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RECEPTIVE SKILLS: LISTENING COMPREHENSION

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It is often stated in textbooks on methods and techniques of teaching English as a foreign language that listening is a prevailing form of communication. Hedge (2000:228) points out that 'of the time an individual is engaged in communication, approximately 9 percent is devoted to writing. 16 percent to reading, 30 percent to speaking, and 45 per cent to listening. Listening is involved in all areas of our life, both public and personal. We process messages from the media, such as radio and television: we comprehend their coverage of political, cultural, and commercial matters as well as sports events and educational topics. We activate listening comprehension to take in culture at a theatre or film show, to take part in religious rituals, when we use public transportation, in our social and professional life. Clearly, listening comprehension is an integral part of interpersonal communication. Both public and personal communicative situations make use of a host of discourse genres. They range from formal to highly informal and include such instances as: interviews, TV news, reports, radio phone-in programmes, commercials, songs, feature films, documentaries, talk shows, political speeches, news conferences, quizzes, announcements, weather forecasts, sermons, talks and lectures, conference presentations of various kinds, public speeches, stories, anecdotes, jokes, instructions, etc. The knowledge of the discourse genre in a given communicative situation provides the same welcome kind of orientation to the listener as it does to the reader.

Functions of auditory input in foreign language learning

As we recall, previous approaches and methods of foreign language teaching did not underestimate the listening skill. Particularly the Audiolingual Method, which prioritized speech and the auditory code, had to emphasize listening as part of its ideology. But in all fairness to the Audiolingual Method and its accomplishments at the time, its treatment of listening would be far from satisfactory nowadays, when real communicative needs of students include the development of listening comprehension for communicative purposes. The Audiolingual Method promoted listening activities, but the material of listening was no discourse. It consisted of sentences constructed to illustrate a point of grammar in the form of sentence patterns and they were practised for the same reason, to learn various points of grammar, so that the learner could learn, or even 'over-learn' these sentence patterns (Hedge, 2000). If dialogues were included, they merely recycled the grammatical information. Deep processing for meaning, intention, sense and further communicative interaction engaging the learner's entire personality was unheard of at the time. The learner echoed these sentence patterns to be able to develop language habits.

Pronunciation practice, which also required the learner to deal with recorded material in one way or another, was conducted in the form of elementary (word-length) discrimination and imitation activities, such as minimal pair drill, but not as part of speaking at discourse level. However, the constant presence and use of recorded materials as well as the emphasis of the spoken language inevitably contributed to the development of auditory traces in the learner's echoic memory. The extent to which they were meaningful and useful in verbal communication is a highly questionable matter.

Auditory input, i.e. spoken discourse which is processed as listening material, is of fundamental importance in foreign language learning (Nunan, 1991). Written input aside, it is the main source of data for language learning fulfiling the primary conditions of language learning: it provides the input for observational learning, especially models of communicative interaction, and it provides input for communicative interaction, i.e. comprehension and production either as relatively independent entities or as conversation (see 9.1.).

The learner as a member of an audience

This environment may take a variety of forms, depending on the source of input and intensity of interaction, especially the learner's personal involvement in this interaction. Input from the mass media, such as TV, engages the learner in the process of comprehension accompanied by a wide variety of quite helpful contextual clues, but the role of the learner is confined to being a member of an audience, a listener or a viewer, rather than a directly involved participant in interpersonal communication. The message is most probably neither targeted at the learner as an individual, nor adjusted to his or her needs and abilities. The learner comprehends this input, but does not at the time interact with the sender to construct output. He or she is merely an observer, rather than a sender and an addressee. But even in this limited role the learner benefits from the opportunity to process monologue and dialogue discourse (interaction) models and learn cultural and language information, especially from the opportunity to pick up plentiful lexical material in its auditory form. This form of input affords extensive listening, whose advantages resemble those of extensive reading. Although the learner in not personally involved as a participant in communicative interaction, the benefits in terms of traces recorded in echoic memory cannot be underesti-mated. But this form of input alone is not sufficient in foreign language learning. This is why - for the purposes of foreign language learning - it is advisable to stimulate the learner to interact with the sender at least mentally, if not in person, by formulating an opinion, or criticism, or any other response in line with the third level of comprehension (see 12.4.).

As has been pointed out, the first type of input which presents instances of verbal communication but is not addressed at the learner personally is treated as an interaction model and can be replicated with various modifications, or even verbatim. Foreign

language learners vastly expand their classroom experience by taking over native or fluent speakers' communicative behaviour as models to be recreated, i.e. acted out in the classroom. This is no different from parallel writing tasks, which imitate communicatively important structural features of written discourse models. The recordings (conversations, situational dialogues, service encounters, exchanges illustrating the use of various functions of English, etc.) which can be found in large quantities in our EFL textbooks may safely be used as input for communication, i.e. input for comprehension, as well as a model of communicative interaction to be recreated with a varying degree of fidelity. Although these recordings are far from ideal material, they perform a useful function in this way.

