

IT'S ANYONE'S GUESS: DEVELOPING STUDENTS' ABILITIES TO MAKE ACCURATE GUESSES FOR LISTENING COMPREHENSION

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Many teachers would react with horror to the idea that their pupils should be encouraged to guess in order to understand speech. 'Surely', they will say 'we should train students to listen accurately, to use their ears, to understand what is said, not to make wild guesses.' This reaction is understandable. At first sight, encouraging students to guess is dangerous – like inviting people to gamble before they can manage their household expenses. Other teachers will argue that their pupils cannot guess – that the most they can do is understand things literally. I will try and answer these fears and objections by suggesting that:

- (a) in order to understand natural speech you have to guess.
- (b) pupils will understand better by making better guesses.
- (c) pupils, however literal-minded, can be trained to improve their guesses.

Firstly, why is it essential in understanding speech to make guesses? In her very useful book called 'Listening to Spoken English' Gillian Brown contrasts natural speech with ideal speech such as might be presented in the classroom by the teacher's model or by tape recordings specially prepared for language teaching. Two examples will show the former requires guessing whereas the latter may not. A mother might say to her little boy, 'Ready?' What will the child understand by this? He will understand that it is a question (or possibly a command), it is directed to him, that she means now and so on. The mother's message is incomplete: only by guessing can the child make it complete. In language teaching, particularly in the early stages, messages tend to be complete and explicit. Mothers will say: Are you ready, John?' In real life messages are incomplete and in-explicit and we have to use our knowledge of the situation and pick up clues and signals to complete them. In our native language it's not difficult – children do it all the time, otherwise mothers would never be able to communicate with them.

In a foreign language the clues and signals are different and communication often breaks down. A second example given by Gillian Brown is that the sounds a speaker utters may be different from the sounds that, in an ideal world, should be uttered. Sounds become distorted or are omitted in real speech. She quotes a radio announcer who, in the statement 'the Government has ignored the needs of the people' omitted the /d/ sound in 'needs'. This is not just a 'sloppy' way of talking – it is normal and inevitable in everyday speech. The interesting thing is that nobody actually hears the 'mistake' (which of course it isn't) until it's pointed out to them. The reason is that we hear what we expect to hear – what our minds tell us makes sense. (The same thing happens when we are reading – that is why proof-reading is so difficult). So we cannot rely on our ears – in order to understand anything at all we have to use our minds to guess what is said.

Granted that guessing is necessary, it could be argued that since pupils do it in their own language, they don't have to be trained how to do it in a second or foreign language. There are two answers to that one: first, giving pupils only a diet of pre-digested 'ideal' language may inhibit their natural guess making. Second, we use a whole range of clues when making guesses; some may depend on our knowledge of the topic or the people involved; others may depend on our knowledge of the culture of the speakers; others are features of the language system itself like intonation, grammar and lexis. So whilst some skills of guessing may be transferred from one's native language the ability to interpret particular clues or signals cannot. Gillian Brown puts it like this: 'The main aim in teaching comprehension must be to help the student recognize and use the reliable signals in the spoken forms of the foreign language and help him predict when only the tip of an iceberg is apparent what the shape of the rest of the iceberg must be'. Gillian Brown lists many ways in which what you hear in normal speech (the tip of the iceberg) is incomplete and has to be converted by

the listener into complete messages. Speakers 'break the rules' — they switch structures, leave sentences unfinished; they convey meanings implicitly or even mean the opposite of what they say; individual speakers vary in their speech, pitch span, accent, articulatory precision etc.; speech on the radio, in film or television often suffers from acoustic distortion or noise in the channel which also makes even more demands on the listener's guessing abilities. So anything we hear should set us guessing in three sorts of ways:

Firstly, about what is being said. This will be influenced by our interpretation of what has already been said, and the situation in which the speech takes place.

Secondly, about what is likely to take place. We should have expectations which we check when the next bit of the message arrives.

Thirdly, it should enable us to check the interpretation we have made of what has already been said and refine or revise the guesses we have already made.

So the better we can guess in these ways, the better we will understand.

So far so good: guessing is necessary and guessing skills should be developed. But is it possible? Can pupils who are struggling to cope with the problems of literal understanding from which all guess work has been removed, be allowed to venture into the unknown, to wrestle with uncertainties, to say 'I think he means this' rather than 'he says that'? Or should we conclude that guessing is either unattainable or can take care of itself? In order to show that tasks involving guessing can be included in any course, even from a beginner's level, I will list a number of listening exercises which seem to me to develop these skills.

