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## Authenticity in Listening Comprehension Courses

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Listening Comprehension, whether considered as a recent fad or a sign of developing professionalism, is certainly the newcomer of popular foreign language course topics. Just five years ago, course books in the specific area required little shelf space, though some were indeed noteworthy: Joan Morley's work and Ted Plaister's work, especially so. While there is a large body of psycholinguistic research on listening per se (i.e. emphasizing auditory perception), there is still relatively little available in the way of theoretical descriptions of listening comprehension as a process of second language acquisition upon which course syllabi might be based. But there has been a virtual explosion in the publication of student texts with tapes, both audio and video, and often practical teacher's guides, to accompany them. One wonders at the phenomenon: why the sudden interest in an area of language learning that was for two decades virtually untouched, even when it was listed by audiolinguists as the first of the "four skills"?

The new interest may result from a computer-age "input hypothesis" that comprehensible input precedes output, logically and, in general, chronologically. Or perhaps the new interest stems from a realization by an alienated generation that virtually every nation's literature has developed from oral roots. Less happily for academicians, the new interest may merely be a response to the demands of the "audio

generation" or to the TOEFL test and the government's foreign language policy.

Whatever the causality, the phenomenon is with us, and therefore, this paper explores more practical mysteries: how can listening comprehension classes, materials and methodology cater more concretely to students' needs? Is there any way to improve the ratio between the instructor's effort and the student's learning? Do the theoretical underpinnings of current methodologies provide realistic guidance for classroom praxis? This paper utilizes two perspectives of authenticity to evaluate listening comprehension classroom procedure. The first of these is textual authenticity.

Authenticity has been a watchword among foreign language educators for more than a decade, but it initially referred mostly to texts for reading skills development classes or to texts for use as a stimulus for communication activities. More recently authenticity has been even more stringently applied by methodologists as a norm for the material considered in listening comprehension classes, though with varied results. The fundamental linguistic insight is far from new: linguists have long pointed out that spoken and written forms of language have radically different realizations. Nevertheless, the use of authentic listening texts in class has presented course designers with a range of problems not encountered in the reading class. Brown and Yule (1983 : 82-3) mention a number of these. The variety of ideosyncratic and dialectical renderings of phonemes together with the numerous environmental conditionings evidenced in truly authentic listening texts pose well known problems for listeners. But perhaps the most significant difficulty for educators is that, while both written and spoken language involve interaction of agent and recipient, the recipient is uniquely specified in spoken language more commonly than in written language. Spoken language normally is realized in a transactional situation where roles are frequently exchanged and para-linguistic communication is at least as important as lexical or syntactic values. The result of such interpersonal grounding is that truly authentic spoken language is of little

interest except to the parties directly involved. Brown and Yule indicate that the so-called "naturalistic dialog" associated with many contemporary dramatists is in fact quite inauthentic if compared to recordings of actual speech. Materials designers then generally find themselves caught between the methodologist's demand for authentic texts and the classroom teacher's demand for intrinsically motivating materials. Brown and Yule suggest certain uses of materials to bridge the gap which will be considered in the second section of this paper.

At the outset, however, it seems worthwhile to consider some of the ways that authenticity has been interpreted in fact by designers of popular listening materials. It appears that the samples of spoken language presented to listening comprehension students are often far from realistic. The following example from a popular video series strains credibility almost to the breaking point. It is a shoe store dialog between a husband and wife who have heavily burdened the shop assistant with their inability to choose.<sup>1)</sup>

- Mary: We really mustn't keep the girl any longer.  
We ought to hurry.
- Neville: I've told you. You should never be in a hurry when you buy shoes. You should always take your time.
- Mary: Then we ought to come back another day.
- Neville: Perhaps you're right.
- Mary: But we ought to buy something.
- Neville: We needn't.
- Mary: I know we needn't. But I think we ought to.