The learner as an addressee

A more interaction-conducive form of input processed by the learner in the foreign language classroom is provided by the teacher and other group members, or visitors, when they target, i.e. address and adjust, their utterances to the learners and engage them in conversation. Such input demands from the learners acting both in the role of addressees as well as senders. Even when the learners are not speaking at the time, they must, at least mentally, prepare for taking their turn and for constructing utterances. Interpersonal communication in which the learners participate as subjects is essential in learning how to cope with the ongoing conversational demands, how to monitor and clarify comprehension problems, how to make oneself understood and process feedback from the communicative encounters. In conjunction with the learner's participation and involvement, auditory input provides vast experience for language learning, consisting, among other things, of procedural representations required in the skillful execution of language tasks as well as pragmatic knowledge. It is not surprising that teachers who demonstrate good communication abilities are recognized as outstanding in our field (cf Chastain, 1971; Moskovitz, 1976; Stern, 1992). Such form of auditory input is processed for the purposes of comprehension and interaction, i.e. conversation. The essential condition for language learning from such an input is fulfiled as participating in interaction.

Input for pronunciation

Auditory input is also the essential material for the learner to master the pronunciation of the English language in communication, i.e. in production and comprehension rather than in isolated words. In production, learners must be able to articulate the phonemes automatically as they construct discourse, while in comprehension, they must be able to discriminate them subconsciously as they decode the incoming discourse. The most significant contribution of the auditory input to language learning is that it is the only source of data for reconstructing the spoken code of the English language with its distinctive phonemic entities, their rhythm, intonation and other temporal constraints. If we cannot observe speakers of the target language modelling

verbal communication in the spoken form, we are unable to discern the components of this system and the way they are used, which means that we are unable to interact with the use of the spoken language ourselves. Auditory input brought into the language class acts as a surrogate natural spoken English environment which is so indispensable in first, second, and foreign language acquisition.

Hedge (2000:240) compiled a list of differences between spontaneous informal talk and recordings for English learners. It seems that the artificial qualities listed here are inevitable in the materials at beginner and intermediate-level, but not higher.

Spontaneous informal talk	Recordings for English learners
• variations in the speed of delivery, often fast • natural intonation • the natural features of connected speech, e.g. elision • variety of accents • any grammatical structures natural to the topic • colloquial language • incomplete utterances • restructuring in longer, more complex sentences • speakers interrupt or speak at the same time • speakers use ellipsis (i.e. miss out parts of sentences) • background noise present	• slow pace with little variation • exaggerated intonation patterns • carefully articulated pronunciation • Received Pronunciation • regularly repeated structures • more formal language • complete utterances • grammatically correct sentences • speakers take careful turns • ellipsis infrequent (i.e. sentences usually compete) • background noise absent

However, these recorded, professionally prepared materials have an invaluable advantage: they provide pronunciation models at discourse level and can be exploited for fluency-oriented pronunciation practice. The point of such practice is not to replace the well-known traditional, yet absolutely indispensable discrimination and articulation work at word or phrase level, but to take the learner's pronunciation ability a step further. A situation in which the learner is asked to repeat a text (be it a dialogue or a monologue), phrase after phrase, having to keep pace with the speaker's rhythm, intonation, pronunciation and fluency for as long as five or more minutes - depending on the student's level - is excellent 'gymnastics' for his or her a) working memory as well as for b) the articulatory coordination at discourse level. As for a) the working memory span is challenged by the necessity to structure the incoming material (a phrase or clause, not a word), as well as to hold and replicate it under the pressure of doing this for an extended period of time. This is essential in building articulatory foundations for speaking. At the

same time, b) the learners' articulation ability is put to the test in that they must implement and coordinate a series of various articulatory movements of their speech organs and must also keep doing this for an extended period of time. Both accomplishments provide the basis for the learner's ability to generate sustained spoken discourse.

The use of recordings provided in the textbook package as well as ANY additional materials should be strongly recommended as an obligatory part of a foreign language lesson at the beginning and intermediate levels, which is not to say they should disappear at the advanced stage. These materials present target language models of communication, including pronunciation, in that they leave indispensable traces in our echoic memory with their appropriate temporary constraints, i.e. pace and rhythm, and they help the teachers to save their own vocal cords while making up for their own articulatory imperfections which are acceptable among non-native speakers of the target language. This input alone, with at least some degree of comprehension, can be helpful in learning the spoken code. If the accompanying activities are well-designed and adjusted to the learner's level, benefits for the foreign language learner naturally accrue.

From the point of view of the Polish learner of English, an important and even difficult learning task is phonemic discrimination in listening comprehension because of a typological difference between Polish, a syllable-timed language, and English, a stress-timed language. Rost (2001:9): writes: 'In 'bounded' languages (or 'syllable-timed') languages - such as Spanish and Japanese - stress is located at fixed distances from the boundaries of words. In 'unbounded' (or 'stress-timed') languages - such as English and Arabic - the main stress is pulled towards an utterance's focal syllable. Bounded languages consist of binary rhythmic units (or feet) and listeners tend to hear the language in a binary fashion, as pairs of equally long syllables. Unbounded languages have no limit on the size of a foot, and listeners tend to hear the language in clusters of syllables organized by either trochaic (strong-weak) rhythm or iambic (weak-strong) rhythm. Stress-timing produces numerous linked or assimilated consonants and reduced (or weakened) vowels so that the pronunciation of words often seems slurred [emphasis M.D.].' For the Polish learner of English, the task is to learn the stress-timed system taking the syllable-timed system as a highly automatized point of departure. This requires practice and effort to restructure (unlearn and relearn) the existing knowledge both at the level of discrimination in listening comprehension and at the level of articulation (emission) in speaking.

