

# The Use of Authentic Materials in Improving Aural Comprehension Skills

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## Introduction

Foreign language pedagogy is increasing its focus on the functional use of language while instructors are looking for materials that more closely reflect the language their students will encounter outside of the classroom. Grammar practice, drills, exercises, and listening texts found in common textbooks are necessary, but students need to be exposed to and have access to the same language native speakers typically use especially in regard to improving listening comprehension skills. The use of 'authentic materials' in the classroom has been proposed as a way to give second language learners this opportunity. Some scholars and many students tend to believe that this type of material is too demanding. Instructors may find it too difficult and/or time-consuming to edit and prepare for lessons.

## Listening

Rubin (1990:309), echoing Clark and Clark (1977) and Richards (1983), says:

"listening consists of processing information which the listener gets from visual and auditory clues in order to define what is going on and what the speakers are trying to express".

Buck (1997:65) explains in slightly more detail:

"listening comprehension is an inferential process in which the listener constructs meaning through this interaction; and the interpretation of the text is guided and influenced by the context of situation and the listener's purpose for listening".

In second-language education, listening has often been overlooked or considered a secondary skill, with speaking and writing taking precedence (Morley, 1990; Nunan, 1997). However, according to Feyton (1991:174),

"More than 45% of our total communication time is spent on listening. [Whereas] speaking takes 30%". Morely (1990) also claims that people spend measurably more time listening than on any other communication skill; twice as much as speaking, four times as much as reading, and five times more than writing. If listening is considered to be a substantial part of language, then it would seem that students' listening skills are not getting the amount of attention they merit.

Although in the 1940's and 50's listening had "near-zero status" (Morley 1990: 317), "in the 1960's, the emphasis on oral language skills gave it a boost" (Nunan 1997). For instance, Newmark and Diller (1964:20) suggested "having students spend more time listening to natural speech and authentic models of the foreign language". At the Second Congress of the International Association of Applied Linguistics in 1969, three points about listening became evident: listening is not a passive skill but in fact a very complicated process; listening comprehension is inadequately understood; and students should have "closer contact with 'real' language" (Morley 1990:321).

The subsequent decades provided more consideration to listening as an important second language skill. In the 1970's, however, listenings were mostly scripted and tasks rarely ventured from test-like exercises (i.e. true/false and multiple-choice questions). In the 80's, Krashen's (1982) comprehensible input theories acquired importance and, bolstered by Asher's (1988) writings on 'total physical response', they helped to change the approach to listening skills. Dunkel (1986:99) said that the "critical importance of listening comprehension development today is widely acknowledged in L2 acquisition" showing that it had progressed considerably from being a 'near-zero language skill'. Brown's *Listening to Spoken English* (Brown 1990) also re-emphasized the significance of listening skills and demonstrated that scholars were earnest in their study. It was also at that time instructors began moving away from the pedagogy of scripted texts and testing, and towards teaching functional listening and using authentic materials (Morely 1990).

There are those who propose that students study listening before learning oral skills (comprehension-based methodology) such as Asher (1972), Gary (1975), Krashen (1981), Postovsky (1974), Terrell (1977), and Winitz and

Reeds (1973). There are some, namely Long (1985), Omaggio (1986), and Rivers (1981), who do not fully agree with this methodology. This embodies Buck's (1997:65) consideration that there seems to be "no widely-accepted, explicit theory of second language (L2) listening comprehension". However, at the same time it demonstrates that "current debate focuses not so much on whether listening is an important skill but rather on how best to promote its development" (Herron and Seay 1991:487). Presently, there is little debate as to whether listening is an important part of second language learning; however, it is still recognized as 'new territory' that deserves further investigation (Oxford, 1993; Rubin, 1994; Vandergrift, 2003).

### **Authentic Materials**

The definition of 'authentic materials' varies throughout the literature. Some definitions differ in exclusivity (Bacon and Finnemann, 1990; Jordan, 1997; Rogers and Medley, 1988; Herron and Seay, 1991), some offer different terms (Geddes and White, 1978; Widdowson, 1990), and Rings (1986) even construes a categorical system divided into different levels of authenticity.

