The Content of Listening Materials: A Checklist for Teachers

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A continuing challenge for language teachers, particularly at the university level, is to maintain the quality and effectiveness of classroom materials while fulfilling the demands of a busy teaching schedule. Effective and high-quality materials may be defined as those that are developed with research or, at the very least, a sound pedagogical rationale in mind. Time constraints may limit the amount of consideration that such a rationale receives when making pedagogical decisions required of curriculum, syllabus, and lesson creation. This paper aims to list and explore vital considerations that risk becoming overlooked in the planning stages of listening materials creation, and to offer a practical checklist to help teachers to remain aware of these considerations within a busy teaching context.

Discourse Patterns

In their research on the patterns of discourse in language, Brown and Yule (1983) discovered three general types of discourse: static, dynamic, and abstract. Static discourse often takes the form of describing things, instructing how to make or do something, or giving instructions on how to go somewhere. Dynamic discourse is related to storytelling; features often include changes in time, setting, or characters. Abstract discourse is that which expresses one's beliefs, opinions, concepts, and ideas; it commonly arises, for example, when an argument is made and supported or when a complex set of ideas is explained.

That authentic discourse naturally takes these forms justifies including all of them within the listening materials that teachers develop and present to their students. Teachers who place a high priority on the authenticity of language within listening passages would benefit from keeping these discourse types in mind while in the plan-

ning stages of classroom materials. Some teaching contexts may demand a stronger focus on one discourse type over others:

- Content-based courses that challenge students to use critical thinking and problem-solving skills or to develop performance areas such as presenting or active listening may inherently include more static input.
- A course that involves literature, fiction, storytelling, or summaries may require more comprehension of dynamic discourse.
- Many EAP-based language courses may demand comprehension of abstract discourse in the form of academic lectures.

There are opportunities within listening materials—beyond the listening passages themselves—to incorporate language input that reflects all types of discourse:

- Teachers' instructions are necessarily static discourse. Whereas the tendency is towards brevity and clarity when it comes to writing task and lesson instructions, the content and complexity of this may also serve as authentic and challenging listening input for students.
- When teachers use anecdotes or stories to build schemata and orient students to the task, dynamic discourse is being utilized.
- When an instructor offers opinions and answers to students' questions, this can be called abstract discourse; opportunities to be exposed to this type of input arises more often in a classroom that stresses student-centered learning and encourages openness and inquisitiveness.

Features of Listening Texts

There are specific factors that when considered may help teachers develop listening materials that suit the proficiency and aims of a group of learners. They are the rate of speech, pauses and hesitations, contractions and reductions, repetition, discourse markers, and simplification or complexity of vocabulary:

- *Speech rate*: Taking into account variables such as turn-taking overlap and approach to rate calculation, we may estimate that native speakers of English tend to speak between 164 and 196 words per minute (Yuan, Liberman, & Cieri, 2007). Inauthentic speech, for example that which is written, rehearsed, and produced in the form of audio books typically includes much fewer words per minute. Teachers' voices are arguably the best sources of listening input, as they may adjust the rate of their own spoken production according to the known proficiency of the learners.

- *Pauses and hesitations*: It is commonly assumed that lengthy pauses help listeners of a lower proficiency to comprehend difficult texts; however pauses tend to be of more use to intermediate or advanced level listeners, as they do not have to deal with an exceedingly high amount of unknown words or phrases in the text and therefore may anticipate and exploit pauses as a strategy for processing input.

- *Contractions and reductions*: Lower level listeners may not be able to decipher the subtle phonology of words such as *can't, weren't*, and others. Whereas adhering to the forms *can not* or *were not* would only serve to limit the growth of comprehension, approaching these in pre-listening tasks would help these learners.

- *Repetition*: By repeating key words within a listening text, teachers may increase opportunities for comprehension and, on a deeper level, acquisition of new lexical items. Repetition also offers the opportunity to develop an understanding of new meanings by using contextual hints as clues.

- *Simplified vocabulary*: Consulting references that offer figures on word frequency and creating listening texts with this information in mind may help to keep the level of vocabulary well suited to a group of learners, therefore keeping cognitive demands at a reasonable level.