Listening comprehension as an integral part of verbal communication

The fundamental psycholinguistic stages of listening comprehension by native or near-native speakers include (based on Clark and Clark, 1977):

1. The listeners register chunks of speech (phrases, clauses) with their working memory.

2. They assign it a structural description (segmentation into constituents with certain importance/function).
3. As they identify each constituent, they assign meaning and reconstruct the underlying propositions building them into a hierarchical representation (i.e. organized into more important and subordinate propositions).
4. Once they have identified these propositions for a given constituent, they must empty their working memory of the auditory information (the form of the audi¬tory stimulus) to be able to process new incoming material. While doing this, they forget the exact wording and retain the meaning.

Listening comprehension is an integral part of verbal communication as much as reading comprehension. The comprehension of the spoken message can be visualized at three levels of semantization, interpretation and evaluation, just like reading comprehension. Listening comprehension is influenced by the situational context, the relationship between the interlocutors, the sender and the addressee, and their mutual perceptions of each other as well as their goals in the communicative event. Spoken communication is goal-oriented, plan-based and strategic as much as the written communication is. The main difference is that by its instantaneous character in many cases spoken communication affords greater intensity of interaction between the speakers and their mutual influence upon each other, including the possibility of negotiating their status, the pace of interaction, the degree of redundancy, and other features. These observations are mere generalizations which must be verified against specific communicative situations with their specific parameters.

As a communication act, listening is as active as is reading. 'The listener takes an active part in interpreting the speaker's message and constructing a con-textually relevant sense.' (Rost 1990:81).

Let us take an example of a dialogue which takes place in a medium-size American grocery store:

Customer : (almost ready to pay asks not quite clearly): Is a check OK?
Cashier : Sorry, I couldn't here you.
Customer : Oh, I said: is it OK if I write a check?
Cashier (laughs) : I thought you were asking about Chuck. I heard: 'Is Chuck OK' and I don't know any Chuck. Yes, check's OK.
Customer : (also laughs and writes a check for the amount shown on the register).

This short exchange shows a minor misunderstanding which has pragmatic and acoustic sources. The question asked by the customer was not articulated distinctly enough, because she thought it almost obvious that a new customer could only ask about payment forms such as credit, debit card, or check. The cashier, however, had a different

set of expectations. Since it was a local, fairly small, grocery store in a rather small town, where most customers were on a friendly basis with the staff, it was even expected that they engage in small talk while shopping.

The depth of comprehension in spoken discourse is no different from deep processing for meaning in written discourse (cf three levels of reading comprehension). As Hedge (2000:235) points out:

Face-to-face encounters involve evaluation and negotiation. If, for example, a friend is describing a complex and distressing financial situation with some degree of emotion, the listener will need the intelligence to follow the information, the prior knowledge to understand the financial implications, the empathy to appreciate the emotion, the cultural knowledge to be aware of the limits on appropriate questions and suggestions, personal knowledge to assess whether the friend is overreacting and over-emotional, and the judgment to know whether the speaker's purpose is to elicit only sympathy or a personal loan as well. In this sense, there is not a total match between the speaker's intended message and the listener's perception of meaning. The listener will be interpreting according to all of the factors just listed.

If we were to characterize listening ability, (cf Rost, 1990:186) we would say that competent listeners can understand different styles of speech that are intelligible to well-educated native speakers, and when not, they are able to elicit clarification; they are able to understand speech at different levels of intellectual complexity, monitor their understanding and be aware of areas of their knowledge deficits as well as recognize when the speaker is not clear; they are able to respond in a wide variety of situations and adopt an appropriate risk strategy to respond to task demands. A speaker of limited ability is able to understand a limited range of styles but is often unsuccessful in seeking clarification, may have problems with understanding more abstract concepts in the target language and requires repetitions and explanations, and may not always be quite aware where their own knowledge is lacking and confused about the source of problems in understanding, their range of listener responses (feedback) may be small, and their risk strategies at listening tasks may be inadequate.

Difficulties experienced by foreign language learners in listening comprehension tasks

If learners of English as a foreign language had regularly and consistently been exposed to the recordings of native speakers engaged in monologues or conversations from the very beginning of their English course, their perceived level of difficulty of listening comprehension tasks at different stages of the learning process would have been tolerable. Listening tasks would not be treated as a reason for concern, as they in fact are (Ur, 1991). Listening comprehension tasks are perceived as a source of considerable anxiety among Polish learners of English, second only to speaking activities (Zebrowska, 2005). The roots of the problem are to be found in the scarce and irregular practice of listening tasks in the

