

LISTENING COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES

Juliet Booth  
Instituto Anglo Mexicano  
de Cultura  
Guadalajara, Jalisco

SECTION AI INTRODUCTION

Contemporary stress on language teaching is directed to communication. 'Communicative competence' are two words frequently heard; the idea that we should be teaching students how to behave in 'real', 'life-like' situations. This is undoubtedly a worthy aim and it puts a big onus on the listening skill, as this is half of the communicative ability. The L<sub>2</sub>'s speaking skill cannot be fully utilised unless the student is able to comprehend what is being said to him. It would seem that in view of the emphasis on communication, the traditional classification of listening as a 'passive' skill needs appraisal. It is, in fact, a highly challenging activity which requires great concentration. In order to improve their skill in listening, students need practice; they cannot be expected to merely 'pick up' the listening skill as part of the learning process.

II SOME COMMENTS ON TRADITIONAL TYPES OF LISTENING COMPREHENSION TEXTS AND EXERCISES

The types of texts used and the exercises set in the text will vary a lot according to the methodology used, textbook, objective of the course and teacher's handling of the material. However, many textbooks especially at the basic level, tend to:

- a) contain very little new vocabulary (the teacher is often advised to introduce any vocabulary which is new before reading the text),
- b) contain no or very few structural items (again, often any new structural items have been introduced beforehand),
- c) contain very little which is redundant; the information is often packed very tightly into the text.

Thus, there seems to be an assumption that students should encounter very little new vocabulary or structural items and should be able to 'understand' everything. This is not in accord with a 'real-life' situation, but fits in with the theory of breaking up language into manageable segments for teaching purposes. The language used in listening comprehension texts is usually very controlled.

I would like to make a distinction at this point, between two types of listening processes. The first involves recognition or identification by the listener of certain items (words, phrases, etc.) The student can generally identify them because he has met them before. He can, therefore, pass over these recognised items quickly and concentrate on the rest of the message. The second type involves selection where the listener is trying to draw out of the communication those elements which seem to be the most important and, at the same time of course, learning to disregard those which are secondary. A lot of listening material at present would seem to be of the 'recognition' type, i.e., students can quite possibly 'recognise' (because it has been previously encountered) nearly everything in the text. There is certainly a place for this type of listening activity, but in terms of 'communicative competence', are we developing the learner's listening ability as fully as possible if we over-use (or exclusively use) texts with carefully controlled language? There is a need for more 'selection' type material, where students are listening to previously unencountered lexical items, structural items, etc.; where they are trained to make deductions, inferences, and to draw out the main points and listen to intonation for clues to meaning.

Many listening texts have questions, often of a fairly detailed nature, which follow the text and which the teacher asks after the students have listened to the material. It is all too easy for this to turn into a memory test. We should be teaching listening comprehension and not testing it. It is important that listening comprehension exercises do not overload the memory; if a student is expected to recall the text in detail and is unable to, his inability to do so is not necessarily an indication of failure of his aural comprehension but could merely indicate that the load on his memory was too heavy. Thus, it seems that with many traditional types of listening material and exercises, we are challenging the students highly on one level, i.e., mainly that of memory, but very weakly on another level, at which it does not appear necessary to use many intellectual skills, such as deducing, inferring, etc.

There are various types of listening comprehension exercises: true/false, multiple choice questions, yes/no answers, intensive/extensive treatment of the text; but basically it is the form of the questions which is different and not the underlying objectives. There should be a change in our expectation of what we want the students to do in a listening comprehension exercise and the goals we have, will in turn, affect the type of material which is used.

Before going on to different types of strategies, I would like to make a final point. Students find it difficult to rely on their ear and tend to panic when they hear something they do not understand. They feel happier with the written form, "Can you write that word on the blackboard? Teaching methodology in the past may well have encouraged this. If students are used to new structures or vocabulary items being explained and isolated beforehand, they will rely on this. Students should be taught that it is only natural that some elements in the message will be lost either because the amount of information conveyed is too much or because it cannot be decoded rapidly enough. It is very important that the teacher explains to students the objective behind an exercise and what is expected of them. Students will, in fact, 'understand' almost any text IF the questions which are set on the text are correct, although this might be at the simplest of levels, i.e., how many people are talking? where do you think they are? how does the woman feel? etc. But the 'rationale' behind this must be explained to students, otherwise they will panic and feel discouraged.

The following suggested strategies are of both a 'recognition' and 'selection' type. The teacher would decide which strategy or strategies could be best used, depending on the type of listening material, level of class and the objective.

## SECTION B

### SOME LISTENING COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES

#### 1. Global Listening and Selecting Essential Information (Selection)

This involves student concentration on, and understanding of, only the essential parts of a given text. It is not necessary for the students to take in and remember all the parts of the text. In order to aid students and get them to focus on certain parts of the text, pre-questions are set. These should be written on the blackboard before the text is read. The text should then be read once and the students should give answers to the pre-questions. This type of listening can be done with any material: dialogues, songs, poems, etc.

