THE USE OF AUTHENTIC MATERIALS WITH LOW-LEVEL LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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Abstract:

In real life, people are exposed to various listening situations ranging from songs to chatting in social occasions (Ur, 1984). The variety of topics and nature of real-life listening situations put strain on learners of English; therefore, textbooks for language teaching are aimed to reflect these real life situations. However, listening, as stated "the Cinderella skill" by Nunan (1999), is the skill learners experience difficulty, hence low self-confidence, especially in low language levels. This paper aims at sharing ideas about using authentic materials in a language classroom with low-level learners of English in a non-English spoken environment to practise listening skills in particular listening for gist and specific information. It is especially low-level learners holding negative attitudes towards listening and expressing frustration even if they listen to it for gist, which results in low self-esteem and self-efficacy. The results show that there is a way to save "the Cinderella skill" by carefully chosen authentic material and well-prepared activities to foster low-level learners' listening comprehension as well as self-confidence.

Keywords: authentic listening material, authentic material, ESL/EFL, listening for gist, listening in English, low-level learners of English, real life listening

1. Introduction

In real life, there are numerous situations in which people use a combination of language skills. Of all, listening takes a large part (Hedge, 2000) and as cited in Vandergrift (2003), 40-50 per cent of communication time is spent for listening. This arises the question "what is listening?" Rost (2002) compiles the definitions considering the orientations of listening in four categories:

- *Receptive*: receiving what speakers actually say which involves direct transfer of the content in speakers' mind, e.g. listening for the news on TV or radio
- *Constructive*: constructing and representing meaning by critically and purposefully interpreting the content conveyed, e.g. listening for the highlights in a press release and reporting it to the audience
- *Collaborative*: negotiating meaning with speaker(s) involved by processing information in the given context, e.g. discussing a matter at a business meeting
- *Transformative*: creating meaning through involvement, imagination and empathy, e.g. dealing with disagreements among a group of children

This categorization leads us to the variety of listening situations in real life, in which listeners communicate and listen for an interactional and transactional function. According to Richards (1990; 2008), *interactional* function of language refers to socially-oriented conversations such as small talk at a party after work. It is two-way and occurs between a speaker and a listener. *Transactional* use of language, on the other hand, is message-oriented. It is one-way and the aim is to get the idea or message in the whole such as listening to the weather forecast to decide on what to wear. This is directly linked to purposes of listening. For example, in small talk, more often casual listening is the purpose. Likewise, it may be global or detailed listening for a press conference depending on purpose.

In addition, there are certain characteristics of real life listening that are observed in many situations (Brown, 2006; Anderson and Lynch, 1988; Ur, 1984):

- *purpose for listening*

As mentioned above, rarely do people listen without a purpose in real life, but listen in different ways according to a purpose.

- *expectations of listeners*

Closely related to purpose, people expect to hear certain things, seeking coherence and relevancy, e.g. sports news is expected to be sports news not the explosions, when listening.

- *prior knowledge about the topic*

Mostly people know some information about certain topics, which activates their schemata and makes listening process cognitively less challenging.

- *contextual, local and socio-cultural knowledge*

Knowing certain information about where listening takes place; who is involved in it and what specific characteristics present there aid listening.

- *environmental clues*

Speakers themselves, with their facial expression and gestures, as well as visuals present in a listening context provide information about a topic so that comprehension is enhanced.

- informal / colloquial language

The degree of spontaneity and colloquiality in real life affects coherence and cohesion of speech due to grammar, vocabulary, syntax and pronunciation in it. Familiarity with this is a factor fostering comprehension, which is true for formal speech as well.

This list shows the need for deployment of different strategies depending on their purpose and on linguistic or non-linguistic clues present in the context (Rost, 2002; Ur, 1996). There are basically two processes, proposed by Rumelhart and Ortony in 1977 and developed by other researchers like Anderson and Lynch (1988), Vandergrift (2003), Brown (2006), Buck (2001), deployed by listeners: bottom-up and top-down processing.

- **Bottom-up processing**

This suggests decoding what is heard in a linear fashion by combining phonemes to make words, then utterances and ending up with meaning. Anderson and Lynch (1988) used the metaphor "tape recorder" to describe this process because it assumes listening is storing what is heard as it is heard. However, it may not always the case listeners recall essential information for comprehension or they may remember more than necessary. Hence, it is crucial for listeners to select, interpret and summarize input for successful listening.

