

IN ONE EAR AND OUT THE OTHER

Improving the Listening Comprehension of English Majors at Addis Ababa University

Barbara L. Morris

INTRODUCTION

«The lessons we took are very interesting and helpful. Even then the listening comprehension is so difficult as we are not adopted (sic) to the native speakers' pronunciation.»

- second-year English major

It was comments such as the one above, as well as general dissatisfaction with student results on listening comprehension examinations, which provoked this writer to re-examine the listening comprehension component of the two-semester course in Spoken English which she had designed and taught to English majors at Addis Ababa University. The importance of the listening skill cannot be underestimated. As Rivers (1972 :87) points out, «Speaking does not itself constitute communication unless what is said is comprehended by another person. (...) Teaching the comprehension of spoken speech is therefore of primary importance if the communication aim is to be achieved.» (our emphasis) In the (now) traditional audio-lingual classroom, however, listening was subordinated to speaking, on the assumption that students could understand more than they could speak. This may be true for «teacher-talk», but is by no means the case in the «real» world. In this regard, Sittler (1975 :118) states that «... the English heard in the (foreign language) classroom often bears little resemblance to that which is heard elsewhere. (...) This fact is the single most important cause of our students' difficulty in aural comprehension outside the classroom.» Moreover, «There is a growing awareness,» writes Montassir (1976 :165), «that even people who have been studying English for years, and do very well in grammar, vocabulary, reading, composition-even speaking, have enormous difficulties when confronted with the real everyday speech of native speakers as well as the university classroom situation (...).» Indeed Fox (1974) maintains that listening is a far more difficult skill to learn than speaking. Given the importance of the listening skill and the difficulties involved, to what extent and in what way can we facilitate the acquisition of this skill in English majors at Addis Ababa University, using the time and resources at our disposal?

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A MINI-EXPERIMENT

It was in the hope of partially answering the above question that the writer undertook a controlled mini-experiment, using English majors enrolled in the first half of a two-semester course in Spoken English during the academic year 1978-79. As Mackey (1967 :157) points out in Language Teaching Analysis, «All language teaching methods ... are necessarily made up of a certain selection, gradation, presentation and repetition of the material.» It was the last of these four components - repetition - which was the subject of the experiment. The question the writer posed herself was: What effect does the amount of practice actually have? A secondary question was: Do students at different levels (but enrolled in the same course) react differently to the listening comprehension practice they are exposed to?

Procedure¹

At the beginning of the term all students were given a Diagnostic Listening Comprehension Test, which consisted of a taped recording of an impromptu conversation between three speakers about she in Great Britain, followed by twenty «Intensive Listening» qu ten «General Comprehension» questions² to be answered in one on the basis of their scores in the first term of Freshman E total student population enrolled in the course was divided divisions: the top 27%, the bottom 27% and the remaining ten³ comb- division was then divided at random into two: an experim⁴ in and a control group. The control group then received the norm que to prescribed work in listening comprehension, i.e., they listened o⁵ in of four listening comprehension passages (taken from Varieties English) with questions similar in level and nature to those o⁶ Diagnostic Test. Both answers and transcripts of the passages we⁷ provided.³

The experimental group also followed the normal coursework in listening comprehension. In addition, they were informed that, due to their results on the Diagnostic Test, they were required to participate in extra listening comprehension work after class hours. For forty-five minutes a week experimental group members were required to listen to a total of from four to six extra listening comprehension passages in the language laboratory. These consisted of impromptu informal conversations and interviews (taken from Listen to this!),⁴ most of which dealt with people's professions. Students were required to answer ten comprehension questions on discrete-points covered in the conversations, in

TABLE 1: Experimental Group

	Before: average scores			After: average scores			AVERAGE CHANGE		
	Inten.	Gen'l	Total	Inten.	Gen'l	Total	Inten.	Gen'l	Total
top 13 students	55.5%	43.0%	51.3%	62.5%	54.0%	59.3%	+ 7.0%	+ 11.0%	+ 8.0%
mid 20 students	49.0%	44.0%	47.3%	53.0%	52.0%	52.7%	+ 4.0%	+ 8.0%	+ 5.4%
low 13 students	42.5%	35.0%	40.0%	53.0%	52.0%	52.3%	+ 9.5%	+ 17.0%	+12.3%
all 46 students	48.5%	41.0%	46.3%	55.5%	52.0%	54.7%	+ 7.0%	+ 11.0%	+8.4%

forty-five minutes. Both the subject-matter (which tended to be more concrete and everyday than that of Varieties of Spoken English) and the type of questions placed these extra exercises on a lower level of difficulty than that of the regular listening comprehension work and the Diagnostic Test. Students were not provided with either the answers to the questions, nor the transcripts of the passages.

