

# Module to develop learner autonomy in listening comprehension

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## INTRODUCTION

The module that follows emerged from action research into how to improve achievement in listening comprehension in A level French in the context of a two-year course at Weston Sixth Form College. This resulted from a recognition that the means I had been using to develop this skill had not hitherto adequately prepared my students for the listening comprehension exercises in the examination. My interest in this area was also fuelled by the opportunities afforded by the refurbishment of the language laboratory. The ease of recording material and the possibilities for self-paced work presented a means of integrating listening work in class much more effectively than previously.

I took as the departure point for this enquiry the disappointing results of the second-year A level French students in their mock examinations held in January 2000 in the listening comprehension exercises in the OCR Contemporary Society paper 1999. These students had, since the beginning of their course, been afforded the following opportunities for developing listening skills:

### Self-study outside language classes

- individual listening using commercially-produced material which accompanies the A level course, consisting of a range of exercise types commensurate with the aims of the examination
- individual listening using transcripts as cloze texts, i.e. direct transcription of missing items as heard (as compared with the cloze exercises set in the examination which require manipulation of what is heard to fit grammatically into a reworked written summary of the tapescript)
- individual listening as part of commercially produced self-study language courses (e.g. *Breakthrough Further French*)

- individual listening with *Fun with Texts*, an IT package which enables the teacher to design various text manipulation exercises. Tapescripts have been entered into the programme and students can listen to the cassette and complete the exercises on screen with immediate feedback.

### Within the language classroom

- class listening including a range of exercises commensurate with the aims of the OCR syllabus
- class listening with cloze exercises using transcriptions.

Despite the opportunities for self-study, students had failed to use their time for listening practice consistently. I interpreted this as lack of motivation and took responsibility for failing to provide that motivation. The key questions I asked myself were:

1. Why have the students not improved sufficiently in listening comprehension during their course?
2. Why have they not taken advantages of the opportunities afforded to them for private study either at home or in college?
3. How can I change this for the future?

Most listening extracts were played to the whole class and individual listening activities were "relegated" to private study. There was no attempt made to integrate pre-listening activities and no attention paid to developing learner autonomy in developing listening comprehension skills. Nor did I seek methods to help learners to overcome psychological barriers to attempting listening exercises, which they admitted they found difficult, by addressing issues surrounding motivation. In short, I had no strategy. In terms of my first question, I believe that the approach I was using failed for several reasons:

**"the possibilities for self-paced work presented a means of integrating listening work in class"**

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**“I needed to develop a properly thought-out strategy to approach the teaching of listening comprehension.”**

- 1) Playing the extract to the whole class did not enable equal access to learning – some students understood, some did not. Nothing more was gained from the experience and learners were unable to identify what they had learned, if anything.
- 2) Students were not exposed to enough listening material.
- 3) Differences between English and French (pronunciation, stress, intonation) were not made explicit to learners, so they continued to be unable to identify word boundaries and to identify the illocutionary force behind utterances in which they understood the individual words.
- 4) Students were not taught to recognise discourse markers in order to focus their attention on when they needed to listen and what could be discarded.
- 5) Students were not encouraged to bring to bear any prior knowledge of any sort.

To my second question I formulated the following answers:

- 1) The absence of a strategy to teach listening comprehension reduced the importance of the skill in the eyes of the learners, as evidenced by their failure to do listening activities in their own time.
- 2) I failed to provide motivation by enabling learners to see that they were making progress and that there were methods they could employ to develop listening skills more effectively.
- 3) I allowed listening practice to be their responsibility. Since other skills were expressly practised and discussed in class, this allowed them to believe that listening was less important and possibly that what was being done in class was adequate.

## FORMATION OF STRATEGIES

In order to answer my third question, I needed to develop a properly thought-out strategy to approach the teaching of listening comprehension.

Within the context of a European Co-operation Programme with which I was involved, I had read about the concept of learner training, which seeks to develop self-awareness in learners, so that they are able to select learning strategies in order to approach a given task. One of the examples given in the literature I read was about listening comprehension tasks and the use of *advance organisers* (Dickenson, 1992). This reading coincided with the refurbishment of the language laboratory at the Sixth Form College, which is based in the languages classroom itself. This allowed for ease of access and individual student control of listening material, a factor which permits students to increase the number of pauses in the listening material, which is identified by Brett (1999) as more important than speed in determining levels of comprehension.

