

BACKGROUND

The latter part of *MET* is chiefly concerned with information of relevance and interest to EFL teachers. It opens with an article, often from an area which can be classified as Applied Linguistics. This presents the most important concepts within that area and enquires into their possible relevance for the teacher in the classroom. On other occasions, a particular teaching situation or problem is explored.

As well as the opening article, the BACKGROUND section usually contains the Book Survey, Books Received column, Announcements and Letters, the BBC MODERN ENGLISH page, and advice on making and using Visual Aids.

Listening comprehension and note-taking part 1

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Introduction

Although I don't know of any figures on the subject, it is quite obvious that most of us spend a great deal of time listening: to the radio, tv, other people, and even ourselves. Such listening is rarely passive, for listening is an active, interpretative process, and it is often accompanied by some sort of response by the listener. Even for the native language listener, active, purposive listening is a taxing and demanding process, and no more so than in lectures in which the audience's attention span may be stretched to its limit. Unfortunately, students embarking on a course of higher education will be faced with many hours of lectures, and while this might be a daunting prospect even for the native language listener, it may be an almost impossible task for the foreign language listener.

How are we to give such students some help? The answer, unfortunately, is not an easy one. Although there are a number of articles and papers on an analytical or theoretical level (e.g. Candlin & Murphy, 1976, Chastain, 1971, James & Mullen, 1973, Rivers, 1966, Wijasuriya, 1971, Wilkinson & Stratta, 1970, Wilkinson, Stratta & Dudley, 1974), on a practical level, listening comprehension (LC) remains among the most neglected areas of ELT, though see Morrison (1974), as the shortage of good published materials testifies. There are probably a number of reasons for this shortage. Firstly, the skills involved in LC – especially in a foreign language – are far from completely understood. Secondly, the production of LC materials is made difficult by the problems of obtaining a selection of recorded texts which exhibit the characteristics of actual authentic spoken language. Thirdly, there is the difficulty of presenting LC material in such a way that it trains or develops whatever skills may be useful in becoming an active, comprehending foreign language listener.

What is LC?

Comprehension, according to many writers (Carroll, 1972, Davies & Widdowson, 1974, Niles, 1963, Rivers, 1968), involves two levels: firstly, a lower order level which can be termed the *recognition* or decoding level; and secondly, a higher order level which involves relating information to a wider context, that is, *interpretation*. The decoding level involves the perception of language forms, such as phoneme discrimination, clause structure, tenses, etc., while the interpretation level includes meanings, concepts and reasoning.

When we come to LC as such, the old African proverb springs to mind; "A word is like water – once spilled it cannot be gathered again." The one crucial distinction between LC and reading comprehension (RC) is that LC takes place in real

time. Whereas in the written medium the *reader* dictates the speed at which he processes the message, in the spoken medium it is the *speaker* who sets the pace, and generally the listener has to try to keep up with the speaker's flow of speech. The continuing flow of language, like water, slips through the listener's fingers.

What is spoken language?

Just as LC differs from RC by virtue of the elusive nature of real time listening, so too spoken language differs from written language in a number of ways. To begin with, it tends to be more complex. Sentences in spoken English can be both long and complex, part of the meaning being conveyed by intonation, stress and rhythm. Secondly, unscripted and unrehearsed spoken language tends to have a lower lexical density than written language (see Ure, 1969). Thirdly, spoken language exhibits a much higher level of redundancy than equivalent written communication. All three characteristics are probably related to the nature of communication in real time, for while the listener is having to process incoming speech in a continuous stream, so too the speaker is having to think and talk simultaneously. The characteristics of spoken language result in part from the constraints of operating in real time.

Since unscripted and unrehearsed speech is different from written language, there would appear to be little point in simply reading aloud from a piece of prose in the hope that this will provide students with an instance of spoken language. The best that we can hope to achieve under such circumstances is the production of spoken prose. Now, although talking like a book may be an impressive and even desirable skill under some circumstances, in general people don't talk in this way, and when they do we tend to feel that something is wrong. So, to train our students in LC, we need to provide them with instances of language which reflects the characteristics of actual, unscripted speech of the type which is common in day to day language use.