While there is much to criticize in the unnatural density of modals and in the unacceptable confrontational tone of this rather typical sample of aural materials, there are also several strong points. First of all, the video tape provides an authentic example of standard pronun-

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1) Sources of all citations of teaching materials (except the second, an informal transcript of an off-air video recording) are listed in order before the bibliography. It should be noted that these materials are generally written for multiple teaching objectives, but are in this paper evaluated only on their suitability for listening comprehension classes.

ciation and of most suprasegmental phonological features as well.

In evaluating the potential of this passage, it is useful to refer to the listing of teaching points which Suh Seung-Jin (1984) has identified as implicated by recent research in speech perception. These also provide a summarized description of the process which students may be expected to acquire. They include phonetic points (e.g. identification and categorization of sound) and phonological points (both levels requiring recognition of defective sections), as well as supersegmental and semantic processing features, though the taxonomy in general refers to listening per se, rather than listening comprehension. All eight of Suh's teaching points can be exemplified by the above dialog (though reduction of unstressed forms is in fact insufficiently represented and reconstruction of defective forms unnaturally minimized due to overly precise articulation).

The video series itself is also remarkably motivating. An as yet unpublished research project at Sogang University (Holland 1983) found that students surveyed perceive programs such as this as "extremely helpful" for the development of their listening ability. They do not find the socially unacceptable confrontation or the unnatural structural frequency to be a problem. This survey revealed that students in general perceived such examples as more beneficial for the development of their listening skills than examples which their teachers prefer on grounds of authenticity.

Some teachers have opted for listening texts more formal in content and style, as the following excerpt from a television program on the brain. While watching a scene of an animal language researcher with a gorilla, listeners hear the following narration:

This is Cocoa, very likely the world's most educated gorilla. Penny Paterson, graduate student at Stanford University, has taught Cocoa more than three hundred words in American sign language. One of the results of experiments such as this is to underline the differences rather than the similarities between human beings and other animals... There is an enormous difference... a huge biological gap... between

the higher apes and man, not simply a missing link but an entire chain of pre-human forms that have not survived. And their absence sets man apart.... The key to human uniqueness is found in the brain.

In many ways this seems a more likely example of the language students might hear in academic contexts. The situation is formal so there is none of the unacceptable confrontation or unrealistic repetition of structure obvious in the first example above. In fact the segment is completely authentic in the sense that it was produced for actual native speakers to hear and, perhaps, enjoy. The more elevated intellectual tone appeals to many. The segment also provides adequate raw material for Suh's teaching points with the same conditions mentioned above. On the other hand there is also much to criticize: the speaker's studied phrasing and carefully edited text hardly represent language except as it is used by television personalities. Only the most dedicated of academicians would be able to polish their lectures to this extent, so this segment too gives, in a sense, an inauthentic experience to the student. Many teachers find both the grace of style and significance of content in such selections very attractive but, sad to say, students surveyed by Holland report that they find these segments both boring and "too difficult." While a certain level of boredom may add dignity to the subject matter, students' rejection of such texts discourages their use on motivational grounds. At least a partial explanation of student criticism has been cited by Iain MacWilliam (1986) who reports experimental evidence that the documentary style of video selection so often chosen by listening comprehension teachers presents unexpected difficulties even for native speakers because the visual and auditory components are not precisely linked. Among several indications which MacWilliam cites, one experiment presented subjects with identical auditory input accompanied by three different types of visual input: newsreader only, newsreader interspersed with still pictures, and newsreader followed by voice-over motion pictures. The experiment showed that the measured listening comprehension was inversely

proportional to the complexity of the input. Although still requiring verification of its applicability to foreign language learners, Mac-William's evidence strongly favors the use either of so-called "talking head" news reports or of drama, rather than the voice-over documentary style.

