

# LEARNERS' POTENTIAL PROBLEMS IN LISTENING AND CRITERIA OF SELECTING RECORDED MATERIALS

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## Introduction

School of Foreign Languages for Economics of UEH is improving and developing the teaching program in order to achieve the target that is to upgrade English level of students at University of Economics. To acquire the target language learners have to improve four skills, reading, writing, listening and speaking. In fact, learners meet a lot of difficulty in learning to listen, especially when their target language is a foreign language, not a second language. Many Vietnamese learners show their proficiency in reading, writing, or speaking but their listening is not as good as expected. As a teacher, I am interested in understanding learners' problems in learning to listen. On the basis of understanding these problems, the teachers can find appropriate ways of listening teaching to reduce these difficulties. Listening is paid a lot of attention to by learning language researchers as well as teachers and students. Referring to listening, I would like to mention some problems my students have in listening learning and suggest several criteria of selecting recorded materials.

## Potential problem for students

A particular source of anxiety for the language learner in listening comprehension is the little control the learners have over the intake of language since this is controlled by the speaker. The other problem is that learners can be confused because of fast speech in the recorded material. For this reason, they cannot distinguish the words and catch the actual sounds of the foreign language. Furthermore, Vietnamese learners also meet difficulty in recognizing linking sounds and final sounds in English. To overcome this difficulty the teacher can divide the listening text into shorter paragraphs, then play the tape several times. Besides, we should encourage learners to communicate with English people or create opportunities for learners to meet them.

The next problem is that when learners miss some of the words they will feel they are failing. Therefore, they also have problems with "keeping up" with all information. For this reason in my opinion, generally, when the speech of recorded materials is fast, it is better when learners are asked to focus on the main content of listening text rather than to focus on exact words. The teacher should present some information concerning the content of listening text before playing the tape.

A further problem of learning to listen learners might have is unfamiliar accents. The learners have to form new habits in the target language and overcome the old habits of their native language. Because of the new accent, the learners sometimes do not recognize familiar words. This problem is more difficult for Vietnamese learners because they study English as foreign language not as second language. Therefore they do not have many opportunities to practice listening to new accents. In real-life, listening learners need to hear recorded material more than the specified time to understand. Furthermore, at the recognition level the student often has difficulty retaining and processing what he hears.

The final problem, in my opinion, is learners' vocabulary is not rich enough to understand listening text. In addition, because of cultural difference between Vietnamese and English, it is difficult for Vietnamese learners to understand or guess the meaning of many words. In this situation, teaching vocabulary is necessary in listening teaching process. I think, new vocabulary items should be taught before playing tape. In addition, students should be encouraged to try to guess from contents, therefore, prediction skills are also important

## Criteria of a selection from recorded materials

In principle, the object of listening comprehension practice in the classroom is that students should learn to function successfully in real-life listening situation. Selecting material is an important step in the listening teaching process because the material is considered as one of the main factors in language teaching. Setting criteria to select recorded materials is necessary because depending upon selecting material, recorded

material can meet a particular purpose, improve some skills of learners or in contrast, the teacher and learners can waste time and the result may be thrown in the wastepaper bin. Teachers also need recorded materials that they can handle, and materials these are appropriate for their learners.

Listening material must be meaningful and purposeful. It is clear that without criteria, the teacher will be confused in making decisions to choose recorded materials, especially nowadays in Vietnam where there is variety of recorded materials. Therefore, we can see that defining criteria is very important in selecting recorded material. Defining criteria, in my opinion, should be based on the aim of the course, the needs of the learners and other factors such as learners' level, particular purpose, their knowledge of English, educational background and interests. Learners play an important role in language learning, but they have some difficulties in learning listening. Therefore, recorded materials based on the appropriate criteria will help learners to reduce their difficulties and improve their listening skills.

### **Suggested criteria**

#### 1. Meeting the aim of the course

With this in mind, I would like to suggest a set of criteria, which would be appropriate for students, to help them improve their listening skill. The first criterion, in my opinion, is to meet the aim of the course. Generally, as we know, listening provides learners with insight into ways in which conversation works. In addition, it also helps learners to have strategies for comprehending conversations outside the classroom. Particularly, the aim of the course is based on the level of learners. Learners might fail in getting any result if the material is not consistent with the aim of the course. For example, the aim of the listening course for first year students of University of Economics is to comprehend simple business conversations. In this case, it is not appropriate when selected-recorded materials consist of complex structures. Teachers should look carefully at the material to check that the aims are actually what they are said to be.

