

# Authentic listening step by step

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**This article gives a step-by-guide for teachers who would like to use authentic audio recordings with B2-level students in the classroom. Along the way, it mentions the various challenges a non-expert listener might experience, and explains how we can devise confidence-building activities which address these problems. The article is illustrated using a concrete example from *English Result Upper-intermediate*, based on a BBC radio programme.**

With the growing availability of podcasts and audio-visual material on the internet, both teachers and students have easy access to a broad range of authentic listening material. However, many teachers feel that such recordings are too difficult to be exploited for intensive listening in the classroom and so use them for extensive listening type activities instead. Students, on the other hand, tend to have limited confidence in their ability to understand audio recordings, and often cite listening as the skill they find the most difficult. They might, however, need or wish to do something to change this, especially if they are aiming to study in an English-speaking environment or planning to travel to a place where the language is spoken.

In this article, I'd like to suggest that we can structure the listening experience by carefully devising success-oriented activities which will help learners around B2 level and above achieve a satisfying understanding of authentic listening texts. I begin by considering a fundamental preconception - that text authenticity equals too much difficulty - before describing and giving examples of some types of listening activities that help make the content of an audio recording accessible to the non-expert listener.

Preparing a 'listening lesson' is rather time consuming, but the activities which follow are easily exploitable with most texts. The activities also help learners develop listening strategies which can be applied to other texts, and give them the confidence to leave the safety of the classroom and go it alone should they want or need to.

## Authenticity and difficulty

The term 'authenticity' can mean different things in different contexts. In this article, I use the term to refer to recordings not initially made for the purpose of language teaching and learning. Examples would include the very popular TED lectures (<http://TED.com>), most of the videos on You Tube and podcasts on the BBC web-site (<http://bbc.co.uk>). You may also be able to find locally produced English language broadcasts which have the added benefit for or relevance to students' lives. For example, teachers in Spain may find the pod casts on Radio Exterior of Spanish national radio station useful (<http://rtve.es>). This rich source of authentic recordings will feature the voices of native speakers from any country or region where English is spoken, as well as those of reasonably intelligible non-native speakers of English. However, such recordings will undoubtedly present the non-expert listener with many challenges.



When an expert listener is following speech, they decode what they hear (sound, syllables, words, phrases and so on), match this with what they know of the language and simultaneously build up the meaning of what is being said. They may have to make a little bit of an effort to tune into an unfamiliar accent at first, but are unlikely to miss very much as they do so. The non-expert listener will be attempting to replicate the same processes, but by virtue of being a language learner, is unlikely to have a complete range of sounds, syllables, words, grammar and so on to draw on to help them decode the message. That's before they can turn their attention to meaning. Of course, the non-expert listener will be up against the time-factor, and while they are maybe struggling to decode an unfamiliar sound or a syllable, the stream of sound continues and it's not long before they become hopelessly lost.

Apart from being hampered by an incomplete representation of the language, the non-expert listener has to deal with the many inherent features of fast speech. To begin with, speakers tend not to pronounce words in the same way students might have first heard them in the classroom. In fast speech, boundaries between words disappear, for example, when a speaker links the final sound of one word to the first of another. Sentence stress and intonation also carry meaning and students might find this difficult to recognise.

Also, voices are like fingerprints: they are unique. We speak at different speeds; we have different pitch and volume levels along with our own styles of speaking. Some of us hesitate more than others, we might have a tendency to digress and ramble around a topic. We also speak with different accents and dialects, which, when unfamiliar to the non-expert listener, can compound the problem. These are just some of the characteristics that contribute to the individuality of a voice.

The difficulty level of a listening *activity*, however, is created by the interplay of the text with the task, and the secret to helping students understand authentic texts resides in what we actually ask students to do as they listen. For example, supposing we want to make a multiple choice-type activity more difficult, we could increase the number of options. As a result, students would have to store more information in their consciousness, both before and during listening, in order to complete the activity. Conversely, to make the same activity easier, we could remove one of the incorrect options or rephrase them to make sure that the correct answer is easily retrievable from the audio. It is the construction of difficulty level through the activities we design that makes it possible for us to exploit authentic audio recordings in the classroom.

