LISTENING COMPREHENSION

THOMAS A KIRKPATRICK

Introduction

Listening is an important skill but one which, in the past, has been sadly neglected. Happily, however, the new secondary English syllabus includes listening comprehension and so listening comprehension will soon become an integral part of language teaching in Singapore schools.

This article lists some uses of listening comprehension and then mentions some points to bear in mind when making listening comprehension materials. It concludes with two examples of listening comprehension materials with suggestions on how to use them.

The Uses of Listening Comprehension

Listening comprehension has a wide variety of uses.

It can be used to:

- train students to listen for the main details in a piece of spoken language. This also develops students’ note taking skills and can therefore be used to help students learn summary writing skills. An example of material designed to help students listen for the main details is included below (Example One).

- present a grammatical item. An example of material designed for this is included below (Example Two).

- present a model of social interaction. For example, a “model” job interview can be taped and then played to the students. In this way, students not only practise listening skills but can also learn how a job interview is structured. This will help them when they themselves go to be interviewed for a job.

- help students discern the attitudes and moods of speakers.
- give students exposure to a variety of accents.
- train students to hear individual sounds – consonant clusters at the ends of words, for example – and rhythm, stress and intonation patterns.
- provide students with a speech model.
- draw students’ attention to the characteristics of spoken language – hesitation, repetition and "errors", for example.

Points to bear in mind when making listening comprehension materials

1. Listening comprehension materials can be made at school. Obviously, a recording studio is the ideal place to make them, but they can also be successfully recorded in any quiet room. It is important, however, for the tape to be clear so that it can be heard easily. This is particularly important for less advanced students. Very advanced students can be inflicted with tapes that have been recorded badly deliberately.

2. Many types of listening comprehension materials can be used in the classroom. Again, however, this emphasises the importance of having a clear tape or using a good quality tape recorder.

3. The tape recorder should have counter numbers and a pause button. The counter numbers help the teacher find the relevant parts of the tape quickly. The pause button allows the teacher to stop the tape efficiently whenever necessary.

4. Generally speaking, listening comprehension materials should come in threes:
   a) the tape itself,
   b) the tapescript,
   c) the student’s worksheet(s).

5. There are three major sources of listening comprehension materials. They are:
   a) Real materials – dialogues or monologues recorded from the radio, for example. If necessary these can then be adapted to suit the level of the class.
b) Fully scripted materials – where the teacher writes out the complete script before recording. The examples below were fully scripted before recording.

c) Semi-scripted materials – where the teacher only provides the people who are to make the recording with notes. Here is an example of a “semi-script” followed by the tapescript of the resultant recording.

The reader will notice that the language in the tapescript is more natural than it would have been had a full script been used.

The Semi-script: “The Complaint”

Person A Last week you bought a shirt from YoYo department store, where you are a regular customer. Although you followed the washing instructions carefully, it shrank when you washed it for the first time. You take it back to the store. You want either a replacement or your money back. The shirt cost $17.50. You have lost the receipt.

Person B You work in the men’s department of YoYo department store. The store policy is not to replace items or give a refund for faulty goods unless the customer has the receipt. You may however use your discretion, especially with regular customers. The store does not want to lose its regular customers!

The Resultant Tapescript

Customer: Excuse me.
Shop Assistant: Yes.
Customer: Uh . . . last week I bought a shirt from this . . . ah . . . from this shop and . . . (uh huh) when I washed it . . . uh . . . it shrank and as you can see now (oh) it’s really too small for me now to wear.
Shop Assistant: Yes . . . mm . . .
Customer: I was wondering whether it would be possible for you to replace it for me as I (uh huh) you know, I
was... I mean I have bought this shirt here and... uh...

Shop Assistant: Yes... oh... uh... when did you buy it, sir?

Customer: Uh... I bought it last Tuesday, that'd be about three days ago, I suppose.

Shop Assistant: Oh... about three days ago, yes... and um... and you've worn it, of course...

Customer: Yes. I wore it and then the first time I washed it, it... it shrank, so I... obviously as you can see, I couldn't wear it again.

Shop Assistant: Yes... um... what size is it? I see, well... how did you wash it... um...?

Customer: Well, I just followed the instructions... it's a fairly straightforward sort of shirt to wash... I just put it in the washing machine and uh...

Shop Assistant: You followed the instructions on the label, did you?

Customer: Yes, yes absolutely (uh huh... yes) I mean, there was nothing complicated in it, I just put it in the washing machine with my other shirts and...