#### Example:

#### Suggested pre-questions on text

- 1) Is Kemal in Helen's house?
- 2) Why is Kemal phoning Helen?
- 3) Are they going to the party?



TEXT

- Helen: Four six nine, two seven three.  
Kemal: Hello, is that Helen Casey?  
Helen: Speaking.  
Kemal: This is Kemal here.  
Helen: Kemal! Where are you? Why aren't you here? It's a quarter past six, you know.  
Kemal: Look, this is ridiculous, but I can't go to the party.  
Helen: Why not?  
Kemal: Because I haven't got any clothes.  
Helen: You haven't got any -- look, Kemal, it's late, there's no time for jokes now; hurry up.  
Kemal: It's not a joke, Helen! Look, I gave my best suit to the boy living downstairs.  
Helen: Well, wear an old suit.  
Kemal: An old suit! Look, Helen, you can't go to an embassy party in an old suit.  
Helen: Well, you must.  
Kemal: Would you like to go to the movies?  
Helen: No, I wouldn't. I want to go to that party.  
Kemal: All right. I'm on my way.

(Dialogue taken from Junior Active Context English, Book 3, page 87.)

Another Example:Pre-questions

- 1) What time is the last show?
- 2) When will the theatre be open?

This is a recording. The theatre is closed. Today's movie is *The Godfather Part II*, winner of six Academy Awards. There will be continuous showings at two-thirty, five o'clock, seven-thirty and ten o'clock. The movie is rated PG. Tickets are three dollars for adults and half price for children under sixteen. If you need more information, please call back at 2 o'clock when the theatre opens.

2. Deducing Unfamiliar Words and Phrases in Context (Recognition)

The students are not given the unfamiliar items in a text beforehand, but it is hoped that by listening to the text carefully and by seeing how the words and phrases operate in the context, they will be able to make reasonable deductions as to what the meaning is. This is very much a 'real-life' situation and, provided that the majority of

the dialogue is intelligible to students, they will generally be able to make intelligent guesses.

Example:

Refer back to the dialogue from Junior Active Context English, Book 3. The words which are unfamiliar are -- ridiculous and Hurry up! After reading the text once and asking a few general questions (which should not require specific knowledge of the unknown items), multiple choice questions regarding the unknown words are written on the blackboard:

Ridiculous means a) fantastic b) cold c) absurd

Hurry up means a) Be quick b) Don't talk c) I'm unhappy

The text is read again and students are asked to choose the correct answer to the multiple choice questions. If the teacher has a monolingual group, I would suggest setting the questions in the L<sub>1</sub> if this is easier.

3. Predicting (Recognition and Selection)

This involves training students to be able to predict how they think a sentence will end. In order to be able to do this, they will have to use their knowledge of grammar, structural items, etc. in the foreign language. The teacher first writes the multiple choice questions on the blackboard, then reads the text, stopping just before the part to be 'predicted' by the students. The students then give the answer to the question.

Example:

Refer back to the text from Junior Active Context English, Book 3. The teacher would stop reading after 'Look, Helen, you can't go to an embassy party' (line 15).

Multiple choices

a) with you b) in an old suit c) in your best suit

Example:

Teacher stops reading after 'I want to' (line 19).

### Multiple Choices

- a) stay at home    b) go to the movies    c) go to that party.

This predicting technique can also be used on a wider basis, i.e., what happened just before the dialogue? what happened just after the dialogue? This will depend on the type of material being used; some texts lend themselves better to this type of questioning than others.

#### 4. Recognising Where the Dialogue Takes Place and the Relationship Between the Speakers. (Selection)

In any spoken discourse it is important to know the situation and the relationship between the speakers, as this will affect the language used by the participants. For example, in the dialogue from Junior Active Context English, Book 3, the first line tells us that this is a telephone conversation. Questions can either be asked before the text is read (pre-questions) or afterwards.

### Suggested Questions on the Junior Active Context English Dialogue

- 1) Where is Helen? Where is Kemal? How do you know?
- 2) What is the relationship between the speakers? Are they friends? Do they know each other well? How do you know?

This can also be practised at the sentence level. The teacher reads the sentence and asks where it could be heard and who could be speaking. The teacher can also ask for the 'clue' words.

- 1) Can I help you, Miss?
- 2) Mr. Jackson. It's a boy. You can see your wife now.
- 3) Are you ready to order yet, sir?
- 4) Can you please finish the sentence you're writing and give me your exams.

#### 5. Recognising the Attitude and Mood of the Speaker (Selection)

This is important in order to be able to understand the message being conveyed. Obviously, in real life we are aided by facial expressions, gestures, etc., but there are occasions, using the telephone for example, when we do not have these 'face-to-face' clues. We should train our students to notice mood and attitude (intonation, rhythm and stress, etc.), as well as the spoken word.

Example:

Refer back to the Junior Active Context English dialogue.