## Preparing the text

To prepare for a lesson of about 50 minutes centred on an authentic audio recording, you should search for a text or radio programme that would either interest your students or be topically related to the unit or lesson you're currently teaching. Recordings vary in length, and it's best to find one from which you can extract about 5-8 minutes of listening material. It might be one recording broken down into 3-5 sections, or 3-5 snippets taken from a longer recording. If you are selecting snippets from a longer programme, it's worth making a rough audio script outline so you can identify the sections which, when taken together, comprise a reasonable reflection of the content of the text or programme as a whole. Try to make sure that, at the end of the lesson, the students will feel they've understood the main thrust of the programme as a whole.

Once you've identified the listening input for the lesson, the next stage is to prepare a full audio script. Although this can be rather time-consuming, if you have a script to refer to at the activity-devising stage, it will be easier and quicker to identify the content and features of the text that you might want to focus on. Also, at some point in the lesson, you might want to exploit the audio script with your students.

## Preparing pre-listening activities

Introducing the topic and activating background knowledge narrows down the possibilities of what students are about to hear, and there are various activities we can use to do this. Providing topically-related visuals can trigger general discussion around a topic, and begin an activation process during which students start thinking about related language and ideas they might hear in a recording.

We could also devise activities that give students the information a person who has consciously decided to listen to a recording might have. One way of doing this would be to provide a short reading text which gives some general background information. The reading text could include, for example, some information about the programme which answers some of the following questions: Is it an interview or discussion? Was it recorded in the studio or outside? What about the speakers - how many there are? Where are they from? How do they feel about the topic?

The reading text could also contain key, new or potentially problematic vocabulary and or phrases from the text. Not only does this avoid the cold, de-contextualised pre-teaching of problematic language, but it also gives you the opportunity to model pronunciation of foreign sounding words if they crop up in the audio. Here's an example of a pre-listening activity.

### **A** Prepare to listen

- 1 You are going to listen to part of a BBC radio programme called *Excess Baggage*. Read the information about the programme and write *T* (true), *F* (false) or *DS* (doesn't say) next to sentences 1-3.

**Excess Baggage** is a weekly BBC Radio 4 programme on which people who have spent time travelling are interviewed about the places they have been to and things they have learnt. In this programme Dan Everett, who now works at Illinois State University in the United States, talks about his experiences with the Pirahã tribe in the Amazon jungle. He has spent much of the past thirty years living with them, studying their language and culture.

For more information and to listen to the most recent programme, go to

[www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/excessbaggage](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/excessbaggage)

- 1 *Excess Baggage* is a holiday programme.
  - 2 Dan Everett wasn't working at the university when he first went to visit the Pirahã.
  - 3 Dan Everett teaches the Pirahã language.
- 2 Look at the photos. What can you guess about Dan Everett and life in the Amazon? Discuss with a partner.

## Tuning in

Expert listeners tune in, or 'normalise' to a speaker's voice within a matter of seconds, leaving them freer to follow what's being said (Field, 2008). It seems only fair, then, that we devise activities which give students the chance to tune in to a voice or voices before they embark on various other listening tasks. This would certainly go some way to helping them avoid the consequences of any momentary listening lapse. The student might find his or herself trying to decode, say, just one word said in an unfamiliar accent while the stream of speech continues.

Exercises 3 and 4 below are based on the first snippet of the BBC radio interview, which students will listen to twice. These activities have been devised to give students the opportunity to normalise to the voices of the English interviewer and the American guest. Whilst students don't need to be able to identify and describe the features of varieties of British and American English, alerting them to the fact that the two speakers have different accents will help them identify who's speaking, especially given that both speakers are male. It also gives the students time to access their own accent repertoire, that is, any 'knowledge' they have about the way people with these accents tend to speak. This helps them prepare for what's to come.

### **B** Tune in

- 3 **5E.1** Listen to the beginning of the interview. Who do you find easier to understand, the interviewer or Dan Everett? Why? Compare with a partner.
- 4 Listen again and read the beginning of the interview. What do you think the following words refer to?  
them they you it
- “ **Presenter** OK, to start with, let's put them into some sort of geographical position. Whereabouts are they and how many of them are there?
- Dan** There are about 350 Pirahã spread out over 300 miles of the Maici river. If you take out all the country boundaries of South America, it would be right in the heart of South America. Right in the middle, right in the middle of the Amazon rainforest. ”
- 5 What do you expect to hear on the rest of the programme? Put a tick (✓), question mark (?) or cross (X) next to items 1–6. Add your own ideas and compare and discuss with a partner.
- 1 examples of the Pirahã language
  - 2 details about Dan Everett's life in America
  - 3 people talking at the same time
  - 4 what the Pirahã think of outsiders
  - 5 the noise of machines
  - 6 *your ideas ...*

Exercise 4 gives students the opportunity to follow the audio script on the page. In this particular exercise, the focus is on identifying the referents of pronouns in order to follow meaning within and across sentences. Both speakers frequently use pronouns in this particular interview.

