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Special emphasis is placed on the potential of dialog learning in a discussion of a sequence of activities and materials appropriate for developing the recognition and selection levels of activity involved in listening to a foreign language. Also referred to are the (1) procedural features of presentation, (2) emotional problems possibly resulting from comprehension practice, and (3) development of community materials for common use. Regular comprehension practice with increasingly difficult materials is advised as an essential element in the effective development listening skills. (AF)

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Listening Comprehension

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TEACHING language as communication has become an accepted aim of the foreign-language teacher throughout the world. To most this has come to mean that we must teach our students to speak the language with some fluency and authentic idiom. What has been less emphasized, however, is that communication is a process involving at least two people. Speaking does not of itself constitute communication unless what is said is comprehended by another person. The greatest difficulty for a traveller in a foreign country is not primarily that he cannot make himself understood; this he can frequently do by gesture, by writing or by pointing to something written in a bilingual book of phrases. His first difficulty, and one that leads to considerable emotional tension and embarrassment, is that he cannot understand what is being said to him and around him. Even if the native speaker enunciates his words slowly and distinctly, elements of stress, intonation and word-grouping, often exaggerated in an earnest attempt at clarity, add to the confusion of the inexperienced foreigner. As a result there is no communication and the traveller's speaking skills cannot be exercised to great advantage. His enjoyment of and participation in community life and thought are further curtailed by his inability to comprehend announcements, broadcasts, lectures, plays and films.

Teaching the comprehension of spoken speech is therefore of primary importance if the communication aim is to be achieved. A long-neglected area, listening comprehension has its peculiar problems which arise from the fleeting, immaterial nature of spoken utterances.

Theoretical Concepts Basic to Listening Comprehension

Much attention has been paid in recent years to problems of discrimination of sounds, stress and pitch, but these are only a few of the elements involved in understanding what is being said to us.

Of great value to foreign-language teachers interested in teaching listening comprehension is the extensive research which has been carried out in recent years by communications engi-

neers concerned with the maximum efficiency of telephonic and telegraphic equipment. Research engineers have given considerable thought and study to the nature of the message to be communicated, the particular qualities of the channel by which it passes from emitter to receiver, and the state in which it is received and interpreted by the listener. The foreign-language teacher who understands his theoretical formulations and terminology can extract many seminal lines of thought from their observations.

The language emitted by the communicator, which contains the message, has acoustical patterning distinctive for each language. This conventional patterning limits the possible sequences of sounds for that particular language and determines their frequency of occurrence. As the child learns his native language he comes to expect certain patterns of sound and not others. He is therefore disconcerted by the sound sequences of a foreign language until he has had sufficient experience with them to build up a frame of expectations. This process requires long practice and familiarity. The acoustic patterning of a language has not only acceptable sound sequences but anticipated degrees of loudness, levels of pitch and lengths of pause. With experience the child learns to recognize groupings of these features as clues to meaning. Some sequences recur with great frequency and in certain contexts alternatives are inconceivable. Such items are considered to contain little "information," in the technical sense of the term. "Information" in this sense does not refer to meaning but to the range of possible alternative words which could occur in a certain position in speech. As Weaver has put it, "the word information in communication theory relates not so much to what you *do* say, as to what you *could* say. That is, information is a measure of one's freedom of choice when one selects a message."[1] If in the context any other word would be most unlikely, the word is said to give little information. If the range of possibilities is great, then the use of one particular word conveys a great deal of information. If I hold a book in my hand and state: "This is a book," the word conveys little information. Possibilities have been reduced by visual and situational clues which help to delimit the alternatives. On the other hand, if I say of someone who is not present: "He is reading", the word "reading" conveys much information because of the great number of words which could easily have occurred in that context. In the native language, we have learned to recognize a number of factors which reduce the possibility of occurrence of any particular word: elements such as syntactic relationships, sequences of words and combinations of sounds of high frequency, clichés, conversational tags and formulae. The effects of these factors in reducing the amount of information conveyed in any one utterance is of great importance because the human organism has a limited capacity for reception of information. When someone is conveying to us a message which is not entirely expected or obvious, we often say: "Wait a minute! Not so fast!" or "Say that again!" These expressions make it clear that we can absorb only a certain amount of information at one time.

