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ABSTRACT

While most people know how conversations, narratives, and other types of discourse are created in their native language, it is difficult for students to know how they are created in a second language. To deal with texts in a new language, the learner needs extensive exposure to a variety of language in realistic situations. The immediate recall protocol designed for development of reading comprehension can be adapted to help develop second language listening comprehension. The reading technique uses short texts to avoid sensory overload, gives students time to read them, and then allows students time to write, in English, what they understood from the text. For listening skill development, the technique would need to be adapted to a classroom listening situation, and features of spoken language (voice characteristics, volume, pitch, etc.) that aid considerably in the processing of listening material should be considered. Students should be given advance organizers and a specific listening task to perform, and should hear the tape once without taking notes. The student protocols indicating their comprehension level can be either graded or discussed, and the teacher can use the protocols as a basis for further instructional planning. (MSE)

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# Listening and Learning: Protocols and Processes

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When confronted with a second language, most learners react with a mixture of curiosity and frustration. The sounds are different, or at least they are used differently from those found in the native language. Words and phrases are arranged in unfamiliar ways. The printed page appears different as well, even if the second language uses the same alphabet and punctuation symbols as the native language. Unless one has already learned a second language, older learners, especially adults, often feel quite disoriented by what they hear and see in the second language classroom and, of course, in the real-life environment where the language is spoken and written.

At the same time, however, there are aspects of learning a second language that parallel those of the native language. Specifically for German and English, the alphabet is basically the same; many of the punctuation rules are similar; many words and phrases are similar in pronunciation, structure, and content; and many verbal cues (for example, those for questions or commands) are similar. In addition, American learners of second or foreign languages bring with them an entire background of learning how to deal with English language texts, both spoken and written, which can help them deal with texts in the target language. There is considerable rationale for using the native language to help learners classify the content and structure of target language material, at least in the receptive skills of reading and listening.

In other words, although much of the second language is new, substantial portions of it are familiar, if not in detail, then at least in broad categories. This report will describe one technique for helping students learn to tap some of the familiar text-processing skills in unfamiliar second language texts—that is, to make use of native language comprehension

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skills that help them focus on what is comprehensible in the target language. The technique is called the "immediate recall protocol."

As described by Bernhardt (1), the immediate recall protocol offers a promising means of determining what a learner retains when asked to read a language text. Because learning depends upon training the short-term memory, tapping the content and structure of language contained in the short-term memory should yield insights into the processes that learners use, consciously or unconsciously, to perceive, absorb, and store language material. The rationale for using the immediate recall protocol procedure for reading comprehension should work well for listening comprehension.

There are a number of motivational reasons for encouraging listening skills early in the language learning experience, including evidence from research showing that language learners are able to progress in listening at a faster pace than in speaking. Lowe (6), for example, discusses the "(positive) offset hypothesis," which indicates that on the ACTFL Proficiency Scale most native English learners perform better in listening than speaking 47 percent of the time for French and as much as 76 percent of the time for Spanish. This offset (separation of one's proficiency levels) begins at the Novice High/Intermediate Low oral proficiency level for French, while it does not set in until the Intermediate High/Advanced oral proficiency level for Spanish.

There is also evidence from research on first language acquisition that listening is essential not only to language learning but also to learning in general. Sticht (8), for example, reports that as the ability to read increases, the need to have texts read or explained aloud decreases. The need to listen actively (Sticht's term is *auding*), however, is a crucial initial step in the development of other learning modalities.

In describing the immediate recall protocol for the elicitation of comprehension in reading in a second language, Bernhardt used short (200-word) reading texts, gave students time to read them, removed the texts, and then gave the students time in which to write, in English, what they thought they had understood from the text. A similar approach can be used for listening comprehension, except that a number of factors relevant to the listening mode must be kept in mind. The length of the text, measured in the number of words, does not always reflect the actual length of time it takes to listen to it. There are many features in spoken

language, such as speaker voice characteristics (sex, age, and emotional state, for example), volume and pitch, background sounds, etc., that are not present in printed texts but that aid considerably in the processing of listening material. In a debate between Sticht and Bever (8, p. 312), it was pointed out that, for example, pauses in spoken texts can facilitate or inhibit comprehension depending on where they occur, whereas in written texts the reader controls where pauses occur. Another difference pointed out by Sticht in his debate with Bever is that some texts are meant to be presented aloud; to read them silently makes them seem artificial and therefore less motivating and more difficult to process. Stage plays are prime examples of language that is meant to be listened to, not just read.