Bacon and Finnemann (1990:469) state that "input is considered authentic when it is produced by and for native speakers of the target language". Jordan (1997) agrees and considers only text that was *not* made for pedagogical use to be authentic. However, they do not indicate whether material remains authentic once in the classroom and/or is used in a way not intended by the authors. Rogers and Medley (1988:468) are more permissive, remarking that authentic materials are "language samples... that reflect a naturalness of form, and an appropriateness of cultural and situational context that would be found in the language as used by native speakers". Herron and Seay (1991) also subscribe to this definition that would include text written for language instruction and acted out as opposed to spontaneous speech or material made for native speaker use.

Geddes and White (1978, in Omaggio, 1986) recognize the difference between the previous definitions and thus created two separate terms. Any text created by and for native speakers is called "un-modified authentic discourse" (ibid:128). Whereas text created for educational purposes but that contain "un-modified" characteristics is designated as "simulated

authentic discourse" (ibid:128). Buck (2001) indicates that authentic material loses its context when taken out of its original situation. He is also concerned that when the materials are heard more than once (which may be necessary - especially for lower-level students) they lose their authenticity as they would not likely be repeated in the 'real world' unless the text were something similar to an announcement. Widdowson (1990) also specified two types of materials, 'authentic' and 'genuine'. Material created by and for native speakers could be considered 'authentic' only if used in the same manner as had been originally intended. If used in a different way, the text would instead be considered 'genuine'. Rings (1986:207) took this even further by differentiating sixteen separate degrees of authentic speech and placing "native speakers' spontaneous conversations produced for their own purposes (no knowledge of being monitored)" at one end of the spectrum and "composed conversations printed in textbooks" at the other.

There is significant difference in opinion regarding the presence of authentic materials in second language learning classrooms. Views range from strong caution to encouragement, but even critics like Walz (1989) do not disagree that their use is a favorable trend (Secules *et al* 1992). This 'favorable trend' was followed by many language teachers who initially were wary of televised courses until authentic materials were introduced in the late 70's (Altman 1989).

Clark (1983:445) claims that "...media do not influence learning under any conditions" thus whether authentic or non-authentic would make no difference. In contrast, Omaggio (1986:128) warns that unedited authentic materials are "random in respect to vocabulary, structure, functions, content, situation and length, much of it impractical for classroom teachers to integrate successfully into the curriculum". Ur (1984) and Dunkel (1986) also caution that presenting the students with difficult material can damage morale and motivation.

In contrast, Harmer (1991) believes that despite many textbooks' use of non-authentic materials to practice specific language points, only authentic materials will genuinely improve listening and reading skills. Canale (1983:17) agrees, stating "maximum comprehensible exposure to the second language is crucial of basic knowledge and skills required for effective language use". Albert (1980), Ricardo-Marques (1981), and Rogers and

Medley (1988) assert that if students are to gain authentic language skills, then authentic materials are needed in the classroom. These materials allow students "to observe the dynamics of communication as native speakers interact in authentic settings" (Herron 1995:775). They also provide motivation (Beeching, 1982; Bacon and Finnemann, 1990) and research on students' attitudes towards authentic foreign-language videos has been positive (Wen, 1989; Baltova, 1994). Terrell (1993) concurs and adds that students say they have more confidence with the studied language after exposure to authentic materials.

Most agree with the use of authentic texts, but pragmatically with the conscientious guidance of the instructor. Duke (1980), McGovern (1983), Lonergan (1984), and Cooper *et al* (1991) believe that using the authentic media of television will negatively affect students without "substantial teacher mediation" (Vanderplank 1994:119). Armstrong and Yetter-Vassot (1994:476) explain that authentic materials, only when accompanied "with appropriate guidance from the instructor, [result in] ...a better understanding of the discourse strategies that native speakers have when conversing". In agreement, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) comment that students need to be taught listening strategy skills or they will fail when confronted with a difficult text. Byrnes (1985), Fish (1981), and Joiner (1986), in opposition to Omaggio (1986), maintain that it is not the difficulty of a text that makes it 'impractical', but the difficulty of the tasks. Bernhardt and Berkemeyer (1988) and Allen *et al* (1988) confirmed this view in their respective experiments.

