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cc Grethe [REDACTED] / SEAL

To Janet [REDACTED] / Practical English Teaching

Dear Janet,

I enclose the piece we talked about on the phone around the use of counselling exercises in the EFL context. I am happy to continue as UK adviser, despite the new financial situation.

Yours ,

Mario.

Careful Listening.

Using counselling exercises in the language classroom.
by Mario Rinvoluceri, Pilgrims, Cambridge Academy and SEAL.

How many people listen to you in your ordinary, everyday life? By the term "listen" I mean really try to feel and understand what you are saying from your point of view, rather than impose their own meanings on what they hear. Nobody can listen to you 100% in your own terms but even a 10% attempt will make you feel more attended to, more cared for.

How many people really listen to each other in a language class? This will vary according to the person but also according to the culture they belong to. There are some cultures that place higher value on listening carefully than others. At one end of Europe you have Greece, where there will be five people talking simultaneously at a dinner where four people are present and at the other end of the continent you have Finland where pauses between utterances give time for plenty reflective processing of what has been heard, too much time for people from quicker-rhythmed cultures.

The exercises I want to report on to you in this article all aim to encourage the students to take charge of their listening and to move freely in and out of states of good attention. The main idea is to give them choice as to how they listen.

You may object that thinking about listening mainly in inter-personal psychological terms fails to deal with the technical, linguistic difficulties of listening in a foreign language. My contention is that these difficulties are immensely reduced when a person is listening to another with empathetic concentration. Respect for what the person has to say, in its own terms, clears the mind to do the linguistic processing much more

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is much better if I feel able to give the speaker full, non-judgemental, empathetic attention. Here then are a set of exercises that allow the student to achieve greater awareness of how she listens.

1. Speaking in the speaker's shoes.

Pair the students. Ask them to choose a topic each person in the pair finds interesting and can speak on for two minutes. The listener's task will be to retain as much as she can without taking notes.

Person A in each pair speaks for two minutes (you time the two minutes). Person B then goes and sits behind her, and speaking over her shoulder, tries to faithfully reproduce what A said. B speaks as if she were A, using the first person.

Ask the students to do the exercise the other way round with B as the speaker.

The first time you do an exercise of this sort it is useful to give time for the students to let you know how they felt about it. It is good if you can listen to their interventions as empathetically as possible, whatever they say!

2. Disregarding the speaker

Pair the students and ask Person A to prepare to speak for 2 minutes about a good holiday she has had. Ask Person B to listen to what A says but to allow her mind to wander freely away from the text A is producing into whatever thoughts or memories come to her. She uses A's text as a daydreaming spring board.

The A people speak for two minutes, which you time. The Bs then tell the As about their fantasies.

Repeat the exercise the other way round, with B as the speaker.

The idea of this exercise is to get the students to consciously experience using some one else's speech as raw-material for going off into their own thoughts. You are asking them to listen as carelessly as they like. This contrasts starkly with the first exercise and the next one.

3. Distractions and red herrings.

Pair the students. Ask them to decide on a topic that A will talk about for 2 mins that is of interest to B. Person B's task will be to listen as closely as possible to A's text and to simultaneously note all distractions

and side thoughts she has. suggest that B just ticks a paper or touches one of her fingers each time she becomes aware of a thought away from A's text.

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The A students speak for two minutes. The B people then tell them all the side thoughts they have experienced. People regularly come up with auditory and visual distractions from the environment, like light glinting on some one's glasses, feelings of agreement and disagreement with A's text, an urge to ask A questions and so divert the flow of her thought, and fantasies out from what A was saying. For some people it is inordinately hard to give themselves loyally to someone else's text for the whole of 120 seconds!

The students do the same exercise with person B as the speaker.

(I learnt this exercise from Mike Lavery)

3. Two stage listening

Pair the students and ask them to choose a mutually interesting interview topic. The A students will interview the B students on the topic. Take all the As out of the room and tell them they are to listen to their interviewee as closely and empathetically as possible. Having done this they let their mind rove freely over the answer, picking the part that really interests them. In their next intervention they focus the speaker on this part.

Allow about 5-7 minutes for the A people to interview the B people.

Bring the pairs together in groups of sixes so the interviewers explain how the two stage listening worked for them. The feedback from the interviewees is also important. How much were they affected by the way their partner listened to them?

Repeat the exercise with the Bs interviewing the As.

4. Practising grammar

Pair the students and ask the A people to think of people they know and to compare themselves to them. I might start like this:

" My son Martin is taller than me but I am taller than my other son. Sophie, my wife, speaks Greek with a better accent than me and is a lot kinder. Her eyes are kinder than mine....."