Bernhardt's and Sticht's analyses lead to the conclusion that any text running over approximately two hundred words without interruption, or approximately three minutes running time, will induce sensory overload in the short-term memory unless other factors, such as interest in the topic or its entertainment value (song, comedy, delivery, etc.), are present

One further factor is the number of times a text should be listened to before a task is applied. In the research that Voss (9) conducted, subjects were allowed to listen to taped texts as often as they wanted. His texts, however, were very short (200-250 words) and the purpose was to have subjects transcribe in writing exactly what they heard. For purposes of creating a protocol under experimentally controllable conditions or for purposes of classroom testing, where understanding of the entire text as well as decoding of specific items in the text may be important it may be necessary to restrict the number of times the tape is played. In discussing techniques involving the immediate recall protocol for listening, experience has shown that for short text segments (one minute or less), playing the taped text more than twice is unnecessary.

#### Techniques and a Text

The purpose of using the immediate recall protocol procedure for the teaching and testing of listening comprehension is to determine what kinds of information students learning German at the university level would produce when asked to listen to unfamiliar texts under conditions involving a minimum of direct teacher intervention, such as that used in worksheets, transcriptions, translations, and the like.

The techniques used for generating immediate recall protocols seem disarmingly simple to use in a classroom setting. A teacher could, of course, read a text aloud at normal speed and with the prosodic features normal to the target language. Students learn language best, however, when they hear a variety of voices and language situations. For that reason the technique will assume the availability of tape or cassette recordings of native speakers of the target language using the language at normal rates of speed in everyday situations. The procedure is as follows:

- 1 The tape segment should not be longer than one minute running time. Anything longer is difficult to use in a classroom setting, although it may be perfect for independent work at home or in a media center.
- 2 The speakers in the tape segment should have relatively clear voices, although not necessarily without background sounds. In other words, the speakers need not be recorded in a professional studio. There are currently many sources of useful listening material available that a teacher can choose from to try out as listening comprehension exercises.<sup>1</sup>
- 3 Students should be given in advance any vocabulary or structure items that might distract from comprehension. Proper names of people and places are notable examples. Especially at beginning levels of instruction, students often have difficulty distinguishing between proper names and other nouns. Thus, whether a person's name is "Martin Schlichenmeyer" or "Max Schmidt" is less important than what that person says.
- 4 Students should be given a brief statement about the topic of the tape segment. They might be told, for example, that they will hear a brief conversation between two students named Martin Schlichenmeyer and Helga Kunold, and that during the conversation the names of three cities (Berlin, Göttingen, and Stuttgart) will be mentioned.
- 5 Students should be given a specific task to perform while listening. For example, they might be asked to note what relationship the three place names have to the two students talking.
- 6 Students should listen to the tape segment once without taking notes.

- 7 Immediately after listening, students should write, in complete English sentences, what they thought they understood. They should be encouraged to write about the text as honestly as possible, there are no right or wrong answers at this stage. Because they can use their native language, students should experience little of the interference or reduced spontaneity that normally accompanies incomplete writing skills in the target language. This first protocol should take no more than two minutes, especially if the tape segment itself is not longer than one minute.
- 8 Students should draw a line under their first protocols and then listen to the tape segment a second time. This time, however, they may take written notes.
- 9 With their notes and their first protocols, students should write a second protocol. This will usually contain only the new information picked up during the second listening or corrections of information misunderstood during the first listening.
- 10 With both protocols and their notes, one of two things can occur. A discussion can follow (in the target language or in English) in which specific information is exchanged about the tape segment; or the teacher can collect the protocols, score them (as tests or as classwork/homework), and make decisions about the kinds of exercises that are needed to help students "fine tune" their listening in subsequent class sessions.