A final illustration of attempted authenticity in listening texts is at the other end of the formality continuum. It presents another confrontation, in this instance far more realistic than the first mentioned. The following example is taken from one episode of a continuing drama about a young man visiting his sister in the big city. The plot generally revolves around the ways in which her expectations about appropriate little brother behavior differ radically from his. In this scene the young man is oblivious of the fact that his indolence and enjoyment of very loud music are sources of frustration to his sister-hostess. When her patience is finally exhausted, she gives vent to her feelings:

Jane: (shouting angrily over recorded music)<sup>2)</sup> Tom, I am really getting tired of this. You have been here for three weeks now and you haven't done a darn thing. I mean, Pat and I go out to work all day. We come home and this place is a mess. Tom, taking care of you is like having two jobs. Tommy, I am not your mother. Now, listen. Turn off that stereo. I want to talk to you.

Tom: (ingenuously) Well, sure. What's wrong?

Jane: (somewhat mollified by her brother's innocence) What's wrong is that... Well, what's wrong is that I just think that if you're planning on staying in San Francisco, it would be good if you got a job and a place of your own.

Of the three cited, in many ways this example of English as it is used for communication incorporates the largest number of authentic factors, though it still falls well within the (inauthentic) realm of drama as described by Brown and Yule. It presents a very natural use of language, with all of the attendant difficulties of natural listening. It

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2) Parenthetical remarks added to indicate tone.

includes a realistic rather than controlled selection of vocabulary and syntax with normal speed and enunciation. There is natural hesitation and repetition; it contains performance slips and false starts and non-linguistic interference in the form of music during the first part of the segment. The visual and auditory elements converge, as recommended by MacWilliam. In addition, students are as a rule motivated to watch this scene, and indeed the entire series, for they empathize with the presentation of sibling rivalry.

The very realism, however, incorporates pedagogical difficulty. Students find the discrete phonological features so authentic as to be almost impossible to identify, though such identification is admittedly insignificant for appreciating the communicative impact of this selection, and the more natural articulation provides helpful practice with reduced forms. A more trying problem is the cultural perspective which the scene presupposes. Recent research has underlined the importance of background schemata for success in comprehension (Aron 1986). The above exchange, however, contains numerous miscues to those without the specifically American schemata. The writer of this scene intended it to portray a long-suffering hostess driven to despair by an inconsiderate guest. Students with a differing cultural background, however, may tend to see an inconsiderate sister making impolite demands on a fairly normal younger brother. The confrontation is understandable, but the audience's sympathies can be entirely reversed. The cultural difference is truly essential to understanding the communication taking place, and for a culture learning class the scene could provide excellent material for discussion of cultural divergence, but, unless both teacher and students are willing to devote considerable class time to such cultural factors, the listening comprehension class based on such materials tends to lose momentum. These considerations point out that authenticity as a norm for listening materials is both complex and difficult to apply in practice. Virtually every text is in some sense authentic, at least at the phonological level, yet is at the same time in some sense inauthentic, for the unique specificity of aural communication entails such a complex

of linguistic, paralinguistic, and non-linguistic factors. A few of the criteria, then, to be applied to potential listening texts might be enumerated as follows:

- 1) Provides data for the teaching points, primarily based in phonology and psycholinguistics, identified by Suh as mentioned above.
- 2) Provides a syntactically and semantically representative sample of spoken language.
- 3) Contains motivating content for which background schemata can be assumed or provided with reasonable effort.
- 4) Utilizes non-divergent production techniques that are suitable for listeners of limited proficiency.

The selections examined above indicate how unlikely it is for a curriculum designer to be able to locate the perfectly authentic text. In fact, on the basis of these difficulties one questions whether textual authenticity is a valuable norm at all.

Richards and Rodgers, in their modification of Anthony's taxonomy (1982), and Richards' more recent specific application of the categories to listening comprehension (1983) provide a different focus for the analysis of listening courses. At the so-called "design" level, the role of materials is assigned. In the foregoing discussion the presupposition has been that a primary task is the provision of "comprehensible input" which is as close to natural language use as is possible. Richards, however, requires that important criteria be applied at the "procedure" level. Richards' criteria provide a basis for broadening the understanding of authenticity to include procedural authenticity.

An extensively used listening activity requires students to listen to a transaction while reading a cloze-like rendering of the text. A widely praised intermediate level course based on a functional syllabus includes numerous exercises like the following in which students, after watching a scene, fill in the words missing from a part of the script and then compare their completions with the actual dialogue. This segment is from a business conference concerning the design of a new bicycle.

