

Success with extensive listening

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While extensive reading is a familiar part of the ELT repertoire, extensive listening has received much less attention. Articles by Ridgway and Field in *English Language Teaching Journal* Vol. 54/2 April 2000 offer conflicting views. Tony Ridgway puts the case for treating extensive listening like extensive reading, and argues that 'in listening, working from the text, or texts in general, may be a more productive way of approaching comprehension than working from the notion of 'strategies'. John Field, in reply, argues for the explicit teaching of listening strategies and the use of authentic listening materials.

Audio recordings of readers offer us a graded resource of extensive listening material, but are they authentic? 'Real' English is made real by context and response, and speaker intention matches listener response in recordings of graded readers. The writer's aim is to produce entertaining and thought-provoking stories at a level where the learner of English can understand them. The aim of the actor who records the story is to use his/her voice to bring the characters alive, while the aim of the student listening is to understand and enjoy the story. Thus there is complete congruence between the writer/speaker's intentions and the listener's response. Authenticity!

So how can we use reader audio CDs in the language classroom? To find out, the Studio School in Cambridge took part in a small piece of action research with interesting results. When provided with multiple copies of readers and CDs teachers largely preferred not to use them in class, citing time pressures and the essentially individual nature of reading as reasons. But once the multiple copies of CDs and readers were made available to students for use and home loan in the self-study centre the take-up was considerable.

Interviews with a group of enthusiastic users of reader CDs were carried out and responses stressed the effect of listening on pronunciation, and the flexibility CDs gave to listen anytime, anywhere. A typical student response was: 'sometimes when you listen, you know... you feel like a real story in front of you, you know,...some stories you imagine'.

An in-service session a few months later with teachers produced ideas for introducing extensive listening into the classroom as a 'taster' to encourage further individual use. These ideas for 'listening for pleasure' included playing a chapter a week as a radio serial, playing short extracts to arouse interest, playing extracts from a story five minutes a lesson and offering 'genre' corners, where students choose which genre they want to listen to.

Research projects to quantify the effects of extensive listening in the way in which extensive reading has been researched are needed. In the meantime we can say that those who agree with Ridgway have a much-needed resource, and that those who agree with Field may wish to consider using reader CDs to teach listening strategies.

Bibliography

Field J. 2000 'Not waving but drowning' *ELT Journal* 54/2

Ridgway T. 2000 'Listening strategies – I beg your pardon?' *ELT Journal* 54/2