1. The first way is the easiest for classroom exploitation but makes the most demands on resources and preparation. This is: use tape recordings of actual speech taken from the radio or real life. The most important thing here is to get pupils used to listening to speech which they will not be able to understand completely and word by word. Many learners will be struck with utter terror and confusion when confronted with language which they cannot understand but it is a psychological barrier that has to be crossed and the best way of crossing it is to show how much they can understand without understanding more

than the odd word here and there. So you can start by asking them to guess whether the speakers are male or female, their age, where it takes place, what the pupils can guess about the situation, the people speaking, what they want, their emotions, the topic, etc. There are two main sources of recordings: the radio or real life. From the radio you can take news broadcasts — political speeches, sports commentaries, plays, weather forecasts, introductions to records and so on. Real life recordings are more difficult but with a small cassette recorder you can tape live conversations, airport announcements, lectures, plays, announcements at a show and, with a little ingenuity, dialogues with hotel receptionists, shop assistants, car salesmen, bank clerks and many others. If you start with recordings, like airport announcements, where the situation is very easily grasped you can give simple questions that will convince pupils that they can understand something without catching any of the words at all. By giving a few hints and playing the recording several times, gradually pupils will pick up more and more of the speech and once they find this they become motivated to this type of work and forget their old fears. Remember to start with questions about the situation where only a few of the clues will be provided by the language itself and where pupils can use their knowledge of the everyday world and their imagination. Then move on to general questions like 'What are they talking about?' 'What does he want?' etc. before asking about particular utterances — and in fact you will have to judge whether the pupils can tackle the last type of question at all.

2. A second technique is to ask similar questions about a type of dialogue which differs from normal teaching dialogues in one important way. Normally, teaching dialogues are clear, explicit and unambiguous. The kind of dialogue, however, which will be most suitable for encouraging students to guess will be vague, ambiguous with meanings hinted rather than spelt out explicitly. The main problem with using deliberately ambiguous dialogues is that they are difficult to write. Fortunately, however, a number of books are now available which contain very suitable materials.* The kind of dialogue is particularly useful for controlling and checking pupils' guesses. This can be done in two ways. Firstly, get pupils to check guesses they're already made from the next bit of the message and to revise them if necessary. This is a very important skill as pupils must be encouraged to improve on their guesses

and not to think of them as answers which are right or wrong. This will require a lot of practice and the teacher should avoid correcting guesses herself but direct pupils' attention to the clues that will enable them to revise their own guesses. This procedure — of drawing pupils' attention to the clues on which guesses are made — suggests the second kind of control the teacher can exercise. This teacher can control the guess work

by asking pupils to justify their guesses; that is, by giving the clues on which they were based. Again, ambiguous dialogues are useful for this kind of checking. The following illustration shows part of an ambiguous dialogue (on tape), the questions the teacher could ask, and possible answers. The tape is stopped frequently to allow pupils to make a series of guesses which check and revise previous guesses.

Tape extract	Teacher's questions	Possible answers
I was looking out of the window at the view.	Where was he when he was looking at the view?	In a house, hotel, a car, etc.
I could see an island in the distance.	Tell me more about where he was.	Near the coast, on a boat, etc.
Suddenly the 'No Smoking' light came on and the captain started making an announcement.	Now where do you think he was? Why?	In an aeroplane because the 'No Smoking' sign came on, and the captain spoke.
Then there was a sort of bang and after that every thing went black.	What had happened?	There was an accident, the plane crashed, etc.
The first thing I remember was the cold when I woke up.	Why was he cold?	Perhaps he was in the mountains, he was wet, it was winter, etc.
It was pitch dark and I felt this crisp powder under my feet.	What was this powder? Why do you think it was snow?	Snow, sand, dust, etc. Because it was cold.
Yes, we were in the middle of the desert.	Now what do you think the powder was?	Sand.

3. A third technique involves guessing the other half of a dialogue. Take a conversation prepared for teaching and remove the words of one of the speakers. It is best to start with simple dialogues and, if possible, remove either all the questions or the answers. Again, start with dialogues which are fairly predictable (cover up the words and see how much you can guess yourself). You can either use a tape recording or speak the remaining lines yourself. As the dialogues you use become less predictable it is a good idea to get pupils to work on them in pairs.

Here is an example of a dialogue with one speaker's words (mainly questions) removed. This requires pupils to work backwards from an answer they hear to the question that preceded it so you could play (or speak) all the answers first then each one while pupils think of the question.

At The Ice Cream Stall.

