

INVESTIGATING THE ROLE OF AUTHENTIC
LISTENING MATERIALS IN LISTENING COMPREHENSION

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Introduction

We cannot develop speaking skills unless we also develop listening skills; to have a successful conversation, students must understand what is said to them. Later, the ability to understand spoken English may become very important (for listening to the radio, understanding foreign visitors, studying, etc.). To develop this ability, students need plenty of practice in listening to English spoken at normal speed. (Doff, 1989, p. 198)

According to Willis (1986), students need to learn how to listen with understanding to spoken English outside the classroom. She raises the following questions :

- a) What types of spoken English will your students need to understand outside their English classrooms ?
- b) What will they need to do while listening ? Take notes, or talk in reply ?
- c) How can taped materials be used to help students to learn how to listen ?
- d) How far will their listening exercises in class help them in the future ? (p. 134)

To quote Hubbard et al (1986), "Often students arriving in England find the listening skill the most difficult, yet in a lot of cases it isn't actually taught- because it is a passive skill, many teachers seem to assume

that it's quite easy. However, as listening is the most varied medium, over which the student has no control, it would seem logical that it should be actually taught along with speaking, and the learner should be exposed, quite early on, to as many different types of listening as possible".(p. 80)

Lewis, M, and Hill, J.(1985) claim that with the receptive skills-listening and reading, there a tendency to use only general, global, questions. Like the productive skills, listening and reading can be sub-divided, so that it is not sufficient to ask, after students have listened to something, "Did you understand that?", nor even enough to follow up with a series of conventional comprehension questions. Listening is more complicated than that.(p.62)

As teachers increasingly understand that listening can be taught, rather simply acquired, and that it can be divided into sub-skills, so they should be more willing to introduce short pieces of authentic listening into all all courses at an early stages. (ibid, 1985, p. 63)

Although the use of authentic listening materials in the EFL is not a new idea, there has been a tendency for teachers to consider such material as suitable only for higher-level students, because it is otherwise 'too difficult'. But, this attitude towards authenticity in

listening material, as Morrison (1989) states, leads to the type of student whose level of comprehension of native speaker discourse is far below that which would be expected from the level of his or her other linguistic skills.

The researcher believes that authentic listening materials can be used at all levels from beginners to advanced, because it is only through exposure from the initial learning stages that the learner can fully integrate the individual listening micro-skills that may be isolated and presented by the teacher.

Most of the students who enroll in the first year in Buraydah Technical College, Qassim, Saudi Arabia have serious deficiencies in listening comprehension and oral communication. (Their scores in monthly exams are very low) With the help of the language laboratory, the researcher tries to solve this problem, at least in part. In Arabic-speaking country like this country, where students have scarcely any opportunity to meet native speakers of English, the language lab. is a place where students can listen to the natural, authentic English of native speakers and try to imitate it. Moreover, the provision of of listening materials allows students to supplement the inevitably limited amount of listening material that their teachers and classmates can provide.

Statement of the Problem

Based on the previous discussion the problem of this research can be stated in the following question:

To what extent do authentic listening materials affect listening comprehension ?

Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the role of authentic listening materials in listening comprehension. This purpose serves a number of objectives:

First, it lends a support to the view that authentic listening materials can be used with all levels, even the elementary level.

Second, it provides teachers of English as a foreign language with an understanding of the place of authentic listening materials in listening comprehension.

Third, it provides the student with opportunities to improve the listening skill and comprehension outside the classroom. This can be done through listening to radio and T.V. programmes, news bulletins, announcements, etc.,.

In the following section the researcher deals with the theoretical aspect of the research.

