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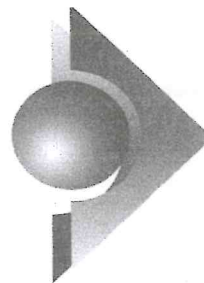
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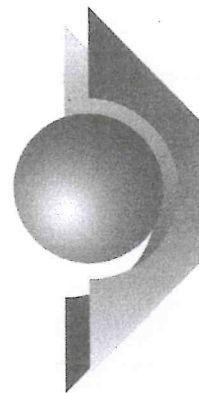
IN QUESTO NUMERO

Il 3/2000 è un numero "ecumenico": l'anno scorso avevamo teso a creare dei numeri che, di volta in volta, focalizzassero l'attenzione di più su una lingua o su una tematica, rispondendo ai molti soci che chiedevano un filo conduttore - ma altrettanti soci hanno chiesto che questa scelta non riguardi tutti i numeri, ma solo alcuni.

Ecco dunque questo numero, dove dopo un saggio che interessa tutti i docenti, il terzo dedicato da Mario Cardona al tema dell'acquisizione del lessico (gli altri due sono in *SeLM* 1 e 2/2000), troviamo indicazioni più specifiche per il tedesco, l'inglese, il francese e l'italiano come lingua straniera.

Il prossimo numero cercherà di avere un doppio taglio: da un lato una prima parte con un'accentuazione monografica sul tema delle tecnologie, dall'altro articoli di varia natura e di diverse lingue.

Richiamiamo la vostra attenzione su un'esperienza di insegnamento particolare e su una lettera di alcuni docenti: entrambe pongono problemi reali ma spesso ignorati.



Some basic principles of teaching listening comprehension

John Christopher Wade

It is often the case when faced with a listening comprehension exercise in class that the students or pupils react negatively to the material proposed by the teacher. The question must be raised as to why this is the case. In the first place, when asked, students often reply that they do not understand anything when they do listening activities. Apart from the fact that this is almost certainly not true (students generally understand a lot more than they think they do!), there is sometimes a tendency on the part of the teacher to confuse certain basic principles in the preparation and choice of listening material. In certain cases the problem may be not the content of the listening material but the way in which it is exploited. Do the students understand the aim of the exercises? Do they know what they are supposed to be doing?

This brief paper intends to examine some of the basic principles in the preparation of listening lessons and give some practical suggestions with particular regard to the teaching of English to Italian students. Three main factors are taken into consideration concerning the teaching of listening comprehension: the aims of the lesson, the choice of materials and the types of activity or exercise employed during the lesson. These points are discussed with examples and references which are chosen from texts which are, or have been, internationally successful since the mid-1980s. Consequently, the material should be easily available to most teachers. I make no apologies for including examples from the venerable *Cambridge English Course* which was far ahead of its time when published, particularly with regard to the teaching of listening and pronunciation skills. Compare the examples given with those of the *Headway Pronunciation* series published some five years later! The page references are intended to focus attention on specific exercise types which can be adapted according to the needs of the individual

teacher. Other references are of a more theoretical nature and may be of interest to those who want to know why exercises are designed in a particular way and how listening practice may help in the overall language acquisition process.

Certain conventions have been used, particularly with the examples which have been provided. They are as follows:

- for lists and specific examples
- for marking main stress
- ∪ for linking between words
- ↗ for rising intonation
- ↘ for falling intonation

Finally the term *text* or *listening text* is used in reference to any given body of listening material employed in an activity or exercise. This is because a variety of text types (dialogues, narratives, etc.) may be used in listening activities.

Aims of the lesson

This aspect of teaching listening skills is of fundamental importance since confusion is often made between what can be considered a drill, or an alternative kind of grammar exercise, and a true comprehension exercise. In the first case the students repeat and manipulate structures in order to consolidate material which has already been presented or to analyse a piece of text (usually a rather forced dialogue situation) so as to draw conclusions about the grammatical content, for instance, how requests are made, how to offer help, identification of irregular past tenses and so on. These could be defined as mechanical skills, perfecting structural or lexical knowledge with which students are already to a certain extent familiar. However, such skills do not necessarily provide the key to comprehension. Comprehension skills may be divided into two distinct, but complementary, areas: "local" comprehension, where specific *micro-listening skills* (not to be



confused with mechanical skills) need to be developed and "global" comprehension, where the emphasis is placed on a more general kind of comprehension (see Gough et al. 1981, p. 86 with particular reference to reading development). These two areas are examined below.