In order to reduce to manageable proportions the amount of information in any one sound sequence each language has developed a certain amount of redundancy. It has been estimated, for instance, that the English language is fifty per cent redundant.[2] Were this redundancy eliminated, the human organism could not absorb information at the rate at which it would be emitted in normal speech. Redundancy in languages is to be found in elements of sound and morphological and syntactical formations which reinforce each other in the conveying of meaning. A French sentence may begin with "est-ce que," which signals a question for which the response will normally be "Yes" or "No." At the same time the voice will continue to rise in pitch until the end of the sentence, this being also an indication that a question of this type is being asked. The listener who was not attending to the first words of the sentence will be guided by the rising intonation. Both of these features are conveying the same element of meaning and one of them is therefore redundant.

It is redundancy in language which helps us to piece together the information we hear. Even in communication in our native language we do

[1] Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, Urbana: University of Illinois, 1959, p. 100.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 104.

not hear everything that is said to us clearly, nor do we pay full attention to every element of each utterance. In a language we are learning as foreigners our difficulties are compounded by so many items which we do not recognize or with which we are as yet unfamiliar. Artificially constructed messages, such as those frequently used in foreign-language classes, often unwittingly reduce the amount of redundancy supplied by a speaker in a normal situation. In this way the perception of the foreign-language message is made more difficult even for a person familiar with the language clues.

Over and above the clues provided by sound sequences, we convey further elements of meaning by body movements, facial expressions, slight changes in breathing, length of pauses and degrees of emphasis. These elements, usually classed as kinesics and paralanguage, vary from language community to language community, and even within language communities at various levels of intercourse. No comprehension of oral communication is complete without taking these aspects into consideration as further delimitation of the message.

The problems of the message itself, then, may be studied in terms of the amount of information it conveys and the rate at which this information is encoded.

Further problems arise, however, in the transmission of the message from communicator to receiver. If the message is transmitted with an accompaniment of irrelevant sound or "noise," some of the message may not be received by the listener. In a foreign-language situation, unfamiliar elements of the message may be perceived in much the same way as noise, so that some parts of it will be lost in the process of transmission to the receiver. The listener is then faced with several problems: the identification of patterns and their combinations in the somewhat mutilated message which he has received, the reconstruction of the defective sections according to probabilities of occurrence, and the organization of these patterns in a meaningful way. This organization will depend on his previous experience with words, syntactical groupings, situational context and the cultural elements reflected in the foreign-language usage. His degree of familiarity with these elements will determine what he selects from the stream of sound which is providing information at a rate at which it is beyond his capacity to assimilate it totally.

Probabilities of occurrence of certain sequences of sounds are built up through experience with a language. These probabilities determine what we hear; in other words, we hear what we expect to hear. A non-conventional, and therefore improbable, sequence of sounds will at first be interpreted as a familiar, or probable, sequence and in this way acquire intelligibility. Psychologists have found that if a non-conventional sequence of sounds is presented to a listener just below the threshold of audibility it will be organized by the listener into a conventional sequence; in other words, a series of meaningless syllables with sentence intonation will be interpreted as an intelligible sentence. In the learning stages of a foreign language many sequences of sounds have low probability of occurrence for the inexperienced learner, and will therefore be misinterpreted, while others which he has never before encountered provide an accompaniment of "noise." His ability to distinguish sequences which are slightly familiar from the unfamiliar will also be affected by the emotional stress and anxiety which not infrequently accompany aural comprehension experiences in a foreign language.