Collecting authentic speech

This is not as easy as it seems. To begin with, we need to decide whether we want instances of interactional language (that is, dialogues) or of monologues. The difficulty with dialogues is that obtaining authentic instances may necessitate recourse to surreptitious recording, an exercise which may be morally suspect, legally indefensible, or both. Alternatively, permission of the speakers can be sought in advance, though this may inhibit the performance and affect the value of the recordings so obtained. Also, the teacher has to take what he gets, and this may not be what he wants or needs for his language programme. The third choice is to simulate authentic speech, and elsewhere Marion Geddes and I have described our experiences in producing such material.

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The problem of obtaining monologues is not so great. The mass media provide plenty of instances of monologues in the form of talks, news broadcasts and such, although of course many of these items are scripted. Lectures within one's own institution are also a source of recordings. But both sources have their difficulties. Again, one has to take what is available. Also, lectures may be either very specialized or very long (up to an hour or more), or dependent upon visual aids. The solution to these difficulties may be again to simulate reality.

Such simulation, following procedures I used when producing a LC and note-taking course, can take the following form. Subject lecturers are asked to record ten minute talks on subjects within their own field, but addressed to a non-specialist audience, and in a manner appropriate to a tutorial rather than the formal mass lecture. The talk should be unscripted, although notes and some advance preparation may be desired by the speakers. Finally, the talks should exhibit structure so that there is an *introduction*, a *development* and a *conclusion*. The absence of a script means that the speaker cannot, on the whole, talk like a book, while the use of notes and some form of rehearsal parallels the kind of preparation which is common for tutorials and lectures. The restriction on length means that the teacher obtains material which is complete in itself, but which can be fitted in to the average teaching period of 40 or 50 minutes.

Designing a LC and note-taking course

In designing a course, several considerations need to be taken into account. Firstly, there is the place of the LC course in the total language programme. Ideally all the so-called four skills should be exploited as a means of promoting acquisition of the language forms and functions specified in a language syllabus. Thus, LC will not be regarded as a separate and independent exercise, but as part of an integrated programme. Speaking, reading and writing will therefore be used as a means of promoting LC skills, while LC will also feed into the development of the three other skills. In some situations, the learners may be more concerned with developing the receptive skills (listening and reading) than the productive skills; but even here, writing and speaking may be used to facilitate acquisition of the desired skills.

Secondly, even when the teacher has tried to control the material he obtains from his speakers, ultimately he is dependent upon what he gets. Thus the form of the course will to some extent be predetermined by the nature of the spoken material he has obtained.

Thirdly, we have to consider which aspects of LC are to be covered in the course. In the course I produced these were as follows:

- a the organization of a talk and clues to structure;
- b redundancy and how it helps the listener;
- c anticipation listening or guessing ahead;
- d transferring information to visual forms;
- e linking reading and listening;
- f using advance notes as a guide.

Finally, there are methodological considerations. If it is our intention to develop LC skills, then I would suggest that the following sequence of activities could be followed:

Teach/Demonstrate → Practise → Rest

This means telling the student what to listen for, providing him with material on which to practise, and finally, testing him to see whether or not he can carry out the tasks specified. In practical terms, it means giving the student a worksheet in

which both the instructions and the organization of the sheet will focus his attention on key elements of the spoken text. The worksheet, when completed, can become a cue sheet for subsequent spoken or written production by the student, for I believe that it is important to give a purpose to listening which goes beyond the listening task itself. In other words, the student is given a use for the material he has gathered.

Preparing a unit

In the course I produced, most of the talks – eighteen in all – were recorded and transcribed before work on individual units was begun. Recording the talks raised one problem: some speakers found it difficult to talk 'cold' into a microphone in a studio with only the producer for an audience. It may be advisable to have a live audience to overcome this problem, though the administrative difficulties involved may be greater than the gains in verisimilitude.

Transcribing the talks is a tedious and time consuming process, but essential, since a transcript is needed in order to devise a worksheet. Also, the transcript is useful for the teacher when preparing to use the recorded talk. No paragraphing or indications of intonation, stress or other phonological features were included on the transcripts, though punctuation was added. The speaker's name, the title of the talk and the tape reference were included. It is also a good idea to number every fifth line of the transcript, for ease of reference later on. An example of part of a transcript is given below.

