

Helping Students Become More Effective Listeners



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1. Focus on Context: Activate different types of background knowledge

A Focus on the topic



Look at the photos. What can you guess about Dan Everett and life in the Amazon? Discuss with a partner.

B Reading text

B Focus on the programme

You are going to listen to part of a BBC radio programme called *Excess Baggage*. Read about the programme and write *T* (true), *F* (false) or *DS* (doesn't say) next to the sentences.

- Excess Baggage* is a holiday programme.
- Dan Everett wasn't working at the university when he first went to visit the Pirahã.
- Dan Everett teaches the Pirahã language.

Excess Baggage is a weekly BBC Radio 4 programme on which people who have spent time travelling are interviewed about the places they have been to and the things they have learnt. In this programme Dan Everett, who now works at Illinois State University in the United States, talks about his experiences with the Pirahã tribe in the Amazon jungle. He has spent much of the past thirty years living with them, studying their language and culture.

C Focus on the speaker(s)

Listen to the beginning of the interview. Who do you find easier to understand, the interviewer or Dan Everett? Why? Compare with a partner.

D Focus on the audio text

What do you expect to hear on the rest of the programme? Put a tick, question mark or cross next to items 1-5. Add your own ideas and compare and discuss with a partner.

1 examples of the Pirahã language	4 the noise of machines
2 people talking at the same time	5 <i>your ideas</i> ...
3 someone laughing	

2. Focus on Content: Decoding and meaning building

a. Help listeners decode words

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.



Blurred word boundaries make it difficult for non-expert listeners to identify words.

The first part of this activity is 'listen and write'. Students can write any sounds or syllables they think they've heard. The second part encourages the use of 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 helpful for risk avoiders. 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.

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.



- country boundaries
- in the heart--of South--America
- the--y--Amazon Rainforest

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.

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 your ideas in the audio script.

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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.

iii. Grammar (2)

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

- It _____ be right in the ...
- It _____ take us
- All the travel I _____ ever ...
- ... first travel I _____ ever underta...
- No, they _____ be interested at all...

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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

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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.

b. Help listeners understand...

i. specific information (then figurative language use – depending on text)

Listen to the next part of the interview and complete the answers to questions 1-4. Compare and discuss in groups.

- 1 What does Dan say about travelling in the Amazon jungle? It's better to travel ...
a overland. b. by plane c. as a group.
- 2 When Dan and his family arrived, how did the Pirahã react? They
a were friendly.
b wanted presents.
c asked him lots of questions.
- 3 How did the Pirahã react to Dan learning their language? They
a thought he was silly.
b were surprised he understood them
c thought it was interesting.
- 4 What travelling experiences had Dan had before he went to the Amazon? He'd travelled
a from Southern California to Mexico.
b a lot in Southern California.
c around Mexico.

Work closely with the audio-script to weight-up difficulty-level

1.

P: What's it like travelling in that part of the world?

D: It can be challenging. It's gotten **easier** over the years with the advent of float **planes** or the easier availability of float **planes**, but, er, it would take us, in the early days, with **the family**, it was a week to two week **boat** trip to get in to the tribe, a very difficult situation as it required carrying large amounts of supplies for the family **overland** through the jungle.

2.

P: You mentioned there that the Pirahã were unusual in that they didn't want any material gifts or input from the outside world. What about human input? Were they ... did they **welcome** you and your little tribe arriving?

D They were **very friendly**, surprisingly so. I didn't know what to expect but they were **extremely friendly**

iii. The main points / detail

Listen to the next part of the interview. Put a - c in the order you hear them. Compare with a partner.

Students read ...

The speaker says ...

- | | |
|---|---|
| a. The language doesn't have words for numbers or colours. | no numbers / no colour words |
| b. Dan was the first person to translate the Pirahã language. | first person / translate / language |
| c. The Pirahã are very primitive but happy. | most primitive / extremely satisfied / pleased |

Identifying the main points requires that listeners decide which information is important, and which is to be ignored.