I recognised that this interest in the development of a learner training programme to enable my students to develop effective listening skills needed to be combined with a better understanding of the process of listening itself, so I began reading about teaching listening comprehension. In my reading I discovered that listening comprehension is often a neglected skill in terms of teacher development (Oxford, 1993); I was pleased, therefore, to be able to try something in the classroom which might be unusual and which might be beneficial to my colleagues.

## THE MODULE

Based on my understanding of learner training and available research into listening comprehension, I developed the following scheme to be tested in practice over the course of about fourteen weeks.

### STAGE 1

Students practise and evaluate teacher-determined strategies for listening comprehension in a familiar context. These activities are largely teacher-led.

**Familiar vocabulary and context:** holidays.

**Familiar schemata and script:** radio advert for holidays.

## PREPARATORY PRE-LISTENING

| TASK   | PURPOSE   |
|--|---|
| read one-page holiday brochures, identifying imperatives and stylistic devices   | to familiarise learners with the lexical field and raise awareness of the stylistic devices used in such promotional material |
| rewrite more formal holiday brochure in a more dynamic, attention-catching style, using previous brochures studied as examples (commensurate with the style of radio advert) | practise using vocabulary and stylistic devices appropriately and raise awareness of the concept of “register” in writing     |
| produce own holiday brochure in a similar style  | practise using vocabulary and stylistic devices appropriately to express own ideas  |

**IMMEDIATE PRE-LISTENING**

| TASK   | PURPOSE   |
|--|---|
| look up meanings of a list of "phrases which will be heard" (i.e. discourse-markers and lexical items) | help learners to identify similarity between L1 discourse style and L2 discourse style for the same discourse type (publicity material) |
| brainstorm as class possible answers to questions (means of transport, sports, etc.)                   | help learners to bring to the fore prior knowledge and possible vocabulary  |

**LISTENING**

| TASK  | PURPOSE  |
|---|--|
| listen to the whole extract all the way through and tick off the phrases as heard (bottom-up)   | help learners to associate sound with spelling; help learners to begin to recognise word boundaries and (implicitly) become familiar with the stress pattern; help learners to recognise discourse markers and focus on information-carrying material                                    |
| listen closely to the extract completing the utterance in which the above was heard (bottom-up)                                       | help learners to recognise discourse markers and focus on information-carrying material; help learners to become aware of compensation strategies; help learners to associate sound with spelling; help learners to identify word boundaries and become familiar with the stress pattern |
| listen for the answers to the questions, referring to the possible answers previously suggested (top-down, scanning; prior-knowledge) | help learners to focus on listening for specific information and to use prior knowledge effectively  |
| listen for which of several towns were mentioned (top-down, scanning; prior-knowledge)  | help learners to associate sound with spelling; help learners to recognise word boundaries   |
| cloze sentences - literal transcription with first letter of words given (bottom-up)  | help learners to identify word boundaries; help learners to associate sound with spelling  |
| listening for whether statements were true or false (scanning and then skimming)  | help learners to listen to find out specific information; help learners to use pre-identified phrases and vocabulary to aid comprehension  |
| cloze text - literal transcription of single words (bottom-up)  | help learners to identify word boundaries; help learners to associate sound with spelling  |

**IMMEDIATE POST-LISTENING**

| TASK   | PURPOSE   |
|--|---|
| check answers with transcript  | allow learners to confirm answers by reading  |
| discussion: how did you get on?  | allow learners to share feelings of frustration and success; inform teacher of which areas caused difficulty; allow teacher to gauge levels of enthusiasm; allow for feedback on why some tasks were more difficult than others |
| identification of cloze-test errors (-> contrast aspirated English /t/ with non-aspirated French /t/ and ease of confusion between /t/ /d/ and /n/, etc. | allow learners to pinpoint specific sound/spelling correlations and interference of L1 in understanding   |
| encourage learners to keep a record of transcript errors to learn from   | allow learners to begin to take control of their learning - their own errors; encourage learners to feel that they can use their errors for improved performance in the future  |

