

5 Listening for comprehension

In this chapter I suggest a number of types of exercise that conform on the whole to the guide-lines laid down in Part 1: that is, they give useful preparation for real-life listening, provide practice in some specific aspects that are problematic for learners, and are straightforward to administer and interesting to do in the classroom. Of course, not all the activities conform to these principles to an equal degree: one may concentrate on practising a specific skill at the expense of enjoyment or real-life relevance; another may give good practice but be difficult to administer. But all in all I hope that the exercise-types will be found to be of a wide enough range and variety to cover the above-mentioned elements satisfactorily.

The chapter is divided into four parts: the first comprises exercises where the learner simply listens without necessarily making any overt response; in the second, a minimal (usually non-verbal) response is required to demonstrate understanding; in the third, the responses are more extensive and may involve reading, writing and speaking, and some thinking-out of problems; in the last, listening takes its place as only one (albeit fundamental) skill used in fairly demanding fluency- and study-tasks. There is a general progression from easier, simpler activities at first to more sophisticated ones at the end; but many of the exercises will be found to be appropriate to very varied levels of proficiency and different age-groups.

At least one example of each exercise-type is given in full. The accompanying text is written out in prose style with only token approximation to the spontaneous spoken mode I recommend in general. This does not mean that the text is meant to be read out in the classroom as it stands, though it can be; it is presented in this way simply to facilitate reading – exact transcriptions of spontaneous speech tend to be rather irritating and tedious to read. If the teacher wishes to try these exercises out herself, she should, in most cases, re-improvise her own text. The dialogues, which have no accompanying recording, may seem to present a particular problem: how does one teacher alone deliver them? However, I generally find it quite feasible to read or semi-improvise them to a class without much changing of voice or

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acting, provided I say the name of one speaker clearly before his or her speech, and pause before saying the next. Alternatively, some of the dialogues may be recast as monologues, or recorded as they stand with the help of another English speaker.

As regards additional ideas for actual exercises: where there are good listening comprehension books available using similar techniques I have given full references in the bibliography. Where I know of no such published material I have made some attempt to supply a number of further suggestions of my own. Such further suggestions are not usually given in the form of complete texts written out. Their content is indicated either through graphic representation or in the form of notes which the teacher can use as a basis for improvising the discourse.

Improvising from skeleton notes is very easy to do, but there are one or two points over which the teacher must take care if the improvisation is to succeed. First, she must make quite sure in advance that the notes or illustrations are easily comprehensible to her, so that she will not suddenly have to stop to puzzle out what is meant. Second, she must be aware that improvising informal discourse from notes does not just mean embedding the content in full sentences, giving a sentence to each item of information. If she does this, she will find that the resulting text will be far too concentrated, lacking the redundancy typical of spontaneous speech, and that students will have trouble keeping up and doing the listening task, particularly if the latter entails, as often recommended, a series of ongoing active responses. Thus, content given in note form must be expanded much more than at first appears necessary, using plenty of elaboration, repetition, rephrasing, 'phatic' interpolations ('well', 'you know'), comments, clarifications, appeals to the listeners ('Did you get that?' 'Are you with me?'), pauses, hesitations etc. Doing all this actually makes the improviser's task much easier, as well as resulting in a natural-sounding text that gives useful listening practice.

Here are two examples of what I mean. In each, the notes or graphic material is given first, followed by the transcription of a teacher-improvisation derived from it. In the first, a sequence of events is expanded into a story; in the second, the teacher identifies faces by description, using the portraits as a basis:

1 The fox and the geese

Hungry fox found six geese in field.
 Wanted to eat them – said so.
 Goose begged for last favour – to say prayers.
 Fox agreed.

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Geese cackled prayers loudly.
 Farmer heard, came, chased fox away.

Once upon a time there was a fox. And this fox was very very hungry. He hadn't eaten for a long time, and he was just dying for a good meal. So . . . he went out of his wood and walked towards a farm where he knew there were some . . . geese and chickens and ducks. In a field near the farm the fox came upon a flock of beautiful fat white geese. They didn't hear him coming, and when he got really close they suddenly heard him and realized that they were trapped, they couldn't get away, the fox was going to eat them. 'I'm going to eat you!' said the fox threateningly. The geese were absolutely terrified, they didn't know what to do, and they begged. . . . But one of the geese who was a little cleverer than the rest turned to the fox and said: 'Well, Mr Fox, you've got the better of us this time, you're obviously going to eat us, we have no way of escape. Can we please ask one last favour?' Well, when the fox heard this, and he was so sure the geese couldn't get away, he decided he'd give them one last favour, and he said: 'All right, one last favour you can have. What do you want?' The goose said: 'Erm . . . I'd like to say my prayers.' And this seemed a reasonable request to the fox, so he said: 'All right, you can say your prayers, but get a move on . . . I'm hungry.' He sat down and the geese began to say their prayers. Well, when geese say their prayers they say them in very loud cackles, and they opened their mouths and cackled and cackled and cackled as loudly as they could, while the fox sat and listened and thought: 'What a terrible noise they make saying their prayers.' Well, the noise of their cackling could be heard as far as the farmhouse, so what do you think happened? The farmer of course heard the cackling, knew something was wrong, picked up his gun, rushed out of the farmhouse, rushed down to the field and there he saw the fox. At the same moment the fox saw the farmer and of course he . . . had no time to eat any of the geese, turned round and ran away as fast as he could back to his wood, as hungry as when he had left it that morning.