Stephen: We.....1.....change the design.



Jane: Well, you can't just change the whole design. It wouldn't work.

Henk: .....2.....modifying the seat?

Jane: No. I never thought of that. It's...3... trying. Thanks.

(Note: Though there are no "correct answers" for such an exercise, the television script provides the following completions:

1. could always
2. Have you thought of
3. worth)

Students almost universally find this type of exercise worthwhile. They like the reassurance of having most of the text written out for them and they feel that the focusing provided by the exercise will direct their attention to valuable vocabulary or useful phonological features. It should be noted that students tend to transform the activity from cloze exercise to transcription, that is they complete the blanks only while listening to the dialog. Such a frustration of the essentially useful schema building purpose of the exercise leads to theoretical problems and renders the activity less than satisfactory. In fact, it becomes an eavesdropping exercise. Eavesdropping is not socially acceptable behavior in most cultures; certainly focused eavesdropping, in which the listener concentrates on minute points of fact, is arguably acceptable only when practiced by private detectives. For most ordinary language users, extended practice in focused eavesdropping hardly seems a worthwhile educational practice. The question which Richards poses about such a procedure is "Does the activity reflect a purpose for listening that approximates authentic real life listening?" (1983 : 233) It might be well to add that the activity must be evaluated as it is actually practiced rather than as it is conceived by the materials designer.

Some curriculum designers have opted for specific transcription exercises based on news broadcasts as a means to authenticize the activity by providing texts that listeners often attend to with heightened acuity. John Pint recently published a book of such texts focusing on content vocabulary in one section and structure vocabulary in the other. Pint's method is easily adapted by classroom teachers to include more

current topics. The following is the beginning of such an adapted content exercise.

### A. STUDENT WORKSHEET

The \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ in \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ with a \_\_\_\_\_ in which \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ its \_\_\_\_\_, only  
 one \_\_\_\_\_ than the \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_.

### B. TEXT (to be read by the teacher or taped in the style of a radio news report)

The Tenth Asian Games closed in Seoul today with a football game in which Korea collected its ninety-third gold medal, only one less than the champion China, and remarkably ahead of neighboring Japan.

This exercise seems a vast improvement over the previous one (if the previous one is performed as a transcription exercise). The listener is focusing upon the content of a radio announcement. Most ordinary people spend some time every day on focused listening, and students in lecture classes devote an extraordinary amount of their time to it. Nevertheless the activity itself is still quite inauthentic. Very seldom, if ever, does a radio listener attempt to copy down the news reader's exact words. In this exercise the student's attention is focused, but it is focused away from a normal goal to an overly precise concern with discrete lexical items. In fact, comprehension is not required at all in the successful completion of the exercise and it is likely that the activity may even impede comprehension. While the procedure does come far closer than the others already discussed in integrating authentic text and para-authentic praxis, it is in many respects wanting. (Because it is so much further from authenticity, the twin exercise in which the structure words are omitted rather than the content words is passed over here).

The exercises discussed so far have the putative advantage of disassociating listening and memory. Educators have long dismissed listening exercises which require students to listen to involved spoken texts and then answer specific comprehension questions because such exercises tend to focus more on memory than on listening. (Richards, 1983 : 233) Yet comprehension does involve a memory component. A recent spate of class materials has been heralded as solving the problem by moderating the memory requirement of traditional listening exercises yet still involving comprehension rather than mere recognition. Commonly such materials incorporate pictures or other graphics which the student interprets on the basis of an aural text. For example, the student might be presented with a map and asked to trace the route described in the following telephone conversation between a lost motorist and her would-be hostess:

- Jackie: You've gone completely the wrong way.  
Fiona: Oh no, have I? Oh dear.  
Jackie: Erm...the best thing to do is to turn round and go back to the London Road.  
Fiona: Oh...the way I came?  
Jackie: That's right, to the roundabout.  
Fiona: So I go back through Headington, yes...  
Jackie: Yes, to the roundabout. That's where you came off the M 40, in fact.  
Fiona: That's right, yes...  
Jackie: Ok. Well, take the first exit on the left...  
Fiona: The first exit on the left.  
Jackie: At the roundabout there...  
Fiona: Un-huh.  
Jackie: And it's a dual carriageway. It's all part-of the ring road that goes round the city.  
Fiona: Oh yes, I see.  
Jackie: So you go along the by-pass until you come to the next roundabout and at that roundabout go straight across...