foreign language classroom with the resulting underdeveloped auditory (echoic) memory representations for spoken discourse in English. Without experience and vast auditory (echoic) memory representations there is no basis in the form of procedural and declarative representations for the activation and development of the listening comprehension skill. For this reason, it is mandatory that the learners face the challenge of processing spoken discourse from the beginning of the course. Practice and experience in sufficient quantities will lead to improving listening comprehension and the development of the listening skill. Why, then, do so many teachers fall into the trap of focusing on the written language neglecting listening input and practice? The answer to this question has little to do with the transient nature of the auditory message because with recorded materials we have given the spoken message a relative degree of permanence and possibility of repetition. The answer relates to the uncomfortable clash between the following factors: a) temporal constraints imposed on the listener to process the auditory stimulus within a certain fluency span, and b) the foreign language learner's insufficiently developed automaticity to do the task so quickly. Since the learner is constrained by his learning stage to perform processing tasks slower than the skilled speaker/listener is, it is natural that he or she feels more comfortable with the written code, which is much more malleable to the slower pace of processing. The only remedy is more practice in the form of intensive listening. Faster action will be possible with further temporal integration of the component sub-tasks and the development of the requisite procedural representations.

When they are talking about their listening comprehension problems, Polish learners of English complain about the fact that listening activities are too long for them, which also means, stressful and tiring, and that not only is it hard for them to discern what the speakers are saying, but to keep pace with them for some time. Listening material is too fast and one round of listening is not enough for them. In their opinion, a remedy for these difficulties would be to have plenty of intensive listening comprehension tasks as well as having the opportunity to choose materials and control the running of the tape to suit their individual needs. As we recall, intensive listening practice is based on the same principles of grading task difficulty in skill development as those used in intensive reading comprehension tasks:

- the length of the task is a factor: the shorter the task, the easier it is for the learner to complete it;
- the pace of the task is a factor: the faster the task, the more difficult it is for the learner; suspending the fluency requirement makes the task easier;
- the amount of input is a factor: the more material is presented to the learner for the sake of the task, the easier it should be to complete it because comprehension difficulty is a function of the balance between the given and the new;
- task complexity is a factor: if the task is first broken down into sub-tasks, it is easier for the learner to perform the whole of it.

To sum up, for many Polish learners of English as a foreign language the solution to listening comprehension deficits include: a) adjusting the listening tasks to the learners' proficiency level because in this way they will be more likely to accept them than to opt out, and b) maintaining a consistent listening practice regimen, because only thanks to processing the listening input will the learners internalize the requisite vast auditory memory representations. If the adjustments lead to tasks which are too simplified or too elementary for the taste of some communicative purists, they may be defended on the grounds that a) they are merely stepping stones to the target-like, i.e. fluent, listening skill (fluency develops through integration of sub-skills), and b) they are an inevitable intermediate stage to target-like extensive listening.

Guidelines for listening tasks

Ur (1991) suggests the following guidelines for listening activities: as for the material for listening, the text should be close to informal discourse rather than simplified or edited. Visual information is helpful so video should be used when possible. The learners should be asked to comprehend as much as possible from a single hearing. As for the tasks, they should be contextualized and introduced as meaningful situations to activate relevant schemata (expectancy set, anticipation of successive elements) which can help them to understand the situation and content, not as forms to be processed. A specific purpose for listening, a task which would guide the learner's attention through the listening material is more conducive to listening comprehension than vague or very general instructions. Learners should be able to give on-going responses as they listen during the task as well as at the very end.

Auditory input and various follow-up activities

Ur (1991:113) lists listening comprehension activities which can be followed by shorter or longer responses. The following is a modification:

- **Performing instructions** is an integral part of classroom reality and may take various forms: typical teacher-learner interaction when the teacher performs his organizing function; in games, for example 'Simon says', in learner-learner interaction for example during project work, we also recall that performing the teacher's instructions was the main line of action in the Total Physical Response. Obeying instructions contained in the recording or read by the teacher is a special case of the above type of interaction; a related activity is to make a drawing in response to instructions, e.g. drawing routes, shapes or pictures
- **Ticking off items in the list**. The learners must comprehend the listening passage with specific clues in order to tick off respective items in their materials.

- **True/false judgment.** The learners are asked to demonstrate their comprehension by judging the sentences provided as either true or false according to the content of the passage for listening.
- **Cloze.** The learners listen to a passage and fill in the blank spaces in the written version of the same text provided for them. It is up to the teacher to decide how much of the original text should be left out and whether only words or whole sentences can be eliminated.
- **Answering comprehension questions.** Comprehension questions may be given orally or in the written form, which makes it easier for the learner to follow the task. Their essential character and levels of cognitive difficulty are no different than questions for reading comprehension.

Interesting activities may be built around authentic materials, such as stories, anecdotes, songs, feature films, or theatre plays recorded on the video. Ur (1991) points out that these materials are suitable for designing activities with no overt response, for example listening to stories (story time is especially enjoyable to children) or anecdotes; the learners will usually enjoy such an activity if the material is suitable and their body language will disclose their degree of understanding. The same can be done with songs and films. It seems however, that possibilities are much more numerous.