### *Scoring*

Based on research by Meyer (7, pp 91-105), who developed a system for assigning numerical values to protocols generated after the reading of prose passages, each listening protocol can be scored on the basis of the "idea units" recalled by each student. The scoring procedure yields a numerical value for each protocol that can be analyzed.

In the sample text at the end of this report (Kramsch and Crocker, 4, pp 22-23), the brief dialogue between Helga Kunold and Martin Schlichenmeyer is broken down into 23 "idea units," which, incidentally, together provide a serviceable English paraphrase for readers of this report. Some of the sentences in the text have more than one idea unit. Martin says, for example, that he comes from the area around Stuttgart,

which could be interpreted by many slower listeners as his being from Stuttgart proper, rather than more specifically from the area around Stuttgart. Similarly, the idea that both students are in Berlin is embedded in a question about how long Helga has been there. In any event, there is enough information available that most listeners should have no difficulty recalling one or more ideas to put in their protocols

Following the sample text's idea units are the first protocols from seven students (of a class of 20) in a third-year college-level composition/conversation course. The score for the number of idea units successfully recalled is indicated at the end of each protocol in brackets. Note that only the correct information supplied (italicized) is scored. The protocols are arranged from lowest number of correctly recalled idea units to the highest number.

The student who scored lowest (three idea units), for example, misunderstood the word *Vorlesung* (lecture) that is related to the verb *lesen* (to read). Additionally, the student put the woman in the wrong city: Helga is in Berlin, not Stuttgart. The student who scored highest gave what amounts to a translation of the entire dialogue, leaving out very few details. The students in between were generally able to recall the information related to the task of determining who Martin and Helga were and what their relationship was to the three cities mentioned. In addition, most students recognized the idea that Helga feels overwhelmed by the size of Berlin, which was reinforced not only by what she said, but by the slightly anxious way she spoke on the tape.

### Teaching from Protocols

As a result of scoring the protocols, the teacher can actually see how well students understood the text, and can then make decisions as to how to proceed with this and similar texts. By the end of most first-year German courses, students can probably comprehend and talk about where people come from, using prepositional phrases like *aus* (from) *Göttingen* or *in Berlin*. It takes time and practice, however, to comprehend more precise information about a person's hometown, such as in *aus der Nahe von Stuttgart* (from near Stuttgart) or, in the less common form actually used by Martin in the tape segment, *aus der Gegend von Stuttgart* (from the region of Stuttgart). The same principle applies not only

to factual information but also to expressions of emotional attitudes, such as Martin's saying *gerne* (gladly) and sounding as though he is not completely thrilled about the prospect of showing Helga around Berlin.

Once students get used to hearing native speakers exchanging this kind of information, they can learn to focus on those cues that they can later use in their own speaking and writing. Before then, however, they should be given many opportunities to show to what extent they have understood such conversations. Sometimes unexpected dividends are realized. In the actual classroom situation where the above protocols were generated, one student indicated that Martin did not sound very enthusiastic about showing Helga Berlin, and wanted to know the German word for "enthusiasm" (*Begeisterung*). It is far better for students to ask than for teachers to demand!

### Discussion

Most of us know how conversations between students, weather reports, editorials, fairy tales, or other brief narrative texts are created in our native language. It is, however, difficult for learners of a second language to know how similar examples in a second language are put together. In order to deal with texts in the new language, a learner needs extensive exposure to a variety of language in realistic situations. Otherwise, what results is a highly unstable pidgin second language superimposed on an extremely robust native language. A technique like the immediate recall protocol can assist students in dealing with dimensions in a text other than structures and vocabulary. It can also help the teacher determine exactly what students do understand in the target language without resorting to contrived worksheets.

At present, language teachers in the United States are engaged in a discussion that seeks to place the ability to do things with language back into the center of the language learning curriculum. The "doing" with language is at the heart of the concept of proficiency. For historical reasons, oral proficiency has been extensively researched and methodologies for its teaching and testing have been developed (Liskin-Gasparro, 5). Other skill areas, however, need instruments and procedures that are just as fine-tuned as the Oral Proficiency Interview. The immediate recall protocol might be one means by which a listening comprehension proficiency instrument can be developed.