Tell the A's they have 90 seconds to compare themselves to people they know well. Time the 90 seconds. At the end of the minute and a half the Bs, without moving from their chairs, feedback to the speakers all the comparisons they heard.

5. A listening-speaking diary

Organise the students in threes. Tell them that you are going to give them a topic and that each person will have two uninterrupted minutes to speak about the topic.

Give the topic EARLY CHILDHOOD and time three periods of two minutes.

Now dictate these questions to the group:

- When I spoke did I speak more to one listener than to the other?
- Did one of the listeners seem to be more involved with what I was saying?
- How did I know who was listening most?

- Which of the other two was easiest for me to listen to?
- Why?
- Did I daydream? If so, what triggered it?

Tell the students that they have five minutes in which to write a private diary entry about how they felt as speaker and as listener. The questions you dictated are just to get them thinking.

At the end of the five minutes diary writing ask the students to form new sets of three. Again give them timed two minutes each to speak- this time the topic is TEENAGE.

Follow this with a three minute round of diary writing.

For the third round of speaking and listening give the topic OLD AGE and ask the students to form new groups of three. Each person in the triad speaks for two timed minutes.

Get the students up and milling-ask them to choose a partner they feel like to talking to about the exercise, drawing on their listening diaries as much or as little as they choose.

All sorts of discoveries are made in a process-reflective exercise like this. People are sometimes not aware that when they are trying to speak to two people they can end up speaking mainly to one of them.

Some people are surprised to find out that one speaker grips their attention while the other disperses it. They come to reflect on the way a speaker can affect listening and a listener affect speaking.

6. You give my talk

Pair the students. Both write down five topics they would be willing to give a four minute talk on to their

They swap topic lists. Each chooses a topic she would like to listen to. She jots down 10-15 key words that seem likely to crop up in the other person's talk and she does this without talking to the other person.

They swap papers again. Each person now prepares a talk on the topic chosen by the partner, taking into account or disregarding the list of key words the partner has prepared.

Person A gives her talk (four minutes) and B then feeds back on how she feels about the handling of the subject. Person B give her talk and A feeds back.

This exercise (John Morgan's) offers the listener plenty of egocentric reasons for listening. She has chosen the topic and she has offered the speaker a possible mapping of the area via the key words. The exercise is particularly useful with people who really think their way of seeing something is THE way, maybe the only way! Have you met students like that?

7. A careful reading exercise

To round off this article on listening I'd like to offer you a reading exercise also based on counselling principles.

Ask the students to get up, move around the room and pick a partner. They then sit down some distance from their partner.

Tell everybody to write a one page letter to their partner- the topic is entirely up to them.

When most people have written about half a page ask them to exchange letters. Person A now finishes B's letter to him trying to write in B's kind of way, and staying as much as possible in B's mindset. Person B finishes A's letter to him in the same way.

The partners get together, read both composite letters, and maybe answer them orally.

This is a new exercise that only occurred to me a few months ago and which I have only tried with two or three groups. I suspect it is much more complex than I yet realise and would be delighted to hear from any PET readers who decide to try it out. Surely you will also come up with significant variations of it.

Positive group dynamic effects

If you decide to add careful listening exercises to your repertoire of classroom activities you will find that in

many groups there is a marked group building effect. Exercises of this sort can induce a calm, other-centred state of mind. Such exercises could give your language

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lessons a very different feel from other subjects on the school time table. It is thrilling when students get to know new aspects of themselves and others through the process of intelligent foreign language practice.

Note to teacher trainers:

It is clear that the ability to listen accurately and empathetically is central to the business of teaching. With trainees on inset courses I often do batteries of counselling exercises to get colleagues to shut up and listen to each other.

On one such course, a few years back, a participant came into the training room on Day 3 with the clear behaviours of some one bursting to speak. She told us she had been to see her mother the evening before and had decided to listen to her carefully and empathetically. The usual trouble with her mother was that she talked non-stop and no one in the family listened to her. On this occasion her mother very soon stopped rabbiting nervously on and began to say less and to be much more coherent. By changing her own listening pattern she dynamically improved the way her mother spoke. This participant was thunder-struck. She had never before realised the way listening and speaking patterns govern each other.

So you may find these exercises useful in the training room and even, perhaps, in your own living room.

Bio-data

Mario Rinvoluceri works for Pilgrims and The Cambridge Academy. He is consultant to the Pilgrims Longman Teacher Resource book list.

1995 will see publication of MORE GRAMMAR GAMES with Cambridge University Press, a new set of grammar exercises that goes way beyond GRAMMAR GAMES (CUP. 1984).

LETTERS will be out in 1995 with Oxford University Press : ideas on how to use your own letters in class and how to get the students to write to each other across the class.