The student learning a foreign language passes through several stages in the comprehension of spoken speech. On first contact, the foreign-language utterances strike his ears as a stream of undifferentiated noises. As he listens, he gradually perceives some order in the noise: a regularity in the rise and fall of the voice and in the breath groups. As he learns some of the arbitrary associations of the particular language (i.e., vocabulary, verb groups, simple expressions) he begins to distinguish the acoustic and syntactic patterning: the recurring elements which give form to segments of speech. Comprehension, however, requires selection of what is crucial for the particular situation in which the utterance is heard. The student then passes through a stage when he recognizes familiar elements in the mass of speech but is unable to recognize the inter-relationships within the whole stream of sound; he does not therefore fully comprehend the message. It is only with

much practice that he can pass beyond this stage in which he feels rather like a man walking in a fog which clears in patches and floats back to obscure other points. As the student hears much foreign-language speech, he eventually acquires facility in recognizing the crucial elements which determine the message. We shall discuss later the teacher's role in helping him to reach this level of achievement. At this more advanced stage, he may recognize the essentials of the message, but not be able to remember what he has recognized. This is because he is unable to concentrate his attention on the crucial elements of the message long enough to rehearse them sub-vocally before moving on with the continuing voice. All his attention is taken up with recognition. In comprehension of native speech he anticipates certain sequences of low information content, which in his previous experiences with the language had occurred in similar contexts, and his full attention is given to the high information items. While the foreign language is still rather unfamiliar territory there are few low information items which may be anticipated and so occupy little of his attention. Furthermore, anticipation based on experience with the native language (as with homonyms and structures which appear to parallel those of his own language) may be extremely misleading. Because of the high rate of information contained in sound sequences with which he is not very familiar, he has not sufficient capacity left for retention.

Teaching Listening Comprehension

Before the teacher can devise a sequence of activities which will train students in listening comprehension, he must understand the nature of the skill he is setting out to develop.

Listening to a foreign language may be analyzed as involving two levels of activity, both of which must be taught. The first, the recognition level, involves the identification of words and phrases in their structural inter-relationships, of time sequences, logical and modifying terms, and of phrases which are redundant interpolations adding nothing to the development of the line of thought. The second is the level of selection, where the listener is drawing out from the communication those elements which seem to him to contain the gist of the message. This process requires him to concentrate his attention on certain sound groupings while others are aurally perceived without being retained. This parallels the process in visual perception where we see the object which attracts our attention but do not absorb surrounding details, which, from the physical point of view, are equally within the range of our view. For the student to be able to listen with ease to the foreign language in normal situations, he needs thorough training at the recognition level and much practice in selecting specific details from the stream of sound.

Training at the recognition level must begin from the first lesson. This does not mean the presentation of much ungraded and ill-designed aural material in the hope that something will happen. There was a period when teachers were urged to surround their students from the very beginning with a veritable mist of foreign-language speech, thus recreating in the classroom, so it was believed, the situation in which students would find themselves if suddenly transported to the country where the language is spoken. It is true that, when plunged completely into the foreign-language atmosphere, people do learn to interpret the sounds they are hearing, but to varying degrees of accuracy. One fact which is conveniently overlooked is that many migrants in a new land are unable, after many years of residence, to interpret more than the simple interchanges of daily life. Some do go beyond the comprehension of banalities but certainly not without effort on their part. When we take into consideration the number of hours during which the average migrant listens to the new language before he understands it to any degree of effectiveness we appear justified in assuming that he is not learning aural comprehension in the most economical and efficient way. In the considerably fewer hours at the disposal of the teacher in the classroom, methods must be adopted which will lead more directly to the objective, developing the greatest degree of skill that is possible in the time available.

For a method to be economical as well as efficient it must take into account all the skill elements which should be developed. As we have seen, in a listening situation the student must be so familiar with the components of a

stream of speech that he can react quickly to some of them and pass rapidly over others which are redundant or irrelevant to his immediate purpose. He must be able to recognize without effort sound patterns (sound discriminations affecting meaning, intonation patterns, significant levels of pitch, word groupings), grammatical sequences and tenses, modifiers and function words, clichés, expletives or hesitation expressions which can be ignored as irrelevant to the message, levels of discourse (colloquial or formal), emotional overtones (excited, disappointed, peremptory, cautious, angry utterances), as well as regional, social or dialectal variations. As these aspects of speech become familiar to the student his expectation of their occurrence in certain contexts rises and their information content is, as a consequence, lessened. As the human organism is able to absorb only a certain amount of information at one time, this familiarity, by decreasing the information content, increases the number of items with which the student can cope in one utterance. Systematically prepared listening comprehension materials will provide training, in a steady progression, for all the areas listed, not leaving essential learning to chance. If suitable materials are not available, the teacher will choose, adapt and re-fashion those which are obtainable, or prepare his own, with these basic requirements in mind.