- **Top-down processing**

Unlike bottom-up processing, this focuses on the overall message in a listening situation and involves constantly reconstructing meaning using the relevant pieces of information heard. Prior knowledge about a topic, expectations about it and having a purpose aid the meaning reconstruction process. What underlies top-down processing is "schema theory", a term first used by Bartlett back in 1932: "*experiences in the past lead to the creation of mental frameworks that help us make sense of new experiences*" (in Nunan, 1999). This also highlights the importance of contextual, local and socio-cultural knowledge about a topic as mentioned above.

All in all, it can be concluded that listening is a difficult mental process by its nature, yet still allows exploration through its characteristics and processes involved.

2. Issues about listening in EFL settings

As previously mentioned, especially low-level students experience difficulties when listening despite intensive listening as a part of curriculum. These difficulties may range from accent, unfamiliar vocabulary to lack of concentration or strategy use (Goh, 2000; Bingöl et al, 2014). Hence, the following learner problems may arise when listening in English.

2.1. Lack of strategy use

In language classrooms, students may consider listening as a one-way receptive skill no matter what language level they are. This may stem from the fact that they are always asked to "do" listening activities and "answer" a set of questions about a recording. The quality of recordings, especially when cassettes were used, and the speakers may also be the reason for this. Therefore, they see it as an activity not a skill to be developed; and failure in doing the activities accurately makes students have negative attitudes and prejudice against listening. Especially with lower level students, holding such an attitude at the beginning of language learning process may become permanent and may eventually lead to the situation that they either "like" it or "dislike" it accompanied with low self-confidence and learned helplessness. Therefore, there is a need to teach strategies systematically to develop students' listening skill. Unless students receive any systematic training on strategy use and awareness-raising, they will perform badly on listening tasks (Goh, 2000).

As Vandergrift (2003), states teaching low-level learners how to use metacognitive strategies would enhance their performance in listening tasks. Therefore, designing listening activities that will help them develop and practice their listening skills; and reflecting on the strategies used such as schemata activation, learning content words and predictions before listening may raise their awareness. Doing this may result in changes in their attitude towards positive and build confidence in time. Also, to rationalize why they are doing what they are doing and to see the relevance of listening skills in real life, using authentic materials that are not designed for teaching purposes might be beneficial, which may also help them develop their self-confidence and contextualize language learning (Gebhard, 1996; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012).

2.2. Too much reliance on bottom-up processing

When students pay too much attention to single words and phrases when listening to a recording, they struggle a lot to get the overall meaning conveyed in it. They may be stuck when trying to figure out the meaning of an unknown word and miss the rest of the listening; or they just pick the words they hear isolating them from the context and underestimate the role of meaning. In language classes, it is common to have students who tend to listen as if they are a "tape recorder", as Anderson and Lynch (1988) put it, and try to listen word by word. As Goh (2000) states, they cannot process the information fast enough to comprehend the message and thus cannot benefit from their short-term memory, which makes the listening experience a difficult one. Therefore, teaching them the importance of listening with a purpose depending to the type of listening may help them determine when they need to focus on single items, or general ideas.

2.3. Failure to transfer their L1 listening strategy to L2 listening

In EFL contexts, language classrooms are possibly the only places students are exposed to the target language. What students bring to the classroom are the strategies they use in their L1, which they may underestimate and see the relevance of strategies they use in L1 when listening in English. Especially low-level learners of English have a tendency to understand everything when they do listening tasks in the classroom, which indicates that they fail to transfer their strategy use in listening in L1 to English. In fact, they should be aware of the fact that they do not listen to understand "everything" in real life (Brown, 2006). Therefore, knowing why they are listening, for gist or specific information, may result in successful listening in L2 because they may adopt this approach in future listening situations, which boots their listening skills (Rost, 2002).

2.4. Having a negative mindset about listening

Some students may have negative experiences in their language learning process, which results in a negative mindset about listening in English: listening is too challenging; different accents make it difficult to understand; and speech rate is always high, which hinders comprehension. It may even be possible to hear students saying "listening activities in text books are specifically designed to make understanding harder", which may be difficult to change.

