The Case For Unscripted Listening Comprehension Materials*

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1. Introduction: inadequacies of listening comprehension programmes: In TEFL circles, the importance of the listening comprehension component in the English language learning programme is a well-established principle which most specialists and teachers claim to support. It is viewed as an integral part of "teaching a foreign language as communication which has become an accepted aim of the foreign-language teacher throughout the world"[1]. And yet, although "teaching the comprehension of spoken language is ... of primary importance if the communication aim is to be achieved"[2] (ibid), the literature abounds with evidence of our failure to give the non-native speaking learner of English the listening strategies needed for communication *outside* the TEFL classroom in real life situations[3]. Various reasons have been given for this failure[4]. Only rarely, however is it suggested that the fault may be with the way we teach-or, I would argue, fail to teach-listening comprehension[5].

At first sight, it might be thought that such a claim is excessive; there is, after all, no lack of materials which claim to teach the skills involved in this language activity, as a look at the relevant publishers' catalogues will testify. However, on closer inspection, it soon becomes apparent that the majority of these materials *practise* and/or *test* listening comprehension rather than *teach* it. This is hardly surprising given the paucity of relevant research into the perception and comprehension of speech in a foreign language including EFL. We have, as yet, no clear model based on relevant experimental evidence of the steps in the process of listening with comprehension in a foreign language, of the skills involved, nor of the stages through which the learner passes before reaching a level of aural fluency[6] at which he can listen to the FL with ease and comprehension in real-life communication. Indeed, a look at the literature sheds little light at all on such issues, a staggering fact given

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the general acceptance of the importance of listening comprehension in FL programmes.[7]

The problem, however, is not simply that available materials do not, in the main, teach listening comprehension. More importantly, it has been claimed, in my view rightly, that the amount of attention that is given to listening comprehension on EFL programmes, certainly at the school level, falls "far short of what we now find is a basic requirement of those learning a foreign language"[8]. At the time these words were written it was possible to lay the blame for this state of affairs on the two competing approaches to foreign language learning which dominated TEFL debates. On the one hand, "audio-lingual" courses tended in reality to be more lingual than audio; in other words, the emphasis was on teaching the learner to speak (rather than listen to) the language "with some fluency and authentic idiom"[9]. On the other hand, courses based on the "cognitive code" approach, in line with transformational-generative grammar theory[10], tended to be predominantly concerned with developing the learner's competence in English, the assumption being that once the learner has achieved mastery of the rules for generating- and, presumably, interpreting-English sentences, the skills needed to perform in the language will follow naturally and as a matter of course. Perhaps the swing towards a communicative, or functional, approach to language learning will generate course materials that will avoid these pitfalls, although, of those few which have been published so far, most, like audio-lingual courses, seem to focus on developing the speaking skills[11].

Finally, even when a reasonable proportion of learning time is allowed for listening comprehension, it seems to me that the teaching of this activity-when it actually occurs-is random, unsystematic and uneconomical, and that the learner's exposure to spoken English in the classroom or the language laboratory is inadequate in terms of content and quality. In the remainder of this paper I shall consider some reasons why the learner's exposure is inadequate in quality and suggest some ways in which this could be remedied.

2. Reasons for the listening comprehension difficulties of non-native speakers of English :

In recent years a number of studies have been conducted which have attempted to identify these features of the speech of native-speakers of English which contribute to the listening comprehension difficulties of non-native speakers studying in countries where English is the L1[12]. Although they differ in terms of the hierarchical order in which they place these features, all agree that, among other things, three major causes of difficulty are:

1. the speed at which native-speakers speak;

2. unfamiliarity with the performance variables which characterize native-speaker speech.

and 3. the confusing variety of native-speaker accents.

Although these conclusions may not at first sight appear directly relevant to the problems of learners of English in Southeast Asia-most of whom are unlikely ever to visit a country where English is the LI-I think, as I hope to show later, that they have important implications if one of our purposes in teaching English in the region is to enable our students to communicate in the language.

As well as identifying those features of native-speaker speech which cause the students problems of comprehension, these studies offer reasons why so many of the students-and, by implication, learners of EFL in general-are so ill-equipped to understand spoken English in real-life situations. Again they all reach similar conclusions. In the first place, even where the learners study English predominantly through the spoken word, the amount of spoken English to which most of them are exposed is extremely limited. Even so, this problem of exposure time would be less acute if the English to which the learners are exposed were more relevant. Of course, it is not always possible to identify the specific communication needs of learners following "general-purpose" courses, that is the purposes for which they need to use the language, the situational contexts in which they will use it, and the language-using skills that they need for these purposes and in these contexts. However, there are other ways, over which we have a considerable measure of control, in which the kind of spoken English to which the learners are exposed is inappropriate and inadequate. These relate to the type of English heard in class-room and the range of voices to which they are exposed.