The first step in training in listening comprehension is well provided for in dialogue-learning. The student is continually hearing the material he is learning repeated by the model, by other students and by himself. In this way, he forms an acoustic image of these short utterances so that he is able to recognize them without analysis. The danger in this situation is that such recognition may remain only at the acoustic level, the student not being more than dimly aware of the meaning of what he is saying. To ensure that the phrases he is learning will be useful also at the selective level, frequent opportunity must be provided for their application to communication situations within the class group, where actual degree of comprehension can be clearly demonstrated by an appropriate response, either physical or oral. This response, if oral, should as a general rule be in the foreign language. If the student is habitually asked to demonstrate his comprehension by translation into his native language a further danger develops. He will acquire the habit of analysing the elements of every utterance for comparison with what seem to be the most nearly appropriate categories of his native language and he will not learn to perceive short utterances and segments of longer utterances as meaningful in themselves. He will also not develop facility in listening to and registering an ongoing stream of sound for retention. With each utterance he will be busy decomposing the first segment he has heard in order to retain a native-language version of it, when his attention should have been fully engaged in forming an acoustic image of the second segment and in selecting from it the elements relating it to the first.

In the early stages, the teacher should concentrate on teaching the immediate apprehension of a segment of sound, not on long-term retention of it: that is, on recognition, not on total or delayed recall. The student, for instance, may not be able to recall a sequence of utterances in a dialogue but may yet be able to respond promptly and appropriately to any one item in the dialogue. He will not be capable of total recall until the material has been overlearned, and he has built up a strong frame of expectations in the language. It is debatable whether time should be wasted on bringing a long series of dialogue sentences to this pitch of overlearning, as the value of the dialogue lies in the usefulness of the individual utterances not in any intrinsic value in the devised sequence.

The potentialities of a dialogue for improving listening comprehension have not been fully exploited until the student is hearing recombinations of the material in the current and earlier dialogues, particularly in the context of actual situations, as in dramatizations acted out by groups of students or in actual conversational interchanges among students. The sense of reality can also be created by filmed situations where these recombinations are appropriate. In classes where dialogues are not being used, the language material of the current lesson and those preceding it should be similarly exploited in recombinations in a situational context.

Recombinations of listening comprehension material can, with a little ingenuity, be included in games requiring a physical or oral response. Often these can take the form of guessing games. Games imaginatively devised give the students comprehension practice in a situation where interest is heightened by the competitive element and their attention is distracted from the skill being practiced. If comprehension is thus demonstrated in a real situation where it is an instrument rather than an objective the teacher will have tangible evidence that the students have passed beyond the recognition stage to that of selection. A few minutes of listening comprehension games at regular intervals, usually at the end of class lessons, will enable the teacher to re-introduce systematically material which is not currently being actively practiced. In this way, retention of material from earlier lessons will be constantly reinforced by active recapitulation without tedium.

All material used for listening comprehension, even in the earliest lessons, should be authentic, that is, it should consist of utterances with a high probability of occurrence. Teaching students to comprehend artificial language combinations which would rarely be heard from a native speaker is a waste of time and energy, and can only confuse the student when he is later confronted with natural speech.

Authentic material will frequently involve details of customs, behavior and attitudes typical of the foreign culture. Unless the teacher prepares his class for such cultural elements, they may pass completely unnoticed by the student or appear to him to be ridiculous or peculiar. Yet it is the understanding of these cultural differences which is one of the most valuable experiences in foreign-language learning. If all comprehension material consists of foreign-language words and phrases applied to native-language behavior, the students will begin to feel that it is a burdensome way of expressing themselves when the native language seems so much more adequate. The concept that foreign-language words and phrases are exact counterparts of certain native-language words and phrases will be fostered and the opportunity of opening the eyes of students to other attitudes and values will be lost. The understanding of cultural differences will often be hastened by the presentation of some visual representation of the situation, by picture, film or film-strip, which highlights the cultural implications.

