

“LIVE” LISTENING

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Making listening comprehension more inspiring

Background

Have you ever wondered why our learners often groan when they hear: “We’re going to do a listening comprehension today”? Pre-recorded materials used in teaching EFL have obvious advantages as well as potential drawbacks.

Listening materials designed for the EFL classroom provide teachers with a valuable resource. They expose students to a wide range of speakers of both sexes and different ages as well as different voice features, such as tone, pitch, accent and speed.

In recent years, with the notion of English being an International language becoming more widespread, several linguists have contended that we should talk about a variety of “Englishes” rather than the English language. Consequently, it has become a routine practice to include in listening materials non-native English speakers, or to be in line with current thinking on the subject, “competent language users of English whose L1 is not English”.

However there are certain disadvantages to the use of pre-recorded materials. They often involve rather inauthentic tasks such as pre-teaching vocabulary and comprehension questions. The teacher usually warms students up by introducing a topic and facilitating a discussion in order to establish a context and create interest. So what can you do when a certain listening activity in the course book you are using is not particularly imaginative? To break the routine and liven up your listening lesson you can do the following “live” listening activity.

“Live” listening lesson plan

Pre-listening

1. Put students in pairs and get them to discuss a topic. It can be your current topic in the course book or any other subject you think might interest your students (your last trip, an interesting film you’ve

seen lately, your favourite TV show, celebrity etc). While students speak, circulate and monitor, noting down their errors and, most importantly, gaps in their lexical knowledge.

2. Tell students to write on pieces of paper (I usually use post-it notes for this) questions about the topic they’ve been discussing to ask you, the teacher. Collect the questions.

While-listening

I then spread out their questions on the table in front of me, sit in front of the class and give an extended talk on the subject at hand. You do not have to answer all the questions, especially if you find some of them inappropriate. I usually pre-plan what I am going to say but also leave room for some spontaneity. It is important, however, to show students that you are genuinely answering their questions to keep them interested.

While you speak, students should note down useful chunks of language they hear. Students do not have to be familiar with the lexical approach, which is actually the underlying principle in this activity (see below); a brief explanation on what a chunk is should normally suffice (on the other hand... take the plunge... etc)

The aim of this activity is to record as many chunks as they can. Tell your students it is a competition, and the pair who gets most chunks / expressions wins.

At the beginning, to ease their way into the chunk-recording activity, you may choose to signal every time you use a certain lexical chunk. I normally do it by making virtual quotation marks with my index and middle fingers on both hands (sometimes referred to as “air quotes”).

I find that students are surprisingly good at this and once they get into it they often find useful the expressions that you might consider quite mundane. It is a good idea to help them identify what a useful chunk is, especially if it is their first experience with “live” listening.

LESSON OUTLINE

❖ Pre 1

- Ss – in pairs – ask each other questions on a topic
- T monitors, notes down errors and gaps in lexical repertoire

❖ Pre 2

- Ss write questions to ask T about the same topic

❖ While

- T gives an extended talk on the topic while Ss listen and note down useful “chunks”

❖ Post

- T elicits the chunks from Ss and writes them on the board
- Ss repeat the task with new partners using the extracted “chunks”

Post-listening

At the end of your talk give students some time to check the expressions they have noted with their partner and then elicit it from them, clarifying and correcting where appropriate. Write up the chunks on the board.

Students then change partners and in new pairs, repeat the first activity (pre-listening). This time when they discuss or ask each other questions on a given topic, they should try to incorporate the lexical chunks.

Variation

Bring in a small tape-recorder or MP3 player with a microphone and record your talk. This way you can simply play your recording again and together with you students identify useful chunks and expressions.

Advantages of the live listening

Motivating

The main advantage of this kind of listening activity is that it helps overcome the disadvantages of pre-recorded materials discussed earlier. It is intrinsically motivating and does not require the teacher to create interest or set a context.

By nature, live listening is more interactive and reciprocal. The speaker (teacher) can see her/his audience (students) and judge by their reactions whether they follow and understand and reformulate or clarify accordingly. The communication taking place is much more authentic than listening to recorded material because it's taking place in the real world.

And last, but not least, good news for most teachers! – it requires (almost) no preparation. Therefore it can be used as a back-up plan for emergency situations or last minute substitutions.

More active listener

In the live listening activity the teacher can at all times monitor their learners' interest and comprehension and add any necessary repetitions, clarifications and reformulations.

You can also encourage your students to interrupt and ask follow-up questions or simply react verbally (“*Oh, I see*”, “*So, do you mean?*”, “*I’m not sure what you mean by*”)

Even if you have been teaching a class for quite some time you will be surprised at how many new things they can learn about you, that is of course depending on how much you are willing to reveal!

Alternatively, and if feasible, you can always bring in a guest speaker or borrow another teacher from your school to provide the listening input.

Underlying Lexical Approach

Background

This activity can also be referred to as lexical listening since its secondary aim is to encourage learners to extract useful language and hopefully adopt it by making it part of their own lexical repertoire. One of the main principles of the LA put forward by Michael Lewis in the 1990's is that language consists of primarily chunks, and grammar merely helps them hold together.

While the benefits of the lexical approach and the unfortunate failure of ELT practitioners to incorporate it into their teaching is a subject of a separate discussion, I would just point out that an adult native speaker possesses thousands of lexical chunks. Rough estimates suggest anywhere between 250,000 – 500,000 chunks.

The teacher's role, therefore, lies in helping students develop vocabulary by building awareness of lexical patterns. One way of doing this is helping them notice, record and subsequently activate lexical “chunks”: collocations, fixed and semi-fixed expressions.

Examples of chunks

Depending on the topic, students may find the following chunks useful for extraction and subsequent production.

Talking about my friend / partner

- We **hit it off immediately**
- We really **see eye-to-eye**
- We are **on the same wavelength**
- We **get on like a house on fire**
- We've **had our ups and downs**
- I **got to know** him/her **better**

Talking about an important decision

- I had to **mull it over**
- It was a **joint decision**
- Looking back** I think it was...

TOPICS YOU CAN USE	
Travel	Your last / favourite trip
Music	Your favourite band / singer
Friendship	Your best friend
Sports	Your favourite sports team or sport that you do
Leisure	Your last / ideal weekend
Film	Your favourite film / last film you saw
Issues	Living in a big city vs. in the country

I hadn't really planned anything – **it was one of those spur-of-the-moment decisions**

Talking about your weekend

I like **to have a lie-in** on Saturday morning
Sometimes I just **stay in and do nothing**, you know,
spend all day **pottering around the house**
I try to **catch up with my emails**

Talking about sport


The other day I **overexerted myself a bit**
As a result, I **ended up with aches and pains all over**
I try to **keep fit**

Conclusion

For most of our students, listening to their teacher in class is the regular weekly dose of English they get and, probably, the most significant exposure to the language.

Live listening not only gives them such an opportunity, but also provides language input and inspires learner output.

References

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