Micro-listening skills

Activities for the improvement of these skills will focus the student's attention on more detailed aspects of the target language which usually cause difficulties at a "local" level. With regard to the English language this concerns, in particular: stress, intonation, word linking and the recognition of specific sounds. This type of activity regards not only the development of receptive skills (recognition), but may also be used in the development of productive skills or, more specifically, pronunciation. Students who find difficulties with the former, may also have problems with the latter since differing language skills are often dependent one upon the other. A listener who is unable to recognise a particular sound pattern will have difficulty producing that pattern and vice versa. Indeed, in general terms, it would be almost impossible to design a classroom activity without the use of multiple skills. For example, listening to a text may imply reading comprehension questions (reading skills) and discussing the answers (speaking skills). These factors should be considered carefully in the preparation of a listening lesson.

Work on stress is particularly important in English since it is a *stress-timed language*. This results in an insidious situation for the Italian learner who speaks a *syllable-timed language*.

In practical terms this means that, to the Italian listener, the English seem to "eat their words".

Let us take an example:

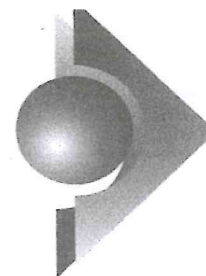
- Waiter! a steak, a hamburger and a salad.

An Italian speaker will tend to place a more or less equal stress on each syllable, of which there are twelve in this case, while the native English speaker would place the stress on the following four syllables:

- Waiter! a steak, a hamburger and a salad.

The "Italian" spoken sentence will therefore seem to be a lot longer when the learner is producing language. Consequently, this creates enormous comprehension problems for the Italian beginner in particular, as he or she expects to hear each syllable clearly pronounced, that is to say, pronounced as he or she would do. This is in spite of the fact that the lexical content of the text is relatively simple.

We may take this as an example of how accurate pronunciation would help the comprehension process. Work can be done on this by asking students to mark the stressed syllables in a short written text, listen to a recording of the same text to check against native speaker production and then try to imitate the native speaker by reading aloud (see Swan and Walter 1987, p. 9). A further type of exercise which helps to develop the kind of sensitivity necessary for detailed understanding of a short section of text is to allow the students to listen to a series of sentences and count the number of words they hear, contracted forms counting as two words (see Swan and Walter 1985, p. 41). Again students will have difficulty identifying the unstressed or "eaten" forms. In the above example, non-native listeners have particular problems with the indefinite article *a* and the weak form of *and*. However, it should be noted that, from a comprehension point of view, the key words are clearly stressed and the students' attention should be drawn to the fact that it is also not necessary to recognise all the words in order to understand the message. In fact, a variation on the last exercise is to ask students to identify only certain key words in a short series of dialogues or texts in order to extract the general meaning (see Garton-Sprenger and Greenall 1990, p. 2). This type of exercise moves significantly closer to the development of micro-listening skills relevant to the comprehension of real spoken English. Stress-based exercises are often linked to intonation exercises (see Bowler and Cunningham 1990, p. 26). The intonation of the voice in itself carries a message, which can change according to the rising or



falling tone of the speaker's voice. Note that the comprehension problems arising in such situations are, once again, not necessarily vocabulary based. The question-tag is a particularly good example of this, where rising intonation indicates a real question, while falling intonation often indicates a desire to make polite conversation. Think of the well-known English bus stop ice-breaker:

- It's a nice day, isn't it?

