

Listening Skills:
Improving learners' skills with news reports

Contents

1. Introduction.....	3
2. Analysis.....	4
3. Learner Problems.....	6
4. Teaching Solutions.....	8
5. Conclusion.....	10
6. Bibliography.....	11
7. Appendix.....	12

1. Introduction

My learners have expressed the need to improve their listening skills with news reports. Having surveyed the students with regard to their listening needs (Appendix 1), I was surprised to see that that this particular genre was their highest priority. I had expected

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interactions such as conversations to be more important to them. My reading on the subject of teaching listening has highlighted a number of issues which have prompted me to reflect on my current practice in the classroom. I propose to focus on listening to news reports on television in this assignment.

2. Analysis

What is listening?

It is the first communication skill acquired by native speakers in an apparently effortless manner in the first years of life. "Listening is the activity of paying attention to and trying

to get meaning from something we hear” (Underwood, 1989, page 1). While hearing is passive, successful listening is definitely an active skill which requires involvement.

The process of listening

Listening is an internal, unobservable process. There are a number of ways to describe what happens as we listen. The aural process is thought to have three stages according to Underwood (1989).

1. The sounds go into the echoic memory for a very short time to be organised into meaningful units according to the knowledge of the language the listener already has.
2. The information is then processed by the short term memory. In a matter of seconds, words are checked and compared with information already held in the long-term memory and meaning is extracted.
3. The meaning extracted is stored in the long-term memory for later use.

However, comprehension can only occur when the listener can place what is heard in a context.

Listening comprehension involves two distinct processes: bottom up processing and top down processing. Bottom up processing refers to the listener’s decoding of the incoming message by analysing it at the level of sounds, words and sentences. Top down processing refers to the listener’s use of background knowledge such as previous knowledge of the topic, situational or contextual clues, schemata or scripts stored in long term memory.

Why do we listen?

We listen for social reasons: firstly, to exchange greetings, to chat, to build and maintain social relationships following the norms of social behaviour (interactional listening) and secondly, to communicate information and messages clearly and accurately (transactional listening). A conversation may be of an interactional nature to begin with before becoming transactional in character as the information being exchanged becomes more message oriented.

Listening is also required to gain information from the media, to follow instructions, to understand a lesson or lecture. We also listen for cultural reasons, for example, when we go to the cinema, play a record or attend a play.

Learning to listen

Effective listening takes place when a number of skills are employed almost simultaneously. Anderson & Lynch (1988, page 4) identify four steps:

1. The spoken skills are identified from surrounding sounds
2. Speech is segmented into units (known words)
3. Syntax is grasped and meaning understood
4. We apply our linguistic knowledge to respond appropriately (where applicable)

However, learning to listen successfully involves more than being able to understand the words and linguistic structure of what is being said. We must provide learners with the skills to identify the schematic as well as the linguistic information. Schematic or non-

linguistic information includes both factual and socio-cultural background knowledge, knowledge of the situation, and knowledge of co-text. (Anderson & Lynch 1988, page 13).

Listening to the news

Penny Ur (1984, page 9) summarizes six features of most real-life listening. Not all of these are relevant for listening to the news.

1. We listen for a purpose and with certain expectations - true
2. We make an immediate response to what we hear – not to the speaker, but sometimes to co-listeners
3. We see the person we are listening to – true for TV, but not radio.
4. There are some visual or environmental clues as to the meaning of what we is heard – TV only
5. Stretches of heard discourse come in short chunks – not always
6. Most heard discourse is spontaneous - while interviewees' discourse might be spontaneous, the newsreader's is not.

There is no doubt that listening to radio news is a much greater challenge for the learner, especially at lower levels. TV news, on the other hand, provides visuals which give the learner clues to what is being said. Not all learners make the most of these supports. It is important for the teacher to provide students with opportunities to practise developing non-linguistic strategies such as predicting, so that they can make the most of their schematic knowledge.

Characteristics of spoken English in the news

The newsreader is likely to speak at a reasonable pace, enunciate clearly and to have an accent which is not very strong. The listener can expect the text to be well organised. Vocabulary can be wide ranging but certain lexical items and collocations occur frequently such as “government spokesman”, “crisis talks”. Certain grammatical features occur more frequently, such as the use of the Present Perfect.