Once again the student is eavesdropping, but in this case without such unacceptable overtones since the student is encouraged to sympa-

thize with the person receiving the directions. However, realistic identification with the lost motorist is impossible, for in this case the student is supplied with a map that the poor befuddled driver does not have. It is rather a simple task for the student to trace the route, whereas the genuine listener in such a situation must create the map in her head. Again the task is merely a shadow of an authentic one.

Positive evaluative criteria are, not surprisingly, less accessible than the negative judgments presented so far. Still it is necessary to find appropriate listening activities and not merely eliminate inappropriate ones. The foregoing procedures have been questioned on the basis of their intentionality and this provides the general norm that listening have a reference which is perceived by the learner as authentic.

Self-evident though it may seem, the question "Why listen anyway?" is the starting point for the design of a valid listening curriculum. The answers produced are numerous and each may be elaborated with procedures that spring from authentic needs. Sometimes one listens merely to show politeness or to confirm relationship. Despite the difficulty of focusing on such language use, it is now common in production classes to teach the utterances which indicate polite interest. Likewise listening classes can valuably devote attention to the interpretation of such utterances, lest etiquette be mistaken for commitment. Sometimes one listens in order to answer multiple choice comprehension questions, though such a purpose is generally restricted to those who are preparing for standardized examinations of the TOEFL ilk. Authenticity for groups with such a specific purpose would demand procedures that outsiders might deem unnatural. In ordinary life, however, much listening is preparation for a decision, sometimes trivial, sometimes momentous. It is often necessary to gather information so that behavior can be modified in the light of the information. For example, few listeners to a broadcast weather report would try to memorize the meteorological conditions prevalent or forecast for each area mentioned (though such expectations are common enough among materials designers apparently). The more authentic purpose in such a

situation is to decide whether to carry an umbrella, or whether to protect the water pipes from freezing, or whether to cancel one's reservation at the resort threatened by a typhoon. Classroom tasks which demand such decisions on the basis of an aural text of reasonable length to be processed and retained in the student's memory are authentic listening procedures and ideally form the bulk of the listening lesson. In reality, of course, such decisions are frequently not taken by students but by their spouses or parents and so even such carefully devised exercises will entail a certain amount of inauthentic pretense. A modified criterion, then, demands that the imaginary situation created by the teacher preparatory to the exercise be one which students can reasonably expect to face themselves and which they consciously recognize to be such.

Another example of authentically motivated listening involves following directions. Much in the line of Total Physical Response (TPR) methodology, students can be given oral instructions (for a task appropriate to their backgrounds) and expected to follow them. Teachers often remark that virtually all students make rapid progress in classroom language, even though they may lag behind in content language. Such a phenomenon is natural because most students have a personal stake in understanding the homework assignment or the testing methodology which (to them) far surpasses the need to distinguish phonological or syntactic niceties. It follows, therefore, that tasks be selected for such exercises because the motivation is intrinsic to the task. Materials designers need a preliminary assessment of student needs in order to avoid creating situations with little such motivational impact.

Courses in "English for academic purposes" (EAP) generally include a large component of listening for precise detail and noting it successfully. Sample academic lectures are frequently presented with a number of comprehension questions set for students to answer afterwards. There is a danger that memory become an overly significant element if the aural texts are not carefully graded. A course which truly caters to academic needs must also, and more importantly, include exercises in

note taking and distinguishing central issues from digressions. As in TPR-like procedure, authenticity depends on accurate needs assessment as discourse within the academic environment can be very field specific.