The speaker is not asking a question, but simply wanting to start a conversation. In order to practice this point students may listen to examples and mark the intonation pattern they hear (see Soars and Soars 1996, p. 110). With regard to longer listening texts, the intonation of the voice can indicate a change of direction in the discourse, a list, exemplification or a question, in this way helping the listener to follow the flow of the argument.

Word linking concerns four specific areas: the elimination, the addition or the modification of certain sounds or the linking of a consonant and a vowel sound. In the first case a final *t* or *d* is often "unexploded" (Swan and Walter 1985, p. 117) when followed by another consonant:

- a ho(t) day
- a ba(d) cold

Note here that Italian native speakers often add an extra syllable to aid linking in the productive process (*hot-a-day*). In this way, again the English native speaker's version fails to live up to their expectations, thus causing comprehension difficulties.

Secondly, in order to facilitate linking, a /w/, /j/ or /r/ sound may be added (Bowler and Parminster 1992, p. 3):

- go and see
- Mary and Peter
- a hamburger and a salad

Otherwise a sound may be modified, as when the final *v* of *have* in *have to* becomes an unvoiced /f/ linking with a similarly unvoiced /t/ (Soars and Soars 1991, p. 56). Finally, it will run on to the next word when a consonant is followed by a vowel as in:

- the Big Apple

In order to work on these points, students could be asked to link words themselves (see Swan and Walter 1987, p. 53), possibly as consolidation work based on a longer listening exercise, taking examples directly from the listening text.

Lastly, certain sounds of the English language cause particular problems for Italian speakers. Take for example the *glottal stop*, which causes notable comprehension problems in such words as *Britain*, where the *t* is almost swallowed. This is then followed by certain sounds which do not exist in Italian, for instance the *th* in *think* and *this*, along with many vowel sounds which are confused, like *cat* and *cut*, *ship* and *sheep* and so on. Exercises based on minimal pairs can help to improve recognition skills with regard to the latter examples (see Swan and Walter 1985, p. 11).

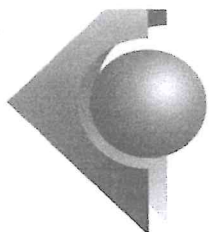
In all of the above cases, these types of exercises are simple to produce, and can be used as warm-ups at the beginnings of lessons, or as "fillers" while the lesson proceeds, i.e. short and stimulating pronunciation-cum-comprehension exercises based on the lesson topic.

Global comprehension skills

This area could be defined as the ability to extract meaning from a listening text. Firstly one must ask the question, "Why are we obliging our students to do this exercise in the first place?" Lewis et al. (1985, p. 62) identify five main points to be taken into consideration when designing a listening comprehension activity:

- understanding of the general sense of the text;
- listening for specific details;
- confirmation of previous knowledge or something previously discussed in class;
- understanding the intention of the speaker;
- understanding the attitude of the speaker.





In structuring a listening activity, it is necessary to note that in real life we very rarely simply listen. A pure listening exercise may be justified if we imagine listening to the radio or interact on the telephone. However, even in these cases the context is clear and we come to the listening to a certain extent prepared with previous knowledge, i.e. if we listen to a news report we (hopefully!) already know something of what is going on in the world, or if we know the person we are talking to on the phone much of the comprehension is implicit in the conversation being based on shared experience. First and foremost it is the teacher's task to create this context for comprehensibility within the aims of the lesson, a kind of false authenticism based on the native English speaker's world while at the same time taking into consideration the non-native speaker's cultural background. Widdowson (1996, p. 68) argues that, with regard to the native speaker,

(the non-native English user's) "reality is quite different: it is one which relates to a different community served by a language other than English. So contexts which will be meaningful for them will somehow have to be constructed in the classroom out of his primary experience of the first language and culture. They cannot be replicated versions of native speaker contexts of use."

This problem may be alleviated with the use of pre-listening activities (Lynch 1996, p. 11) which serve to focus the student's attention on a particular subject area, introduce new or relevant vocabulary or draw attention to cultural and lifestyle differences existing between one country and another.