Are authentic materials too random and impractical for the classroom or can the right tasks alleviate those problems? Does authenticity damage or raise morale, confidence, and motivation? If the materials are authentic but not used in an authentic manner, do they lose something? Or does it not make any difference whether materials are authentic or not? The questions are innumerable and can not all be answered practically in one experiment. Thus, this study has focused on revealing information about whether the use of an authentic listening text in listening training will result in better comprehension skills in students compared to the use of non-authentic materials.

## Research

In spite of the progress towards the widespread use of authentic materials in the classroom, there has been relatively little empirical research carried out regarding its effect on learners (Bacon and Finnemann 1990). There appears to be even less research specifically on listening or the comparison of authentic and scripted texts' effectiveness.

Perhaps one of the earliest experiments with authentic materials was carried out in the 1970's. The children's television show "Plaza Sésamo" (Spanish-language version of "Sesame Street") was used to teach second-language learners Spanish. When questioned, the students felt their language skills had improved and accredited it directly to the videos (Usami 1979). As this was a measure of students' impressions and not an empirical study, it cannot be considered a confirmation of the effectiveness of using authentic material. Also, it could be argued that "Sesame Street", being an education program for children, does not qualify as authentic material in an adult class as the level of content is low and it is partly designed for language education. Nevertheless, it is a good example of the shift from the use of scripted to authentic texts that began thirty years ago (Altman 1989).

In an examination of high school students studying German as a foreign language, Bernhardt and Berkemeyer (1988, as referred to in Bacon, 1990) noted that all levels of students were able to manage using authentic texts. Similarly, Allen and his associates conducted a study of 1500 high school students in three different language levels using authentic materials. They concluded, "all subjects were at the very least able to capture some meaning from all of the texts", even at the beginning level (Allen *et al*, 1988:168). Duquette *et al* (1987, as referred to in Bacon, 1990) found linguistic improvement after testing kindergarten children who had been taught with authentic materials. These three experiments were promising and again showed the continuing interest in authenticity. However, they failed to provide concrete proof that authentic materials were effective and did not offer any specific insight into listening comprehension.

A more relevant experiment by Rubin (1990) involved American high school students learning Spanish over the course of eight weeks in 1988. The 394 subjects were all second-year students from seven schools whose levels were classified from very low to very high. The subjects were divided

into five groups; three experimental groups distinguished from each other through teaching style (blind, informed, and self-control) and two control groups. The experimental groups were given listening comprehension training during every class, using five-minute clips from authentic Spanish-language films (the single exception being an educational film contrived for language learners). Control Group One was allowed to watch all of the videos but was not given the listening training provided to the experimental groups. Control Group Two was given similar lessons to all other groups, but without watching the videos or receiving the listening training.

In comparing the pre- and post-test scores, the groups who watched the videos improved their listening comprehension by 50%, nearly 20% more than Control Group Two. It was observed that when the text was difficult, Control Group One had difficulty performing without the strategies taught to the experimental groups. Also, through daily quizzes, the researchers observed that the subjects' listening comprehension was higher when the films contained clear diction and less slang or regional dialect, indicating the importance of authentic material selection. For beginning students, materials with clearer language and uncomplicated themes are the best choice. More difficult material should be used to challenge students of higher levels. The conclusion of the study was that authentic video can "enhance listening comprehension if it is selected so that it provides sufficient clues for information processing" (ibid:315). Rubin also claimed that "the combination of well-selected video and training in effective listening strategies can also improve student affect and motivation" (ibid:315). This training included what they found to be a very effective listening strategy. They taught the subjects in the experimental groups to predict the plot of the story and then to check their predictions with the actual story. This trial clarifies that authentic materials are usable and even more effective with teacher guidance. It does not, however, prove that they are necessarily better since there was no control group that was trained in listening using non-authentic materials. Also, because the pre- and post-tests were based on videos, it should only be expected that the groups who had exposure to that type of text would perform noticeably better. In spite of its shortcomings, Rubin's (1990) study demonstrated a more detailed approach to discovering the potential of authentic text in listening

comprehension.