1. **Stories** maybe treated as material for listening, followed by some comprehension work and material in the story may be used for acting it out, a story continuation task, retelling from another perspective, summarizing, and many others.
2. **Songs** are in vogue nowadays as material for language teaching, which makes material for developing listening comprehension. Songs may be used in a listening activity, for singing along, as cultural input, and for interpretation and discussion. A typical activity which accompanies a song in communicative text books nowadays is a gapped text of the song the learners are asked to listen to. Although this task is almost mandatory with a song-based activity, the value of such a comprehension check is questionable. If the purpose of the activity is to comprehend the song, the learners are in fact distracted in it by having to focus on the task of reconstructing the missing lines. Songs often have interesting poetic lyrics worth concentrating upon, so more meaning-oriented comprehension work would be advisable. Moreover, the use of tapescript in its complete rather than gapped form, may be helpful in reconstructing the exact form of the text, which is necessary comprehension before discussing the sense of the song (see 13.7. on the function of tapescript in developing listening comprehension). Songs, especially the traditional ones, connected with special holidays or other social occasions, are presented as cultural input as well as listening comprehension material. In these cases, additional cultural commentary is needed as well as learning to sing the song, if

possible. Needless to say, songs and chants are 'staple food' in teaching children. It is widely recognized that language material, especially vocabulary, presented with its melody - in the form of a song - is much more memorable than other forms of vocabulary presentation (cfWach, 2003).

3. Feature films and other recorded programmes, if adjusted to learners' proficiency level, may provide valuable material for listening comprehension, discussion, evaluation. Situational clues and body language are useful clues which compensate the learner's listening comprehension deficits. Where available, tapescript may also be used as feedback and for clarification purposes. Watching such programmes is motivating to students because they can participate in target language media culture. Whenever the use of video is involved, many authors recommend such activities as silent viewing to predict what the speakers are saying, but they seem to me to be a waste of time and in conflict with deep processing for meaning that can be activated on the basis of the linguistic and paralinguistic material on the recording.

Activities aimed at developing listening comprehension

Considering the functions of auditory materials in developing pronunciation, auditory comprehension and conversation abilities (input and a model of conversational interaction and pronunciation), we may order the activities from verbatim imitation to modelling of various sorts.

Repetition of the recorded material after the model from the tape is especially useful in the initial stage of learning English as a foreign language, or as remedial activity for learners with problems in articulation because it helps the learners to master pronunciation at the level of clauses and sentences. If the material is meaningful, it may even be remembered. The point of the repetition is to get the rhythm and stress pattern right and to integrate clauses by using linking devices. This activity is also beneficial from the point of view of developing our working memory span for productive tasks. Although the activity seems quite undemanding, students tend to have problems keeping pace with the rhythm and speed of this activity.

Dictation may be considered a traditional, if not an old-fashioned, spelling test, but it is mentioned here for its very important other uses. It is irrelevant for listening comprehension problems that most dictations are read out by the teacher, rather than played from a recording: when there is eye contact between the teacher and the group, the pace of dictating and the learners' progress in writing down clauses and sentences can be more conveniently syncronized. The most important feature of this activity is that the auditory input for processing is converted into its graphemic form. The learner must work out this graphemic form on the basis of his or her processing of the auditory clues and transcode, i.e. convert the representation of the phonemic into the graphemic code. The

written version of the text reflects quite precisely the way in which s/he processes the auditory input.

Example of a dictation
Original text
Restaurant manager:

Well, what can we do? I can't have half a dozen extra waiters standing around every day on the off chance we'll have a sudden rush, can I? These franchises are very tightly financed, we have to keep our costs right down or we can't operate. People complain enough already at the prices we have to charge, and if that means queues when there's been some sort of hold-up, there's not much we can do about it. I mean, contingency plans would mean staff on standby and as I say, we're not making the sort of profits that'd let us do that, are we now?

A dictation taken by an intermediate learner
Restaurant manager:

I can't have a dozen waiters, standing around everyday, on the of chance, will have a sudden rush. Can I? This franshisers are very titly financed. We have to keep are costs write down, or we can operate. People complain enough or ready at the price we have to charge. It that means couse when there is been some sort of hold up, there is not much to we can do about it. I mean contingexxx plans would mean stuff or stand by, and I say were not make in the sort of profits. That would lead us to that are we now.
Source: L. Hashemi, 1997. CAE Practice Exams Part 2. CUP, test 3, paper 4, section D, page 136.
The learner's mistakes provide insight into his or her processing because they reflect:

- the way s/he segments the stimulus material into clauses,
- represents grammatical relationships within clauses,
- reconstructs individual content words,
- reconstructs the unaccented grammar morphemes attached to words,
- and the way s/he discriminates and codes the phonemic-graphemic correspondences.

This is the reason why feedback on such tasks is highly educational and absolutely necessary, especially at the initial stages of foreign language learning. Although at a later stage of language learning dictation may have a rather marginal role to play, one cannot deny that it is a useful elementary and intermediate form-focused activity to be used with those learners who have auditory discrimination problems, or with learners who have not practised auditory discrimination tasks sufficiently for their general language level. This activity supports communicative abilities, without being a communicative activity itself. It

provides the teacher with precise feedback on the learner's auditory discrimination processes.

Dictation drawing. This activity makes use of the material which contains some spatial information, for example a description of a room or a route in a map.