Review of Literature

In this section the researcher summarizes his readings about the topic under investigation. The following points are dealt with:

1- Authentic listening material

2- Listening comprehension

1- Authentic listening material

Brown, G. (1987) states that it is important that teachers should provide students with "authentic" examples of language to study. It is clear that one aspect of authenticity resides in natural, spontaneous speech which has normal irregularities, hesitations, and simplifications- so that students are trained to listen for cues that will be present in normal speech and not just in that particular brand of speech spoken only to foreigners. Another aspect of "authenticity" lies in the response that the student is expected to make to the taped text. If the student listens to a tape of two friends chatting and giggling together, ... it does not seem reasonable to ask the student to respond to such a text by answering questions about the content or the details of what was said. But when the point of the text is the transfer of information (for example, in a news bulletin or a lecture), it is appropriate that the student will respond in terms of processing the content of what is being said. Here, the student becomes an active listener

who needs to maintain a response to the text in order to move on to the next step in the task. A further dimension of "authenticity" lies in the use of taped texts that deploy typical language use--use appropriate forms, for instance, for adolescent speakers, appropriate forms for apologies, appropriate forms for requests. (p. 13)

Morrison, B. (1989) claims that authentic listening materials are useful to all students, and not just students whose level of English is advanced. He provides two lessons outlines (one for an elementary class, one for a more advanced class) based on news broadcasts. These two lessons plans serve to highlight a number of points about the use of authentic materials in general, and of radio broadcasts in particular. They are as follows:-

- 1- The broadcasts expose students to 'real' spoken English, and in such a way they prepare students to be able to approach such materials without the constant presence of a teacher setting questions.
- 2- Such broadcasts contain elements that practise the listening skills both individually and integrally; and they integrate listening with other skills.
- 3- The broadcasts allow the teacher to encourage 'relaxed' listening, where there is no particular purpose other than to get more listening experience.

4- The lessons demonstrate that it is the task rather than the text that needs to be graded.

5- The lessons show that although the use of radio material involves the teacher in quite a lot of preparation, it has the great advantages of being flexible, highly motivating, and widely exploitable. (pp. 14-18)

Richards (1983) proposes a model which supports the view that the student should be encouraged to consider the meaning and function of the message before any analysis is made of the actual words used to convey it. Richards' model is helpful in respect of making specific decisions about skills and micro-skills, and of making more general decisions about whole lessons.

Briefly, Richards' six-stage model refers to processes in which:

- 1- the type of discourse is determined;
- 2- the listener recalls experimental knowledge relevant to the situation;
- 3- the listener infers the speaker's goal by reference to the situation, previous knowledge, and the linguistic context of the utterance;
- 4- the utterance is assigned a propositional meaning (which can be judged either true or false);
- 5- what the speaker intended to convey is determined;
- 6- the information is held in short-term memory, and an appropriate response (if any) is made. (cited in Morrison, 1989, p. 15)

Hubbard et al (1986) maintain that listening material can be selected which does include structures and vocabulary beyond the ability level of students, providing the task the students have to perform after the listening is within their capabilities. In other words, the activity and not the material is graded.

According to them, authentic materials are also important as a motivating device. Students get real satisfaction from having made some sense out of real-life language at the early stages. If teachers can show students how easy it is to understand something from authentic material rather than how difficult it is to understand everything, then students are more likely to want to understand more. (pp. 89-90)

From the above discussion the researcher can conclude the following:

- a) Authentic listening material are useful to all students, even at the elementary level provided that the topic is chosen with care and the task or the activity is graded.
- b) If our aim is to train students to understand normal spoken English, it would seem more sensible to use authentic listening material rather than trying to write our own 'normal sounding' dialogues which are never quite the same as natural speech.

c- Teachers can find in radio programmes, news bulletins, lectures or announcements suitable authentic materials that can be used with their students.

2- Listening comprehension

Studies of how people process and interpret speech suggest that the key factor in comprehension is the ability to make intelligent guesses as to what will come next (Watts, 1986, p. 21). According to Fry (1977), prediction is one of the most powerful factors in the reception of speech. We should get nowhere at all if we did not know to some extent what to expect(p.75). Rivers (1980), points out that in comprehending oral messages we are not just extracting linguistic information, but we are selecting and matching what we have selected against probable messages that we are anticipating(p.17).