Activities which involve students listening to a short snippet while simultaneously reading an audio script provides support and offers a multitude of tuning in possibilities, depending on the qualities of the speaker's speech. For example, we could focus on the pronunciation of particular sounds, how groups of words are run together, or which words are stressed or unstressed. We could also show students how to interpret meaning of unknown words by using the information given in the text, where false starts, repetition or rephrasing occur and how recognising this can be used to the listener's advantage.

Another activity which gives students the opportunity to tune into the characteristics of a speaker is one in which they are asked to listen to the snippet and tick the characteristics of the speaker's voice from a given list, as in activity 5 above. Leaving the list open, and giving students the opportunity to add their own ideas, means they will invest a little of themselves in the listening activities and thus increase motivation.

## Preparing while-listening activities

The activities you design to accompany the rest of your snippets will be largely determined by the content of the recordings. In this BBC radio interview, Dan Everett told the presenter about the first time he travelled to an area of the Amazon jungle where a certain tribe he went to meet lived. The 3 different activities in Section C (see p.4) are based on the second snippet taken from the programme.

Once I've devised an activity, I always return to the audio script and highlight precisely what a listener needs to be able to understand to successfully complete the task. At this point, I might modify the wording of questions and information in the activity to adjust the difficulty level of the task according to the level of a group of students. Exercise 7 requires the students to recognise figurative language before thinking about meaning. Before listening, teachers could work on how the words in the phrases are linked in fast speech, thus helping students recognise them in context when they listen. The meanings of the phrases in the audio context are fairly recoverable and students should be able to guess what the speaker means and



students can use the audio script to check. The purpose of this particular activity was to introduce speakers' use of figurative language to a mid-intermediate level learner. If a non-native listener is struggling to understand words, they might lose sight of the overall meaning of figurative language. Exercise 8 focuses again on pronouns, but this time in short stretches of text related to some of the phrases in exercise 7.

The reiterative nature of the activities in section C help make the specific information mentioned in the snippet more memorable, and students can carry this forward into the next excerpt from the programme. Other snippets might better lend themselves to a focus on the main point, main points or detail. There are many different activity types which suit these kinds of listening purposes, for

### C Listen for specific information

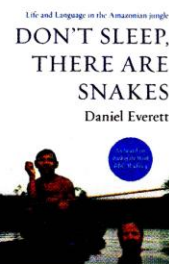
- 6 5E.2** Listen to the next part of the interview and answer questions 1–4. Compare and discuss in small groups.
- What does Dan say about travelling in the Amazon jungle?
    - It's better to travel overland.
    - It's better to travel by plane.
    - It's better to travel as a group.
  - When Dan and his family arrived, how did the Pirahã react?
    - They were friendly.
    - They wanted presents.
    - They asked him lots of questions.
  - How did the Pirahã react to Dan learning their language?
    - They thought he was silly.
    - They were surprised he understood them.
    - They thought it was interesting.
  - What travelling experiences had Dan had before he went to the Amazon?
    - He'd travelled from Southern California to Mexico.
    - He'd travelled a lot in Southern California.
    - He'd travelled around Mexico.
- 7** Listen again and put the phrases a–d in the order you hear them. What do these phrases from the interview mean? Find them in the audio script on >> p.154. and compare with a partner.
- a sort of highly-trained parrot
  - in the early days
  - a really tough expedition
  - your little tribe
- 8** Find the texts 1–3 in the audio script on >> p.154. What do the underlined words in 1–3 refer to? Compare with a partner.
- Presenter** Did they welcome you and your little tribe arriving?
  - Dan** They found it very curious.
  - Presenter** This sounds like a really tough expedition ...

example, listening to confirm (or otherwise) a general prediction about content, marking statements true or false, or answering open questions. In all cases, activities which involve more than one listening will give students greater confidence to deal with the next set of activities.