- A ?
- B I want three ice creams, please.
- A ?
- B No, three.
- A ?
- B Two chocolates and one mint.
- A ?
- B No one *mint*.
- A ?
- B No, it can't be two dollars.
Three fifty cents, that's one dollar fifty.

Notice how intonation can give clues as in 'No one *mint*' where the prominence is on *mint*. *Mint* is therefore the new word, the one that contrasts with the question so the question could be 'Did you say one chocolate?'

4. So far I've mentioned the use of authentic, ambiguous or incomplete materials as a stimulus for guess work. Let's now look at two particular aspects of a bit of speech that pupils can be encouraged to guess about. Imagine you overhear two people talking in the street; perhaps an isolated phrase catches your attention and sets you wondering 'What are they talking about?'. This is a common way in which our guessing abilities are called into play in real life and a way which can be reproduced in the classroom in the form of 'guessing the topic' exercises. Collect examples from dialogues in teaching books where the topic is not mentioned explicitly but where there are clues as to what they're talking about.

Here are some examples. See if you can guess the topics yourself.

1. No thanks. I won't . I'm trying to give *them* up as they make me cough so much.
2. Where can *they* be? I'm sure I left them on the table last night and I simply can't read without them.
3. Look you've broken *it!* Now how can I do my hair? I can't see myself properly.
4. I don't want to go *there*. We went last week and the sea was so rough you just couldn't swim at all.

Look at these examples.

Extract	What might have come before?	What might come next?
... and that's not the only reason why I think he's unsuitable	– a reason	– another reason
... well yes, we could but on the other hand it might be better not to kill him immediately.	A suggestion that he should be killed immediately.	Why there should be a delay.
... however, I think this view is mistaken as conservation is impossible for one very good reason.	A view supporting conservation.	A reason why conservation is impossible.

If you want you can make tape-recordings of these snatches or alternatively read them out yourself. Start making a collection and you will be able to give regular short periods of practice (it's also a useful way of filling-up the first or last five minutes of a class).

The final one is a little more tricky and has also been designed to encourage you to revise your guesses. Have a guess after each line and see how you have to modify your answers.

Let's have a look at it. Hmm, I don't like the colour. (a new hat? a car?)

You say you did it with a large brush? (a painting? a redecorated wall?)

Well, it will soon clear up. I'll just put a bandage on it for you. (a wound, perhaps a bruise cut)

Notice that a common type of clue to the topic is the association between words. In the above examples we can find the following associations.

something you read with (spectacles)
 something that makes you cough (cigarettes)
 something that you look at yourself in (mirror)
 a place where you go to swim (beach)

So our ability to make accurate guesses depends on our ability to recognise these familiar associations.

The second aspect of isolated snatches of conversation about which we can guess is the context: that is, what do you think comes before this extract and what comes next?

5. Guessing about the context leads us to another guessing skill which is equally important in reading and listening. That is, predicting on the basis of the text so far what is going to come next. Why is this an important skill? The reason is that when listening to a foreign language we tend to treat every bit of the message as a completely new problem — each time we start off in pitch darkness trying to work out what is going on. This is not how the fluent listener tackles the task. He will approach each bit of the text with expectations about what it will contain. The process of listening then becomes a question of matching the incoming message with your expectations, sometimes confirming them, sometimes modifying them. The fluent listener is like a traveller armed with maps and timetables which he modifies as he goes along; the unskilled listener just waits patiently at the nearest bus-stop in the hope that he will get somewhere. An effective way of showing how we make predictions is to take the kind of joke that relies on a punch-line. Now the punch-line of a joke is often effective not because it is a total surprise but because it confirms our prediction of the unexpected. Try and complete the punch-line of this joke: The man went to a restaurant and said 'What have you got to eat?' The waiter said: 'You can have anything you like, sir. We guarantee to serve anything.' 'OK,' said the man, 'I'll have elephants' eggs on toast.' Half an hour later the waiter returned, looking miserable and apologetic, 'I'm sorry, Sir,' he said 'you win. We've got the but we've run out of ' The normal, sensible thing would be to say 'We've got the toast but we've run out of elephants' eggs' but you probably predicted the more unexpected statement 'We've got the elephants' eggs but we've run out of bread.' Political speeches are a good source of predictable language. How do you think the following sentence will finish?: 'Weakness invites Soviet expansion: strength . . . ' Presumably it will be something to do with the opposite of inviting Soviet expansion: deterring or discouraging it. In fact the sentence, taken from a speech by Mrs Thatcher finished: 'strength deters it.' So politicians, even the Iron Lady, are fairly predictable in their speeches. I will suggest two ways of encouraging pupils to predict what is going to come next. The first is to draw on their knowledge of the topic being talked about. For this, take the ways in which a speaker starts off by giving the main topic and the aspects of it that he will be dealing with in a talk or lecture. Can we, in the following cases predict what aspects the speaker will go on to talk about?:

1. My topic today is birth control. I will start by giving some of the arguments often used against birth control and then
2. My lecture today is about Indonesia. I'll first of all give a brief outline of the history of the country and after that
3. Hello, I'm going to talk to you this evening about collecting butterflies. I'll say something first about the different species of butterflies and then I'll give some suggestions on

However, it is most important when developing skills of prediction to develop the students' ability to make use not just of clues given by topics but of linguistic clues given by the grammar itself. This involves understanding meanings signalled by grammatical devices and then relating these broad meanings to the particular context in which they occur. For example, consider the utterance which begins:

'On the one hand, I'd like to go, but on the other' The grammatical clues signal that we are going to find, very broadly, a contrasting idea. So what ideas could be in contrast to 'I'd like to go'? Possible ways of finishing the sentence would be:

- my mother wouldn't like it
- I know I shouldn't
- I know I should stay, etc.

You could, as a first step in the practice, give pupils a few possible ways of completing the utterance to choose from (including some which would be inappropriate) but the practice will be much richer if students suggest ways themselves and discuss with the teacher which are acceptable. Try making this a group activity — individual pupils write their own suggestions then discuss them in their group and the group decides on which to suggest to the whole class. The teacher should then guide pupils to deciding which are acceptable and modifying those which may not be. Here are some more examples of incomplete utterances with grammatical clues as to how they might be finished: (the broad meaning is given in brackets).

- The female of the species is brightly coloured whereas the male (contrast)

- I'll lend you 10 dollars as long as (condition)
- '10 dollars', he said. So I put my hand in my pocket in order to (purpose)
- I'm not going to lend you any more money since you (reason)

6. The same type of clues can help us in another kind of guessing; that is, guessing words that have been left out of an utterance. In reading it is often important to be able to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words; in listening not only is this skill necessary but also there is frequently a need to guess what words we did not hear in the message. It very often happens that when listening to a radio broadcast or taking part in a conversation you do not catch individual words that are said. Now the unskilled listener is thrown right off course by this experience whereas the skilled listener, who can draw on his understanding of the context, can quickly repair the damage and make sense out of what was said. Some people are more proficient than others at doing this in their own language and when a foreign language is concerned the skill can be and has to be developed. Let's look at some examples and see what kind of clues enable us to make informed guesses. (It is possible to make tape recordings of speech, erase or cover up with a distracting noise particular words, but this is time-consuming and reading the examples is probably as effective). See what the clues in the context are and see if you can guess what words could be missing.

1. The weather will be warm in the . . . tomorrow but rather . . . in the north.
2. We cannot beat inflation by doing nothing. We can only . . . it by positive measures. We can only . . . it by . . . productivity and by . . . wages.
3. I'm sorry I haven't got the time. I'm just so . . . at the moment.
4. We lost. They . . . us 5 nil.
5. No, I can't lend you a dollar. You . . . one from me yesterday.
6. No. I don't think it was excellent, it was . . . good.

As you can see, all kinds of words can be deleted and we can make a variety of guesses based on different kinds of clues. Another technique, more advanced, is to delete words at random from a message. It is worth remembering that by itself this is a testing technique but when there is guidance and discussion of the kinds of clues which can be used and an assessment of different guesses made, it becomes a teaching technique. So it is important to teach language devices like grammar not just as an end in themselves but as providing clues to the discovery of meaning in messages. One area of language that particularly needs to be taught in this way is intonation which does not itself carry meanings but signals a range of meanings which the context helps narrow down. There is not space to discuss the contribution of intonational features to understanding spoken English — readers are referred to works 1 and 4 listed below. I mention it to reinforce the point made throughout this article — meaning is not handed you on a plate nor is it signalled with flashing neon lights and if you want to train students to discover it you have to train them in aural detective work. Try it — it's not only effective, it's fun.

Some useful books

1. Gillian Brown, *Listening to Spoken English*, Longman
2. *Maley and Duff, *Variations on a Theme*, Cambridge University Press
3. *Colin Mortimer, *Dramatic Monologues for Listening Comprehension*, Cambridge University Press
4. Brazil, Coulthard, Johns, *Discourse Intonation and Language Teaching*, Longman