

Reviews

BASIC LISTENING

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Edward Arnold, 1982

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As the authors of this listening text note, the listening skill has been neglected in language teaching in the past. Even in classrooms where students have apparently spent a lot of time 'listening', after several hundred hours of instruction, many students still find normal spoken English utterly incomprehensible. Why? Because a lot of that time spent 'listening' had little to do with developing the ability to understand people speaking English. A lot of that time was spent 'listening' to dialogues students were in the process of memorizing, or 'listening' to cues and responses in structure drills. But that 'listening' was simply incidental to oral structure practice, which was the real point of the exercises. Also, a lot of that 'listening' time was spent hearing the teacher speak English. Whereas the frequent use of English in the classroom by the teacher is important and helpful to students, this listening cannot be relied on to train students in this area. The teacher's voice is only one voice, and frequently we teachers tend to unconsciously slow down and distort language to make it more comprehensible to our students.

In order to develop the ability to understand spoken English students need practice. They need to hear a variety of voices speaking English at a normal rate (and normal spoken English goes by fast), incorporating the fully correct contractions and reductions, as well as the omissions and ungrammaticality frequently found in native speakers' English. Also, especially at the beginning, students need to realize that they will not understand everything that

they hear - and that it doesn't matter. They need to learn that, very frequently, understanding a little is enough.

Frequently, recorded materials accompanying language textbooks do not provide students with this kind of practice. The recordings are often painfully slow and clear; they contain few or no words, structures or functions students are unfamiliar with; and the exercises accompanying them require students to understand every word.

This is not the case, fortunately, with Basic Listening. The recordings (in British English) are unscripted and natural, and the tasks accompanying them require students to listen and pick out specific details from the stream of speech ("recognize" and "select" in the terms used by the authors to describe the "micro-skills" developed). Much of what the students hear is complex and very difficult, but they are not expected to understand it all. Thus, even beginning students with some familiarity in the area concerned can complete the tasks successfully. It is important that students get used to hearing normal spoken English right from the beginning. Providing simple tasks makes it possible to give beginners relevant listening practice without simplifying and distorting the language.

Each of the fifteen units in Basic Listening deals with a specific area. Some included are: Personal Information, The Telephone, Time, Instructions, Food and Drink, Houses and Flats, and Travel. Several exercises revolve around the topics. The student's book provides visual material which helps students get the context of the conversations, which is a great aid to understanding them. Each exercise includes several conversations giving students more practice. Tapescripts are included only in the teacher's book. This is good, as it makes it impossible for students to 'read ahead'. But perhaps more important, including tapescripts in students' materials (even if used only after doing the listening exercises) can encourage the attitude that every word on the tape is important - an attitude which must be overcome if effective listening strategies are to be developed.

The authors say the book is for the "elementary/pre-intermediate level" and can be used in groups or by individuals. I think it could be quite useful in private classes and can be recommended for self-study. In groups, it could be used straight through, but probably not with beginners. Some familiarity with the topic areas is necessary to complete the tasks, as I have mentioned above. If the students have had no work with personal descriptions, for example, the unit dealing with that area would be difficult. But this does not mean that the book cannot be used with beginners. I have used it successfully with first semester students by selecting the units to correspond to topic areas dealt with in oral interaction activities. I would not, for example, use the unit on Directions until we had worked a little with giving directions in class. This does not mean that students should be briefed on all the vocabulary used in a unit before attacking it (heaven forbid!), but it does help if they have some familiarity with the topic. Students further along in their English studies probably have some knowledge of most of the areas included, and they could certainly benefit from using this material if their listening skills are lagging behind their abilities in other areas (frequently the case, for reasons mentioned above).

The student's book is designed so that students do not have to write their answers in the book. It would be difficult (and unnecessary) for students to purchase this listening text in addition to another textbook for English, but if the school or English department could buy one class set and a cassette, all groups could benefit from using the material.

Basic Listening contains a nice variety of task types including: filling in charts, choosing a picture, writing numbers, following maps, writing lists, writing messages, taking notes. All, however, are based on the same simple, sound principles of listening comprehension. By working with the materials in this book, teachers can get ideas on how to make similar listening materials of their own - materials which could more closely fit their own program and their own students' needs.