The visual stimulus can, however, be more of a hindrance than a help if it is introduced without due attention to context. A picture which is ambiguous in concept may concentrate the attention on a misleading feature and arouse false associations which it is hard for the teacher to identify and correct at a later stage. The student may also acquire incorrect notions about the foreign culture if certain elements in the visual accompaniment have not been fully explained. The teacher must study carefully the visual aids he is to use in order to ensure that they are reinforcing what he is trying to teach and not merely distracting attention from the oral language. Reliance on a visual representation at all times may certainly mean that the student comprehends less well when he is left to depend on his ear alone. In some cases it may be impossible in the school situation to determine whether the student has actually comprehended the aural message or deduced it from the visual stimulus. It is important, therefore, to ensure that the student has abundant practice in listening without the support of visual clues other than the situational clues of normal conversation.

Certain procedural features of the presentation of listening comprehension exercises have been the subject of experimental study. Physical aspects of the classroom or laboratory presentation, such as speed of utterance, length of segments, length of pauses, and the acoustics of the classroom should be carefully studied by the teacher because of their decisive effect on the value of the exercise.

All utterances for listening comprehension should be delivered at normal speed from the earliest lessons. Normal speed does not mean rapid native speech, but a speed of delivery which would not appear to a native speaker to be unduly labored—a speed which retains normal word groupings, elisions, liaisons, consonant assimilations, natural rhythm and intonation. Utterances which are delivered at an unnaturally slow pace are inevitably distorted and the acoustic images stored by the student will

not be immediately useful when he hears a natural form of speech. It may be argued that, in a foreign-language situation, the native speaker will, on request, speak very slowly, but in so doing he exaggerates what to the listener are already confusing liaisons, elisions and phonemic distinctions of his language or tries to incorporate into it, in an unsystematic fashion, what he believes to be the distinctive characteristics of the language of his interlocutor. This labored delivery, running contrary to the expectations of the foreigner, is often as difficult for him to interpret as undistorted speech at normal speed. Even in the very early stages familiar material can be understood when spoken at normal speed. It is obvious that difficulties will arise when unfamiliar material is included, thus increasing rapidly the amount of information to be assimilated. At more advanced stages, when unfamiliar words and phrases are intentionally included in comprehension exercises, they should be embedded in so much easily recognized material of low information content that the student is able to concentrate on comparing the new elements with the surrounding context and deducing their meaning in this way. These new elements are also more easily assimilated at this stage because their characteristic acoustic and structural patterning is recognized by the trained ear of the student.

The length of the segments emitted in each breath group and the length of the pauses between the segments are of more importance than the actual speed of delivery within the segments. The amount of information in a segment increases rapidly with the length of the segment, a greater number of words allowing for a greater number of alternatives. The longer the segment the greater is the strain on the auditory memory. During the pause between segments, the organism rehearses what it has heard, thus strengthening the memory trace. Research has shown that the auditory memory span for foreign-language material is considerably less than for native-language material, probably on a ratio of nine words to fifteen.[3] With segments of from eight to ten words (less in the early stages) the mind can recirculate the material during the pause, relating it to what preceded and anticipating to some extent what will follow. Such pauses are supplied in natural speech by hesitations, a certain amount of hemming and hawing, some re-stating, and by certain conventional expressions contributing nothing to the meaning of the utterance but having a high frequency of occurrence which reflects their usefulness in extending the pauses in a normal utterance. As artificially prepared material usually omits these common features of natural utterances it tends to deliver information at a much higher rate than normal speech. A slight lengthening of the pauses will supply the extra time which the organism requires to absorb the information presented to it, without adding a time element not available in normal conversation.

For the same reason, listening comprehension exercises should contain a certain amount of repetitious material. This may take the form, for example, of explanations or descriptions in slightly different versions. Such repetition is another characteristic of normal speech. In conversation and other forms of extempore speech there is redundancy of content as well as linguistic redundancy. It is because redundancy of content has been eliminated that following a close-knit discourse or the reading of a well-written paper, even in the native language, requires a concentrated effort on the part of the listener. This fact is often overlooked with the result that listening comprehension materials in the foreign language contain features which make them even more difficult to follow than similar material in the very familiar native language.

