

MY FIRST LISTENING COMPREHENSION LESSON

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During the 1978/79 academic year, I attended the Diploma in ESL (TESL) Course at the Language Centre, University of Malaya. In September 1978, I was posted to SMJK Sri Pantai, Kampung Kerunchi, Kuala Lumpur, for Teaching Practice. I was assigned to teach English to Form IIG and Form IID. I must draw the reader's attention to the fact that I am essentially a Physical Education teacher. During the ESL course I had done some Listening Comprehension in the language laboratory and had listened earnestly to lectures on the techniques of teaching listening and speaking, but at the time of Teaching Practice what I knew of the actual teaching of Listening Comprehension was, if taken on a scale of 1–10, somewhere around 2.

Why, then, did I attempt a lesson on Listening Comprehension? The answer is simple: I was desperate. After only a few days of Teaching Practice, I found myself comparing my past Physical Education lessons with my present English lessons and coming up with the same conclusion each time: my Physical Education lessons were much more fun, both for the pupils and for me. Compared to my Physical Education lessons, the atmosphere in my English class had all the exuberance of a funeral-parlour. I spent hours wondering how to make my English lessons half as much fun to teach and to learn as my Physical Education lessons had been. By the end of the first week, I was convinced that if I did not do something drastic, the class and/or I would succumb to terminal boredom.

The "something drastic" was the voices of two people called Olivia Newton-John and John Travolta coming from my teenage daughter's room. They were singing a song called "We go together", if "singing" is the word for it. My daughter informed me that it was the current hit tune, and everyone knew it. ("Everyone, I found out, referred to those of sixteen years of age and below.

Ideas came rushing into my head. I would make cyclostyled sheets of the lyrics with some words blanked out; I would play the tape of the song; I would get the pupils to fill in the blanks as they listened to the song; I would ask a few questions on the lyrics at the end of the lesson. As the pupils in my class fell into the "everyone" group, they would find no difficulty with this song. But first, I would have to listen to the song to familiarise myself with the lyrics and the tune. Accordingly, I borrowed the tape from my daughter and played it.

Only the first four words made sense. I appealed to my daughter for help.

"There's something wrong with this tape," I said. "It starts with: 'We go together like...' and then there are some ghastly sounds —'rama-lama-lama, keding-keding-kedong'. What are the words?"

"Those are the words," said my daughter, with the same reverence I normally reserve for Biblical quotations.

I was aghast. I played more of the tape, only to get a fresh assault of "kedings" and "kedongs" with a couple of "shang-a-lang-a-lang's" thrown in. Undaunted, I borrowed a few more tapes of "current hit-tunes" from her, and listened to them. They ranged from the incomprehensible to the downright offensive. I could not possibly use any of them. I was back to square one.

I now turned to my mouldy collection of records. (Does anyone know when "Yes, we Have no Bananas" was a current hit tune? 1929?) I could not find anything suitable there, either.

I had a few tapes of my own which I now proceeded to play through, to find a tune that was clear, simple, inoffensive and pleasant. The reader may be amazed to know what narrow confines I had to work in. There are very few songs nowadays with those qualities. I finally found one: "Homeward Bound" by Simon and Garfunkel. I had to play the tape through several times before I got down all the lyrics. I wrote the lyrics out on a stencil, with random blanks, supplied the missing words at the end, wrote out five questions on the lyrics, took two aspirins and fell into bed at 2.00 a.m.

Early next morning, I showed my daughter what I had done. She was appalled. Nobody, she told me, sang such "freaky" songs like "Homeward Bound" anymore. I was, she told me, going to be laughed out of the class the minute I mentioned the song.

That afternoon, when I entered the class carrying my tape-recorder, I caught the pupils exchanging puzzled looks. When they had settled down, I explained to them what I was going to do. Apparently, like me, they had never had a Listening Comprehension lesson before, so I had their full attention. I told them that I did not choose a current hit because they would know all the words and could fill in the blanks without listening to the song — thus defeating the purpose of a Listening Comprehension lesson. (I did not have the heart to tell them what I really thought of their current hit tunes). I then told them the title of the song, and waited, on the defensive, for the wave of hysterical laughter to hit me. There was none. Quickly, I passed round the handout of the lyrics. I gave them a few minutes to read through it, and when they were ready, I played the tape. There was a deathly hush. "Now they're going to laugh," I thought. But no. Heads were bent over papers. They had started to fill in the blanks.

When the song ended, I told them that I was going to play it through again. There were audible signs of relief, as there were still some blanks left unfilled. When the song was played for the second time, nearly the whole class had managed to fill in the blanks.

I played the song a third time. This time, many of them sang along quietly with the tape as some of the others filled in the last of their blanks. At the end of the third playing, all the blanks had been filled.

Now there were cries of "Please play it again." This time, when the tape was played, the whole class, and I, sang the song through.

The questions at the end were easy ones, and these were quickly completed.

There was still some time left before the end of the lesson.

"Please play it again". And I did, and we sang together.

When the ball rang, I floated out of that class in a daze of happiness, pursued by pupils begging to borrow the tape, making me promise to play it again the next day, asking me to give them such lessons every day, and demanding to know why I had not done lessons like this before.

In lessons on Listening Comprehension like this one, where the aim is purely for enjoyment, the teacher is bound to get just that – enjoyment. There should not be a pass/fail standard of assessment. Pupils are able to tell how well they have done almost immediately – certainly by the third playing, when everyone is singing the correct words. Best of all they, like Oliver Twist, ask for more. □