This exercise implicitly helps listeners discriminate between the main/subsidiary points. Students could highlight the information needed to understand in the audio-script – so they can see what they don't need to understand. As they become more proficient, and depending on difficulty level of text, cues can be less similar to words spoken.

Interestingly, students will probably stop listening after they've identified the first two points, a wash-back (and logical) process from testing strategies. Doing so in a 'teaching' rather than 'testing' context lessens listening exposure, and so we would want to build in something to pre-empt it. You could always tell students (especially the risk-takers) that they will be asked about the exact speaker's words.

Audio script

P: As you were going around being this highly educated parrot as you say, what were you learning about the way that the people lived, before we come on to the language.

D: I, I learned that they had, what was technologically it was perhaps the most primitive culture I had ever read about or seen, that they also seemed extremely satisfied and pleased. I know a lot of indigenous groups that I've met since then who are dissatisfied with their lot in their lives because they desire things from the outside world. But the secret to the Pirahã seemed to me to be their lack of interest in the outside world and I wanted to know where that came from so that launched me on studies of their culture.

P: You were the first person to fully translate, and other explorers have picked up some of their vocabulary, but in terms of really translating the Pirahã language, you were the first man to do that, and, through that, that work, you realised that actually the way they spoke, and the way it related to their daily life challenged their basic precepts of linguistic science, is that right?

D: That's right. I mean I noticed first of all that they didn't have any numbers or counting, and these are have been proposed to be innate in all humans, at least some sort of number system but the Pirahã have no numbers, no counting and they have no colour words.

iv. The main point

Work with a partner and guess which option (a-c) completes the short summary of what Dan says in the final part of the interview. Listen and check.

When Dan visits the Pirahã,

a he gives them presents **and** they ask for news from other parts of Brazil.

b he gives them presents **and** the tribe talk about what they've been doing.

c they talk about what the tribe's been doing **and** the tribe want to know about America.

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The wording of options a-c, the number of propositions in each one and proximity of one to another contributes to the overall difficulty level of the activity. Each option contains two propositions, but there are only 4 propositions in total. The fewer the propositions, the less the cognitive overload placed upon the listener's memory, but this should be balanced so that the risk-takers are required to concentrate on more of the text to arrive at the correct answer.

In this particular activity, the answer (b) is a more concrete realisation what is inferred by the speaker, that the tribe are essentially inward looking. Once students are more competent and confident in identifying the main point in a listening text, they would be more able to deal more effectively with inference type activities.

Audio script

P: Are you, are you, do you visit them often, or do you get out there often?

D: Over the past 30 years I've I have never missed a year with them, er spending at least 3-4 months of the year with them. I haven't been able to be with them since I just moved to the States, since January 2007, but I'm planning to go back in June of 2009 to spend some time with them.

P: And how is it when you arrive there? Is is do do you have a party what ...?

D: Well, they all crowd around and they start asking me *Where were you? You should have been here the whole time, you know, we missed you and er what did you bring us?* You know, I always bring them things like coffee and sugar, and, you know, little candies, and things like this that they like and er we just sit around and talk for quite a while about what's been going on. They tell me about their children and I ask about new children in the village and er we have a great time.

P: When you go back next time, I'm just thinking of the big news, we ... particularly for someone from Illinois, the election of president er president elect Obama, will they be interested to hear about that?

D: No, they wouldn't be interested at all. They, they don't even, the concept of a chief or a president or something like someone who has authority over a large group doesn't mean much. Er I had a Pirahã out with me in the city of Brasilia once, the capital of Brazil, for health reasons and and I took him to a function. Er the president of Brazil was passing by and I just said that's the, you know, the person who tells other Brazilians what to do, trying to get across the ... Oh right, is there a place where we can have lunch? They were completely uninterested.

P: That's all Dan for the moment. Thank you very much indeed, and Dan's book *Dont's Sleep There Are Snakes* is a Radio 4 Book of the Week from Monday 17th November.

3. Useful references & resources

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