Teachers should be aware of certain emotional problems which may arise in connection with listening comprehension exercises. Any trepidation on the part of beginning students not accustomed to paying close attention to aural messages can be overcome by the early introduction of much practice in listening to a limited amount of linguistic material. Considable difficulty is experienced by students trained to study the language through written texts when they are suddenly confronted with listening comprehension material of a similar stan-

[3] Robert Lado: "Memory Span as a Factor in Second Language Learning," *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, III/2 (1965), p. 127.

dard of difficulty to that which they are accustomed to studying at their leisure in graphic form. The emotional tension associated with this experience is frequently compounded by the near approach of some examination for which this type of activity is preparing the students.

Materials for listening comprehension at an elementary level will consist mostly of the give-and-take of simple conversational situations, short sketches or short stories containing a considerable amount of conversation, and brief reports from fellow-students. The material will be a recombination of words and phrases which the student recognizes with ease. A listener cannot concentrate his attention on every constituent of an utterance with the same intensity. The familiar expressions form a matrix from which he selects certain elements which are inter-related from segment to segment and which outline the developing pattern of the ideas which he is pursuing. If the student is confused by an effort to comprehend every element as he hears it, thus concentrating his attention fully on every constituent, he will not perceive these inter-relationships and what he has not perceived he will not retain. It is in listening comprehension particularly that the teacher can easily underestimate the difficulties of the student. To the teacher the comprehension of elementary material is immediate and effortless. He must try to see the processes involved from the student's point of view and provide plenty of practice in hearing well-rehearsed material while requiring the extraction from it of different lines of thought. It is only at an advanced stage when so many more features of the language are familiar, that the teacher may begin to allow the student the opportunity of working with uncontrolled material where he must deduce meanings from context in a very rapid mental process of association. This process is possible only when the effort involved in retention has been considerably reduced by almost automatic recognition of language patterns. At this stage the teacher may seize the opportunity from time to time to enliven the lesson by recounting in the foreign language some amusing incident which has occurred during the day, or by providing some anecdotal background to a subject under discussion. When the teacher uses the foreign language as he would use the native language, the students begin to look upon it as a normal instrument for communication.

When the student has acquired confidence in listening to ungraded material much practice may be given in individual situations: in a language laboratory, in listening booths established in the library, in a listening room equipped with a tape-recorder or a record-player. At this stage direct listening practice can be divorced from a conversational situation. Material for listening may be drawn from literature being studied and may provide a basis for oral reports in class. Practice in listening may be given by taped lectures on informational subjects, sustained scenes from plays, or readings from poetry and prose. Students may attempt to follow radio broadcasts or the sound track of a commercial film or documentary. They may relax with a program of popular songs. Training should be given, too, in listening to group conversations and discussions. In the excitement of the discussion speech will be slightly slurred, but this will be compensated for by the hesitations, interruptions, and repetitions characteristic of natural speech. Conversations and discussions of this type may be taped and used over and over again. Simulated telephone conversations are also worthwhile, for they give practice in listening to slightly distorted speech with no visual clues available to counteract the effect of the distortion.

Groups of schools in the same supervision area should co-operate in the production of material for listening comprehension, freely exchanging tapes which they have had the opportunity to make. One school may be able to tape an interview or conversation with a native speaker who has visited them. This material should be immediately circulated to other schools in the district. In areas where contact with native speakers is rare no opportunity should be lost of building up through co-operative action a supply of semi-informal material in the foreign language. In this way students will have the opportunity to hear a variety of voices of differing quality, and accents representative of several regions and educational backgrounds.

Above all, it must be clearly borne in mind by teacher and student alike that listening comprehension is not a skill which can be mastered once and for all and then ignored while other skills are developed. There must be regular practice with increasingly difficult material. This practice must, however, be regularly spaced over the language-learning period and not massed urgently in great blocks at some moment preceding an examination. Listening comprehension increases with growing familiarity with the vocabulary and structures of the language and can provide one of the most enjoyable activities associated with the language program and one which the student continues to enjoy after he has left the classroom.