The interdependence, once again, of different language skills should also be taken into account when considering the aims of a listening lesson. We have already seen this above in the development of micro-listening skills, but this also holds true in developing generalised comprehension skills. Peck (1988, p. 187) forcefully asserts that "listening comprehension, together with reading, offers one of the most powerful means of extending students' stock of language items which they can later express themselves in speech or writ-

ing". Krashen (1981, p. 102-103) takes this even further:

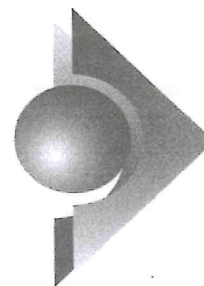
Indeed, comprehension may be at the heart of the language acquisition process: perhaps we acquire by *understanding* a language that is "a little beyond" our current level of competence. This is done with the aid of extra-linguistic context or our knowledge of the world.

In other words, listening may serve as a vehicle for general language improvement, providing the essential "input" (ibid., p. 102) necessary to provide students with target language competence. These points need to be considered, not only in the preparation of one particular lesson, but also in how this lesson fits into the general syllabus designed for the students, i.e. the focus of the lesson is on listening skills, but what kind of speaking (discussion of the listening text content), reading (questions or supplementary written texts connected with the listening material) and writing skills (summaries, commentaries and short compositions) can be employed in this context?

A more challenging area of listening comprehension, and one which is often neglected, regards the understanding or interpretation of a speaker's intention or attitude, a form of "listening between the lines". A standard comprehension question would place emphasis on the surface lexical content of the text. Let us consider, however, the following example:

- It's a nice day

This could be taken at face value on the written page, but in speaking, changing stress or intonation pattern it is possible to change the message communicated to the listener (see Gude and Duckworth 1994, p. 105). Is the speaker using irony? An excessive stress on *nice* could indicate that the day was, in fact, quite terrible. A marked stress on *day* would possibly indicate a contrast with *night*. Here the context of the utterance would be essential in decoding the real message. The intonation often indicates attitude. A rising-falling tone on *nice* (↗ ↘) may indicate enthusiasm while a monotone would usually indicate boredom



(see Bowler and Cunningham 1990, p. 9). A final point could be the very choice of the adjective *nice* in this case. This word is decidedly overused in British English, therefore taking on a somewhat negative connotation, i.e. to express sarcasm. In this way we see that the overall tone of a text, the general comprehension may be influenced by elements which are based on micro-listening skills. Thus, it is necessary to decide the focus of the lesson, possibly taking a main aim to give the lesson its overall structure and a series of sub-aims focussing on specific skills.

Choice of materials

The choice of materials is dictated by the aim of the lesson or activity. The first question many teachers ask is, "Where do I find such material?" There are various sources and, as we shall see later in the next

section, it is not so much the choice of material as the type of activity devised to exploit that material which is important. In the first place it is possible to make use of the many publications available in this area, not only dealing with listening skills, but also general text books. The teacher may also record his or her own voice or simply read aloud. We have already examined examples of material suitable for the development of micro-listening skills in the previous section, while material suitable for a wider approach to the improvement of listening ability could be selected from eight main typologies:

- context specific dialogues,
- interviews,
- discussions,
- news reports,
- documentaries,
- narratives,
- songs,
- poems.

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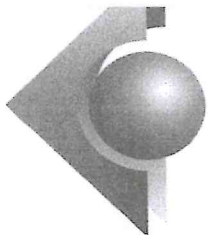
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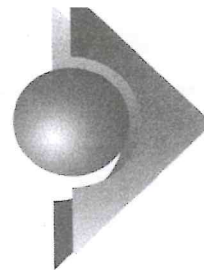
The **context specific dialogue**, in terms of comprehension, should not be confused with drill type activities or grammar presentation activities. The aim of the exercise is to extract meaning from the text. For instance, if the situation takes place at the ticket office of the railway station, as a pure comprehension exercise, students will be required to understand how much the traveller pays for the ticket, what the destination of the journey is and the time and date of the journey. Either the students will have been pre-taught the necessary language structures necessary for making requests (the customer) or offering advice (the ticket seller) or this will be dealt with subsequently and developed with role play situations. Alternatively, students may be asked to identify who is speaking (shop assistant to customer), what the relationship is between the speakers (mother and child), what the attitude the speakers have towards each other (angry neighbour complaining about loud music) or where the conversation takes place (in a hotel reception) (Soars and Soars 1996, p. 44).

