

What stimulates a response in the language laboratory?

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English has been taught for thirty years at the language laboratory of the University of Neuchâtel, and this without any interruption despite fluctuations in popularity. Its longevity is a confirmation that, at an institution like this, there is quite clearly a need for a methodology which allows students to function more autonomously than in a classroom: freedom of choice in subject matter and level - twenty-eight different courses varying from beginner to university lectures are available in the language laboratory - provides the framework for a personalized syllabus; a choice of eight hours a week, half of which takes place during the lunch break, enables the students to invest themselves in language learning under their own responsibility; an English-speaking monitor, working as a counsellor, ensures that problems are solved as they arise and gives a one-to-one learning situation to participants if they need it.

On average, about a hundred people use the English language laboratory every year. The majority of these are French speaking students regularly inscribed at the different departments of the University: arts students, law students, economists, scientists and theologians. Apart from these, students of other mother tongues come to brush up their English, as well as members of the teaching staff, before lecturing abroad. Like all university installations the language laboratory is open to the general public and although few people take advantage of this, there are sometimes groups of businessmen who come for specialized courses.

Our language laboratory has recently been modernized, and compared to the first laboratory of six cabins squeezed into a tiny room under the roof of the university with wires all over the place, its different aspect clearly indicates a change of methodology. The student now steps into a carpeted room in different shades of pink, more like a listening centre than a laboratory; all tapes are available, thanks to a compact sliding cupboard which stocks the whole English programme (some hundred and fifty cassettes). The student receives a list of the courses and

decides, with or without the help of the monitor, which one he wishes to follow. He then selects the appropriate tape from the cupboard and takes it to his place.

Both the warm welcome and the self-catering approach are deliberate ploys to give the student confidence and autonomy. Seen in the light of a HUMANISTIC pedagogy, see Stevick (1990), the student's coming to the language laboratory would be considered as a conscious decision to assume a task for which he takes entire responsibility. However, unless he is at his "umpteenth" language, managing his own learning process, especially if he is fresh from school, is not an obvious task. That is why the choice of methodology is particularly important in a language laboratory.

Recently, courses have shown a greater awareness of this problem, and in the January issue of the English Language Teaching Journal, Susan Kellerman (1992) emphasizes this point in her survey review of listening materials:

Since L2 listening is a demanding activity, one welcome development in recent listening courses is the move to educate the learner in the listening process itself, making him or her more aware of how speech is perceived and understood, and to encourage the development of strategies for coping with input.

This awareness-raising approach is overtly adopted in two of the listening courses which she reviews and which are available to our students: "How to Listen"¹ or "The Listening File"².

A second point that Susan Kellerman makes in her survey is the necessity for material to be:

genuinely challenging and thought provoking

This is particularly obvious working with university students (although the same would be true for most people) who react infinitely better to subject matter which stimulates their curiosity or their

¹ "How to Listen", Geddes, M. (1988): BBC English by Radio and TV.

² "The Listening File", Harmer, J., S. Elsworth (1989): Longman.

imagination. Too many courses, especially in the early series of English for special purposes, brought no new knowledge of the subject to the learner, who was often an expert in that particular field. It is as if, in Ms Kellerman's words:

some material still seems to be based on the principle that restricted command of language goes hand in hand with limited intellectual powers. (Kellerman 1992)

It is quite clear that to provoke a creative response in the student in the form of an act of language learning, there must be intellectual stimulus. And it is to this end that we at Neuchâtel are collaborating with members of the teaching staff of the University so as to offer a series of tapes that will correspond to the student's daily lectures: two series, one in Physics and one in Law, are in preparation.