3. Learner Problems

The problems learners encounter when learning to listen have been identified by Underwood (1989) as

- Lack of control over the speed at which speakers speak
- Not being able to get things repeated
- The listener's limited vocabulary
- Failure to recognise the ‘signals’.

- Problems of interpretation
- Inability to concentrate
- Established learning habits

Some other factors which contribute to learners' difficulties with listening are the volume and accent of the speaker, the listener's own lack of knowledge of the topic, and background noise. Field (MET 5/4 1995) maintains that it requires a much higher degree of attention for listeners to get used to any voice employing the unfamiliar sounds, rhythm patterns and intonations of a foreign language. Sometimes learners cannot hear the difference between certain sounds because such a difference does not occur in their own L1. For example, Japanese students have such difficulties with /l/ and /r/.

Problems listening to the news

When listening to the news, the learner will encounter some difficulties more than others. For example, on television news, there is often strident background music playing while the news headlines are being read. The speed of delivery can be quite fast and of course there is not the possibility of asking the speaker to repeat or clarify. However there are certain factors which should be less problematic. For example, the range of topics is quite limited and the student should be able to predict to some extent what they will be if s/he listens to the news on a regular basis. Many learners believe that their greatest difficulty with listening is their inability to control the speaker's speed (Underwood, 1989 p16). Few learners appreciate that they have an equally challenging problem in learning how to deduce meaning from contextual clues. I have observed that this skill comes more naturally to some students than others.

News Jargon

The range of vocabulary and grammatical complexity can vary quite considerably from news service to news service. Learners are not always aware that they are likely to hear similar news items presented in linguistically contrasting ways, depending on which station they are tuned to. The BBC, for example, will use more formal language than, say, Sky News. Students will hear jargon in both cases, but they will tend to be quite different from each other. For example, the BBC's "the very latest entertainment news" is equivalent to Sky's "the inside track from the world of showbiz"

Connected speech

Even though the news is scripted, learners still have problems identifying sounds and words. Although the news is clearly articulated, some problems with connected speech cause difficulties. One such difficulty is assimilation i.e. the blending of words at their boundaries. Field (MET 6/1 1997) points out that learners often fail to recognise a known word when they hear it in continuous speech because the end of the word has been modified e.g. /z/ often becomes **ʒ** or is omitted before /z/ those shoes > tho shoes.

While the newsreader presents relatively fewer challenges in this respect of accent, learners can have real difficulties with interviewees on the news, especially who are members of the public. Very often, such interviews take place with a considerable amount of background noise. I have noticed that students find such interviewees difficult to follow, not only because of their accent and rapid speech but also because they can be upset, anxious or angry.

Cultural unfamiliarity

Satellite services offer more opportunities than ever before for learners to listen to international news broadcast in English. If the learner is in an English speaking country s/he also has the opportunity to listen to local news. Short term students may not have the time to familiarise themselves with the native culture and so may experience frustration in their attempts to understand local news stories. Even when students have been in a country for a long time, lack of cultural knowledge may exacerbate their difficulties in listening successfully to local news items.

Chinese students, in particular, have found themselves at a disadvantage, as they are often unfamiliar with many aspects of western culture.

Unrealistic expectations

Most learners do not fully appreciate that even native speakers do not listen successfully all the time. Because there is no possibility to ask a speaker on the news to slow down, speak up or repeat, the learner sometimes mentally switches off because s/he has not understood everything. I have noticed that some students become so anxious when listening to the news that they give up in frustration. The reason could be that the learner's receptive system is overloaded (Penny Ur 1984, p 21). The student tries to interpret every detail instead of relaxing and taking a broader view.

5. Teaching Solutions

Unfamiliar accents and speed of delivery

Most learners who come to Ireland to learn English are unfamiliar with the accent, stress and intonation which they are likely to hear on local news reports. Repeated listening to a recording of interviewees on the news can be of real benefit to students because they can examine the features of speech which cause problems to them. Field (1998) advocates a

diagnostic approach whereby the teacher follows up incorrect responses in order to determine where understanding broke down and to put things right. I have begun to experiment with the kind of exercises for practising sub-skills advocated by Field (1998). For example, I use audio recordings in order to address this issue because they are easier to replay in class quickly. I give learners the opportunity to guess what the speaker is saying. Sometimes during a segmentation exercise they hear a group of words they have heard before and have not understood. For example, a pre-intermediate Spanish student was very happy to hear someone being interviewed say: / ʒɔ* (do you know what I mean?). At last she could find what it meant.

