they will be taking notes and discussing what they hear. Present the following guides to the class. Provide copies, or display them and have students copy them into their notebooks. I wrote versions of these guides on a chalkboard or white board. The first is adapted from reading instruction.

What came before:	What I heard *(Start here):	What comes next:

(Table 1; see Richardson & Morgan, 1990, p. 97; Ogle, 1986)

What I can identify about:
Speakers:
Emotions:
Relationships among the speakers:
Type of listening:
Topic:
Why someone might listen to this:

(Table 2. Based on Mendelsohn, 1995; Anderson & Lynch, 1988)

3. Tell the students to be ready to take notes in the “What I heard” part of Table 1.
4. Play a one-minute segment from the middle of the listening text. All of the speakers should be heard in this portion. Students should take notes.
5. Stop the recording. Students should check their notes with a classmate. The discussion provides additional listening practice and opportunities to negotiate meaning (Lee & Van Patten, 2003; Pica, Young, & Doughty, 1987).
6. Play the same one-minute segment again. Have the students check or add to their notes, and then confer a second time with classmates.
7. As a class, discuss and fill out the displayed copy of the “What I heard” portion of Table 1. As a class, discuss and fill

out Table 2.

8. Play the segment a third time. Then, as a class, make corrections to the “What I heard” and “What I can identify about” tables. I have found that the repetitions and class discussion helps intermediate learners develop their listening. The repetitions could be omitted for advanced listeners, or to increase the context authenticity of the activity.
9. As a class, discuss and fill out predictions for the “What came before” and “What comes next” portions of Table 1. Students can confirm these predictions by hearing the entire listening selection.
10. To close this activity, review the basic strategy of attuning to the listening by identifying who is speaking and what they are saying. Next, the class can move on to working with the listening text as a whole. As homework, students could try out this approach, and report back to class on when and where they had to listen from the middle, and how effective they found the technique. In future classes, use the technique to introduce listening texts.

Thematic Listening

One good extension for listening from the middle is thematic listening, or listening to texts that have related ideas. Thematic listening allows us to apply what we have learned to a new listening situation, something we normally do when we listen (Ur, 1984). We listen thematically when we follow favorite television shows or have repeated conversations with friends. In the L2, experienced listeners have been found to rely on topic knowledge applied in top-down fashion to support their language processing (Tyler, 2001). In L2 pedagogy, Flowerdew and Miller have noted that listening in a university class involves repeatedly reading about, listening to, and discussing a set of ideas (2005). Extensive reading is recommended for L2 readers (Aebersold & Field, 1997) “Narrow listening” to texts with interrelated themes has been recommended for L2 listeners (Krashen, 1996; Dupuy, 1999). Thematic listening uses these ideas and promotes student autonomy, which is recommended (Berne, 2004). If learners are listening thematically, listening from the middle of a broadcast or conversation becomes much easier because the listener already has knowledge about what he or she is likely to hear. Colleagues and I, like many ESL teachers, have used thematic approaches to listening to help students develop their decoding skills and to enhance their background knowledge. Thematic listening can be implemented through classroom work and through student assignments.

Thematic Listening in the Classroom

Choose thematically related listening texts for use in class. Seek out materials that use listening selections that are related thematically (see Kozyrev & Stein, 2001, for one example). Supplement class texts by bringing in thematically related listening selections. I supplemented my then current text (Kozyrev & Stein, 2001) with a listening on a related topic drawn from a text my school was not using at the time. The Internet provides additional possibilities for thematic listening. For example, I supplemented a listening text on the environment from Kozyrev & Stein (2001) with material from the U.S.-based National Public Radio. Thematically-related podcasts, or audio or video content from major broadcasters such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (2007) are possibilities. Obviously, choose material that meets student needs. For a thematic approach to an entire course, see Wachs (1996).

Student Projects and Assignments

Students can keep logs of their listening outside of class or be given extensive listening projects (Rost 2002). White (1998) also offers suggestions for listening projects. If your students like YouTube (2007) videos, they could find, follow, and report on English-language content of interest to them. I have assigned students to lead class discussions on listening selections of their choice drawn from National Public Radio. Colleagues and I have asked students to follow favorite shows. I have assigned students to follow an issue in the news by listening, and then report on their listening by making audio journals (brief, recorded oral reports) (Madden, 2002a). In these instances, students have opportunities to repeatedly listen to and discuss thematically related material. I have also directed students to National Public Radio’s Middle East coverage page because it offers listening files and transcripts that are all related thematically (National Public Radio, 2007).

Conclusion

Listening has implications far beyond the L2 classroom. Students may have to listen from the middle of a broadcast, or from the middle of a conversation conducted face-to-face or via the Internet. Students might listen thematically when they follow the

news or watch a favorite show on-line, or when they take a class, whether in person or through distance education. Preparing students to listen outside the classroom can help them meet the challenge of listening in the middle of a context, and take advantage of the opportunity to explore their own interests and use English for their own purposes.

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