Watts(ibid) claims that:"It would seem that effective listeners are those who are able to select relevant information and not be side-tracked by unimportant details. By using anticipation and prediction strategies they are able to work out in advance what the speaker is likely to say, and, as a result, they know which parts of the message they need to concentrate on. In making these predictions the students would be drawing on their background knowledge of the topic and their

experiences of how talks on such themes are structured, as well as on their understanding of the language forms that are related to the subject area" (p. 21)

According to Nicholas (1988:19), psycholinguists have put forward some theories as to what they think happens when one listens to language. One theory suggests that as a person listens he is constructing a parallel message based on the sound clues he receives from his interlocutor and verifying whether his message corresponds with what he hears.

Rivers and Temperley (1978, cited in Nicholas, *ibid*), see that the process of listening with understanding as going through the following steps:

- a- Before we go on to understand or fail to do so, we must perceive whether the sound coming at us is systematic or not.
- b- Our next step is to impose some kind of structure on the stream of sound. We can break it up into words and sentences if it is language, or other equivalent units if it is music.
- c- We next recirculate the sound in our mind, selecting from it what we judge to be important. The selected information is recorded or put into different language and then stored in the memory for future use (p. 19).

According to Hubbard et al (ibid:82-83), there are three types of listening comprehension:

1- Intensive listening

The listening exercises here focus on detailed comprehension of meaning. This can be done through comprehension questions or summary questions. In comprehension questions the student is asked about facts, inferential information, or personal experience or opinion. In summary questions the student listens to a passage and then has to summarize what he has heard.

2- Extensive listening

Extensive listening exercises are those where a student is primarily concerned with following a story, or finding something out from the passage he is listening to. As students can sometimes be overawed by the prospect of doing extensive listening, the teacher can prepare the students for listening to a passage by telling them something about the topic of the listening text or by giving them key words.

3- Summary

To a large extent, the division between intensive and extensive listening is somewhat artificial. It is perfectly easy to use the same listening passage for both extensive and more detailed work. The summary could be written up in the form of a letter or a newspaper report.

Commenting on the previous discussion, the follow-
points should be taken into consideration:

- a- Listening to a language involves participation-not in the classroom sense of answering questions, but in the 'real world' sense of dealing with the message received.
- b- In the classroom students should be encouraged to develop their sense of anticipation and prediction in order to prepare for using the language in the real world. This can be done by stopping the tape./reading in the mid-flow and asking the students to guess what is coming next.
- c- Finally, the learners should be made to understand that though complete understanding is desirable, some native speakers have to manage with whatever is at hand and they never care about complete understanding.

It is now possible to discuss the experimental design of the research.

Research Method

Subjects : The subjects in this study consisted of 60 students selected and divided into two identical groups, one served as the experimental group and the other served as the control group. Each included 30 male freshmen recently enrolled in Buraydah Junior College of Technology, Saudi Arabia. The subjects were homogeneous in terms of language background and grade level. They ranged in age from 19 to 22. All of them began language learning at grade level 7, with an exposure of a six years EFL instruction.

Authentic Listening Materials : The selection of authentic listening materials was based on a variety of factors. These factors included: (1) types of listening material, (2) the purpose of listening and (3) familiarity with the listening topic.

The authentic listening passages were recorded from lectures given by native speakers. They were technical or scientific passages dealing with topics relevant to the students's specializations such as Value of Electronics, Types and Uses of Valves, Measurement, Engine Components, Chemical and Process Industries, etc.... There was no grading of material except the researcher gave an idea about the listening passage before listening so as to enable the students to predict what is the passage about and at the same time set the scene for what follows.

Instrument

Fifteen exercises were developed to improve the student's listening comprehension. These exercises were divided into three sections. Every section dealt with a number of listening sub-skills. Section One develops the student's ability to predict, to identify discourse-type, to discriminate between different sounds of the language, or to recognize word boundaries. Section Two dealt with guessing at unknown words or phrases without panicking, recognizing cohesive devices, e.g. 'such as', 'which', or discourse markers, e.g. Well, Now, finally..... As for Section Three, it develops in the listener the ability to find out factual information, the ability to understand inferred information, e.g. speaker's attitude or intentions, the ability to take notes or to make a summary.