- 1) Kemal feels happy. True/False  
How do you know? (Use of intonation, 'This is ridiculous' 'You can't go to an embassy party in an old suit' etc.)
- 2) How does Helen feel in this conversation?  
a) excited    b) very tired    c) angry  
How do you know? (Use of intonation, 'Where are you?' 'Why aren't you here?' 'Hurry up' 'Well, you must' etc.)

6. Making Logical Inferences (Recognition and Selection)

Very often we are not specifically told a piece of information, but we are meant to infer it from what has been said. We should train the students to make logical inferences.

Example:

Refer back to the Junior Active Context English dialogue.

- 1) Kemal's only got one good suit. True/False
- 2) Kemal's going to wear an old suit.  
to the embassy party. True/False

Example:

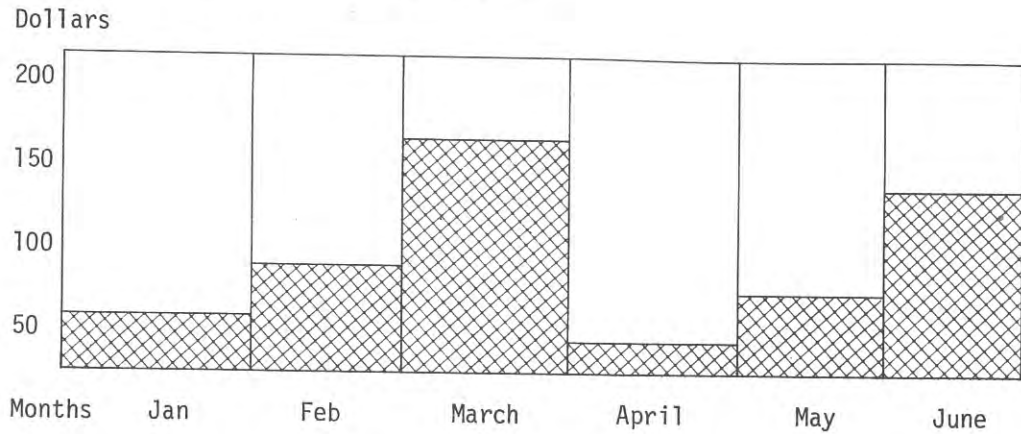
Teacher reads: The plane leaves at 10 o'clock. They must be at the airport an hour before.

Question: What time must they be at the airport?

7. Using Pictures (Mainly recognition)

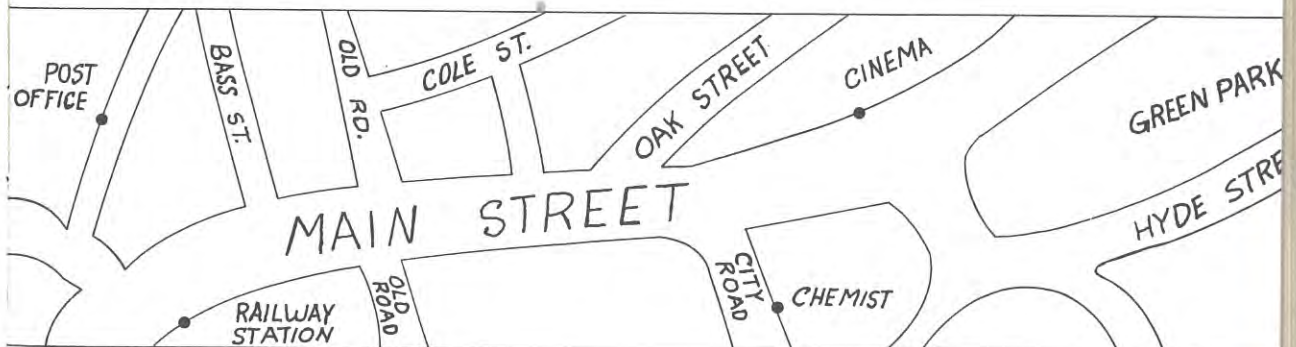
- a) The students can be given a picture and then given various pieces of information to fill in, i.e., The man running is called John. His shoes are brown. The girl under the tree has a dog, etc.
- b) The teacher brings a wallchart (or does a simple blackboard drawing) and does True/False questions:  
The cat is between the two chairs.  
John is watching television.  
There is a dog in the room.  
Mary isn't near the door, etc.



8. Using Graphs, Charts and Maps (Recognition and Selection)a) Example: Use of GraphMONEY SAVED: January - June 1978

The teacher makes statements and the students must decide if they are true or false. For example:

- Ann spent more money in April than in May
- Ann saved a lot of money in March
- Ann saved more money in June than in any other month
- Ann didn't save much in March, etc.

b) Example: Use of Maps



- ) The teacher describes Peter's walk and the students trace this on the map.

Peter came out of the cinema and walked along Main Street towards the railway station. He turned left along City Road to go to the Chemist's. Then he ..... etc.

- i) The teacher gives instructions and the students fill in on the map.

There is a post office on the corner of Old Road and Cole Street.

- i) The teacher reads statements and the students decide if they are True or False.

The cinema is in Main Street.  
The Railway Station isn't in Old Road, etc.