

Tuning in to Spoken Messages

BY LILA BLUM

Lila Blum, *Tuning in to spoken messages: Basic listening strategies*. Longman, 1990.

Reviewed by Brad Wahlquist.

Tuning in to spoken messages is a simple and practical handbook to teach listening comprehension in the classroom. It also serves as a guide to outside learning activities. There is a definite focus to the book--competence in the social, public setting--as it moves teacher and student through a progression of listening and then communicative activities. Most activities revolve around a cassette recording of a "real life" language situation. Lila Blum shows a sensitivity to student frustrations as she guides the student step-by-step through each situation (e.g. understanding a "Community Calendar" radio broadcast, or a phone company message about a disconnected number). Each new task completed builds the confidence needed to perform the next one. This is true of the activities within each unit as well as of the progression of the book as a whole. Listening confidence and competence grow naturally. And Blum makes provision for this growth to be visible and measurable. Blum begins *Unit One* with *Why didn't the call go through?*, and establishes a general pattern for the rest of the book. The unit is divided into the activities, the first called *Thinking about it*. Here Blum provides several questions for discussion: "Have you ever had a problem making a telephone call? What happened? Have you ever heard a recorded message? What did you hear?" In this section the students are introduced to the topic of each unit in a personal way.

Next is *Tuning In*. This is the students' first exposure to the recorded message. For example, in the first unit Blum gives a brief written introduction and then the students listen to the segment and identify several phone number changes. In the following units, the students are asked to identify the main idea or general topics covered in the recorded segment. The task focuses the students' attention on listening, and without discouraging anyone, prepares them for the more difficult tasks to come. A script for this and all other recordings is printed in the appendix.

The third activity is called *Listening Vocabulary*. Students learn the new words they'll need for the more complex listening segments. Rather than providing a simple vocabulary list, soon to be forgotten, Blum asks students to match sentences with similar meaning and asks for a discussion of the new terms.

Blum follows with another *Tuning in* activity where students listen to the original segment a second time, this time looking for more specifics. In Unit One this consists of giving students a list of words and asking them to complete a transcription of the segment as they listen. Then follow several *true/false* questions based on the segment. The students must gradually give more energy to understanding the message.

At this point the units begin to differ somewhat, based on the particular situations being presented, but a pattern is still in place. In some of the units a new recorded segment is presented and the skills previously practiced are applied to the new message. In other units Blum provides additional activities involving the original message. These additional activities include, *Tuning in for details* where students must focus on even more detailed information in the original message, and a *Figuring it out* section where students take information from the recorded message and apply it personally to questions and situations. For example, in one unit where students listen to an information recording from a movie theater, they figure out how much three tickets to *Empire of the Sun* would cost, how much it would be if one ticket was for Grandmother, and how much they'd save by going to the matinee.

Also, all but one of the units have a *Review* section where students answer true/false or multiple choice questions about the main points and important vocabulary in the unit. This helps in developing the auditory memory needed to understand actual spoken messages. Answers to these questions are found in the appendix along with answers to all the book's exercises.

The most effective activities Blum has placed in the book are the last two: *Role-play* and *Life Skills*. Here the students actually put to work the skills they've been learning in the other sections. For the role-play, students work in pairs to create life-like situations. Student A calls a restaurant to ask about the food, prices, reservations and directions to the restaurant. Student B, the employee, answers the questions.

The lesson comes together in the *Life Skills* section. Students are given directions to apply the new skills to real-life tasks, outside the classroom. In one of the units, this section asks students to call or visit the Chamber of Commerce in their city to ask about upcoming festivals. Here students can live the application of their new skills. Blum provides space in the book for students to record the information they find. This is something she includes in nearly every activity, giving teachers and students the means to concretely evaluate any progress or problems.

Tuning in to spoken messages thus takes students step-by-step through a sensitive and worthwhile program, a program sure to have a positive and significant effect on their ability to listen and thus communicate effectively in the new language. Blum expresses in the introduction the hope that this program will be a starting point for teachers and students. "The most successful listening materials," she writes, "are those that are highly relevant and finely tuned to students' real-life needs and language-learning goals." She appears to be encouraging teachers to add their own *Life Skills* activities to the ones presented in each unit, activities based on the specific needs of specific students. But *Tuning in to spoken messages* seems more than just a place to start. It's already a genuine listening comprehension program, and there could certainly be a temptation to let it stand on its own. Yet any teacher with the energy and creativity to move beyond the author's material would certainly be moving into the realm of exceptional teaching and learning--and that seems to be what Blum is hoping for.

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