Interviews can be more or less authentic (Soars and Soars 1991, p. 17-18, 24-25 and 54-56), but they certainly offer ample scope for the development of comprehension skills and the motivation of students according to the person being interviewed. A bank robber is intrinsically more interesting than a bank clerk, unless the latter is unusual in some way. An interview offers scope for the interpretation of a speaker's attitude to current or past issues as well as simple biographical details. It should be noted that a truly authentic interview is extremely challenging (and often frustratingly incomprehensible) for all but the most proficient of students. The focus of attention of the conversation may not live up to the expectations of the non-native listener, as native speakers "draw from a common stock of idioms, and, what is more important, see the same things as being worthy of comment" (Maule 1996, p. 15). That is to say, to the non-native speaker the very subject matter of the interview may not seem compatible with the context of the conversation for the simple reason that the native speaker is interested in different

aspects of life. Take as an example an authentic interview with a British teenager. In Italy teenagers spend money on clothes, watch football matches on Sundays and go to school on Saturdays while in Britain they spend money on compact discs, watch football matches on Saturdays and don't go to school on Saturdays. In this case the focus of attention should, perhaps, not be placed solely on surface comprehension but also on cultural differences between the listeners (students) and speakers (the material chosen). In addition, native English speakers use a vast range of idioms in everyday speech. The question of idioms is a notoriously thorny issue since it is particularly difficult to teach their effective use without sounding ridiculous. Nevertheless, from a receptive point of view, this area has a certain importance as idiom and culture are closely linked and possessing cultural background knowledge is often the key to comprehension. To take a specific example, in Britain numerous references are made to ships and sailing for the simple reason that, historically, the sea has had an enormous influence on the British way of life, culture and economy. Therefore an expression such as:

- Bill, can you show Mr Jones the ropes, please?

causes problems because it is not compatible with the non-native listener's cultural background, while in Britain it has been passed down from generation to generation with the same meaning, but transferring to a modern context. In fact, this is a reference to the extremely complex rigging of sailing ships in the last centuries. Two hundred years ago an inexperienced British sailor would have been "shown the ropes" in order to understand the rigging of the ship and become an efficient member of the crew. In the above example, placed in a modern context, the head of the department is telling one of his staff to explain office procedure to a new arrival. Although it may be interesting to examine these aspects of language use, we should avoid overburdening our students with long lists of expressions which are extremely difficult to use correctly. Attention may be focussed



on selected items either in a pre-teaching phase in order to aid comprehension or in a specific follow-up session to the listening exercise dealing with connected idiomatic expressions, e.g. referring to the weather (see Gude and Duckworth 1994, p. 38).

Discussions fall into a similar category to the above, although they may involve more than two people and the exchange of opinions may provide interesting scope for discussion on the part of students, for example with regard to the influence of television on children (see Bell and Gower 1992, p. 18). Nevertheless, the very emotions expressed in such situations, with incomplete sentences and interruptions, should be studied carefully before using this type of material in order to avoid demoralising the students.

News reports are commonly used for listening practice. There is the advantage that they are relatively brief, therefore not taxing the listener's concentration span. Truly authentic material may cause problems for non-native listeners, because of the speed of delivery and the use of journalistic language, for example *blaze* instead of *fire* (see Swan 1995, p. 361-369), and therefore specially produced material is often used, where language and content is filtered (see Granger and Beaumont 1987, p. 56). From a language point of view, vocabulary is selected according to the presumed knowledge of the students, while from a cultural point of view neutral subjects are chosen, which do not make a reference to aspects of British life which may cause comprehension problems to the listener. However, it is important to note that such material loses something of its authenticity and may seem a little banal. Real news reports are highly context specific, and much of the information transmitted is dependent upon a certain degree of background knowledge. We may assume that many of our students know who the British Prime Minister is (note the different possible references: "the PM", "Mr Blair", "Tony Blair", "Tony", the "Labour Party Leader" and so on), but do they understand a reference to "Nat West", one of the main British banks (the *National*

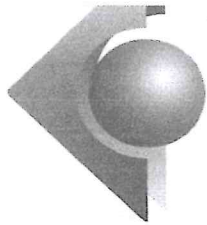
Westminster Bank), for example in reference to interest rates or a bank robbery? These factors need to be considered in the selection of such material.

