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Teaching listening: Where does it all go
wrong, and how can we put it right?

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Outline

1. Critique of our current approach to teaching listening –
ELT materials, tasks, teacher training and results
2. The processes involved in listening and the challenges our
students face
3. The reality that is spontaneous spoken English –
demonstration (not available due to BBC copyright)
4. Combining the listening comprehension, decoding and
language-learning approaches (automaticity warning)
5. Demonstration
6. Conclusion and invitation

Critique of our current approach to teaching listening

ELT materials: graded, scripted, 'performed', and why

Confusion between **learning the L2 through listening** (modelling) and **learning to listen in the L2** (training)

Tasks: traditional listening comprehension (product v. process)

Teacher training: insufficient

Results: successful language learners' consternation

The processes involved in L1/L2 listening

1. We bring external knowledge to the listening situation. (problems for students who have different external knowledge)
2. Decoding – we recognise sounds which make up words, clauses, sentences and so on. (students struggle with the decoding of even those words that are part of their active vocabulary)
3. We construct meaning as we go along, based on the words we recognise and inference. (students are so busy decoding that they have little spare brain capacity to construct meaning)
4. We revise this as new information comes in. (students tend to stick to their first guess which may be based on faulty decoding)

Spontaneous speech: the facts

Four rules of spontaneous speech:

1. Speakers emphasise key words and reduce all others
2. Speakers say what they mean as directly as possible
3. Every word has at least one strong form and multiple weak forms
4. Speakers speed up and slow down

Students don't need to know how, why, or the terminology.
What they need is exposure/practice.

Combining the traditional listening comprehension and decoding approaches

Listening comprehension tips

Decoding 1: Automaticity warning

Decoding 2: weak forms, assimilation, elision, linking, ellipsis, but there is far, far more going on in spontaneous speech

Solution (it's not rocket science) gap fills, dictations

Combining both approaches

1. Pre-listening
2. Listening comprehension at three levels
3. Learning to listen in the L2 (**decoding**)
4. Learning the L2 through listening 1 (**noticing grammar, lexis and phonology**)
5. Learning the L2 through listening 2 (**recycling grammar and lexis**)
6. Speaking activities
7. Transcript

Demonstration 1



Exercise 4: Reduced forms: speed of delivery

Fill in the missing words.

1. Now we talked recently **about maybe going** to see **that** Nelson Mandela exhibition in central London.
2. I'm sure **you told me once** that you **met** Nelson Mandela.
3. **Have** I **got** that right?
4. **Can** you tell me **about** how **that** happened?
5. So **he was just** taking his time with his bodyguards and...
6. I **don't know** how to explain the feeling. It's, it's one of a kind.
7. I: **You'll never** forget **that**. D: No, no, no, no, no.
8. We **didn't want** anybody to touch our hand after...
9. **It was** such a beautiful day.
10. ...we **didn't** care.
11. **That's** a wonderful story.

Demonstration 2



Exercise 1: Dictation: speed of delivery

Here students transcribe short extracts from the text which are spoken at different speeds. Give them lots of support and encouragement.

1. (7 words) And you're working in a DIY store.
2. (7 words) I get so much out of that.
3. (7 words) I spend a lot of time there.
4. (10 words) Have you made any friends with English people over here?
5. (8 words) I did a lot of climbing in Denmark.
6. (9 words) I need to think about how I say things.
7. (6 words) We all just talk rubbish sometimes.

Conclusion

Students need exposure to the spontaneous spoken English they will encounter in the real world beyond the ELT classroom, but this isn't happening.

Teachers can create their own listening materials, but...

Alternatively...