2. See the pictures in Fig. 1.

Right . . . you can see in the picture some people talking on the telephone. Some of them are happy, some of them are serious, some of them are sad . . . old . . . young . . . men . . . women. I'm going to talk about three of them, see if you can identify which is which. O.K. The first one I'm going to talk about is Tom. Tom is a young man, and he's wearing some kind of dark jacket. He has short hair, it's difficult to tell if it's dark or fair. Tom has obviously had some good news, or perhaps he's talking to his girlfriend or someone he likes very much, because he's smiling, looks very pleased and happy. That's Tom. The next one I'm going to talk about is Kate. Kate of course is a girl, or woman, not very old. She has hair which is not very short, but also not very long, and Kate

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Fig. 1

doesn't look happy at all. She looks very serious, perhaps someone is telling her some bad news. She isn't actually talking, she has her mouth shut, and she's listening to someone talking to her. The third one I'm going to talk about is Bob. Bob is an older man. He doesn't have much hair any more . . . and he's wearing a suit. He looks rather worried, very worried in fact, obviously trying to talk about some problem which is rather difficult for him to solve and worries him. O.K. That's Bob.

I am indebted for the ideas in this section to the work done on the subject by Ron White and Marion Geddes and reported in

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their article 'The use of semi-scripted simulated authentic speech and listening comprehension' (*Audio-visual Language Journal*, 16:3). For further workable examples of skeleton stories see *Once upon a time* by John Morgan and Mario Rinvolutri.

5.1 Listening and making no response

Having made a point of explaining in Part 1 that most of what we hear we also respond to, it may seem rather perverse to recommend at this point a series of no-response exercises. But there are certainly many real-life situations where we do not respond; and in the classroom such exercises have at least one big advantage: if we do not have to keep stopping to hear and give feedback on our students' responses then we have correspondingly more time for the actual listening itself, and can get through a great deal more material. Thus, no-response exercises can be an excellent framework for exposing students to relatively large amounts of spoken English, providing much of the sheer quantity of listening experience needed for optimal learning.

But if there is no response, we need other ways of ensuring that students are actually listening – it is no use providing them with hours of spoken material if they do not absorb any of it! The text, and its presentation, must be particularly geared to attracting and holding students' attention: it should not be difficult; its content should be pleasing and interesting; and if possible it should be delivered 'live' and accompanied by graphic or written materials that provide a visual focus and give help in understanding. Whether, after all this, students are actually listening or not can be fairly well judged by a glance at their faces. Optionally, the teacher can also throw in occasional native-language clarifications (for the weaker students) or questions (to 'jog' the more apathetic ones).

The first two exercise-types discussed here involve the use of written or memorized texts and therefore do not provide optimal conditions for aural practice. However, they are useful as an easy preliminary to activities where the learner does have to concentrate on his listening skills, such as hearing descriptions of visuals or teacher ad-libbing, or listening to songs, stories or plays – as described in the last three sections of 5.1.

Following a written text

Listening to a text and reading it at the same time is something that is frequently done in the foreign-language classroom: the

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teacher reads out a story or question, and the students follow her words in their textbooks. This is certainly a valid technique for presenting new material and aiding reading; and it does get students used to how the language sounds and to the correspondence between orthography and pronunciation. But beyond this, such activity has only limited value for training in listening comprehension. It does not help to develop learners' reliance on their ear, since the written form is there to give the answer in cases of doubt. Also, it does happen occasionally that the written word actually interferes with accurate aural perception. For example, if a student reads the words 'all right', he is less likely to perceive that the spoken form has in fact been /'ɔ:'raɪ/, and fails to 'absorb' that form for future recognition. Finally, the use of a written text (unless this is a transcription of speech) often precludes the use of colloquial style.

No particular material is recommended here; obviously any written text can be used in this way.

Listening to a familiar text

Most of the exercises in this book are based on material that the student is hearing for the first time. The reasons for this are fairly obvious: we rarely in real life know exactly what we are going to hear (though we usually have some general expectations); listening to a familiar text does not demand such intensive exercising of the perception or comprehension skills, since the student knows more or less what it is all about without listening carefully; and lastly, the teacher has no way of assessing quite how good the student's listening comprehension was if he (the student) knew the content and meaning beforehand. However, hearing familiar material certainly has value as a sort of easy transition between listening for perception and listening for comprehension, or between listening as a supplement to reading (as described above) and listening as free communication. When the student hears something he is simultaneously reading, he may not need to use listening comprehension skills very much – he can always fall back on the written text. When listening to material he knows by heart on the other hand, he does at least have to rely on his ear; yet once he has perceived the sounds, understanding is much easier than grasping totally new material, and the listener is more relaxed.