Shop Assistant: Yes, well, let me have a look... Yes, I can see that it has shrunk quite a lot... um... could I see your receipt then, sir, please?

Customer: Well look, I'm terribly sorry, but I seem to have lost my receipt but... (oh my)... but I can assure you that I did buy this shirt here, I mean, I do a lot of shopping here...

Shop Assistant: Yes.

Customer: ... and... uh... I'm sure that... well, I know that I paid seventeen fifty for it and I certainly bought it here.

Shop Assistant: Well, we usually... um... we do require a receipt, you know, sir, as proof of purchase...

Customer: Yes... I... I realise that and I'm very sorry that I've lost mine... it's just one of those things, but I'm sure that... I can... well, I can assure you that I'm not trying to cheat you or anything like that.

Shop Assistant: Well, can you remember the salesgirl who
helped you? ... uh ... can you see ... can you remember her name?

Customer: Um ... I think, it was a girl called Amy. I'm not absolutely sure, but I've got a feeling it was someone called Amy.

Shop Assistant: Yes, we do have a salesgirl here called Amy. ... Yes ... Well, let me see, sir, as you've brought it back so soon ... um ... yes ... we will ... uh ... change it for you. Would you like me to call Amy for you and perhaps you'd like to choose a shirt of another brand?

Customer: Oh, that ... that would be very kind. I would very appreciate ... Yes, that would be fine. I'd be quite happy if I could ... uh ... have a replacement shirt for this one.

Shop Assistant: Well, yes. Obviously this ... this garment is ... um ... is not satisfactory and ... uh ... of course, you must get another shirt.

Customer: That's very kind of you. Thank you very much indeed.

Note: For dialogues like this, using one male and one female voice makes it easier for students as they can immediately identify which person is talking.

Two Examples

Example One: Oddities in Singapore English

1. Aim
   a) To help students pick out the main details and to make brief notes.
   b) To interest students in language.

2. Materials
   1. A tape—a monologue in the style of a radio programme.
   2. Student worksheet (see below).
   3. Tapescript (see below).
3. **Method**

1. Set the scene. Show students a picture of a kampung. Elicit the word “kampung”. Ask students what language the word “kampung” comes from. Then ask if there are any kampungs in England. Elicit the nearest English equivalent – “village”. Elicit some other words that are used in Singapore English but which come from other languages.

2. Tell the students they are going to hear a short talk on these types of words.

3. Pre questions. Ask students to listen for
   - the American equivalent of pavement.
   - what an Australian means when he says “I’ll shout you a beer”.
   - as many of the Singapore English words mentioned as possible.

4. Play the tape all the way through once. Check the pre questions.

5. Hand out the worksheets and explain the listening task to the students.

6. Play the tape again – pause the tape to allow students time to complete the worksheet. Weaker students may need to hear the tape two or three times at this intensive listening stage.

7. Ask the students to check their worksheets with their neighbour’s.

8. Go through the worksheet with the class.

9. Hand out the tapescripts.

10. Play the tape again allowing students to read the tapescript.

**The Worksheet²**

**Listening Comprehension: Oddities in Singapore English**

**Listen to the tape and complete the worksheet.**

1 a. What types of English does the speaker mention?
b. What would an American say instead of pavement?

c. What would an Australian mean if he offered to shout you a beer?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word used in Singapore English</th>
<th>In British English</th>
<th>Original Language and Original Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Amah</td>
<td>domestic servant</td>
<td>Portuguese – nurse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Jaga</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Tapescript²

Listening Comprehension: Oddities in Singapore English

Listen to the tape and answer the questions on your worksheet.

Singapore English has words not used in older types of English such as British, American, Australian and New Zealand English. This is not surprising as there are examples of words used differently among all types of English. For example, "pavement" in British English becomes "sidewalk" in American English. And when an Australian says "I'll shout you a beer" he means "I'll buy you a beer".
There are many examples of words that are used in Singapore English but are not used in other types of English. Here are some of these examples.

1. **Amah**  
   'I always speak Cantonese to my amah.'  
   In British English an amah would be called a domestic servant. The word "amah" apparently comes originally from the Portuguese word "ama" which means a nurse.

2. **Jaga**  
   'The jaga fell asleep while guarding the house.'  
   A jaga would be called a watchman or janitor in British English. The word comes from the Malay word meaning "watch or guard".

3. **Kampung**  
   'I stay in a kampung in Sembawang.'  
   A person speaking British English would use the word village for kampung. Like jaga, this word also comes from Malay. It means village or settlement. Notice also the use of the word "stay" in the sentence. In British English a person would use "live".