3. Inadequacy of exposure:

There is a general conviction that the type of spoken English to which the EFL learner is exposed in the classroom bears little resemblance to the way English is spoken in actual communication and that this is "the single most important cause of our students' difficulties in aural comprehension outside the classroom."[13] This is because most learners of English study the language in their own country and only hear English spoken by their teacher. If the teacher is, as is most likely, a fellow countryman, he almost certainly speaks a "non-native speaker dialect" of English; if, much more rarely, he is a native-speaker, he probably adopts an "ex-patriate native -speaker style" in the classroom[14]. In either event, what the learner hears is likely to differ considerably from normal native-speaker speech at both the phonological and syntactic levels.

At the phonological level the classroom English heard by the learner

is probably delivered slowly and precisely with each word carefully articulated-sometimes inaccurately-and the divisions between words clearly marked. In effect, what the learner hears, and, more importantly, becomes *accustomed* to hearing, is a form of English which is phonologically distorted, and thus unnatural, since it deletes such phonological characteristics of native-speaker speech as vowel reduction in unstressed syllables, contraction, elision, and liaison. The result is a distortion of the characteristic phonic and rhythmic patterning of spoken English[15].

At the syntactic level, the EFL teacher characteristically tries to provide a model which is grammatically accurate-however that may be defined-as well as phonologically clear. There seem to be two underlying reasons for this. The first is the teacher's conviction that a slow, accurate delivery will facilitate comprehension for the learner. The second, which I have already referred to, is the predominant emphasis on developing the learner's ability to *speak* English, an emphasis which ignores the fact that in normal communication native-speakers do not compose sequences of grammatically accurate sentences. What the teacher offers, then, is a *productive* model which is geared to helping the learner to speak accurately and comprehensibly. This is a perfectly laudable aim, but speaking is only one half of the act of spoken communication[16]. The learner must also be able to decode and interpret a stream of authentic spoken English with all its attendant performance variables such as false starts, hesitation features, repetitions, filler phrases, formulaic expressions, incomplete sentences, grammatically inaccurate sentences, and sentences with grammatical changes of direction.

The characteristics of the EFL teacher's spoken classroom English -and of many published recorded materials-which I have discussed above explain in large part why many foreign learners of English are unable to cope with the speed of delivery of native-speakers and are unfamiliar with the characteristic performance variables of native-speaker speech. This typical classroom English also explains the third major cause of the learner's difficulty in understanding English outside the classroom, namely his lack of exposure to a wide variety of speakers of English. Obviously, the learner's customary diet of the teacher is not sufficient to give him the variety of exposure that he needs for communicative purposes. Unfortunately, despite their potential for flexibility, most existing published recorded materials, particularly at the beginner level, do little to vary the diet, relying as they do on carefully scripted texts spoken by a limited range of speakers using stereotype voices and speaking an

idealized standard English slowly and clearly. Such a diet offers the learner exposure to the spoken word which is unnatural in articulation and severely restricted in range. As a result, instead of the aural flexibility[17] that he needs if he is to listen with comprehension to the wide range of internationally comprehensible phonological varieties of spoken English, the learner develops a narrow and rigid mental set for how English should sound.

Given the type of spoken English and the limited range of speakers to whom foreign learners of English are exposed, it is hardly surprising therefore that many of them become confused and experience considerable difficulties of comprehension when they hear English which is typical of educated native-speaker (and, indeed, non-native-speaker) speech but which does not equate with what they have come to expect. In my view this problem would be greatly reduced if more use were made of unscripted recorded materials.

4. Advantages of unscripted recorded materials:

Stated briefly unscripted recorded materials[18] potentially have two major advantages over most scripted materials at present available. In the first place they are delivered at normal pace and so retain the characteristic phonic and rhythmic pattern of authentic spoken English. Secondly, they retain the performance variables of natural native-speaker speech, a factor which can, and should, be exploited to improve the learner's aural fluency.

To take up the first point, it is my opinion that EFL listening materials, whether they are recorded or presented by the teacher, should be delivered at normal native-speaker speed and that this should be done *from the earliest stages of the learning process.* This is essential if the learner is to develop the ability to attune his ear to spoken English in real-life situations. And yet it seems, and indeed is, unrealistic to expect the new learner to be able to handle authentic spoken English delivered at normal speed *and* in the normal time-span.

The answer to this dilemma lies in the *length* of the word groups presented and of the *pauses* between them. It has been shown that the amount of information carried by "chunks" of language increases rapidly as the size of the chunks (i.e. the number of words per chunk) increases[19] In fact, the native-speaker is able to cope with chunks of meaningful sequences of words up to seventeen words in length[20], which explains why pauses in native-speaker speech tend to occur at major syntactic boundaries. The non-native speaking learner, however, has a significantly shorter memory-span for meaningful sequences of words (eight to ten words)[21], and he also needs more time to process the acoustic input.