Brown and Yule (1983 : 60-80) have presented telling arguments indicating that listening comprehension classes need include more than practice in actual listening if the student's experience is to be an authentic one. They have indicated how heavily listeners in authentic situations are dependent on background knowledge and expectation. In authentic listening, the subject is virtually never expected to deal with large bodies of entirely new data, but rather to reorganize or perceive new relationships. Consequently techniques that develop and complexify the student's aural schemata, to appropriate a term from reading theory, must also be included in the listening curriculum. Pre-listening activities have become far more complex in the contemporary listening classroom; no longer do they consist of lexical or syntactic revision. The emphasis now is on encouraging the student to develop a creative approach to a situation so that the aural stimuli, when they come, will in general reinforce (though at times challenge) the student's expectations and thus comprehension will proceed almost effortlessly. An example of such pre-listening activity would be a lesson in which a student first watches... without hearing the sound track... a video tape of a scene, perhaps in a hotel lounge where a businessman, engrossed in writing a report, is interrupted by a woman who makes a number of small requests, seemingly in hopes of engaging him in conversation. After focusing, with the teacher's help, on the facial expressions and gestures, students predict the language they expect to hear when the sound track is turned on. After considerable discussion and sharpening of expectations, the students are finally allowed to hear the audio portion of the video tape, and to discuss the similarities and differences between their expectation and the actual language used. The pre-listening activities which are aimed at developing background knowledge actually fill most of the class time so that the successful listening experience becomes the culmination of the class. Some might object that such a class plan is

a return to the eavesdropping procedure criticized above. The use of the oral text is quite different here, however. Students are not listening in order to note down linguistic tidbits in this case, but rather they are attending to their background schemata so that, when faced with a similar situation themselves, they will be attuned to the likely utterances and thus free to concentrate only on those stimuli which demand attention due some peculiarity. Despite a relative lack of "listening practice", such a class improves listening comprehension because it enhances the student's readiness.

There are in fact materials available for listening classes which contain no aural component, but are completely concerned with developing the student's expectations. One popular series of video-taped pantomimes presents students with a vivid situation, a shy couple trying to make small talk at a dance, for example, and allows viewers to create the suitable language. The complete absence of verbal stimuli requires that the class concern itself completely with expectation rather than with deciphering and analysis. Native speakers have no difficulty at all with such a task since the situation virtually requires certain definite social interchanges. But those less familiar with English-speaking cultures, find such a task more challenging. They need to advert consciously to the non-verbal clues indicating the probable relationship of the two people, the level of formality required by the situation, and the rather restricted range of topics which the culture deems acceptable for the conversation. (In fact the producers of the series have very recently published taped dialogues to accompany the series, but these would only be played after working through such background information.)

To summarize then, these are some of the positive criteria that might be applied to listening comprehension courses:

- 1) They should be purposefully motivated, that is the purpose in listening should be an ordinary one rather than an artificial one.
- 2) They should require some decision or activity from the listener.
- 3) They should help listeners to distinguish important content points

- from trivial ones if data gathering is the normal purpose of the listening. In addition, they should relate memory span with note-taking or other memnotic aids, if such would normally be utilized.
- 4) Finally, they should complexify the student's background knowledge and develop the accuracy of the student's expectations.

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## &lt;국문초록&gt;

## 청취력과정의 실제성

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독해교수자료와 비교하여 청취력교수자료를 평가함에 있어, 실제성의 기준은 비교적 덜 중요하다. 대화의 전이가 일반적으로 듣는이에게 자세히 명시되어 있기 때문이다. 어떤 기준을 청취력교재에 적용함에 있어서 어려운 점을 검토한 후, 교과과정입안자가 사용하는 데에는 과정의 실제성이 더욱 중요하다. 참된 과정을 작성하기 위하여서는 동기, 결정하기, 자료의 평가, 다양한 학생의 선행지식에 대한 이해 등이 필요하며, 그러한 것을 증명하기 위하여 약간의 예들을 인용하였다.