## POST-LISTENING

| TASK  | PURPOSE  |
|---|--|
| write own script for a radio advert for the holiday advertised in own written brochure  | encourage learners to re-use language from the listening extract and from the reading and writing tasks, incorporating vocabulary and stylistic devices appropriately  |
| record script, making it as authentic as possible   | encourage learners to concentrate on what the L2 sounds like in terms of intonation and stress patterns and how this differs from the L1   |
| listen to another student's advert, make notes  | allow learners to listen again to similar vocabulary, discourse markers and stylistic devices  |
| "telephone" student requesting a brochure (pay attention to pronunciation)  | allow learners to concentrate on how L2 sounds; raise learners' awareness of the difference between two discourse types  |
| individual written feedback from teacher on own radio advert (pronunciation, grammar, intonation, stress, etc.)   | provide personal feedback for learner  |
| individual feedback shared with other students in teacher-led discussion  | allow learners the opportunity to share what they did well and which areas they need to improve; allow learners to learn from each other   |
| whole class listens to two student radio adverts and contrasts intonation (very English -> more French)   | allow learners to actively identify what makes for an authentic-sounding L2 speech; enable learners to identify differences between L1 and L2 with reference to stress patterns, pronunciation, intonation, etc. |
| "telephone" other student to complain about the difference in the reality and what was promised in the brochure and radio advert (re-use phrases; practise intonation of complaining) | allow learners to re-use the vocabulary and restructure the stylistic devices in a way appropriate to a different discourse type   |
| record own conversation, listen carefully - how authentic is it? does it sound French? Why (not)?   | enable learners to concentrate on what they sound like as speakers of L2 and in which ways their L1 is interfering   |
| use sample letters to write to other student complaining as above (re-use phrases)  | allow learners to re-use the vocabulary and phrases in a different register and become aware of the concept of register  |

**STAGE 2**

Developing learner-autonomy (meta-cognitive approaches). Students start to identify appropriate listening behaviours and to design pre-listening activities in a familiar context. These activities are designed for the students to do with teacher help

as required.

**Familiar vocabulary and context:** holidays with parents.

**Familiar schemata and script:** interviews with young people about their feelings towards holidays with parents.

## PREPARATORY PRE-LISTENING

| TASK  | PURPOSE  |
|---|--|
| translate English text into French              | become familiar with topic-related vocabulary and register   |
| compare French translation with original French | identify interference of L1 with L2; become aware of differences in language structure between L1 and L2 |

**SELF-CONTROL TRAINING: REFLECTION ON STAGE 1 AND ITS APPLICATION TO LEARNING**

| <b>TASK</b>   | <b>PURPOSE</b>  |
|---|---|
| <p>In the target language, the teacher leads a discussion which seeks to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Remind the learners of the tasks they did</li> <li>2) Encourage the learners to reflect on what they learnt from them</li> <li>3) Help the learners to recognise the purpose behind each task</li> </ol>  | to develop awareness of the cognitive strategies used to facilitate and practise listening comprehension  |
| <p>The teacher explains to the students that they are going to listen to one or more interviews with young people about holidays with their parents and have the task of designing a similar "scheme of work" to that followed in the previous listening module. They should design tasks which will maximise:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ comprehension of the listening material</li> <li>◆ retention and future recall</li> <li>◆ appropriate application of the vocabulary and structures encountered in the listening text</li> </ul> <p>They will work in pairs on this and present their scheme to the class on flipchart paper, writing the task in French and explaining its purpose (in French as far as possible). The class will then discuss the suggestions and come to an agreement about which tasks to do</p> | to enable learners to apply cognitive strategies (i.e. to develop metacognitive strategies; selecting appropriate strategies to approach given tasks) |

**STUDENT SELECTION OF STRATEGIES**

| <b>TASK</b>   | <b>PURPOSE</b>  |
|---|---|
| students identify (in pairs) possible pre-listening exercises to activate prior knowledge and evoke schemata and script | to help students to focus on the need for pre-listening exercises<br>to enable learners to recognise that they can select for themselves appropriate pre-listening exercises  |
| students design (in pairs) listening exercises which involve listening for different purposes                           | to help learners to focus on the fact that different listening exercises develop different sub-skills<br>to help learners to focus on the fact that we listen for different purposes and that we can tailor the way we listen to that purpose<br>to give learners control of their learning |
| students design (in pairs) post-listening exercises which seek to consolidate their learning                            | to help learners to focus on the importance of post-listening activities<br>to help learners to recognise that they can design for themselves their own post-listening activities   |
| students present their "schemes of work" to the rest of the class for discussion  | to stimulate further discussion on the reasoning behind task selection  |
| class decides together, using the suggestions made, which tasks they will actually do                                   | to help students to select from a variety of options  |
| teacher prepares material as appropriate to support their tasks   | to enable students to complete the tasks, and, at this stage, to reassure learners that they are being supported in their work  |
| learners work through their "scheme of work"  | to enable learners to try out the strategies they have selected   |
| post "scheme of work" evaluation  | to enable learners to assess the suitability of their strategies<br>to enable the teacher to gain feedback from the learners on the whole process of self-designed schemes  |