Herron's (1995) study from 1991-1992, involving American university students of French, compared video and text-based materials. The control group was taught with a text while 'semi-authentic' videos were used with the experimental group. These videos were an "on-going drama in which native speakers interact in authentic situations" (ibid:778). The 'drama' was made for language learners but the videos also included clips from French films and television ads adding at least a measure of authenticity. The experiment group's scores in listening comprehension significantly improved, leading Herron (ibid:790) to conclude that "the content of the video-based curriculum (native speakers interacting within authentic situations in France) and accompanying class procedure... better prepared students". Since the control group did not have any listening training and the materials were not completely authentic (according to the working definition previously described and used for this study), it cannot be assumed that the use of authentic listening text is more effective than non-authentic text in improving listening comprehension.

Herron and Seay (1991) researched the effect the use of authentic French radio broadcasts had on various second language skills in a study involving twenty-three Emory University students. Both the control and experimental groups used the same 'non-authentic' video series in class over ten weeks. The experimental group, in addition, used the French radio series *Champs-Élysées* for half of the class time and thus was exposed to authentic text. The results indicated that the experimental group which had used the authentic materials performed better on listening comprehension tests. They concluded that "exposure to authentic speech... when introduced as a structured, in-class supplemental activity, can increase listening comprehension" (ibid:493). Again, because the control group received no additional training in listening, it is obvious that the experimental class would perform better. This does little to demonstrate the advantage of authentic over non-authentic materials, but it can be learned from and improved upon, as all previous studies.

In 1994, an experiment was carried out using Mexican *telenovelas* (television soap operas) in two University of New Mexico Spanish language classes to reveal their effects on students' oral and listening skills. The



classes were held every day for eight weeks and there were 20 students in the experimental group and 17 in the control group. Both classes used the same textbook, but the experimental group was given supplementary training using the unedited videos. The pre- and post-tests for aural skills were taken from the standardized Level 2 1994 National Spanish Exam and resulted in the experimental group's improvement being "far greater" (Weyers 1999: 343) than the control group. The tests were objective, but as the control group received less listening-specific training, it is unknown whether the improvement was due to the use of authentic materials, the listening training, or both.

From the previously mentioned studies, it may be concluded that authentic listening texts, especially with proper listening strategy instruction, are effective in improving comprehension, other language skills, and even providing motivation. However, no conclusions may be drawn from their results in regards to the use of authentic versus scripted listening texts. These studies have taught that in order to discover authentic materials' effect on listening comprehension, several aspects of the experiments need to be improved. The variable of listening training between the experimental and control groups needs to be diminished by giving both groups similar training in listening skills. Also, the pre- and post-tests must be based on material that neither group have familiarity with so as not to give one an automatic advantage over the other. With the narrowing of these variables, a more accurate and valid experiment can be created.

A future study should avoid the faults and shortcomings of the experiments mentioned above. It should be designed to produce empirical evidence unlike Altman's (1989) which relied on the students' own perceptions of their progress or Bernhardt and Berkemeyer's (1988) that used teachers' opinions. Also, the presence of a control group would ensure clear results which were absent in Duquette *et al*'s (1987) testing of only one group of students. The pre- and post-tests would need to be based on material completely unfamiliar to both the experimental and control group in order not to give any advantage to either as was the case in Rubin's (1990) study. The listening trainings should be planned and carried out to be as equivalent as possible so that the only variable might be the listening text used. This is in contrast to studies where the control groups received no

listening training (Rubin, 1990; Herron, 1995) or less training than the experimental group (Herron and Seay, 1991; Weyers, 1999) thus putting them at an automatic disadvantage.

Some favorable aspects of past experiments could be applied to a future study as well. Rubin (1990:315) found the students had better comprehension when the authentic text contained "sufficient clues" so for a future study's training, in addition to familiar topics, authentic radio news clips could be chosen that would have key vocabulary at the subjects' level. Also, activities such as predicting and verifying the predictions at the end of each lesson should be included (strategies taken directly from Rubin's (1990) study). The study should also follow Herron and Seay's (1991) advice to use the authentic material as a supplement to the regular class curriculum.

## Conclusion

Publishers are introducing more useful and realistic materials into language text books and teachers also wish to expose their students to as much of the 'real world' as possible, thus authentic materials will likely gain a larger presence the classroom. This essay challenges researchers and instructors alike to use the information provided and to continue to question classroom materials and the way they are used. By examining past studies, improved experiments and lessons will result, culminating in further development of language instruction in the future.

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