News jargon

It is important for students to listen to news items in class on a regular and frequent basis so that they profit from the opportunities to practise listening and to examine the language as it is commonly used on the news. At lower level, the headlines provide sufficient sources of news jargon which can be identified and learnt. Identifying typical collocations is an important skill at all levels. There is a good example of a task which can be used with elementary students for this in Tuning In (Spratt, 1989 p.42). Before listening to a news broadcast, students are asked to match nine groups of headlines with nine drawings. While they listen to the tape, they put the news items into the correct order. Then they match newspaper headlines to the stories.

Connected speech

Field (MET 6/1 1997) makes a case for micro-listening sessions in the early stages of acquiring a language, where the teacher dictates examples of assimilation, for example. I have found such sessions to be useful for learners at all levels. For example, my Chinese students have benefited enormously from the Connected Speech sections of Headway Intermediate Pronunciation (Cunningham and Bowler 1990). The word linking task (p 25) draws the learners' attention to the phenomena of words linking together and of sounds disappearing between words. The listening, predicting and repeating activities are good examples of activities which are satisfying for students, because they often result in increased understanding and better pronunciation

Cultural unfamiliarity

With elementary learners, I concentrate on TV rather than radio news so that they can learn how to utilise the contextual clues that are offered by both pictures and captions. Also, I have learned from my colleagues the value of displaying maps of the world, Europe, Ireland and Dublin city in the classroom in order to help students build the context for listening to both local and international news reports. In Listening 1 (Cambridge University Press 1991) Chapter 2 Round the World, is a unit based on guessing the name of a country from the clues that are heard. This activity can be adapted as a game of guessing features of local geography, the world of politics and

entertainment, the names of sports personalities. In this way students can build up their cultural knowledge so that they can make use of such top-down information to compensate for their understanding of a text (Field, 1999)

Unrealistic Expectations

What is important here is to encourage the student to relax, gather what s/he can and use common sense and discourse skills to help him/her understand the whole.

Penny Ur (1984, page 21) advocates exercises which train students to skim for specific information, to ignore details and gather general import, to cope with redundancy and 'noise' and to listen for recreation and pleasure.

The listening activity in Soundings (Bell, 1989 page 41) is a good example which I have adapted for listening to news reports. There is a photograph of an earthquake which helps students to activate schemata. Then students are asked to answer only three questions during the first listening. A gap filling exercise gives them the opportunity to use any new vocabulary. This is an gentle and enjoyable approach which can be adapted to all levels in order to boost learners' confidence listening to he news.

6. Conclusion

As a result of undertaking this assignment, I have been challenged to examine the extent to which I have been testing rather than teaching listening. By focusing too much on the product of listening and too little on the process (Field, 1998), I had not fully appreciated the importance of micro-listening exercises in equipping the learners with the necessary listening sub-skills, familiarizing learners with the features of natural speech and training learners in strategy techniques. I am encouraged by the fact that I have already adapted my listening classes accordingly. My interest in this area has deepened and I look forward to further research and reading in order to build on these insights.

6. Bibliography

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7. Appendix

Listening Questionnaire

1 = most important, 2 = next important, and so on...

1. What do you need to listen to most in English?
 - a. News
 - b. Weather
 - c. advertisements
 - d. conversations
 - e. lectures
 - f. TV programmes

- g. Other students
- h. Movies
- i. Other _____

2. Why do you need to be able to listen well in English?

- a. to pass an exam
- b. to understand instructions
- c. to make friends
- d. to exchange important information
- e. to go shopping
- f. other _____

3. Who do you need to listen to in English?

- a. customers
- b. teachers
- c. friends
- d. other students
- e. employer
- f. fellow workers
- g. people on the telephone
- h. other _____

4. In what situations do you find listening difficult?

5. What do you find easy about listening?

6. Why do you think you do listening in class?