The text is read out to the students twice and the learners try to understand the text content and visualize it. On this basis they draw the plan of the room or the route on the map. This material activates the learners' auditory comprehension, visualization ability, and the ability to convert the mental model into a drawing. The activity is quite well-known in the field of foreign language teaching from the Communicative Approach. Hedge (2000:248) presents a variation on this theme based on White (1998), namely an activity called: describe rooms from stories, in which students are asked to make a drawing on the basis of a description from a literary work as well as discuss various ideas connected with the characters in the story considerably contextualizing the information that they work on. The task may be followed by a segment from a feature film made on the basis of the story or novel presented to the students so that they can compare their vision with that of the film director's,

Dictogloss is described by Nunan (1991) as a listening activity which involves individual note-taking, and collaboration in groups to reconstruct the text on the basis of the notes they have. It is not a dictation because the learners take down bits and pieces of information, and not the text verbatim. Feedback is provided on the text reconstruction which the students have done in a group, not individually. For the sake of consistency, Nunan says, it is better to play a recording than to read the text. The stages are as follows:

- preparation - asking questions, discussing some visual material, vocabulary, etc. and dividing students into appropriate groups;
- listening to the text - learners listen to the recording twice, the first time for the general idea of the text, the second time to make notes;
- reconstruction - the learners pool their notes together and without any addi¬tional input from the teacher at this time, they produce their collective version of the passage;
- analysis and correction - the teacher may provide feedback to groups of stu¬dents and the corrected versions may be copied and distributed to the other groups. Possibilities are numerous, depending on the learners' preferences and the teaching material.

Summary writing. When the learner is warned that a summary will be required after listening, his or her attention will be focused not only on comprehension of the passage, but also on retention of the verbal form. This particular task guides the learner's attention to concentrate on what is required. It may be advisable to give the instructions, play the material once or twice, depending on the circumstances, and ask the learners to

start writing. But if they experience difficulty in recalling the relevant information, the teacher may play the tape yet again. A successful summary should be proportional to the original material and it should reflect the structure of the original. By reading the summary, the teacher may evaluate the learner's comprehension and retention processes and decide on the amount and type of feedback needed. This activity builds the foundations for sustained discourse processing: it enhances verbal memory processes, it helps the learner to store some discourse plans, it focuses the learner's attention on lexical phrases and syntax in context. There are courses which make use of this technique as a leading one which would be exaggerated and unnecessary in the typical school context.

Note-taking involves a compromise between attending to the listening material and the need to record selected information (Rost, 1990). In this effort, the learner converts the information processed in the auditory code to the written code. At the same time, he or she must cut down on the amount of writing, develop a kind of shorthand, to keep pace with the incoming auditory information. Note-taking is an authentic task in the sense that we are often engaged in it outside the foreign language classroom, for example when we must record some information, e.g. the content of a lecture. In this way note-taking is one of the study skills. From the point of view of foreign language learning, note-taking is a useful attention-channeling task: to write down the important items of information from the passage, the learner must listen attentively, whereas the process of converting the auditory material into written notes strengthens its memory trace.

Notes taken by different learners vary as to their quality. Ideally, the information selected to be written down should correspond and be proportional to the original text content as well as reflect, even graphically, the hierarchy of the ideas (main points, supporting ideas, examples, counter-examples). These are the features that good notes share with a good summary. For the same reason, notes may be treated as a form of checking the learner's listening comprehension: as they convert their auditory intake into written output, the learners provide important evidence about these processes as well as a relevant basis for the teacher's feedback. However, whether or not learning how to make notes adequately should become an aim in its own right is another matter and depends on the course.

Notes are a recording strategy which is meant to overcome our memory limitations. In the classroom as much as outside, it is useful both in productive and receptive tasks as well as in the function of plans (i.e. discourse plans or lists of things to do). It has been pointed out that in receptive tasks notes act as a mnemonic strategy to help us cope with numerous ideas we want to keep track of, while in productive tasks they provide a record of things to say or do. It seems that in addition to their function in checking comprehension, note-taking activities may be helpful in various cases of coping with complex content learning.

Filling a grid or a form

Peter Whitehead interviews Frances Kelly

Peter Whitehead: The Campaign for Clean Air has just issued a report on air pollution and we have in the studio Frances Kelly of the CCA who's going to tell us something about the dangers we face from air pollutants.

Frances Kelly: Hello.

Peter Whitehead: Let's start with sulphur dioxide which causes acid rain. I thought the government was doing something about that.

Frances Kelly: Well, they are but slowly. Sulphur dioxide emissions from power stations are still going on and the resulting acid rain is killing off fishes and plant life in lakes and destroying the forests. And we in Britain are among the worst culprits when it comes to this kind of pollution. Peter Whitehead: What are the other pollutants?

Frances Kelly: Carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide. Carbon monoxide, which is mostly produced by motor vehicles can, even in small doses, cause sickness and a slowing of the reflexes and there is strong evidence that it has an effect on the growth of children. Peter Whitehead: And carbon dioxide?

Frances Kelly: Well, in a way this is the least dangerous of the pollutants we've mentioned but in the long term it may be the most damaging. Peter Whitehead: Why?

Frances Kelly: There is clear evidence that the build-up of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is the main cause of the Greenhouse effect. This will have dreadful results like the melting of the polar ice caps and subsequent flooding in the lower-lying areas.

Peter Whitehead: So what you're saying is that the increased amounts of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is making it warmer.

Frances Kelly: Yes, that's right and the results will be catastrophic. Peter Whitehead: And what should we be doing about this?

