Decoding activities

Here are some generative activity-types to help students develop their decoding processes by focussing on unknown words, phrases and structures.

i. Unknown words

Read and listen to Dan talking about where the Pirahã live. Write the words you hear in the blanks. Compare with a partner.

If you, if you take out all the country ___ of South America, it would be right in the ___ of South America ...

Do you understand the words? Can you guess, more or less, what they mean? Discuss.

When listening to a stream of connected speech, with its blurred word boundaries, non-expert listeners often find it difficult to identify words, even if they already know them. The first part of this activity is simply 'listen and write'. Students can be asked to write any sounds or syllables they think they've heard, before comparing and discussing.

The second part of the activity encourages the use co-text to narrow down meaning, perhaps even guessing at the word by using the information obtained from the first listening.

These combined activities help students tolerate a degree of ambiguity, which is particularly helpful for risk avoiders, who are, by nature, reluctant to form conclusions. If we are to help students develop their listening skills, we need to encourage them to use this achievement strategy or compensatory process.

This activity includes a short audio transcript. Using these, where a significant amount of reading isn't required, can be very useful. The text in conjunction with and activity economically demonstrates a listening strategy, without requiring lengthy explanation from the teacher. (Answers at end).

Here's a different activity, based on the same snippet of text.

This time, phrases which students might find difficult to understand in context are given in advance of listening. The teacher models aspects of pronunciation, for example, syllable stress and word linking before students do pair work in which they use the phrases to complete an activity. Once suggestions have been shared around the class, students can listen to the section to see if their ideas were mentioned.

Prior work on phrases which students might have difficulty in understanding provides for success orientation, which will improve students' self-confidence early on in the listening lesson.

ii. Phrases

Work with a partner. Look at the map of South America. The Pirahã live in the 'area of detail'. Make sentences to describe where they live using the phrases below. Use your dictionary to help.

a. c**ou**ntry b**ou**ndaries
b. in the heart**--**of South**--**America
c. the**--y--**Amazon Rainforest

Grammar, or function words (ones which have no clear dictionary definition) are usually downgraded in prominence in connected speech. This makes comprehension doubly difficult for students who have a limited representation of the language at their disposal. English has 50 of these (see John Field for a list), so they're worth regular focus.

iii. Grammar (1)

You are going to listen to 7 phrases taken from the audio.

You will hear each one 3 times.

There is **ONE** word which occurs in **ALL** 7 phrases. What is it?

Check you ideas in the audio script.

This activity can be done before or after students do the main listening activities. The phrases have been extracted from the whole text.

Using the audacity programme, it's easy to cut very short sections which might contain the same grammatical element, and give students practice in understanding that particular element.

Once we've identified common elements in our listening text audio-script, we can isolate phrases and devise an activity around them. Practice like this, over time, helps students develop their decoding skills.

You can find the mp3 of this text with this post, so try it out for yourself. (The answer's at the end).

Here's a similar activity based on decoding of grammar.

Again, this activity has been devised using the audacity programme. Its purpose is not to teach a structure, rather it is to give students practice in recognising it in context. It's a good activity for risk-takers, and they are asked to listen very carefully. This activity contrasts two similar sounding auxiliaries (denoted by blue and red blanks). Students could be asked to guess which 2 words could be used to complete the sentences, before listening to check. Rather than focus on two different structures, the same activity-type could be used to focus on different forms of the same structure if it occurs in the audio text. Again, the audio is available with this post. (Answers at the end).

iii. Grammar (2)

Listen to the phrases. You will hear each one 3 times. Complete the gaps.

1. It _____ be right in the …
2. It _____ take us ….
3. All the travel I _____ ever …
4. … first travel I _____ ever underta…
5. No, they _____ be interested at all… [20]

An activity to help students use their grammatical knowledge to make predictions.

iii. Grammar (3)

Look at these phrases. What do you expect to come **next**? Match 1-4 with a-d. Compare with a partner.

1 … bring them things like xxx   a. adjective
2 … planning to go back in xxx   b. noun
3 … they were extremely xxx   c. examples
4 … sounds like a xxx   d. time word

Answers:

1 c   2 d   3 a   4 b

[22]

Lower-level students and risk-avoiders won't be able or prepared to make predictions as they listen, and yet this is a very useful strategy. Whilst acknowledging predicting might remain difficult to do, the following activity demonstrates to students that they could use resources they might already have and so buy themselves some valuable time, making listening a little easier.
Select phrases containing structures that students are already fairly confident at using, so they will have mental representations of the structures to draw on for comparison. You could play the snippet and pause for students to make their guesses before listening to confirm.

Here's another activity-type which incorporates a transcript of the audio text.

iii. Grammar (4)

Listen again and read the beginning of the interview. What do you think the following words refer to?

them   they   you   it

Presenter: OK, well, er to start with, let's er p-put **them** into some sort of geographical position. Whereabouts are **they**, how how many of **them** are there?

Dan: There are about 350 Pirahã spread out over 300 miles of the Maici River. If **you** if **you** take out all the country boundaries of South America, **it** would be right in the heart of South America, right in the middle, in the middle of the Amazon rainforest.

[23]

In this particular listening text, both speakers frequently use pronouns for co-referents which are either understood between them, or are evident as co-referents have been mentioned previously in the text. If speakers in a text you choose use do this, it's worth pointing this out early on in your listening lesson. Here, rather than simply hearing the word, students are directed to identify the co-referent of the pronoun to help them follow what's being said.
Again, the beauty of this exercise is that it economically exemplifies characteristics of the text which might cause problems. It also provides practice in a 'safe' format, demonstrates a strategy (ie. think both inside and outside the text), and it sets the scene for what's to follow in terms of commonly used features of this particular text.

Answers to activities.
i. boundaries; heart
iii. (1) the word is *not*
iii. (2) 1 would 2 would 3 had 4 had 5 wouldn't