#### 2- Consisting of required particular structures and vocabulary items

Second, the content of recorded material is very important. The content of selected-recorded material should consist of required particular structures, vocabulary. Because the listening text is also used for teaching grammar and vocabulary, therefore the above criterion is necessary in choosing recorded materials. Teachers have to specify particular structures, items of vocabulary, which are expected to occur in the recorded material. Vocabulary should be limited since the emphasis is placed on the acquisition of the patterns of the language. The items of vocabulary also are required for a particular purpose.

#### 3- Creating communicative activities

Third, another criterion of recorded materials, in my opinion, is that a lot of discussions could be generated. It will be boring and less effective if learners merely listen to the tape. Recorded materials should offer the teacher opportunities to generate the language activities such as conversations, writing and reading. These activities can be based on the content of the recorded material learners have just done. By doing various activities learners may interact with the listening text. In addition, recorded materials should be skill-oriented. The students is kept firmly focused on using the language in relevant reading, writing, speaking situations, not on struggling with concepts and ideas. Obviously, recorded materials should present activities and some bits of the language for learners to work with.

#### 4- Reducing unfamiliar words

Another criterion is that recorded materials should not contain many unfamiliar words. As we know, listening is a difficult subject because of some reasons. One of them is that learners cannot guess the meaning of unfamiliar words through gesture. In addition, the pronunciation of these words is quite strange, so learners might fail in comprehending. To help learners to understand listening text more easily, reducing unfamiliar words is necessary.

#### 5- Including subject-matter area

A further criterion should be considered in selecting material is that recorded material should include subject-matter area(s), especially recorded material used in classes studying English for a specific purposes. Learners normally have some objectives in listening beyond understanding for its own sake to find something. And they expect to hear something relevant to their purpose. In University of Economics, for example, my students expect materials to be concerned the business area. Therefore, recorded materials with

specific subject matter, in some extent, should meet the need of students learning foreign language for particular purpose.

#### 6- Being relevant to learners' level

Obviously, the content of recorded materials must be based on learners' level because learners are the main factor in language learning. This should be considered as a criterion of choosing recorded materials. When the teacher uses the same material in different classes with different levels, the result may be good with these classes at this level but may be bad with the others at other level. If the recorded material is not suitable to learners' level there will be a waste of time and this material can bore learners.

#### 7- Having interesting, up-to date content

In addition to the above criteria, recorded material chosen for use in class should be the most exciting ones for the teacher and the students to use. This attracts learners to attend listening with the positive attitude and, as a result, their learning will be more effective. In my opinion, a recorded material is considered interesting, exciting when it is up-to-date and suitable to the need of the learners. My students, for example, are very interested in up-to-date content related to business fields. It will be more interesting when material meets this criterion. Students also enjoy exciting recorded material with many activities, such as role-play, pair work, group work or discussion . By this way, learners can have enjoyment in listening learning and their motivation to study will be raised.

#### 8- Other criteria

Next, I would like to mention natural speech in recorded material. Should we assume that natural speech is one of criteria of recorded material? In my opinion, recorded material chosen for classroom use should be natural because the aim of listening teaching is to help the learners to be able to use the target language communicatively in real-life situations. Recorded material should include redundancies as well as "imperfect" speech in real-life. Hesitation, false starts etc. must be included. However, I think, we should use recorded material with authentic language for students at the high level of proficiency. For students with lower proficiency in the target language, it may not possible to use natural, authentic language materials such as these. Simpler authentic, material, for example, the use of a weather forecast when working on prediction will be better for. students with lower proficiency in the target language.

Finally, I think that quality of recorded material should be considered in selecting material. Usually, at University of Economics, there are over forty learners in each class. It is hardly natural for forty or over forty people to sit in silence listening to a tape, especially when the people in the back row find it difficult to hear. Students often feel very threatened in this situation, particularly since if they do not understand what they are hearing, they gradually lose the thread, while the tape continues on relentlessly. For that reason, we can see that quality of recorded material is important in selecting recorded material.

### **Conclusion**

It is difficult to say which criteria are more important because every criterion affects learners' listening learning strongly. In my opinion, it is best when we select material having all of the above criteria. If the recorded material has only some of specified criteria, designing tasks or creating further activities will be necessary to help learners to understand well and make the listening text more interesting. The most important is that the ecoreded material must be neither too easy nor too difficult, but at an appropriate level in order to challenge the student to actively understand, form hypotheses and to try to clear up ambiguities. I have just mentioned some criteria of selecting recorded material. However, I think, to improve the listening skill of learners we should consider some more factors.

As we see, recorded material is very important in listening teaching. The main factor these criteria are based on is learners. Because of many difficulties as we have mentioned above, there should be combination of good recorded material and good method of listening teaching in order to reduce- learners' difficulties and improve their listening skill. We should be interested in developing our students into good listeners who use their listening skills in the widest range of language and thinking processes.

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