Many early listening courses restricted themselves to banalities because they were based on authentic material. Examples of this can be taken from: "Listen To This"³, especially chapter five (Children) or "Varieties of Spoken English"⁴, chapter six (A Patient's Visit to an Optician). If such tapes can be justified to encourage listening for gist or to accustom foreigners to different social or geographical dialects, they should not be used for detailed comprehension which implies close and repeated listening. Here again we subscribe to Susan Kellerman's remark, quoted earlier, that the listener is at a particular disadvantage coping with *input* (our italics) in the language laboratory, where his margin of manoeuvre is restricted to sound, compared with the same problem in listening face-to-face or with audio-visual material, where visual clues are part and parcel of communication. In the video course "Bid For Power"⁵, for example, where scenery, body language and proxemics are well exploited, the viewer's understanding of the spoken word is guided by predictions drawn from these, while with audio-oral tapes (where the non-verbal element is absent) prediction is limited to context. Despite this handicap some audio-oral courses have managed to do this particularly

³ "Listen to This", Underwood, M. (1971): O.U.P.

⁴ "Varieties of Spoken English", Dickinson, L., R. Mackin (1969): O.U.P.

⁵ "Bid for Power", (1983): BBC English by Radio and TV and ELTDU.

well: in the course "Success Story"⁶ the context is suggested by the Narrator:

The narrator prompts: I'm terribly sorry.

Student: Oh, that's all right.

The narrator prompts: Guess what! I'm engaged!

Student: Congratulations!

The narrator prompts: I've failed my driving test.

Student: Oh, bad luck!

The narrator sneezes

Student: Bless you!

etc.....

These conversations are quite obviously contrived and yet the language is perfectly natural, the learning problem is a real one (Automatic Responses) and sufficiently acceptable to the student to stimulate the learning process. This brings us to our third and last point which concerns authentic and contrived texts, where authentic is taken to include unscripted, informal conversations round a microphone (Kellerman, 1992) while contrived refers to dialogues written for a particular learning purpose and recorded in a studio.

The proponents of authentic material make an interesting distinction between input and intake: Alan Maley, the general editor of Oxford Supplementary Skills makes the point in his Foreword to the "Listening" series⁷.

In our materials we do not expect input to equal intake.

If unedited conversations are to be the basis of listening material, we wonder what level the student must have attained to be able to decide what is useful and what is not. It strikes us that such requirements are only possible at near native-speaker level or where the listening exercise is being closely directed.

⁶ "Success Story", (1984): The Canning School of English and Longman.

⁷ "Listening: Advanced", Revell, J., B. Breary (1988): Oxford Supplementary Skills Series editor: Maley, A., O.U.P.

Another disadvantage of authenticity can be illustrated from an example taken from "The World of Business"⁸, which is otherwise a perfectly sensible course. The tape material for chapter 6 (The Japanese Worker) consists of an interview with a Japanese businessman, talking about working conditions. It is practically incomprehensible even to a native speaker. This example illustrates the folly of uncritical use of authentic material, as not only does it overexpose the listener to trivia (as we have already mentioned) but it renders the task of deciphering exaggeratedly difficult and therefore demotivating.

Learning a language by yourself from tape is already a pretty frustrating experience, but at a certain level you should not be faced with too many listening difficulties, especially if they are out of your control: poor sound, too much background noise, bad voice tonality, unclear articulation etc... Again we can quote from Susan Kellerman's article:

The technical quality of the recordings used for listening comprehension purposes is of paramount importance.

Luckily, the language laboratory of Neuchâtel University has a tradition of ensuring very high quality sound, thanks to a professional recording studio and excellent maintenance. One would wish those authors who are unconditional users of authentic material to try their hand at learning a language like Russian from the recording of two "babuschkas" in a food queue!

We have tried to show that the answer to our original question: What stimulates a response in the language laboratory, is more complex than we were led to suppose by behaviourist psychology which accompanied their first installation some thirty years back. A language laboratory, like a video set, is no more bound to a particular method than is the overhead projector or the blackboard. It might seem ironic that we have replaced Skinnerian determinism by Carl Rogers' humanism (Brown 1980), yet we feel that humanistic methodology corresponds much better to the way university students use the language laboratory as it is learner-centered and based on students discovering learning strategies on their own. We

⁸ "The World of Business", Cotton, D. (1984): Bell and Hyman.

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are perfectly aware of its limits but we are equally aware of its advantages in the particular context we have just described.

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