

TRANSFORMING A LISTENING DRILL TO HELP OUR STUDENTS

Lê Anh Dũng

I. INTRODUCTION

Needless to say, the undeniable fact is that most of our today undergraduate students always feel discouraged when practising listening in class, although the listening drills given in their text books (*Market Leader*, and *Practice Book*) are to some extent not too difficult.

For most of our freshers, especially those coming from remote provinces, due to their poor background of English despite six years of learning the language from grade six to twelve, instead of trying to improve their listening skill in a studious and effective manner, they are often inclined to deal with their listening problem deceitfully!

Indeed, in case of a listening drill given in *Market Leader Elementary* (student book), for example, they may use a related script provided at the end of the textbook to find correct answers. They often try to keep these answers in mind so that they can jot them down on the chalkboard when they are invited to show their listening skill in front of the class (with no books, of course, as requested by the instructor). It is funny to see that they can easily inscribe some correct answers on the chalkboard before the disc player produces the sounds of the related recording!

Witnessing what they have often done, the instructor cannot help amusingly comment, *“I’d like to check your listening skill rather than your good memory!”*

It is even much easier for them to cunningly deal with the listening drill given at the beginning of each unit included in *Practice Book One / Two*. How can they do?

Each drill of this kind, as we know, consists of ten separate questions asked by a man or a woman. The way to answer them is simple: choosing either A or B or C, which is the best. (Although the related scripts are not provided in *Practice Book*, most of **our students** can easily find the scripts as well as the keys if they spend little time contacting some photocopy shops near their campus.) Therefore, some of them merely write the letters A, B, or C in their palms and then, when standing on the stage and facing the chalkboard, they can secretly reveal the “hidden” key to themselves.

Whenever surprisingly seeing that some of his students have done well, giving 90-100% correct answers, the instructor will not let them return to their seats right away. As his frequent “reaction”, a recorded question is then played back, and the instructor asks his “excellent” student, *“What does that man/woman say?”*

Timidly, the student may confess, *“Sorry, I can’t...”*

The instructor smiles, *“If not, how could you manage to choose the best answer to that question?!”*

There is always a silent moment then!

Reporting such “ironical” cases in class, the author of this writing would like to share his very trivial measures to deal with his students’ “manoeuvres” as mentioned above. Simultaneously, he would like to retell here a few ways to help his students lessen their burden of listening practice. In the eyes of TEFL professionals, maybe his efforts are not regarded as a recommendable teaching technique; however, they can to some extent facilitate the task of both the instructor and his students in class.

Furthermore, listening practice in class usually creates a rather passive atmosphere, if not boring. Consequently, the instructor may transform a listening drill into an oral practice

so that there is an interaction between him and his students. By raising appropriate questions, one by one, and inviting his students' answers, he can encourage his students to join a simple conversation based on the context of the listening drill. In other words, he can stimulate his students to speak English, using standard patterns chosen from the recordings.

Whenever hearing some words worthy of explaining the meanings or the grammar points involved, the instructor may pause the disc-player, do playback, focus on the target word(s), and then he may make a few suitable questions to help his students get the point.

Our students are supposed to prepare their lessons well at home before attending the class. However, the fact is that most of them usually fail to fulfill their expected duties. By transforming a listening drill into an oral practice, the instructor can teach them speak, help them review some grammar points, consolidate some terms or lexicons, etc.; in addition, he can check how the students do self-study at home.

The transformation as suggested above naturally takes more time than a "pure" listening drill. Certainly, more time must be spent because transforming a listening drill is really a trade-off for a "three-in-one" drill – listening, speaking, and grammar review or vocabulary improvement.

II. TRANSFORMING A LISTENING DRILL

To illustrate the instructor's transformation of a listening drill, below are some examples.

A. Transforming a Listening Drill given in *Practice Book*

Step 1. Inviting a few students (with no books) to go to the chalkboard. Asking them to write their answers on the chalkboard while listening to the ten recorded questions. Doing playback and correcting their work. After finishing this step, the instructor will start his transformation of the listening drill.

Step 2. Doing playback. After each recorded question, the instructor pauses the disc-player, then he asks the class, "What does the man / woman say?"

Example 1: (For question No. 2, Unit Eight, *Practice Book Two*.)

Woman: *Where can I make a phone call?*

Instructor: *What does the woman say?*

The expected answer: *She asks / says / wants to know where she can make a phone call.*

In this way, the instructor can get a double target:

(a) Checking his student's listening skill;

(b) Helping his student *orally practise a reported question*. (In this case, before starting the "game", the instructor should spend time reviewing some basic rules of making *reported questions*.)

