Micro-drilling
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John Field, in *Listening in the Language Classroom* (CUP 2008) suggested that the traditional comprehension approach to listening tests the product of listening but does nothing to teach the process. He suggests an alternative approach which he calls *micro-listening*, in which the learners pay attention to the spoken language up close and in detail – focusing on what Richard Cauldwell calls the *sound substance* (Speech in Action 2013). Micro-listening activities involve taking very short snippets of audio recordings and listening to them carefully. Cauldwell goes into great detail about the surprising features of spoken English which learners can made aware of through this approach.

Receptive or productive
It's often said that listening comes before production – that in order to pronounce something, learners must be able to hear it first. This sounds like common sense, but I don't think we can always assume it to be the case. Sometimes learning to *produce* something improves a learner's ability to *hear* it. I would like to suggest that, if we want to focus on the sound substance of English we can do it productively as well as receptively. If micro-listening is a receptive approach, is there a productive equivalent? In this article, I am suggesting that there is, and I will call it *micro-drilling*.

Hidden words
In order to get a handle on what micro-drilling is, try the following experiment. Say *peaches and peaches and peaches and...* without stopping. Say it with stress on the first syllable of *peaches* and with a weak form of *and* (with the 'd' elided). After a while, you'll notice a hidden nonsense word emerging from the sound substance: *chizampea* – with the stress on the last syllable, rather like *chimpanzee*. This can be represented as in figure 1 – in this sound stream, we can hear either the black on white or the white on black.

peaches and peaches and peaches
chizampea	chizampea	chizampea

figure 1

We can do the same thing in reverse – begin with the nonsense word and see how an actual English phrase is hidden it. Say *jizanorin jizanorin jizanorin* over and over again with the stress on the third syllable. After a while, you may notice the following alternative way of interpreting the sound stream emerges: *oranges and oranges and oranges*. This phrase seems to emerge magically from the mist of the sound substance.

Gestalt loops
Let's call these repeated sound stream segments which can be interpreted in two ways *Gestalt loops*. Gestalt is a movement in psychology often associated with ambiguous images. For instance, you may be familiar with the silhouette image of two faces, face to face, which can also be interpreted as one white vase against a black background (see figure 2). You can flip between seeing the image as faces or as a vase, but you can't see it as both at the same time.
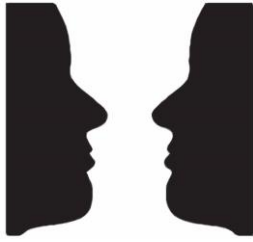
figure 2

Gestalt loops are an auditory equivalent of the ambiguous image – the black on white phrase or white on black phrase in figure 1. You can flip between hearing it one way or the other, but you can't hear it both ways at once.

Making it strange

What is interesting about the Gestalt loop experiments I asked you to do above is the way they turn the familiar into something strange. This is potentially very powerful for language teaching purposes. It can be very difficult to hear the sound substance of the language objectively – instead, we tend to 'hear' what we expect to hear. The mind imposes a pre-conceived order. For instance, we may *think* we hear a gaps between words where in reality the sound stream is continuous. We may *think* we hear three distinct letters in *and* where in reality it is be something more like *am*. The Gestalt flip from *peaches and* to *chizampea* forces us to notice how the reality differs from our expectation. It draws our attention to the weirdness of the sound substance, and this is an important step in raising awareness.

Micro-drilling in class

Let's see how micro-drilling can be incorporated into a lesson activity. By way of an example, let's say we are working with *Fruit Rhyme* (figure 2). This is a rhyme designed to work over the melody of the French nursery rhyme *Frère Jacques*. The melody is represented by the position of the words on the musical stave in figure 2. It is written to highlight the pronunciation of plural

endings, which may be pronounced /s/, /z/ or /ɪz/ - there are examples of each of these in the rhyme.

figure 3

Stage 1: Traditional drilling

We can start working on this rhyme with a traditional drilling format. Notice that on each line in the song, there is a phrase repeated twice. This will work well with a call and respond drill format, with the teacher calling out each phrase and the class echoing with the repetition. You can choose to do this without the melody to begin with, and add it in gradually (or not at all, depending on how you feel about singing!).

Stage 2: Micro-drilling

At this point, you can start to break the phrases down into smaller segments. These may include words or only parts of words. You may call out the following segments for the class to repeat, for example. I will write them as they are pronounced.

1 chiz
2 peachiz
3 am peachiz
4 zam peachiz
5 pear zam peachiz
6 pear zampear zampear zampear
7 chizampea chizampea chizampea

Notice that the segments do not necessarily correspond to words. For example, 1 has only the 2nd syllable of *peaches*, and 4 has only the last phoneme in *pears*, followed by the reduced form of *and*, and *peaches*. Breaking the sound substance down into unexpected fragments is an important part of micro-drilling, since the objective is to make it sound strange.

Segments 1-5 are single phrases, but we can also use multiple repetitions of very short segments, as in 6 and 7. These produce a gestalt loop, where nonsense words seem to emerge out of the sound substance. This amplifies the 'making-it-strange' effect.

Stage 3: Putting it all together

As a final stage, return to the complete rhyme. Get the class to chant or sing it all together, or with half the class singing the call and the other half echoing with the repeat.

Stage 4 (optional): Nonsense words

Write *chizampea* on the board. Say it repeatedly and ask the class to repeat until they can identify the hidden fruit (*peaches*). To begin with, *chizampea* looks like a nonsense word, but through this activity, students discover that it is not nonsense at all, but a segment of the phrase *peaches and peaches*, as it is really pronounced. Write a couple more apparent nonsense words on the board such as *zampear* and *jizanorin*. Ask the class to identify the hidden fruit in these. Finally, let learners create their own nonsense words out of repeated fruit and vegetables, for example *onions and onions* to *zanunyun*.

A final tip

It is useful to practice micro-drilling yourself before doing it in class, because it is not as simple as it may appear. It requires a little practice. The knack lies in breaking the phrase down into fragments *without* distorting the natural sound shape of the fragment. Most of us have a tendency to subconsciously 'tidy up' the pronunciation when we focus our attention on it. With a bit of practice, you should be able to utter snippets of speech as if they had been mechanically edited out of a recording. It's worth it – learners seem to find it fascinating to play with the sound substance in this way.

Cauldwell, R. *Phonology for Listening* Speech in Action 2013
Field, J. *Listening in the Language Classroom* Cambridge University Press 2008