Documentaries, i.e. texts which give information in specific subject areas, may provide a source of such cultural information. The texts used tend to be longer, and therefore need to be divided into shorter sections in order not to overtax the concentration span of the listeners. Subject matter could concern geography and economy (see Soars and Soars 1996, p. 50), traditions, daily habits and a multitude of other subject areas. Such material can also be supported by maps, charts, tables and all manner of visual material in order to aid the comprehension process in pre-listening activities and also to focus students' attention during the listening procedure.

Narratives offer vast scope for exploitation in listening activities, ranging from short fables (see Soars and Soars 1996, p. 24-27) to short stories (see Bell and Gower 1992, p. 62-74). Apart from specific language focus, as in the first case where work is carried out on the narrative tenses, students can be motivated by suspense, raising expectations or the simple desire to solve a mystery. Detective stories, ghost stories and real unsolved mysteries lend themselves to this kind of activity, bearing in mind that with the longer text, as noted above, there should be short listening sections not only to avoid tiring students, but also to stimulate interest and curiosity.

In considering motivation, perhaps songs provide the most consistent stimulus for many students. They are often presented to classes as a form of bonus at Christmas or on other special occasions. This is all well and good, but a song can be a useful vehicle in the practical improvement of listening skills from three main points of view: vocabulary development, stress and intonation and comprehension skills. In the first place, we may fall back on the well tried and tested gap-filling exercise. Choosing a song with a particular rhyming system, leaving the final word of alternating lines out, can be used for focussing attention on pronunciation





and spelling. In the second case, work can be done on contracted forms and the non-standard *gonna* (going to) and *wanna* (want to), etc. It is interesting to note that these forms are often considered incorrect, but this is the way in which native speakers use (and abuse, from the point of view of the purist) the English language. The language of pop music is remarkably close to everyday spoken English (see Viney 1985, Unit 55) and consequently can be an aid in helping learners understand real native speakers using real English, however difficult it may be. Alternatively, comprehension skills can be developed by using songs which tell a story (see Soars and Soars 1993, p. 109-110), express particular feelings (see Swan and Walter 1987, p. 43 and 153) or have a specific political or moral message (see Swan and Walter 1985, p. 104 and 159).

Poems provide similar material for the improvement of both pronunciation and intonation combined with, often, powerful and relevant messages regarding our everyday life (Soars and Soars 1989, p. 56) or which are simply entertaining (see Swan and Walter 1987, p. 118).

Types of activity

The choice of activity is as important, if not more important, than the choice of material. Gauging the activity type to the knowledge which the students have of the target language is probably more important than modifying the content of an authentic text in order to help comprehension. In this way more or less authentic material may be employed, consequently preparing students better for the reality of language use. In the case of radio news reports, students may be required to identify only very specific information (see Swan and Walter 1987, p. 46), like numbers, names, prices or specific vocabulary relevant to the syllabus (e.g. the description of a bank robber, referring to clothing and physical description), in this way combining true comprehension, i.e. identification of linguistic content essential to the global understanding of the text, and micro-listening skills.

Exercise types can be classified according to three distinct procedures.

As specified previously, **pre-listening** activities are particularly useful as they serve to place the listening material in a specific context or provide students with the necessary linguistic elements, which may be lexical or structural, to carry out a listening task successfully.

Activities carried out **during listening** should be as simple as possible from the point of view of recording the answers, as the listener needs to concentrate on the content of the listening text and not be distracted by complex or time-consuming procedures for writing answers or understanding what is to be done.