TAPE 1	TALK 2	TRANSCRIPT
Speaker:	Professor Frank Brosnahan	
Title:	The Comparison of Language with a Map-making Device	
		(ah) The comparison of language with (ah) a map-making device. (ah) I thought in the short time that is allotted to me on this particular event I would (ah) say something about the relations of language (ah) 5 as a map-making device. (ah) I think in some ways this is very illuminating (ah) with regard to the way that language (ah) operates. (um) Consider first of all (ah) the situation of someone – shall we say a 10 geographer – who wishes to make a map of this campus, (ah) He would begin by walking over the campus, (ah) making a number of measurements, of notes, (ah) of getting the angles correct from one position to another, and so on . . .

The talks were classified according to their appropriateness for the tasks specified earlier. Then detailed work began on preparing a worksheet or worksheets for each talk. The worksheet is a key feature of the method I used, and it is tied to the general procedure of presentation. In units 1 and 2 of the course, two worksheets were prepared for each unit. The first worksheet drew attention to organizational features of each talk, this being the key element being taught in these two units. The second worksheet, which was a development of the first, focussed on the content of each talk, using the organizational clues (or 'sign posts') as a guide. All worksheets were preceded by an introduction, either to contextualize the talk or to guide the students' attention. Here is an example of part of a worksheet for unit 2.

INTRODUCTION

In unit 1 you learnt about the use of words and phrases which show the organization of a talk. You learned about the use of enumerating words, and the use of questions.

Write examples of *enumerating words* here:

Write an example of a *question* here:

In this unit you will learn about other words and phrases which show the organization of a talk. We will call these words _____

In the talk you are about to hear, the title gives us the first clue to the organization of the talk. The title contains these key words:

comparison language map-making

The first word – comparison – tells us to expect a talk organized as follows:

item a
item b
comparison

During his talk, the speaker tells his audience to listen for different kinds of information. He uses SIGN POSTS to show the way through his talk. Here are the sign posts, and here is what they tell us.

SIGN POSTS	WHAT THEY TELL US
"Consider first of all..."	This is my first main point.
"In other words..."	Here is an illustration or an example.
"You will appreciate..."	Attention! This is important.
"Now..."	Here is a new point.
"Although..."	Here is a contrasting point.
"Let me summarize."	This is the end.

Our listening is more efficient if we recognize these signals or sign posts. The sign posts help us to organize our listening.

- a** the recorded talk will be played to you for *global listening*, that is, to give you an overall idea of the talk.
- b** as you listen, fill in Worksheet A. This worksheet focuses on the *sign posts*.
- c** after the global listening, the tape will be played again for *detailed listening*.
- d** this time, fill in Worksheet B. The items in this worksheet give the main points of the talk.
- e** when you have completed Worksheet B, write a summary of the talk, using your completed notes in the worksheet.

WORKSHEET A

- a** listen to the talk.
- b** tick the sign posts on the worksheet as you hear them.
- c** write in any sign posts not given on the worksheet.
write in the blank spaces provided.

TITLE: The _____ of _____
with a _____ Device.

STEP ONE: Consider first of all...
EXPLANATION: In other words...
SUMMARY &
ATTENTION: What he is doing, you will appreciate, is to...

STEP TWO: _____

ATTENTION:
REVIEW: Now, you will appreciate what I am doing...

ATTENTION: REVIEW: _____

REVIEW: In both cases...

Thirdly...

STEP THREE: _____

ATTENTION: _____

NEW POINT: CONTRAST: On the other hand...

ILLUSTRATION: _____

CONTRAST: _____

CONCLUSION: Let me now try to summarize...

Once the draft worksheets had been prepared, they were tried out against the recorded talk. This is important, because the use of the transcript as a basis for devising the worksheet may result in setting unrealistic tasks for the listener who, after all, has to complete the worksheet in real time. Usually some modification of the worksheet proves necessary when the draft is tried out against the actual talk and, indeed, Worksheet A given above was twice modified as a result of such trials.

Finally, the completed worksheet was used with a class. Although the actual presentation procedure was varied from unit to unit, the general pattern was as follows:

- Step 1:** teacher introduction of lesson material
- Step 2:** hand out worksheet. Students look over worksheet, and teacher explains any difficult or obscure points
- Step 3:** listen to tape: global listening for overall organization and gist of the talk
- Step 4:** teacher reviews and checks Worksheet A if there is more than one worksheet
- Step 5:** listen to tape: detailed listening and completion of Worksheet B
- Step 6:** listen to tape: review listening to check worksheet
- Step 7:** teacher reviews and checks worksheet
- Step 8:** follow up activity

BACKGROUND

4 Multiple choice items presented on tape are more difficult than the item being tested. Limitations of short term memory are such that the listener cannot hold the lead as well as the options in his mind. If such items are to be used, the written mode is to be preferred.