At the end of the term both groups of students took a final examination, which consisted of the same conversation and questions as in the Diagnostic Test at the beginning of the term.

Results

The results of both the Diagnostic Test and the Final Examination are reported in Tables 1 and 2 below. If we consider each group taken as a whole, using the statistics at the bottom of each table, we see that the experimental group had a total score improvement of 8.4%, as against a control group had a total improvement of 3.4%. There was a 5% difference in overall improvement between the two groups,

of the experimental group. We can also see that for both the experimental groups there was a greater improvement in scores on General Comprehension questions (involving the «higher» skills of analysis, inference and evaluation) than in the Intensive Listening (involving the «lower» skills of discrimination and recognition), the absolute scores for the General Comprehension questions lower for both groups. To explain this, we may

note that in the Diagnostic Test, both groups had to devote most of their time to recognition and consequently had little processing-time for recall of any of the higher cognitive processes. With increased facility in discrimination and recognition, they were able to bring their scores on the Final Examination in General Comprehension much closer to those in Intensive Listening.

TABLE 2: Control Group

	Before: average scores			After; average scores			AVERAGE CHANGE		
	Inten.	Gen'l	Total	Inten.	Gen'l	Total	Inten.	Gen'l	Total
top 13 students	61.0%	48.0%	56.7%	62.0%	52.0%	58.3%	+1.0%	+4.0%	+6%
mid 20 students	44.5%	39.0%	42.7%	50.0%	50.0%	50.0%	+5.5%	11.0%	7.5%
low 13 students	43.0%	40.0%	42.0%	40.5%	47.0%	42.7%	-2.5%	+7%	+7%
all 46 students	48.6%	40.0%	46.9%	54.6%	48.0%	50.3%	+3.0%	+8%	+3.4%

If we consider the top, middle and bottom divisions of each group, our statistics are more revealing. We see that the top division of the experimental group had a total improvement of 8%, compared to only 1.6% for the control group. Their absolute scores were also higher on the Final Examination than those of the control group, although they started out much lower. The results of the middle division were much more ambivalent. The control group improved by 7.3% as compared to only 5.4% for the experimental group. However, the experimental group retained a slightly higher absolute score (52.7% as compared to 50% for the control group). Clearly the extra practice was not as useful for this division as for the upper group. By far the most significant results were those for the lower division. The experimental group had a total improvement of 12.3% as compared to a mere .7% for the control group. The experimental group, moreover, made a very big jump in the General Comprehension questions (17% improvement). The control group also improved itself by 7% in this exercise. This may be partly due to the fact that the poorer students were so completely overwhelmed by the Diagnostic Test that many of them did not even reach the question of General Comprehension; by the end of the term, however, both groups had gained a certain amount of experience with spontaneous conversation and with questions of the Intensive Listening type. Indeed the bottom division of the control group seems to have neglected Intensive Listening questions in favor of the General Comprehension exercise, as their scores in the former actually decreased by 2.6%.