Frances Kelly: Frankly, the government has got to impose far stricter controls on the emissions and bring in tough legislation to deal with the problem.

Peter Whitehead: Frances Kelly, thank you very much.

Frances Kelly: Thank you.

Peter Whitehead: After the news we hope to be talking to the Minister for the Environment, Patrick Hilliard...

Source: The text of the recorded listening is taken from jon Naunton, 1990. Think first Certificate. Lon-don: Longman, unit 7, The Natural World, page 77.

At first sight, we notice that the text presents three pollutants, their sources and negative effects on us and our environment. It is a suitable example of listen¬ing material for a comprehension activity in which learners show their under¬standing of the main ideas by filling a grid (Rost, 1990). The information used in the table must reflect the structure of the comprehension material.

The function of tapescript in listening comprehension tasks

From the perspective of a foreign language learner who is not yet very skilled, lis¬tening comprehension presents itself as an auditory discrimination task of the material which is not available to the learner in an exact form. The fact that the speaker structures discourse into sense groups with stress patterns, rhythm, and intonation, uses the voice pitch and accompanies speaking with body language, facial expressions, and other non-verbal and para-verbal clues enables a competent listener to decode the message without a deep analysis of the morphosyntactic forms. The most important semantic information may be extracted on the basis of the accented content words in context. Syntactic information does not have a sig¬nificant role unless there are alternative interpretations of meaning. Native or very fluent speakers can afford not to be preoccupied with reduced and unaccent¬ed forms in the spoken discourse because, if necessary, they can easily reconstruct (reinstate) these forms on the basis of their auditory mental representations any¬way. For foreign language learners, however, the forms are not readily available from their mental representation. The learners find it frustrating to process a lis¬tening passage because the speakers' clues are reduced and therefore insufficient for them to reconstruct the forms on the basis of the incoming information. When they infer the meaning and still feel that they are not sure about the precise syn¬tactic forms used by the speakers, they may be shown the tapescript as a kind of feedback on form at the end of the listening task, after they have made the effort to understand the meaning on the basis of the available information and the teacher's input. Matching the graphic representation of the listening passage with the recording helps learners to improve the precision of its mental representation. The use of tapescript in this function must have a positive influence on the quali¬ty, i.e. precision and certainty, of the reconstructed system. To conclude, a tape-script may occasionally be used as a feedback device at the end of a listening task when the learner is still developing his or her auditory comprehension and/or when the text is rather difficult, but this does not make it an obligatory or regular feature of listening tasks.

It seems that the above situation, in which foreign language learners receive the tapescript of the text they have been listening to, is in a way comparable to a dictation task.

Options in designing a listening comprehension task

The text below is a tapescript of recorded material for listening. An interview with Sally, a book designer

Interviewer: Sally. You're a book designer. What does your job involve?

Sally: Um I'm first involved in producing a book when I'm given a raw manuscript and a brief, that is an explanation of who the book will be for and I have to er mould the manuscript - obviously I read it first of all - and mould it into something that's presentable, that is marketable um and attractive to the person who is going to buy it. That doesn't necessarily mean it is full of illustrations and photographs. It doesn't have to be particularly er current or wacky in any way but it has to actually suit the market. Interviewer: And how did you become a book designer?

Sally: Slightly by default, really. I didn't know what I wanted to do, so when I finished school and chose my A-levels, I thought I'd do art as an easy option, the third A-level, and it just went from there. I still didn't know what I wanted to do when I finished so I did a foundation course which is a general design, well a general art course and got interested in photography, then decided to do graphics and photog-raphy and er went to university, did three years and changed my mind yet again, specialized in typog-raphy and that was it, that was my training. Interviewer: What do you like about being a designer?

Sally: Creating, I think. Urn I don't think that there are any parts of my job that I don't like. I like the challenge, the -, of taking something that most people wouldn't want to look at and making it something that's attractive, into something that's attractive. Um the creation side. Problem-solving. Interviewer: Could you give us an example of a problem-solving situation?

Sally: Being given several pages of manuscripts and being - and a brief, for instance, the market, um, and having to produce something that would be suitable for the market. Um maybe making lots of bits fit one page. Making the decisions to which bits shouldn't be on there. Interviewer: What don't you like about being a designer. There must be something. Sally: When I have to open artwork - i.e. when I receive artwork in the post and it is an illustration I've paid several hundred pounds for and I open the package and when I first take the wrapping off and see if it's any good or if I've actually wasted all the money ... It's quite nerve-racking. Interviewer: Being a designer must be quite tense at times because you're having to meet tight deadlines perhaps. Are there any situations you'd like to tell us about?

Sally: Er yes, I'd say I was quite tense at the moment because I'm going on holiday next week so I've actually got three week's work to do in no time at all, you know, not allowed for in any schedule and er the book I'm working on at the moment is such a high priority title that there is no excuse whatsoever for any work not getting done on time. So I'm actually coming in at half past eight and leaving the building when the alarm goes at eight and in between times running from job to job and that's quite stressful, not being able to take any lunch-break and chasing up other people and waiting for them to give me work which is overdue and then being expected to actually make that time up as well as working in advance of when I should be working.