5 It is not necessary to use sophisticated recording equipment to make an exploded version of a talk for classroom use. A simpler procedure is for the teacher to use the complete talk and a marked version of the transcript. He can then stop the tape manually and follow the procedure noted in 2 above.

RONALD V WHITE

The second part of Ronald White's article, in which he discusses the relationship between listening and reading, will form part of the Background Section in MET 6/2 (March). A bibliography of works referred to in the article will also be included.

Listening comprehension and note-taking – part 2

In the first part of this article (*MET 6/1*), Ronald White discussed some of the problems involved in listening to unscripted spoken language. He described ways of simulating authentic speech to help students listen with understanding, and gave examples of worksheets which directed their attention to the structure and organisation of short talks included in a listening comprehension and note-taking course. These worksheets also focused on redundancy and anticipation listening, and he gave advice on ways of exploding a tape for the insertion of questions to practise these aspects of listening.

In this second part, the relationship between listening and reading is discussed. Readers should note that the bibliography relates to both parts of the article.

Correction: the introductory line to the final paragraph, first column, on page 24 in MET 6/1 in Ron White's article on listening comprehension should have read 'Teach/Demonstrate → Practise → Test.'

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Information transfer

The transfer of verbal information to a visual form — tables, diagrams, pictures, maps — is a familiar procedure in RC, and it is also used for LC tests (eg the Northern Joint Matriculation Board Test in English for Overseas Students Aural Comprehension Test). There are some problems with the use of visuals. If the visual is closely integrated with the organization and content of the talk, it may be necessary to provide the students with either a *completed* visual or with a

series of visuals equivalent to the successively completed illustrations which the speaker produces during the course of his talk. In either case, the transfer of information is in the speaker's rather than the listener's hands.

If the visual requires interpretation, the listener is being given a task which adds to his difficulty because, in addition to interpreting the talk, he is being asked to interpret the visual as well. This can be the case when the visual is ambiguous or when it is incomplete. The appropriateness and clarity of the visual must be considered carefully.

Finally, not all students are visually minded, and for such students a verbal rather than a visual form of summary may be more helpful.

In the unit which introduced the idea of using visuals, a combination of summarizing procedures was used. Some items followed a completion pattern (the student completions throughout are in italics).

Yet, there is a wide *diversity of climate* types.

How?

The importance of solar radiation or *energy from the sun*, which

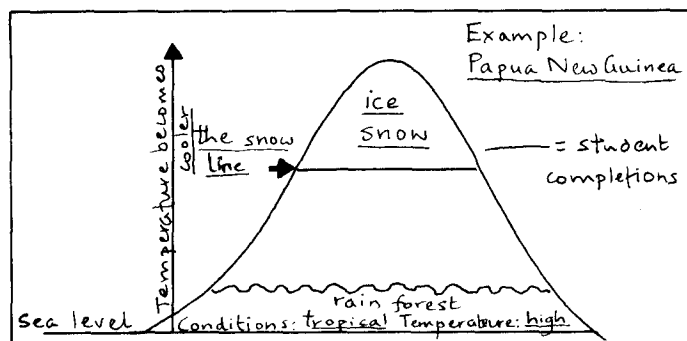
- a *moves the winds*
- b provides areas of high and low pressure
- c *brings areas of hot or cold temperatures*
- d *provides energy for evaporation of moisture*

Others were in tabulated form:

FACTOR 2: *altitude*

Example: *Big island of Hawaii*

ALTITUDE	CHARACTERISTICS
high	<i>snow</i>
sea level	79° to 80°F



Before beginning work on the talk, students were given the following instructions.

- a What are the KEY WORDS in the title?

CLIMATIC DIVERSITY PACIFIC

What information do you expect to hear in the talks? Discuss this with your classmates and your teacher.

- b During the global listening stage, try to pick out those parts of the talk which would best be summarized in diagram form, and those parts which would best be summarized in tables.
- c Discuss your ideas with your teacher and classmates.
- d Look at the worksheet which will be given to you. Compare your suggestions for diagrams and tables with those given on the worksheet.
- e Listen to the talk again. During this detailed listening stage, fill in the worksheet as you listen.
- f Use your completed worksheet to give a spoken summary of the talk.

