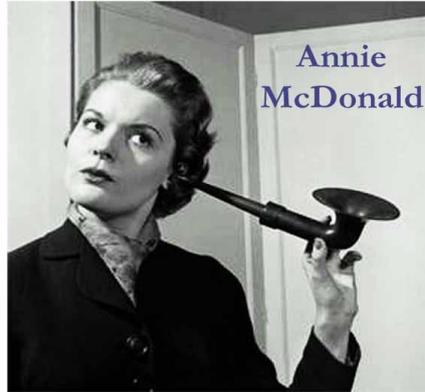


TESOL France 2012

Helping Students Become More Effective Listeners



1. Listening and listeners

Before getting down to devising listening activities based on authentic listening material, it's worth thinking about the listening process along with the character traits of the listener. Here's a somewhat over-simplified description of both.

a. Listening

There are two main processes we engage in when making sense of an audio signal. We decode – we identify sounds, syllables and words, and we also build meaning. We might decode sounds and syllables so we can identify, say, the word 'bank', as well as use contextual clues to work out what meaning of the word 'bank' is intended. These processes don't necessarily happen consecutively. Rather, they happen like simultaneous two-way traffic.

b. The listener

The extent to which individuals are willing to deal with ambiguity and to take risks can affect the degree to which they understand an audio text in a second language.

Ambiguity in text might come about for many reasons - it might be intended, or it might occur by virtue of the listener not understanding sufficient of the audio signal to follow meaning. Broadly speaking, some of us are happy to live with it, others not so.

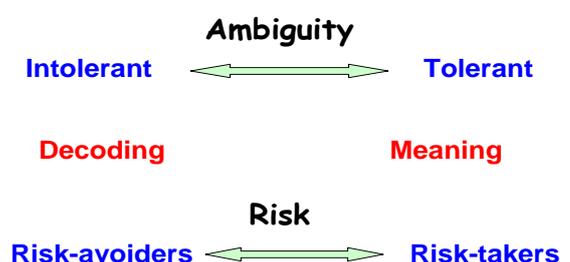
Similarly, some of us are happy to take risks and might, by nature, be content at guessing at what we haven't fully decoded. Alternatively, we might want to understand absolutely every word before we address meaning. Both character traits, in their extremes, tend to hinder a second language learner's ability to deal with audio text, especially if that text is authentic.

The language learning listener who is by nature intolerant of ambiguity and has a tendency to avoid risk, will be more inclined to devote attention to the decoding process. Those who are more tolerant of ambiguity and happy to take risks will tend to prioritise meaning building as opposed to accurate decoding. The converse is also true.

1a. Listening

Processes
Decoding
Meaning building

1b. Listeners



2. The Listening Lesson

Some of the activities that follow were written to be used with about 5 minutes worth of an authentic listening text, divided into 4/5 snippets and exploited to make a 45/50 minute listening lesson. Taken together, the snippets give the flavour and main content of a 30 minute BBC radio programme. Each snippet provides listening input for a different listening focus/section of the lesson. The programme was a studio interview with Dan Everett, who has studied the life and culture of an Amazon tribe.

To follow are a range of activity-types you could use to focus on various elements of context and content with authentic texts of your choice.

3. Focus on Context: Background Knowledge

You could choose *one* or *two* of the following task types (A-D)

Task A: Focus on the programme (situational knowledge). Write a short text providing introductory information about the programme – a reading text containing the type of information a person who chose to listen to it would know about. Devise *true*, *false* and *doesn't say* statements to make sure students have basic facts and don't start with mistaken assumptions. You could include foreign words, if appropriate. For example,

Task A: reading text

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. ²

Focus on the programme (A)

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.

- 1 **Excess Baggage** is a holiday programme.
- 2 Dan Everett wasn't working at the university when he first went to visit the Pirahã.
- 3 Dan Everett teaches the Pirahã language. ³

Task B: Focus on the speakers (speaker knowledge). If the audio you are using has speakers with different accents / dialects - select a short snippet from the beginning of the programme. Ask students to listen and discuss who they find easiest to understand and why.

Task C: Focus on the topic (world knowledge). Select 2/3 pictures which give a flavour of the topic. Ask students to discuss in groups what they can guess about the topic. Class brainstorm. Don't comment.

Task D: Focus on the audio text (schematic knowledge and knowledge of setting). After students have listened to a short introductory section, give them a list of about 4 examples of elements that might appear in the snippets eg. content information, qualities of spoken language, aspects of speaker styles, and general features of audio texts (background noise, music etc.). Ask students to tick, put a cross or a question mark next to each one to indicate if they expect to hear these things in the rest of the audio. Students can add their own ideas, and then discuss in pairs or groups. Ask students to justify their answers, but don't give feedback. They could return to this at the end of the listening.

3a. Focussing on Content - decoding

Select from the following activities A-C, depending on the text and your students needs.