N.B.: To facilitate his student's task, the instructor should not ask, "What did the woman say?"

However, when he thinks he should upgrade the students' level, he may ask, "What did the woman say?" In this case, the expected answer is, "She asked / said / wanted to know where she could make a phone call."

Example 2: (For the same question No. 2, Unit Eight, *Practice Book Two*.)

Woman: *Where can I make a phone call?*

Instructor: *What does the woman want to do?*

The expected answer: *She wants to make a phone call.*

In this way, the instructor can get a double target:

- (a) Checking his student's listening skill;
- (b) Helping his student *orally practise a language pattern*. (In this case, before starting the "game", the instructor should ask the class to repeat the pattern "to want to do something" a few times so that everybody can easily remember it.)

Example 3: (For question No. 1, Unit Nine, *Practice Book Two*.)

Man: *Whose cassette is this?*

Instructor: *What does the man want to know?*

The expected answer: *He wants to know whose this cassette is.*

In this way, the instructor can get a triple target:

- (a) Checking his student's listening skill;
- (b) Helping his student *orally practise a reported question*.
- (c) Helping his student *orally practise a language pattern – to want to do something*.

B. Transforming a Listening Drill given in *Market Leader Elementary*

Step 1. Inviting a student (with no books) to go to the chalkboard. Asking him/her to write his/her answers on the chalkboard while listening to the recording. Doing playback and correcting his/her work. After finishing this step, the instructor will start his transformation of the listening drill.

Step 2. Doing playback. At a point worthy of focusing on, the instructor pauses the disc-player, then he asks the class about that point. To facilitate the students' task, he should let them listen to the target recording twice or three times.

Example 1: (Listening Drill 6.1 [excerpted], Unit Six, *Market Leader Elementary*)

Man: *I love the January sales. I buy things like electrical goods because the discounts are so good. You can get some real bargains, especially in the high street department stores. I go every year.*

According to the given listening drill, the students are required to answer these three questions:

- (a) What product does he buy?
- (b) Where does he buy it?
- (c) How often does he buy it?

However, in order to check whether the students have carefully prepared the lesson at home or not, the instructor can raise three further questions about the man's words. For instance, to check their *understanding of some new terms*, the questions may be as follows:

- (d) What does the man mean by saying "January sales"?
- (e) What does the man mean by saying "some real bargains"?
- (f) He says he goes to *high street* department stores every year. What does "high street" mean?

As mentioned at the beginning of this writing (*Introduction*), most of our students are not serious enough for self-study at home. Thus, they usually neglect or skip the listening drills; let alone pay little attention to some new terms included therein! As a bad result, they lose a good chance to improve or enlarge their vocabulary.

In other words, when raising some further questions (like the example above), the instructor can prove that the students have failed to prepare their lesson carefully enough; then, he can teach them three new terms (*January sales; bargains; high street*).

Example 2: (Listening Drill 6.3 [excerpted], Unit Six, *Market Leader Elementary*)

Man: *Well, I think there are four key points. Firstly, make sure you prepare for the sales call. (...) And finally, after making your sale, leave as quickly as possible.*

For several years, from class to class, the instructor always asks the same questions, “*According to the man, what is a sales call?*”

Strange to say, the instructor always receives a wrong answer, for instance, “*A sales call is an effort to sell something on the phone.*”

Instead of rejecting the wrong answer right away, the instructor only asks **these** follow-up **questions**, “*If so, why does he have to leave as quickly as possible after making his sale? He has to leave his office? Or where else?*”

In this case, the instructor has a good chance to teach a phrasal verb (*to call at a place / to call at someone*). Then, he will help them learn another meaning of the noun *call* (say, *a short visit to a place*).

Raising further questions to “exploit” a listening drill as illustrated above seems to be rather challenging for the students; however, this way creates an interaction between the instructor and the students. The instructor can invite the class to join a mini discussion on the recording; so, the students have a chance to practise speaking, improve their vocabulary, etc. In other words, teaching listening in class may cover more than a single purpose or target. The students’ passive attitude may be changed if the instructor can create an active atmosphere for the class.

III. CONCLUSION

An experienced instructor can guess what mistakes the students often make, or what shortcomings they generally have. He can, therefore, devise some trivial but helpful measures to deal with them appropriately.

To save enough time for transforming a listening drill, the instructor should skip some easy exercises given in both *Market Leader Elementary* and *Practice Book*.

To attract the whole class, after a student individually gives the correct answer as expected, the instructor should request everybody to repeat it twice or three times in chorus. Practice makes perfect! Repetition is always indispensable in teaching/learning any language. It is also helpful to teach listening in parallel with orally practising some language patterns or standard sentences, etc.