Suitable types of questions were presented such as cloze exercise, true/ false statements, yes/ no questions, multiple choice questions and statements and information questions.

Tasks were graded from simple to difficult in a sense that recall or recognition exercises or questions that require one word answer were practised at first.

Procedure

- 1- The subjects were assigned randomly to two groups, i.e. experimental and control. A pre-test was administered to measure the means and standard deviation of both groups. (See a pre-post test in the appendix). The control group received no special treatment and the listening authentic materials were given and practised only by the experimental group.
- 2- Students were asked to listen to the passage. The researcher explained that they won't understand much of it and they should only take a note of any information or idea they hear. This task serves a number of functions. It accoustoms the students to the fact that, when listening to 'real life' native-speaker discourse, they will not be able to understand every word they hear. Secondly, it encourages gist listening. Finally, it reduces some of anxiety felt when students are inevitably exposed to texts beyond their linguistic capacity.
- 3- The researcher wrote or dictated some guide questions to the learners. These questions require prediction or an understanding of the general ideas in the passage rather than detailed knowledge.
- 4- Students were asked to listen again to the passage. The purpose of listening in this stage was to practise listening skills. Students were asked to answer listening exercises that follow each passage.

5- Some exercises were done orally, e.g. yes / no questions, true / false statements, or giving the meaning of unknown words, others were done in writing, e.g. making a summary or answering information questions. Every now and then the researcher replayed the passage, directing the students to check their answers.

6- The programme lasted for a period of eight weeks in November and december, 1991, one hour each week. The taped passage took from 5 to 10 minutes to be played. The teacher was teaching the experiment himself because he was the students' English teacher. At the end of the experiment a post-test was administered to the 2 groups.

Results and Discussion

The analyses of the results revealed the following:

Table (1) Comparison of the Pre-test Means

Group	Mean	S.D.	t
Control	93.04	26.891	0.123
Experimental	93.52	29.391	

Table 1 reveals that the observed value of t was 0.123 which is not significant at the level 0.05. This shows that there was no significant difference between the

two groups. Thus, the pre-test established the equivalency of the entry level of the two groups before treatment.

Table (2) Comparison of the Post-test Means

Group	Mean	S.D.	t
Control	92.40	21.138	*4.634
Experimental	118.75	25.303	

*p.0.05

As shown in Table (2), there is a significant difference between the two groups in favour of the experimental group. This indicates that authentic listening materials lead to an improvement in the students' listening comprehension. This also supports the view that authentic listening materials can be used with all levels, and not just students whose level of English is advanced.

Conclusions

In the light of the above findings the following conclusions may be drawn:

1- Authentic listening materials expose students to 'real' spoken English, and in such a way that they prepare students to be able to approach such materials without the constant presence of a teacher.

2- Based on the results obtained, the answer to the research question turned to be positive. Results of the post-test revealed that the experimental group had scored significantly higher scores than the control group. These results indicated that listening comprehension could be improved effectively by using authentic listening material.

3- In using authentic material, we train our students into the type of language they will be hearing outside the classroom.

4- Although authentic materials often go beyond the linguistic level of the students, they are in any view preferable to non-authentic materials, whose simplified forms are difficult to keep up with the existing course.

5- The results of this study were in line with Morrison's suggestions regarding the use of authentic listening materials with all levels (ibid,1989).

Recommendations

EFL students need special practice in listening. It is recommended that our students should have regular training in listening to authentic materials. This can be done through recording news bulletins, radio programmes, lectures given by native speakers, etc.,. Then students should practise listening to these tapes at least three times a week.

Listening skills, e.g. anticipation, prediction, guessing, selection or taking notes should be emphasized in any listening programme.

EFL teachers should be fully aware of the importance of using authentic listening materials in increasing listening comprehension among their students.