Interviewer: Being a designer sounds like quite a highly pressurized job. How do you keep smiling? Sally: I love it. I love it, as I said originally, just creating and making things, and I think I work quite well under pressure anyhow, so although I find it traumatic at the time, when the book actually arrives on my desk and it's a good product and I think that it's it looks good and interesting and it's going to be successful, it's going to make money, it's going to sell, I get a buzz out of it.

Source: Roy Kinsbury, Felicity O'Dell, and Guy Wellman, 1991. Longman Practice Exams for the CAE. London: Longman, exam two, section C, pages 29-30.

Having analysed the material, which seems suitable for upper intermediate or advanced learners, from these two overlapping perspectives, the teacher notices that the interview contains some interesting, but non-technical information about the job of a book designer, its positive and negative aspects, and that the learners may relate to this account through their own or their parents' professional experience, or their professional plans, as well through such concepts as stress or creativity or what makes a book attractive to buy, etc. They may have many ideas about this or other professions to talk about to personalize the content and elaborate on the ideas from the text. The plan of the interview is fairly transparent as the interviewer asks questions referring to the job responsibilities, Sally's personal route to choosing this profession, as well its good and bad sides.

On the basis of this analysis, it is possible to outline the following options for the three essential stages of the listening task:

1. The warm-up or introductory stage

The purpose of the introductory stage in listening comprehension is to stimulate the learner's curiosity in the subject matter of the passage, contextualize the task of listening in its communicative context or otherwise orient the learners, e.g. guide their attention to it, recall some relevant information and otherwise eliminate excessive uncertainty, which may lead to anxiety.

The following options can be considered for the listening task-based on the text in the example

- classroom conversation about the job of a book designer and what it involves; teacher or student input on the same topic prepared beforehand;
- a short talk about such terms as graphics, typography, design, photography, drawing;
- the question to talk about: what is important in choosing one's job;
- if you were doing an interview with a book designer, what questions would you ask?
- other options?

2. The listening stage

This stage is the time for the learners to comprehend the material and become familiar with its contents including the lexical material. The teacher's options include:

- listening to the passage more than once, each time with a different purpose in mind;
- dividing the material for listening into segments to give learners the possibili¬ty of intermissions to talk about some language points such as the vocabu¬lary/expressions, to elicit explanations from the teacher, etc. The teacher has a clear idea where such naturally dividing lines may be found in the discourse.
- choosing the most appropriate form of comprehension check from among the available possibilities (questions, multiple choice, true/false, a grid, a retelling or summarizing activity, note-taking, etc.)
- focusing on the discourse plan to identify the main ideas and the supporting examples and details;
- other options?

3. The follow-up stage

Serves the purpose of providing the learner with opportu¬nities to internalize and personalize, or even visualize the content of the mate¬rial for listening a little further, elaborate on any aspect of the material and respond to it as a sender or replicate the material as a communicative model for production. The options include:

- responding to the ideas in the interview from the learner's personal perspective to answer the questions regarding the job: What do you think of...?, Do you like...?, Would you like...?, What kind of person is Sally, do you think? How do you imagine her appearance? What kind of clothes does she wear? Do you think you work well under pressure? What makes a book attractive to you? What makes you buy a book? Why do you think the creativity involved in the job is so important and motivating?
- elaborating on the lexical material in the passage from the point of view of the following criteria: the content domain (terminology connected with book designing,

expanding knowledge in this content domain), the importance of the concept in the text (here: the concept of creativity and stress; what do they mean to you, what is their role in one's profession? etc.); elaborating on the topic of what makes a book attractive, a short oral composition with an exam¬ple prepared by each student (suitable as homework);

- responding to the material as a sender: what is your response to this interview, what is your opinion of the ideas expressed, what questions would you ask Sally?
- as for using the material as a model for production, options include: imitating the interview with Sally in a slightly abbreviated form to practise communicative behaviour under 'sheltered conditions'; parallel interview on a topic related to one's job but more personalized, including the students' choices of content, but with informal phrases from the listening material;
- any other options?

Keeping in mind the criteria for the analysis of the text from the point of view of its communicative and language learning potential, it seems clear that the choice of the specific strategy for each of the three stages cannot be arbitrary. It must result from the character of the material at hand. With an interview such as the above some options seem to be quite natural while others are impractical. The only thing that remains for the teacher to do is to coordinate his or her choices at each stage within the whole task, so as to avoid monotony and maximize variety within a) the available options for each stage and b) within the important didac¬tic categories to keep in mind (discourse genres, planning, content and culture learning, lexis, accuracy, skill learning, fluency, working memory work, etc.). Having considered all of the above, how would you plan the listening task based on: An interview with Sally, a book designer?

Further reading

1. Anderson, A., and T. Lynch, 1988. Listening. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
2. Brown, J., 1990. Listening to Spoken English. London: Longman.
3. Rost, M., 1990. Listening in Language Learning. London: Longman.
4. Rost, M., 1991. Listening in Action. Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall International.
5. Rost, M., 1994. Introducing Listening. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
6. Underwood, M., 1989. Teaching Listening. London: Longman.
7. Ur, R, 1984. Teaching Listening Comprehension. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. White, G., 1998. Listening. Oxford: Oxford University Press.