The logistics of playing a sufficient number of taped segments to determine a person's listening proficiency level are somewhat disheartening. Listening requires spending a fixed amount of time dictated by the nature of the text and the machinery involved. People can read at any speed that their native talents and/or training allow. As Foulke (2) has shown, however, listening texts, even when compressed, still bring with them a rigid time frame that allows the listener relatively little control. Indeed, for effective comprehension of structurally, semantically, and thematically complex texts, it appears that actual text lengths of at least fifteen seconds and at least two listenings may be necessary before even the most proficient listeners can efficiently process information in them.

With continuing improvement in electronic media, however, and with ready availability of cassette recorders, students may practice listening to many and varied models of the spoken language. This listening practice increases their motivation to listen, their speed and efficiency in listening, and their overall language ability. Utilizing the examinee's native language minimizes distortions possibly present from deficient speaking or writing proficiency. Use of native language protocols, therefore, seems to offer both the teacher and the student the opportunity to make the learning of the second language much more dynamic.

## Appendix

## Tape Transcript (Kramsch and Crocker, 4, pp. 22-23)

- M. Servus, ich heiÙe Martin Schlichenmeyer.  
 H Morgen, mein Name ist Helga, Helga Kunold.  
 M. Wo kommst du eigentlich her?  
 H Ich bin aus Göttingen. Und du?  
 M Ich komme aus der Gegend von Stuttgart Bist du jetzt schon lange in Berlin?  
 H Nein, ich bin gerade jetzt angekommen. Ich kenne mich noch nicht so sehr gut aus. Die Stadt ist so groß Kannst du mir vielleicht helfen?  
 M Ja, nach der Vorlesung, gerne  
 H Gut, dann schauen wir etwas in der Stadt herum  
 M OK!

## 23 Idea Units

hello / my name is Martin Schlichenmeyer / hello / my name is Helga Kunold / where are you from? / I am from Göttingen / and you? / I am from Stuttgart / I am from near Stuttgart / Berlin / have you been in Berlin long? / no / I just arrived / I don't know my way around / the city is so big / can you help me? / yes / after the lecture / gladly / good / let's look at something / in the city / OK

## Student Protocols\*

- AJ Her name is *Helga* She is *new in Stuttgart* She asks Martin for help, and he offers to read something aloud to her [3]  
 PM The guy was *from Stuttgart*, Martin, but *the girl was not*. She was studying in Stuttgart and felt that *the city was too big*. Martin offered to help her and she accepted [3]  
 JM Helga has *just arrived in the city* and is *not familiar* with the area Martin comes *from Stuttgart* and is *willing to help her find her way around* [4]

\*Correct information is italicized; student scores are in brackets

- MJ The story takes place in *Berlin*. *M. has been there a little longer than H. H. asks for help in the huge city of Berlin*. She herself is from Stuttgart *They gave their names at the anfang*. [6]
- TK A girl and boy meet in *Berlin*. *He is from Stuttgart* and has probably been there awhile. She is a bit *overwhelmed* by the *size of the city and asks him to show her around*. *He agrees and they go off*. [6]
- PB *Martin S* meets *Helga K.* at the Uni in *Berlin*. Martin asks *Helga where she is from*. She answers *Göttingen*. She says *she is new in Berlin and does not know her way around*. He will *show her around the city after the lecture*. [9]
- SN 1 My name is *Martin*. 2 My name is *Helga*. 3 *Where are you from(?)* 4 I am from *Göttingen*. *And you?* Have you been *here (Berlin) long*. 5 I come from *near Stutgart*. *Have you been here long*. 6 *No, only a short time*. The city is *so big*. *Can you help show me around?* 7 *Yes, after the lecture*. [16]

#### Notes

- 1 For German the slide and tape materials from Inter Naciones (Kennedy Allee 93, D 5300 Bonn 2 Federal Republic of Germany) offer many such examples. Also recommended is *Verstehen Sie das? ubungen zum Horverstandnis* (Jacobs et al. 3) as well as the tape material produced to accompany *Reden Mitreden Dazwischenreden* (Kramsch and Crocker, 4)

#### References

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- 4 Kramsch, Claire, and Ellen Crocker. *Reden Mitreden Dazwischenreden*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle, 1985.
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