The EFL teacher has always been aware of this need and has extended the temporal span of spoken messages by slowing down his speed of delivery. I would suggest an alternative procedure.

In an important piece of research, Friedman and Johnson have shown[22] that the temporal span of the whole spoken message is a more significant factor in the perception of speech then the speed at which word-groups within the message are delivered. Even in a FL, the speed of delivery of word-groups may be increased considerably without the listener's comprehension being significantly affected *as long as the pauses between the word-groups are increased proportionally so that the temporal span of the whole message remains the same.* From this evidence we may conclude that it is not necessary to slow down the rate of delivery for the learner even at the earliest stages of learning: instead, the length of word-groups should initially be short and the pauses between them longer than normal so that the learner is only required to handle chunks of language that his processing mechanism can cope with while being given sufficient time to complete the decoding process. As the learner develops greater aural fluency in the language the length of the word-groups can be gradually increased while the pauses between them are gradually reduced. Eventually, the point is reached when the learner is listening to and understanding spontaneous natural speech at the normal rate of delivery with reasonable accuracy. Such a procedure presents no problem where the teacher is the source of the listening material, and a good technician, given a clear brief, can explode unscripted recorded materials without too much difficulty.

The speed of delivery of listening comprehension materials is perhaps a less controversial issue than what I consider to be the second great advantage of unscripted recorded materials, namely that they retain the performance variables of natural native-speaker speech. In my view, any listener's ability to interpret a particular message is influenced to an important degree by the *amount* of information[23] it conveys as well as the *rate* at which it is encoded (i.e. the speed at which it is delivered). Any message is redundant[24] to a greater or lesser extent, that is the more information a message carries, the less redundant it will be[25]. In information theory terms, then, some of the performance variables of natural speech[26] can be viewed as adding to the redundancy in the message-at least for the native-speaker. Effectively they reduce the information load carried by the message by extending its temporal span, that is, they function like pauses between chunks of language which give the listener the time he needs to complete his processing of the acoustic input. It would seem to me, therefore, that, if the learner is

able to recognize those performance variables in natural speech which extend the message, but which are empty of meaning, he will be able to filter them out (i.e. not process them) when they occur; thus he will be able to use the time he saves to focus his attention on processing the main meaning-bearing elements in the message. And yet most published recorded materials, by conforming to an idealized standard of sequences of grammatically "correct" sentences, deliberately omit these variables. In so doing, they *increase* the information load in the message and at the same time *reduce* its temporal span. In other words:

"...we may be demanding *more* of our foreign-language listeners in the exercises we present than is demanded in native-language listening."[27]

In short, then, I believe that the learner's exposure to spoken English from the earliest stages in the learning process should include-though not consist exclusively of-unscripted natural speech if one of our aims is to give him the skills he needs to understand natural spoken English.

There remains one other major advantage of recorded materials which so far has tended to remain potential rather than actual, namely the variety of voices that they can encompass. I have already referred to the learner's customary diet of exposure to spoken English and the limitations of most published recorded materials. It seems to me that one of the major objectives of recorded materials, whether unscripted or not, should be to provide the learner with as wide a range of exposure to different educated speakers of English as can be realistically incorporated in a course of limited time. The speakers should vary according to sex, age, geographical region, and, at a more advanced stage, social class. They should include non-native speakers as well as native-speakers. In the context of Southeast Asia, the native-speakers should include Australians and New Zealanders as well as Britons and Americans. Among the non-native speakers, priority of exposure should be given to speakers from the region, for example Thais should hear educated speakers of English from Malaysia, the Phillipines, Indonesia and so on. If time permits they should also be exposed to speakers from outside the region-for example, speakers of other European languages or from the Indian sub-continent-since many such speakers work in the region and use English to communicate where they do not have adequate command of the local language. Only with such a variety of exposure will the learner develop the aural flexibility that he will need to be able to attune his ear to the distinctive phonological characteristics of each new speaker of English that he meets.

4. Conclusion :

In this paper I have looked at three reasons why, in my opinion, the EFL learner's exposure to spoken English in the classroom or language laboratory is inadequate in quality, namely:

1. the abnormally slow speed at which many listening materials are delivered;
2. the deliberate omission of the performance variables which characterize native - speaker speech;

and 3. the narrow range of native speaker voices and accents to which the learner is exposed.

I have also suggested that these inadequacies in large part explain why so many non-native speakers of English experience comprehension difficulties when listening to natural spoken English outside the EFL classroom or language laboratory.

