

## Why teach listening as if it were reading?

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### What are our normal listening patterns in mother tongue?

On an average day how much of your listening in your mother tongue is to long strings of utterances to which you do not have to give any sort of reply? In other words how much of your day is taken up listening to lectures, radio, sermons, court case proceedings, TV etc...?

I asked a group of Spanish teachers who came to Pilgrims this summer this question and most people said that they spend around 2 hours per day listening to continuous text and that eight or more hours a day are taken up with conversational listening in which they are themselves directly implicated. So one teacher, Raquel, told me that the first hour and a half in the morning is mainly loud exchanges with her children and husband, sometimes shouted conversations between people in different rooms!

The next half hour consists of intense female conversations among three teachers on the way to school in a shared car. A large part of the working day involves staffroom, corridor and classroom exchanges.

On the way home from school half an hour teacher gossip in the car.

Raquel reckoned the listening she does in late afternoon and evening is half to radio and/or TV and half to family members and on the phone.

I wonder how different your typical listening pattern is to Raquel's?

### Why is coursebook listening so different from listening in real life?

At first sight it is odd that what is mostly presented in coursebooks as listening practice involves the students following blocks of speech of anything from 2 to 10 minutes or more. This is "third person" speech in which the learners have no direct involvement, they do not intervene in the construction of the text, any more than they would if they were listening to TV or radio. At first sight it is odd that listening should be taught in this rather remote, distanced way.

From a commercial point of view it is not odd at all, since the capitalist companies who do coursebooks have to sell a mass of materials, and clearly they cannot produce empty CDroms and DVDs. Given the nature of the product they want to sell they have to offer slabs of listening and teach this skill as if normal conversational listening did not exist.

In effect the coursebook treats listening as though it were reading. When we teach reading it is reasonable to offer the student a stretch of text for him/her to comprehend without offering any interactive possibilities, since when we read in L1 it is normally a one way process in that the reader cannot influence what will come next from the writer.

[ Internally, within the reader's head, it is **not** a one way process as the reader's schemata quickly get to

work on the incoming information and transform it just as any digestive process radically alters what it works on ]

The reason the coursebook offers third person listening passages has nothing to do with pedagogical thinking. It has to do with the need to have something to make money from.

### The nature of conversational listening

We know from the work of Ron Carter and Mike McCarthy (Cambridge Grammar of English) and from much earlier work that conversational listening is I-thou and not third party, it is relational, co-constructive and highly active.

In daily life we do not spend all our time listening to distant, public voices with whom we have only a remote relationship. Most of our listening is to people with whom we have an intimate relationship, such as family or friends, a professional relationship such as colleagues, students, head teachers, or a service relationship, in shops, when buying tickets etc.

Most of our listening in mother tongue is affect-laden....we hear the words of people we are well-disposed towards, the words of people who have just annoyed us, the words of people we have good reason to dislike, the words of distant people we find vaguely attractive etc....Compared to this type of listening, the stuff offered in coursebooks is of a different order as it does not involve conversational interaction.

As suggested above, normal conversational listening is co-constructive. The listener takes in what she is hearing while at the same time preparing her response. Take a typical, phatic UK weather exchange:

Speaker A: *Well, it's warm today*

Speaker B: *'Bout time too.*

Speaker A: *Beginning of the summer we ain't 'ad!*

The two people have satisfied their need to have mildly warm contact in which the point is to reach easy, cosy agreement, not to be especially insightful about the meteorological conditions.

The point of this listening and speaking is purely affective.

Sometimes speaking and listening are interwoven to such a degree that Person A starts a sentence and Person B finishes it. This will sometimes happen with conditional patterns:

Person A: *S'ppose we could go over and see Mum if.....*

Person B: *it seems like she's taking a turn for the worse.....*

Speakers will often finish each other's proverbs eg:

Person A: *A stitch in time.....*

Person B: *....saves nine*

Though many more examples could be given my point is made: conversational listening is I-thou, emotional, interactive and co-constructive.

## Affective, relational listening exercises for the EFL classroom

What follow are two practical exercises for you to use with your elementary to advanced classes that avoid the non-dialogic nature of much coursebook listening.

### 1. Shared story-telling and shared re-telling

Sit in front of the class with two student volunteers sitting either side of you but with their chairs drawn back a bit.

Start telling your story : eg: *T here was this village in Vietnam and there was a river somewhere.....I've forgotten exactly.....*

Then turn to the volunteers ask them to provide the description of the village that you have "forgotten".

Continue your story but stop six or seven times during the telling to ask the volunteers to fill in stuff you have " forgotten"

At the end of the telling thank your volunteers and now put the students in pairs. Tell them they are going to re-tell the story to each other. Person A in each pair starts re-telling. After 20 seconds clap your hands.....on the clap Student B takes over the telling. Clap again after another 20 seconds and A continues the re-telling and so on.

**Comment:** During the first half of this exercise all the students have a relational listening exercise, since you are their teacher, a real person, not a DVD, and they know you.

What's more you have chosen to tell this particular story- the decision was not made in far away Oxford, Cambridge or Harlow (Pearson-Longmans's HQ). The two volunteers will be listening even more attentively than their classmates.

In the second stage the students have the co-reconstruction of the story in their hands and have to listen extremely carefully as the clap comes up.....not much time to drift and dream of girl-friends or boy-friends! [ I learnt the re-telling part of this exercise from my Pilgrims colleague, Chaz Pugliese.]

### 2. Two students "double" the teacher.

Choose a happy year in your past, maybe a time when you were just a bit older than these students now.

Ask for two volunteers to come and sit either side of you and a bit behind you, in front of the class and facing the group.

Yourself have biro and paper ready.

Tell the students they are going to interview you about your xth year but that your two "voices" will answer their questions.

As the questioning and the answering starts note down the main points of what is said. Feel free to react silently to what is being said but do not give too obvious clues as to your feelings.

When you feel sufficient ground has been covered thank your "voices" and turn to the class: they will now be really interested to find out the real facts about your xth year. Tell them the facts, however being kind to the "voices" who had stuck their necks out during the exercise. (Teacher kindness is not always taught on training courses and I wonder how verbally kind Polish classrooms are).

**Comment:**

This is an intensely emotional, inter-personal exercise where truth and falsehood are in play, an area that tends to fascinate teenagers. Once again we are a very long way from the third person listening the coursebook can offer, however excellent and maybe intrinsically interesting its recordings.

**Conclusion**

My feeling is that listening is too important a part of language learning to be done in an impersonal way. Listening in L2 needs to draw on the power of the emotions of the learners. Once these are mobilized then the technical task of decoding the strange foreign sounds becomes much easier.

While all the above is important, it is equally important that in the two exercises described you, the teacher, are fully involved emotionally too. How much learning goes on in your groups partly depends on your own level of emotional involvement and thrill. Half dead teachers = three quarters dead students!

Why not send some person-centred listening activities that you already do to NEW ROUTES to share with other colleagues around the continent of Brazil?

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