Section D below is based on two listening snippets and focuses on listening for detail.

### D Listen for detail

- 9 5E.3** In the next part of the interview, Dan talks about the Pirahã way of life and their language. Listen and write *T* (true) or *F* (false) after sentences 1–4. Listen again and check.
- The Pirahã are the only primitive culture Dan's met.
  - There are many indigenous groups who don't want things from the outside world.
  - Dan was the first person to translate the Pirahã language.
  - The Pirahã language doesn't have words for numbers and colours.
- 10 5E.4** Listen to the final part of the interview. Answer questions 1–4. Compare with a partner and listen again and check, if necessary.
- When is Dan planning on going back to visit the Pirahã?
  - What does he take them when he visits?
  - Why wasn't the Pirahã man interested in seeing the president of Brazil?
  - When can you listen to *Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes* on Radio 4's *Book of the Week*?
- 11** Do you think it was difficult for Dan to learn to communicate with the Pirahã? How do we know he was successful? Exchange your opinions with a partner.



In exercise 9, the wording of the questions closely resembles the actual words used by the speakers, so making it easier for students to more easily locate the information they need to listen closely for. They are also given the opportunity to listen and check which, in effect, provides a second listening to the snippet. In exercise 10, the students are expected to provide the answers to open questions, which is more challenging than ticking text on the page. However, these particular questions are of a fairly concrete nature, and the information is explicitly stated in the audio. The instructions have been worded in such a way as to encourage students to do the activity with only one listening. The level of challenge increases in exercises 9 and 10. As with the previous activities, the key to difficulty level in activities 9 and 10 involves the relationship between information given in the exercise and how it relates to what the speakers actually say.

The final activity in Section D on page 4 is a general discussion question in which the students have the opportunity to give their opinion on what they have heard in the programme so far. It is worded in such a way that all students would be able to contribute something to a discussion which rounds off the listening tasks. Giving students the opportunity to do this helps make the listening experience, including perhaps the characteristics of the accents of the speakers, more memorable. It also leaves the students feeling with a sense of success.

## Preparing review activities

To finish the listening lesson off, it's a good idea to give students the opportunity to talk more generally around a topic. Exercise 12 below provides examples of the kinds of questions students could talk about, which provide further opportunity to indirectly review the listening experience, and help them remember features of authentic speech.

### **E** Think about what you've listened to

**12** Work in pairs or small groups and discuss questions 1–3 below.

- 1 What else do you think Dan learnt on his visits?
- 2 Would you like to read Dan Everett's book or listen to the Radio 4 *Book of the Week* programme? Why? Why not?
- 3 What's the most unusual place you've ever visited? Would you like to visit an unusual place? Where?

#### **Tips**

- \* Think about the topic before you listen.
- \* Think about the type of text you're going to listen to.
- \* Remember key facts while you're listening.
- \* Listen out for words in groups (phrases).
- \* Listen and think about pronouns to follow ideas.

Furthermore, you could also provide students with a list of listening tips which they have applied as they've listened during the lesson. The list could simply be left to sit on the page, leaving the students with a record for the future. Alternatively, if you and your students value the learner training nature of such an activity, you could ask them to match the tips with the different activities they have done in the lesson. Finally, you could direct them to the whole radio programme and suggest they apply the same strategies as they listen.

## Conclusion

The listening skill is perhaps one of the most difficult skills to 'teach' as we tend to base our approach on what expert listeners report what they do when they listen. Listening for gist and focussing on understanding key words are two examples of this. Certainly, we can and do provide our students with plenty of opportunities to listen to various speakers talking about different things and in different context during a course. Whilst this is valuable experience, for the student, it often feels as if they are starting again from scratch when they face a different set of problems in a text. In effect, it's like doing unique listening several times over, with students failing to see how they are progressing.

In this article, I've suggested we can mediate the inherent difficulty level of authentic listening materials by carefully devising activities that are both supportive and success-oriented. We can also embed strategies into the activities and so provide students with suggestions of what they can do and give them the confidence to listen to other authentic listening texts of their own choosing. In this way, listening experiences can also become learning experiences too.

## References

- Field, J. (2008) *Listening in the Language Classroom* (Cambridge University Press)  
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