4. **Towkay**  
   'A lot of towkays used to live in this street.'  
   This usually means a wealthy businessman or boss. The word comes from Hokkien "thau ke" which means the owner of a business or a businessman.

5. **Wayang**  
   'There is a Cantonese wayang this week.'  
   Wayang refers to Chinese opera, usually Chinese street opera. Interestingly, the word actually comes from the Malay word "wayang", which means a theatrical performance.

6. **Dhobi**  
   'He's a dhobi man.'  
   This means a washerman or laundryman and the word comes from Hindi.

7. **Syce**  
   'He works as a syce for a rich towkay.'  
   A user of British English would use the word "driver" or "chauffeur" here. The word has an interesting history as it comes from Arabic originally. It then became a Hindi word before arriving in Singapore English. It originally meant a groom.

8. **Thamby**  
   This means an office boy or an errand boy. The word comes from Tamil and means "younger brother".
Example Two: Professor Norbert Grimble and the Aborigines

1. Aim
   1. To present the use of the present perfect continuous tense in context so students can see how it is used.
   2. To help students pick out the main details.

2. Materials
   1. A tape – a dialogue in the style of a radio interview.
   2. Student worksheet (see below).
   3. Tapescript (see below).

3. Method
   1. Set the scene. Ask students what people who were the original inhabitants of places are called. Try and elicit "aborigine". Elicit places where aborigines live (for example, Australia). Show a picture of aborigines to the class.
   2. Tell the students they are going to hear an interview with a man who has been studying a certain group of aborigines for a long time.
   3. Pre questions. Ask students to listen for
      - the name of the professor.
      - the name of the aborigines.
      - the name of the island.
      - why the professor has to finish his research quickly.
   4. Play the tape all the way through once. Check the pre questions. Write Norbert Grimble on the board. If students have problems with the final pre question, ask them to listen for the answer during the second hearing.
   5. Hand out the worksheet. Explain to the students that they should only try and complete Section A at this stage.
   6. Play the tape again, pausing to allow students time to complete the listening task. Check the answers.
   7. Tell students that they are now to complete Section B. Play the tape again pausing at the relevant parts of the tape. Check the answers.
8. Hand out the tapescript.
9. Play the tape again allowing students to read the tapescripts.

The Worksheet

Listen to the tape and complete the worksheet. Do Section A first.

Section A
The name of the professor ___________
The name of the aborigines ___________
The name of the island ___________
Length of time spent studying the aborigines ___________
Length of time spent living with the aborigines ___________
Date aborigines arrived on the island ___________
Place aborigine children now go to school ___________
Effect of this on number of aborigine families on the island ___________

Section B
Fill in the blanks in the sentences.
1. I’ve ___________ ___________ them ___________ a ___________ ___________ ... for ___________ ___________ years.
2. ___________ only ___________ ___________ with them ___________ ___________ ___________ years.
3. ___________ ___________ ___________ there ___________ generations.
4. Parents ___________ ___________ ___________ their ___________ to ___________ on ___________ ___________ ___________ for ___________ ___________.
5. People ___________ ___________ ___________ the ___________ in ___________ ___________ go ___________ ___________.

The Tapescript

Interviewer: Tonight I'm pleased to welcome in the studio Professor Norbert Grimble. Professor Grimble has been studying the Tami aborigines of Butterfly Island. Professor Grimble, how long have you been studying the Tami aborigines?

Prof. G: I've been studying them for a long time . . . for about thirteen years.

Interviewer: I see, and have you been living with them for all that time?

Prof. G: Oh, no . . . I've only been living with them for about two years.

Interviewer: Ah . . . and how long have they been living on Butterfly Island?

Prof. G: They've been living there for generations . . . for several hundred years . . . at least since the thirteenth century.

Interviewer: Is their way of life changing at the moment?

Prof. G: It certainly is . . . for example, parents have been sending their children to schools on the neighbouring mainland for many years, whereas before, they didn't have any formal education.

Interviewer: Has this affected life on the island?

Prof. G: Oh yes, indeed . . . you see, people have been leaving the island in order to go to school, but they've not been coming back . . . in fact they've been leaving so fast that there are now only a few families left for me to do any research on.

Interviewer: Well, I suppose that unless you finish your research quickly, there won't be anybody left for you to do your research on?

Prof. G: Yes, . . . I'm afraid that's absolutely right.

(Note: 1, 2, 3 – these examples are taken from Interlink 3, 4 by T A Kirkpatrick et al. Used here by permission of the publishers, Oxford University Press).