ON THE NET

Listening: You've Got To Be Carefully Taught

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INTRODUCTION

Listening is arguably the most important skill required for obtaining comprehensible input in one’s first and any subsequent languages. It is a pervasive communicative event: we listen considerably more than we read, write, or speak (Decker, 2004; Omaggio Hadley, 2001; Wilt, 1950, cited in Hysop & Tone, 1988). Given the importance of listening, the natural assumption is that listening skills are actively taught to both first (L1) and second (L2) language learners. However, this is not necessarily so in L1 instruction (Hysop & Tone, 1988). The situation is slightly more sanguine in L2 instruction, but only in recent years. For some time, listening was regarded as a "passive" or "receptive" skill and, consequently, not particularly crucial as a skill area to be taught. Researchers then began to recognize the importance of listening and its role in comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982), and attention to and adoption of newer comprehension-based methodologies brought the issue to the fore. Listening became a skill to be reckoned with and its key position in communication recognized (Feyten, 1991; Omaggio Hadley, 2001). Listening is a skill to be taught, with concomitant strategies to help L2 learners be successful (Berne, 2004).

The proficiency movement, with its emphasis on the use of authentic materials, underscored the value of developing listening skills in L2 learners. Where and how, then, do educators obtain authentic materials for use in the instruction of aural skills? This was a particular problem for L2 teachers and learners in geographic areas devoid of native speakers (NSs). Technology has been a real boon to this conundrum, ensuring that no one need be isolated from L2 input generated by NSs anymore. An internet connection is all that is needed to gain access to a myriad of examples of NS speech. Nevertheless, the wise L2 instructor must prepare appropriate activities for working with NS audio and video clips that will maximize comprehension and minimize frustration on the part of the learners. For this column, we have chosen two sites to serve as examples of what is possible in online lessons through communications technologies. The sites discussed below will give the reader an idea of what can be done in terms of materials development and also how to prepare one’s students for optimal work with the aural input.

BBC LANGUAGES

The BBC Languages site presents a smorgasbord of listening activities for several languages: French, Spanish, German, Italian, Mandarin Chinese, Greek, and Portuguese. Pages focusing on these languages are fairly extensive and offer several different listening exercises for language learners.

The Better @ languages section runs you through a series of "excuses" for not attempting to learn another language and asks for corroboration or denial. Then it presents a list of nine remarks and explanations tailored to your responses, designed to encourage you to begin language study.
The Better @ listening section is based on the premise that language learners want to be able to "use" the language they are learning. In order to accomplish this, exposure to natural real-life language samples is imperative. The languages treated in this section are French, German, Italian, and Spanish. All languages have similar sections for listening activities.
For each of the above-mentioned languages we find a series of 5 listening activities, including

A recipe:

Deciphering time in a context:
Recognizing the gist of a question:

Getting directions from someone in the street:
Shopping in a market and asking prices of items:

The language learner has three chances to listen, opportunities to confirm/corroborate one's response, and eventually the transcript of the clip is provided for reinforcement or checking. After the fifth activity, several strategies are suggested to improve listening comprehension.
Other activities for these languages can be accessed through the main Languages page: http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/
The activities for Chinese, Greek, and Portuguese are slightly different and include videos that demonstrate useful phrases and basic language structures to a beginning language learner.
For example, the Portuguese section presents videos of NSs in the process of interacting on the following topics: greetings, introducing yourself and others, saying a bit about yourself, buying coffee and drinks, finding your way, shopping for food, finding and booking a room, getting around by public transport, ordering a meal, and summer in Brazil.
In addition to listening, the listener has the option of hearing and seeing the text in either the target language (TL) or the L1. Once through all the phrases in a given selection, the entire video can be played, giving more context and flow to the conversations.

In this Talk Portuguese lesson on shopping for food, we see the background information provided to set up the situation presented in the Flash player.
In this *Talk Greek* lesson we see the Flash player options for viewing the Greek text, the English text, or pronunciation assistance as the sentence is heard.

The Chinese section, in addition to the sorts of audio activities already mentioned, includes introductory material for a variety of topics.
These activities use Pinyin script instead of Chinese characters.

They also include short videos with transcripts.

All of these languages provide additional links to cultural notes, pronunciation guides, language notes, and additional useful phrases with each selection. At the end, the learner can take a quiz to check comprehension and progress.
Not to ignore the less-commonly-taught (but not less-commonly-spoken!) languages, another page is devoted to an extensive listing of more languages found across Europe, as well as Japanese and Urdu. While not represented to the depth of the above languages, these languages are acknowledged, their history provided, and some key phrases represented in audio clips as well as in written form, including non-Roman scripts where appropriate.

Here, for instance, is a sample from the Guide to Urdu.

An added benefit for each of the language sections is a tutor page, which provides instructions on use of the activities and materials. Several activities have accompanying worksheets that can be downloaded as .pdf files. Also available within the tutor section is a page entitled Get the most out of video. This section
provides tips and strategies for using video in teaching. Twelve different approaches to using video are listed. Clicking on each individual approach yields more in-depth directions for lesson activities while using the video.

Perhaps owing to their geographic proximity to the UK, added activities for French, Spanish, German, and Italian include further tutorial courses. One, called *Talk French* (or Spanish, German, Italian), addresses basic topics, and includes video clips, word games for practice on the computer, and worksheets for comprehension checks. A second one, *French Steps* (or Spanish, German, Italian), is a 24 step online course for beginners that addresses survival French, the basics of L2 vocabulary, and allows learners to track their progress through the activities for each section.
This BBC site for languages is extensive and offers many things for many people in many languages. Considerable thought an organization has gone into its development, making it a useful tool for language teachers. Authentic language can also be found on a great many web sites that are much less ambitious.

**VIDEO CLIPS OF SURVIVAL CHINESE**

The *Video Clips of Survival Chinese* site developed by Jianhua Bai and supported by the Andrew Mellon foundation uses a series of 20 Quicktime movies of survival situations including: *Hotel Check In, Hotel Check Out, Changing Money, Asking Directions, Ordering Meals, Seeing A Doctor, Bargaining, Post Office*, etc. Each clip can be viewed with an annotated transcript in which key expressions are glossed. There is also a series of questions for each video. The acknowledgements section thanks Clara Yu and Middlebury College for the use of the video clips, pointing out the value of collaborative efforts in developing such materials in an academic environment.

![Video Clip]

**CONCLUSION**

Improved speed of the Internet and the generalization of broadband access, along with faster processors, has greatly facilitated the distribution of audio and video media online. In addition to sites like the ones highlighted above that incorporate media into language lessons, an unending stream of audio and video from around the world is now accessible to the language learner for practice and to language as a basis for lessons. Television and radio, including news and documentaries, music videos, indeed, almost any video imaginable and unimaginable, is now at our fingertips through sources such as Google Video or YouTube (see this issue's *Emerging Tech column* for further discussion of video in language learning). As search tools improve as well, finding just the right video clip to support a language lesson keeps getting easier. Five years ago the Internet held the promise of access to authentic audio and video. Today that promise is realized, but the future is likely to exceed our wildest imaginations.
REFERENCES