Task A: Unknown words

Give students a short section of the audio script, with one or two words blanked out. Ask them to listen and read, and write the word(s) or parts of the word(s) they heard and compare with a partner. Then get them to use the words surrounding the blanks to try and refine the words or identify an approximate meaning.

Task B: Phrases

Select 2 or 3 topically-connected key phrases. Cut the phrases from the audio (use audacity) and play each one 3 times for students to tune into how they sound. Ask students, in pairs or groups, to identify the phrases and then make a sentence containing the phrases.

Task C: Grammar

Type 1

Give students different snippets containing the same linguistic item (taken from all the snippets) but in different environments.

For example,

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.

4

Grammar (1) answers

1. They didn't want any material gif ...
2. I didn't know what to expect ...
3. I don't know if they ...
4. They didn't have any numbers ...
5. I haven't been able to be with them...
6. No, they wouldn't be interested at all...
7. Dan's book, Don't Sleep There are Snakes, ...

5

Type 2

Give students different snippets containing similar sounding structures, along with a gap fill activity.

For example;

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 really ...
4. ... first travel I _____ ever underta...
5. No, they _____ be interested at all...

6

Grammar (2) answers

- It **would** be right in the ...
- It **would** take us
- The first travel I **had** ever really ...
- No, they **wouldn't** be interested at all...
- All the travels I **had** ever really ...

7

Type 3

Select a couple of incomplete phrases for students to use grammatical information to predict the type of information which follows. Students should already be familiar with the form.

For example,

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

Type 4

Use a short section of the audio transcript to help students understand how pronouns refer to nouns within and across sentences, as well as to things understood in the context (in this case, between the speakers).

For example,

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.

10

Grammar (4) answers

them - members of the tribe

they - members of the tribe

you - indefinite, impersonal 'you' = anyone

it - the tribe

11

3b. Focussing on Content: understanding (meaning building)

Devise 1 or 2 activity types for each of the main sections of your audio. You could focus on

- specific information
- meaning in context (figurative language use)
- identifying the main points/detail
- the main point and/or inference

If you use a snippet more than once, check students have the information they need to do the second, probably more challenging, activity.

Task A: Focus on specific information. Moderate the difficulty level through the number and wording of the options (see a-c below, alongside the corresponding audio script on the left).

Once students have some specific information from the listening, the same listening snippet can be used in conjunction with more taxing activities.

Multiple choice

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

- 1 What does Dan say about travelling in the Amazon jungle?
 - a It's better to travel overland.
 - b It's better to travel by plane.
 - c It's better to travel as a group.
- 2 When Dan and his family arrived, how did the Pirahã react?
 - a They were friendly.
 - b They wanted presents.
 - c They asked him lots of questions.

12

Audio-script for questions 1 and 2

Bold and underlined words indicate what students will need to understand to identify the correct option.

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**

13

Task B: Understanding meaning in context – figurative language use. (Optional follow-up to task a – depending on text).

For example,

Sequencing and discussion

Listen again and put the phrases a – d in the order you hear them. What do they mean? Find them in the audio script and compare with a partner.

- a a highly-trained parrot
- b in the early days
- c a really tough expedition
- d your little tribe

14

Task C: Identifying the main points / detail. Make sure the options are simple summaries of the points made by the speakers. Mediate the difficulty-level by adjusting the similarity of how the options are phrased and what they speaker says.

For example,

Sequencing

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

Students read ...

- a. The Pirahã language doesn't have words for numbers and colours.
- b. Dan was the first person to translate the Pirahã language.
- c. The Pirahã are more primitive than other cultures Dan's met.

15

Task D: Identifying the main point. Think about the number of propositions in each summary option and the differences between each one (see examples a-c below). The more content, the more the student has to remember while listening. The closer the options, the greater the cognitive load.

For example,

Summary selection

Read sentences a – c. Work with a partner and guess which short summary reflects what Dan says in the final part of the interview. Listen and check.

- a When Dan visits the Pirahã, he gives them presents and the Pirahã ask about the news from other parts of Brazil.
- b When Dan visits the Pirahã, he gives them presents and they talk about what the tribe's been doing.
- c When Dan visits the Pirahã, they talk about what the tribe's been doing and the Pirahã want to know about America.

17

Audio-script

The speaker says ...

- a. no numbers / no colour words**
- b. first person / translate / language**
- c. most primitive ever seen**

16

Task E Understanding inference. Depending on your student's level, the difficulty level of the text and the degree of explicitness, Task D might serve as a spring-board for understanding and discussion of inference.

Postscript

A balanced listening lesson will be one which gives students the opportunity to develop their decoding and meaning-building skills. It will also be one that nudges different learners according to their character traits. For example, some might be encouraged to deal with ambiguity more effectively, and be less reluctant or more pragmatic when it comes to risk taking. Others, those who might err on the side of tolerance, a willingness to take risks, and a tendency to prioritise meaning-building, might be nudged to direct greater attention to accuracy and gain a better understanding of what they hear.

Listening and Listeners