Dialogues are good bases for this type of listening: the text is learnt by heart by the students and then listened to as spoken by native speakers. If longer texts are used – short stories, poems, songs – then the student may not know every word by heart, and

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he will use the spoken or sung words as clues or reminders – one step further in the progression towards free communicative listening.

This kind of exercise is obviously very easy to administer, with no task or teacher-assessment involved. It simply gives plenty of easy and pleasant experience in listening to meaningful English sounds. But this easiness itself can be misleading: students may think they are listening and understanding effectively when in fact they are only recognizing what they knew already; and they may get a rude shock when they realize how difficult it is to understand a listening passage of comparable difficulty which they have *not* studied before. It is important, therefore, not to dwell too much on such practice, but to use it only as a transition to exercises based on unfamiliar texts.

As to material: 'bits' suitable for learning by heart can often be found in the classroom textbook. Dialogues short enough to be learnt by heart can be taken from *Variations on a theme* by Alan Maley and Alan Duff or *Ship or sheep?* by Ann Baker. For songs see the last section of 5.1, *Entertainment*.

Listening aided by visuals

In this type of exercise, learners look at visual material while simultaneously following a spoken description of it. The latter may be limited strictly to details that can be verified visually – or it may include extra information, using the illustration as a jumping-off point for longer narrative, description or discussion. The discourse is easily improvised using the visual material as a basis.

A simple, large, clear drawing can be used, put up on the board or projected using an overhead projector; or a number of small pictures can be distributed among students. In either case, all the students have to do is follow the spoken description according to its graphic representation, looking at the various components of the latter as they are mentioned. In spite of the fact that they do not actually seem to *do* anything much, I have found that students usually concentrate very well in an exercise of this sort. If the teacher wishes to make quite sure her students are following properly she can ask them to point at the relevant parts of the illustration as they listen.

PICTURES

The descriptions can simply be based on what is seen around: the classroom environment. Or the teacher can describe a

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particular object in the room (a vase of flowers, a magazine, a clock, an item of clothing), or a member of the class. But of course such possibilities are quickly exhausted, and really *pictures* are the most practical basis for simple graphic description.

For fairly elementary classes, we might use a picture like that shown in Fig. 2, and its description could run something like the following:

You can see the picture of a park somewhere in a town. You can see it's in a town because there are some big houses behind the park. Two women are sitting on a bench; one of them has black hair, and she's giving some food to a pigeon – the other woman is just looking at it. Three more pigeons are on the ground nearby. Then there's a man with a little bag in one hand – I think he's got pigeon food in it, because he's throwing food to the pigeons and they're eating it. On the path there's a little boy playing with a hoop and running away towards the entrance of the park. Behind the path you can see the statue of a man with a tall hat sitting on a horse; and there are some flowers growing around. There are two trees in the picture, on either side of the statue.

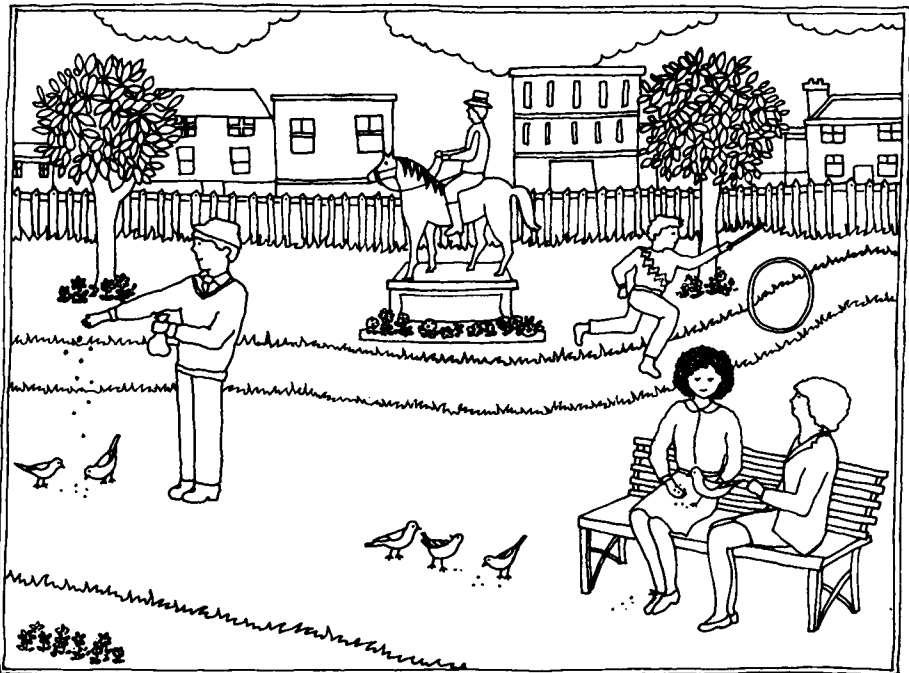


Fig. 2