I have then gone on to argue that the listening problems of the non-native speaker of English would be greatly reduced if he were exposed to unscripted recorded materials on the grounds that he would thus become accustomed to hearing English spoken at normal speed with the characteristic performance variables present; he could be exposed to a wide range of educated speakers of English with different and distinctive accents and voice characteristics. In this way he would develop the aural flexibility which is an essential part of actual communication. In my view such materials could and should be used from the early stages of language learning when the listening task could be made less difficult by initially presenting the listener with small chunks of language with large pauses between them, thus extending the temporal span of the whole message without reducing the speed of delivery.

It has not been my purpose to suggest that conventional approaches to listening-or, rather, practising-listening comprehension should be abandoned, but rather that on their own they are insufficient. My purpose has been to justify the inclusion of unscripted listening materials among the existing range of materials to which the learner is exposed. In my view, unless this is done, our students will continue to be inadequately prepared to cope with spoken English in natural situations outside the classroom.

References :

1. Rivers (1968), p. 135
2. Ibid., loc. cit.
3. e.g. Sittler (1966), James (1971), James and Mullen (1972) Holes (1972), Jordan and MacKay (1974), Morrison (1974) and Frankel (1977).
4. cf. Sittler (1966) pp. 3–6, James and Mullen (1972), pp. 17–21; Holes (1972), pp. 115–7; Morrison (1974), p. 64.
5. Exceptions include Angelis (1973) as well as the works referred to in 3. above.
6. By the phrase "level of aural fluency" I mean the degree to which the listener is able to perceive, decode, and interpret quickly and accurately the natural speech of native speakers delivered at the normal speed.
7. The outstanding exception to this general comment is Wilga Rivers who, over the years, has based her approach to teaching listening comprehension largely on evidence drawn from studies of the process of perceiving and interpreting speech in the mother tongue. See for example:

    1. Rivers, 1968: Ch. 6;
    2. ——— 1972: Ch. 7;
    3. ——— 1975: Ch. 3.

8. Angelis (1973), p. 102
9. Rivers (1968), p. 135
10. For a powerful critique of the application of transformational-generative grammar to foreign language teaching see Lamendella (1969).
11. Exceptions to this generalization are "Functions of English" (1977), "Strategies" (1975), and "Starting Strategies" (1977). Significantly, only the last of these books claims to include "beginners" among its target population.
12. cf. the works referred to in 3. above.
13. Sittler (1966), p. 5
14. These terms were first used by James (1971), p. 2.
15. Even published recorded materials, with some exceptions usually aimed at "intermediate" or "advanced" learners, are unnatural in the sense that the speakers tend:

    1. to conform to an idealized standard of English of one or other of the major dialects;
    2. to enunciate clearly and slowly.

    However, as they are often recorded by professional actors, they usually manage to retain the rhythmic pattern of natural spoken English.

16. There has been considerable debate over whether the FL learner needs two grammars, one receptive, the other productive, to be able to communicate in the FL (see Naiman (1974), Swain et al. (1974), and Tarone (1974) for arguments for and against this hypothesis). However this debate is resolved. it is generally agreed that the learner's receptive knowledge of the FL needs to be substantially greater than his productive knowledge.

17. By "aural flexibility" I mean the listener's ability to adapt his listening strategy quickly and without difficulty to a wide range of speakers of English with different accents and voice characteristics.

18. By "unscripted recorded materials" I mean recordings either of actual speech or speech for which a topic, a setting, and perhaps some notes on content are provided the speaker(s) in advance. In the latter case, I assume that the speaker(s) are asked to speak as if communicating with native speakers.

19. See Miller (1956).

20. See Lado (1965), p. 127

21. Ibid., loc. cit.

22. See Friedman and Johnson (1971) and Johnson and Friedman (1971)

23. I am using "information" in the technical sense as defined by Shannon and Weaver (1949), p. 100.

24. Again, I am using "redundant" in the technical sense. Redundancy is "a measure of the excess of linguistic signals above the minimum that could carry the message" (Gleason, 1965 : 458). As well as reducing the amount of information carried, redundancy in the message "supplements and reinforces the essential detail and enhances the decoding process by extending the period of time over which the message is transmitted" (Frankel, 1977 : 155).

25. I am referring here to the redundancy in the message for the native-speaker. Linguistic redundancy is a relative concept ; thus, what is redundant for the native-speaker is not necessarily so for the non-native-speaker. Indeed one way of explaining the non-native-speaker's listening comprehension difficulties is that the degree of redundancy in the message is low; in other words, the message carries such a high information load for him that he is unable to process it and assign it a meaning in the time available.

26. Especially hesitations, repetitions, filler phrases, formulaic expressions, and pauses.

27. Rivers (1975), p. 63. My emphasis.

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