Linking reading and listening

In an academic context, what students listen to is often linked to what they read. Set readings may either precede or follow a lecture or tutorial. It is unusual for a student to come to a lecture without having some previous knowledge of the topic. Such knowledge helps in comprehending the lecture and in taking notes.

One of the eighteen speakers I recorded was able to supply me with a reading text which closely paralleled his own talk on 'The Family'. A worksheet was devised for use with the reading text, and students were given the task of reading the text on Family, Kinship and Marriage and of completing the

worksheet in advance of listening to the talk on 'The Family': Then they listened to the talk twice. The first time they could make general notes, while the second time they were to make detailed notes. They were not given a worksheet to use with the talk, and they were told that they were expected to use their knowledge of the subject, gained from the reading text, to help in making their lecture notes. When they had listened to the talk and made their notes they were to use the completed RC worksheet and their lecture notes to write a paragraph on 'Changes in the Family'.

Advance Notes

Reading a parallel text provides one clue to the organization of a talk, particularly of the content of the lecture. Clues to organization of the text itself can also be provided. Here is part of the sheet given to students before listening to a talk.

In this unit you are going to listen to a talk by Dr Tony Weir on stars. There are some very clear signals in his talk, and there are several repeated patterns.

His talk is in four main parts:

- 1 *Introduction*
- 2 *Characteristics of the sun* (as an example of a star)
- 3 *A star's source of energy*
- 4 *Conclusion* (a quick review of the points made in part 3)

Dr Weir begins with an introduction to his subject. He tells us what he is going to talk about:

"I've been asked to talk about *what is the physical structure of a star.*"

He then discusses the difficulties of studying the physical structure of stars because they are so far away.

Next he moves to the main part of his talk. This move is signalled as follows:

"Now the *first* and most difficult feature . . ."

He then states that this feature is *distance*.

Next, he talks about the very high speed of light. Because light travels so fast, we see far away stars simply as a point of light.

During this part of his talk, Dr Weir uses three sign posts one after another:

so that
however
but

However shows that he has moved to a new stage in the discussion. He talks about five characteristics of the sun.

During this part of his talk, he uses the following pattern:

can { *know*
tell
work out } something { *by*
from } something

He goes on to say that the sun has been shining for a very long time. He says we *can tell* this *from* something.

The talk now moves to the next main stage, signalled by a question:

"So what *keeps it going?*"

The rest of this part of the talk answers this question.

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The students read the advance notes before listening to the talk. Then, during the first hearing, they followed the advance notes, attending to the points outlined in the notes. During the second hearing, they completed the worksheet which focussed on detailed points in the talk. The worksheet was then used as a cue sheet for a spoken summary of the talk.

Using the transcript

In the material I produced, I did not make use of the transcript as a direct teaching item except in the unit on redundancy. I avoided putting the transcript into student hands on the grounds that the course was designed to help with *listening* and not reading. There are, however, two uses to which a transcript may be put.

The first is as a form of advance notes: the students can be given the transcript to read before listening to the talk. Key ideas could be highlighted on the transcript, as in the redundancy unit described earlier; or else the students themselves could have the task of identifying the key ideas in the transcript.

The second is to use the transcript as part of an editing exercise. This would seem to be a valid exercise in that the transfer to the written medium of material which was originally

spoken almost always involves reduction in length and correction of expression and grammar. Such an exercise would appear to serve more point than the traditional precis, which tends to involve the reduction of an already well written text to a pale facsimile of the original. Editing a transcript, while involving abridging, also involves some improvement in what may be, in transcribed form, an untidy, repetitious and poorly phrased text.

Conclusion

The procedures I have described are based on the assumption that LC skills can be trained, and that using a combination of authentic (or simulated authentic) material and worksheets is one way of developing these skills. Obviously there are other paths to the same goal. Clearly, too, the methods and materials I have used are not all equally applicable to all situations; nor are all exercises equally successful in promoting LC skills. Ultimately one wants students to be autonomous, and to develop LC strategies which can be applied to a wide variety of listening experiences. Probably the most important move — and certainly the most difficult — is to wean students away from the *what* of a talk to the *how*. The methods described in this article may encourage other teachers to make further contributions to the difficult problem of training LC skills.

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