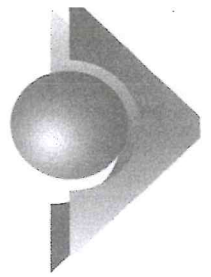
Finally, **follow-up** procedures give free scope to students in discussing a particular theme based on the listening text, developing further language skills or focussing attention on specific vocabulary areas. The listener needs to be actively involved in the lesson with clearly defined and explained tasks which have a clear aim, while the follow-up activities help to refine those more subtle analytical skills necessary to become an effective listener. As Peck (1988, p. 202) asserts

"a good listener is not simply a passive recipient of heard language, but is actively seeking a coherent, self-consistent mental representation of the message, and is actively seeking to eliminate inconsistencies from that representation".

That is to say, the listener should be required to process the listening material in order to draw conclusions, make inferences and express opinions.

Pre-listening activities

These activities give students the opportunity to tune into a particular subject area and pre-teach vocabulary essential to the topic. Carefully setting up a listening activity in this way, it is possible to aid students in the comprehension process, activating their knowledge in terms of what they already know about the subject area and giving them more self-confidence in their ability to understand the material. Typical activities can include:



- specific vocabulary work,
 - discussion based on topic of listening text,
 - pre-questions prepared by the students, such as "What do you want to know about the person in the interview?",
 - pre-questions to be discussed before listening,
 - pictures or photographs to stimulate discussion work and activate the listeners' world knowledge,
 - a short reading text for discussion.
- filling in charts,
 - true/false questions,
 - multiple-choice questions,
 - completing maps or diagrams,
 - putting a picture story in the correct order,
 - predicting,
 - taking notes based on specific points mentioned in the text,
 - matching speakers with opinions or statements.

Vocabulary work can be carried out with the use of gap-filling exercises, where students are required to put key words selected from the listening text in the correct spaces, either in short reading text or a series of sentences (see Soars and Soars 1996, p. 59) or matching words to their definitions. It is often useful to give more words than definitions in order to avoid an exercise which is little more than a guessing game.

In an interview text regarding a famous person, for example, the students themselves could prepare questions based on what they want to know about the interviewee (Soars and Soars 1991, 52). This exercise type has benefits as it teaches students to direct their own listening, thereby acquiring more self-confidence in their ability to predict the content of a listening text and consequently enhance listening ability.

Pictures or short reading texts connected with the subject matter of the listening material aid the student in focussing attention on the global meaning of what is being listened to, bearing in mind that contextualisation and prediction are an essential part of listening comprehension, as in a certain sense we construct meaning from what we already know about the world or "the confirmation of predictions based on what is already known" (Widdowson 1983, p. 61).

Listening activities

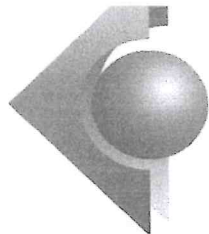
As mentioned above, during listening the type of activity employed should not be too complex. As we see below most of these exercise types require the students to complete information without having to write an excessive amount:

The focus of attention in these examples generally tends, for the most part, to be on the literal meaning (Brown and Yule 1983, 56) of the text. There may, however, also be some scope for developing interpretational skills with true/false or multiple choice questions regarding the mood, attitude or intentions of the speaker(s) or distinguishing between fact and opinion. In the last example above, paraphrased opinions or statements from the listening text would also help in this regard, e.g. in a discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of television: "Gillie believes that TV is dangerous for children" (see Bell and Gower 1992, p. 18).

Prediction exercises can be motivating for students if a narrative is divided into episodes as a kind of "soap opera" (see Swan and Walter 1985, p. 43) in order to keep concentration levels high. At the end of each episode, questions, such as "What happened next?", "What is going to happen next?" or "What do you think will happen next?" may be used to stimulate discussion and formulate hypotheses which are then confirmed (or not!) on listening to the subsequent episode.