The improvement made by the lower division of the experimental group is all the more impressive if we compare their results with the middle divisions of both groups. We see that in terms of absolute scores, the experimental lower division virtually equalled the scores of the experimental middle division (52.3% vs. 52.7%) and bettered the scores of the control middle division (52.3% vs. 50%). Indeed, there is only a difference of 7% between the lower division and the upper division of the experimental group (vs. 11.3% on the Diagnostic Test). In contrast, the gap between the two divisions in the control group increased (from a 14.7% difference to a 15.6% difference).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear from the previous discussion that listening comprehension, being both an essential and a difficult foreign language skill to master, should be taught to English majors at Addis Ababa University. While there are many pedagogical components which might potentially facilitate the acquisition of this skill, it is evident that the factor of amount of

practice is a crucial one. What minor miracles can be performed by merely doubling the amount of practice, at least in the case of the poorer students, has been demonstrated by the mini-experiment discussed above. Unfortunately, up to now adequate exposure to taped listening comprehension materials in the language laboratory has been handicapped by two restricting factors. One is a lack of suitable personnel. Surely it is not the role of the laboratory technician to supervise such sessions. Nor is it an appropriate use of the lecturer's time. What is needed is a laboratory assistant, among whose duties it would be to record listening comprehension materials for student use in the laboratory and to supervise «library» hours, in which students may listen to either materials assigned to them by their instructors or of their own choice. Which brings us to the second restriction: class hours. If listening comprehension activities are freed from control by the lecturer, then there is no reason why they must be part of the four-hour per week scheduling which at present characterizes the Spoken English course. They could be assigned as «homework» and done in the laboratory during the students' free time, albeit during pre-scheduled «library» hours. Eventually the laboratory could be opened to third and fourth year students as well. If these restrictions are overcome, not only will the language laboratory be more likely to reach its potential as a teaching aid, but also English majors at Addis Ababa University will be greatly facilitated in reaching their own potential in a foreign language.

NOTES

1 I would like to thank Dr. Makonnen Yimer, Director of the Testing Center, Addis Ababa University, for his advice regarding the design of this experiment.

2 The transcript of the questions used is found in the Appendix.

3 The course book as it is presently written includes five such passages. However, only four were able to be covered in the amount of time available.

4 The pre-recorded taped materials used were obtained through a grant provided by the Office of Research and Publications, Addis Ababa University.

APPENDIX

DIAGNOSTIC TEST AND FINAL EXAMINATION QUESTIONS

Ex. 1: Intensive Listening

1. «drop the lamb» here means:

- A. ignore the lamb
- B. give birth to the lamb
- C. let the lamb fall

2. «the first lamb» here means:
 A. the first-born of two or three lambs
 B. the first lamb the sheep has ever had
3. «a first lambing ewe» is a ewe (female sheep) that gives birth to a lamb for the first time.
 A. true
 B. false
4. «takes to the lamb» here means that the ewe
 A. feeds it and cares for it
 B. likes it
5. Complete: «... and unless it's just the _____ of insisting for the first week or so and then they take to them. _____»
6. Complete: «... all kinds of ways of getting over this problem _____»
7. «presupposes» here means:
 A. imagines
 B. requires
 C. assumes
8. Complete: «Yes, one of the ways that I had heard that rather appealed to me was the idea of rubbing rum on the lamb's _____ have a ewe with a lamb and you have a ewe or you have a lamb without a mother...»
9. Complete: «I _____ what modern methods they have now with advisers _____ the Department of Agriculture.
10. «docile» here means:
 A. always sleeping
 B. gentle
 C. domesticated
11. «butt» means:
 A. to attack with their heads
 B. to make angry noises
 C. to bite
12. The speaker stressed the underlined words
 A. But they are never fierce to human» beings of course-
 B. « But they're never fierce to human beings of course ...»
13. «very tough» here means:
 A. the most is hard to chew
 B. very hardly
 C. fierce
14. «have to go» here means:
 A. try to run away
 B. attack
15. «It won't follow this through» here means:
 A. it is gentle
 B. it won't attack
 C. it won't continue the attack
16. Complete: «I'd never _____ sheep as being animals before ...»
17. «turn on dogs» here means:
 A. turn away from dogs
 B. attack dogs
18. «sheep gathering» here means:

- B. the idea that rum is rubbed on a lamb to confuse the ewes' sense of smell.
 - C. the idea that advisers from the Ministry of Agriculture are of any use
9. The last speaker tells his listeners about
- A. how a sheep can be trained to attack a dog
 - B. how a sheep can be trained to protect a flock.
10. The method he describes relies:
- A. only on the sheep's failure to understand the danger from the dog
 - B. only on the dog's failure to understand the sheep's behaviour
 - C. on a combination of (A) and (B)

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