- *Discourse markers*: These will help listeners to not only ready themselves for forthcoming points in an organized text, but to organize points and draw relationships between these points within the text.

Listening task types

By varying task types within listening lessons, learners may experience the components of input ranging from individual sounds to global meanings. These tasks may take on a few forms:

- *Intensive listening*: These tasks are commonly referred to as bottom-up task types, in which learners decipher smaller components such as phonemes, words, intonations, and perhaps whole phrases.

- *Selective listening*: These tasks demand that students listen for specific details. They may require some knowledge of synonyms and the ability to comprehend details by listening to utterances expressed in a circumlocuted fashion. Selective listening tasks are of the most common to appear in English textbooks.

- *Extensive listening*: This type of listening aims to develop a top-down, global understanding of a relatively lengthy passage. It involves the use of a text with a complex message and allows for the listening of several different facets. Ideally, the text will include many important features such as discourse markers.

- *Interactive listening*: In this type of task, listening is intricately integrated with other skills such as speaking or writing in an authentic communicative exchange. This is commonly referred to as an "integrated" or "mixed skills" type of listening task. Activities that incorporate active listening are

inherently interactive. Active listening may be described as the "doing" of something as a component of—or in addition to—listening, as to increase opportunity for successful comprehension. A common classroom approach to interactive listening is dictogloss, which often includes repeated listening and pair work to confirm information and fill in gaps in comprehension (Vasiljevic, 2010). Active listening typically includes one or more of the following:

- note-taking
- making efforts to confirm and clarify information with the instructor or others
- summarizing what is heard for further clarification and global comprehension
- writing about what is comprehended and adding one's own point of view

- *Fluency listening*: In fluency listening, the learners' cognitive load is kept to a minimum so that they may listen fluently with maximum comprehension. Promoting fluency means that students use as much language as they know, as opposed to the commonly held belief that they necessarily reach an advanced level of proficiency. There are many ways to promote listening fluency, and all of them should ideally limit the amount of cognitive stress for students. Listening content may include:

  - Something students or their classmates have written
  - Stories recorded by the teacher
  - Something students have read
  - Something students have heard before
  - Common knowledge for students
  - Students' experiences
  - A text that they may read at the time of listening
  - A text that they may listen to while looking at pictures

A checklist for teachers

After creation but prior to implementation of listening tasks, lessons, or materials for an entire term, teachers may benefit from utilizing a checklist such as this:

- Do my materials include a suitable amount of static discourse, as my teaching context requires?

- Do my materials include a suitable amount of dynamic discourse, as my teaching context requires?

- Do my materials include a suitable amount of abstract discourse, as my teaching context requires?

- Do my recorded listening texts reflect the speech rate of native speakers, or at least represent a manageable rate for listeners?

- Are pauses and hesitations within the texts natural and frequent enough to provide opportunity to exploit them for increased comprehension of input?

- Do contractions and reductions occur naturally within the listening texts at a frequency comparable to that of native discourse?

- Is key vocabulary repeated to the extent that it offers sufficient opportunity for acquisition of new and targeted words and phrases?

- Is vocabulary chosen to reflect word frequency as it occurs in authentic discourse?

- Are discourse markers used at appropriate junctures and do they appear in the same varied forms in the text that they often do in native discourse?

- Are listening task types numerous and varied, and are their themes appropriately relevant to the teaching context?

Implementation and development

The inclusion of the above checklist in the planning stages of curriculum, syllabus, or lesson design seeks to offer learners a well-rounded listening experience as they take on input throughout a course. The main purpose is to expose learners to as many of the various forms that authentic native English takes, thereby raising the quality of teaching materials on the whole. In addition to this, the checklist may serve a framework for the creation of a listening course. Such an aid may be used as an outline from which to begin the design of materials, thereby satisfying teachers' concerns over whether all relevant areas have been covered. The effectiveness of the checklist and its underlying ideas may be assessed in the form of implementation into a course or program, follow-up surveys completed by the teachers involved, and improvements made based on this feedback.

References

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