Exercise in authentic listening material should be used inside and outside the classroom as an essential part of the listening assignment.

Suggestions for Future Research

Students responded to authentic listening exercise orally or in writing. This means that authentic listening materials lead to an improvement in other language skills. The question is: "How far do these materials affect speaking and writing?"

How can authentic listening material be used to train our students how to predict the end of a sentence in English? One can anticipate how people are going to finish their sentences in one's own language. If this is a skill people have in their own language, is it something which needs to be taught? This needs further investigation.

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APPENDIX

A Pre-Post Test

Listen to the following passage and then answer the questions below:-

Fire, water, wind, coal, and oil are important sources of energy. They provide electricity, cook food, and run the machines which manufacture what people need. Because the world population is increasing, and because industry and technology are growing, additional supplies of energy are needed to support today's industrial civilization. Some energy sources, such as oil and gas, are hard to get and expensive, however, others are not yet efficient. Therefore, the development of alternate sources of energy is an important goal of today's scientists and technologists. The passage you are listening to tells you about three alternate sources: solar energy, geothermal energy, and coal.

Solar energy comes from the sun's heat. Large panels are used to collect the heat brought to the earth by the rays of the sun. The heat is then stored in a thermal mass. It can be used to heat water and homes and to generate electricity.

Although solar energy can be changed into heat, light, mechanical power, and chemical energy, there are problems in using it effectively. One problem with solar energy is that many places often have dark, cloudy

weather. How can power from the sun be collected in such places? One answer is the photovoltaic cell (a solar battery or solar cell), which stores energy for use when there are no direct rays from the sun. another problem is that, up to now, solar cells cannot provide energy as cheaply and efficiently as other devices can. For this reason there is at present no answer.

As oil becomes more expensive, more and more countries are turning to coal as a source of energy. The main difficulty with burning coal is that it pollutes the air. It may even be the source of "acid rain", which is rain containing harmful chemicals.

Geothermal energy comes from subterranean water. Such water is found in hot springs like those in Yellowstone National Park in the state of Wyoming. To get geothermal energy we must drill wells and pipe the hot water to the radiators in homes and factories. The problem is that geothermal is not available everywhere.

There is another way to use hot water for heating: to use waste heat and hot water from factories and mills. Such water can be piped to homes and other buildings in the community.*

*The above listening passage was chosen by the researcher and recorded by a native speaker.

Questions:

(A) Complete the following sentences (each with one or two words):-

- 1- Fire, water, wind, coal, and oil are important sources of.....
- 2- Solar energy comes from.....
- 3- The photovoltaic cell is a solar.....or solar.....
- 4- Acid rain contains harmful.....
- 5- Geothermal energy comes from.....

(B) Fill in the blanks with a suitable word:-

As oil becomes more expensive,.....and more countries are turning.....to coal.....a sourceenergy. The main difficulty.....burning coal is.....it pollutes the air. It may even.....the source.....acid rain.

(C) Here are some phrases from the listening passage. Choose the correct meaning(s) of the underlined words:-

- 1- The development of alternate sources of energy is an important goal.
a- substitute b- many c- other
- 2- The heat is stored in a thermal mass.
a- materials that hold heat b- materials that hold air
c- materials that hold water.
- 3- The heat can be used to generate electricity.
a- to originate b- to bring into existence
c- to produce

4- Geothermal energy comes from subterranean water.

a- distilled

b- coming from melted snow

c- under the earth's surface

5- We pipe hot water to radiators in homes and factories.

a- motors

b- heating devices

c- generators

(D) Are the following statements true or false. Correct the false ones.

1- Oil is considered an alternate source of energy.

2- Coal, the sun, and the wind are sources of energy.

3- Solar energy is cheap and efficient.

4- The sun's heat can be collected by panels.

5- Geothermal power can be generated by large river dams.

(E) Make a summary of the main ideas of the passage.

The following guide questions may help you:

1- List three kinds of energy.

2- List their sources.

3- List their advantages.

4- List their disadvantages.