Finally, note-taking is a useful skill for students to develop, as it has applications in real life, therefore providing the listener with a realistic reason for listening. The activity may be guided by providing the listeners with headings under which they should take notes specific to particular arguments. For example, in a description of life in a big city (Soars and Soars 1996, p. 62) general headings such as *People, Shops, Work, Holidays, Transport*, etc. may also be backed up with specific questions if this is felt necessary, or students may simply exchange their ideas after listening. As





noted in the introduction, it is often surprising how much students manage to understand, especially on exchanging ideas with a partner or in a group.

Follow-up activities

More detailed language work tends to be carried out in this phase, where students may be allowed to listen to the text a second time or even work independently with their own tape recorder:

- detailed comprehension questions which are discussed and then checked with a second listening,
- jigsaw listening,
- structured discussion or debate based on the content of the text,
- a role-play, where students assume roles similar to those in the listening text,
- choosing the best summary of the listening material from a number of alternatives,
- a reading passage,
- a composition in which students write about a theme based on the listening text or re-write a story from the point of view of one of the people involved in the listening text,
- writing a summary.

In this phase the student is tending to move away from pure listening comprehension, and begins to consider his or her reaction to the text and exchange ideas and opinions with other members of the class. More importance may be placed here on interpretation rather than literal understanding.

Jigsaw listening, or the division of the class into two or more groups who listen to different texts subsequently exchanging information about what they have listened to, has been classified here as a follow up activity. This is for the reason that the aim of the exercise is not only the development of pure listening skills but also to stimulate intensive discussion (speaking skills), for example comparing the different versions of a number of people involved in a traffic accident (see Bell and Gower 1992, p. 48). For further consolidation role-plays based on the speakers in the listening exercise, perhaps during police questioning,

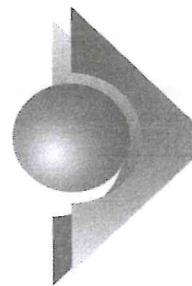
simulating a court case or a radio interview which can itself be recorded. In these cases "role-cards" can be prepared to give students additional information helpful in acting out their roles effectively (see Klippel 1984, p. 121-129).

An extension of this idea could be the formal debate, particularly if the listening material concerns a more controversial topic, such as the death penalty, fox hunting, etc. (see Ur 1981, p. 105-108), where students are encouraged to express their own opinions or defend a point of view. Such work may be further consolidated with the reading of relevant newspaper articles or with the use of writing activities which can be given for homework. A variation on the theme of the composition is to require students to write a passage from the point of view of one of the speakers in the listening text. For example a worried father speaking about his daughter who has left home to attend a dance school in London, or from the point of view of the daughter (Soars and Soars 1991, p. 11). In this case students are required not only to deal with the facts, but also the feelings and emotions of the people involved.

Conclusions

Although the overall aim of a listening lesson may be the improvement of listening skills, it provides an excellent vehicle for a multi-skills approach to language development. This not only enriches the learner's knowledge of the target language, but also provides motivation, which is an essential element of the language acquisition process. Consequently the choice of material used is important, bearing in mind the interests and needs of the learners and how such a lesson may fit into the general context of the syllabus. If a longer text is chosen for a listening lesson, it should be divided into shorter extracts in order not to run the risk of over-taxing the listeners' concentration span.

Detailed work on the micro-skills necessary for the extraction of detailed information from the text is as important as general work on global comprehension skills since the two are interdependent. The ability to



identify key words in a text provides the basis for the effective extraction of meaning and therefore overall understanding. This does not mean that it is necessary to understand or identify every word in a text in order to extract the meaning and students need to be trained to sift the information available in the text necessary to carry out a given task without being distracted by unnecessary information.

A balance between the extension of lexical knowledge and the development of interpretational skills should be found, as many comprehension problems arise, not from lack of vocabulary knowledge, but an imprecise knowledge of micro-listening skills, a lack of background information, an inability to identify or interpret idiom, attitude or intention of the speaker and to distinguish fact from opinion. It is for this reason that very often the follow up activities are possibly more important than the listening activities themselves and perhaps more time should be dedicated in the classroom to discussion and interpretation after the listening procedure, rather than a word-by-word analysis of the listening text proposed.

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