As Brown (2006) states the classroom environment and materials used help students hold a positive attitude towards language learning; and this may also be applied to teaching listening. Designing activities that do not require them understand people speaking very fast or with heavy accents may show them the activities are to help them in listening activities, not to prevent them from understanding. However, as Porter and Roberts (1981) state classroom materials do not reflect real life situations because they are simplified tailored to teach certain structures or functions e.g. slow pace, recurring structures in speech and unnatural turn-takings. Therefore, frequent use of authentic materials with appropriate activities such as getting the gist or specific details may help change their attitude, especially with lower level students, and make connections between real life and classroom (Nunan, 1999).

The issues stated here may have different shapes and consequences in different settings and there may be a lot more to add. Also, it may vary depending on the group dynamics, cultural backgrounds or the requirements of the language classes offered to them. Whatever the issues are, the following suggestions made below may give insights into how to make a start to use authentic materials in one's own language classroom.

3. Use of authentic materials in language classrooms

Different researchers may define authentic materials differently, but the commonly shared idea is that they provide real-life examples of listening situations and they are not specifically designed for language learners (Harmer, 2001). Language textbooks, although they are all carefully designed and written, all listening materials may not necessarily reflect real life because they are mostly are created or adapted for specific learning purposes (Porter and Roberts, 1981) such as teaching a specific grammar rule or a language function.

Authentic materials, on the other hand, provide students an opportunity to expose to real English, boost their motivation, provide cultural information and hence increase their success eventually (Richards, 2001). However, it does not mean that authentic materials would be beneficial for students when they are used as they are. Indeed, it is important to note that authentic materials should be carefully chosen with a clear pedagogic aim in mind. Otherwise, it might be discouraging or demotivating for students unless appropriate authentic material is chosen carefully. Senior (in Al Azri and Al-Rashdi, 2014) suggests a set of criteria to be considered when choosing authentic material for language teaching: relevance to course book and learners' needs, topic interest, cultural fitness, logistical considerations, cognitive demands, linguistic demands, quality and exploitability.

Despite the fact that authentic materials bring variety to the classroom and show samples of real language to the students, some researchers argue that it may not be suitable for especially low-level students. If the level of chosen authentic materials is beyond students' level, it may have undesirable effects on students. For example, it may demotivate them and they may feel discouraged and develop a negative attitude towards it, therefore they should be used with higher level students only (Kim, 2000; Kılıçkaya, 2004). However, abandoning this idea and using authentic materials only with high level students may hinder us seeing the positive impact of it on low-level students. This can be achieved by mainly considering the relevance of material, its exploitability, topical interest, students' needs as well as its linguistic features such as the vocabulary used and non-linguistic features such as the pace and accent. Here may come the question how it is possible to find authentic materials meeting this criteria. In today's world, everything is at the reach of our hands thanks to the Internet where the alternatives are endless. This requires careful search, though, but not impossible when searched with a clear goal in mind.

4. Suggestions for teaching

In this section, some sample materials will be shared to exemplify the use of authentic material with low-level learners of English. All the materials shared here were developed and experimented in the classroom by the researcher.

Activity 1

Aim: To show low-level students the importance of listening with a purpose

Material: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8XLzqQx478

(The video is used as it is. No simplification or tailoring is done.)

Procedure: Students are asked to make a list of what makes them happy. Then, they listen to a number of people talking about what makes them happy to locate the similarities. Then, they are asked to listen again to understand what specific people say about it (appendix 1). After they do that, students are given a set of statements to reflect on the activity (appendix 2).

Evaluation: Learners with low English proficiency have limited practice with authentic materials and it is unlikely to expect them to understand everything they hear as it is also the case for the textbook listening materials. Therefore, it is essential to raise awareness that listening with a purpose aids listening because they know what to focus on. In this activity, there is a specific question that all the speakers talk about, which is also the purpose for listening. This helps highlight the importance of listening with a question in mind, i.e. purpose. Also, providing pictures in the activity for second listening is a way to show them they are not supposed to understand everything.

Activity 2

Aim: Helping students to stop bottom-up processing for everything and to show them the similarities between L1 and L2 listening

Material: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bnC1RSbbDBY

(A Turkish public announcement meant to raise awareness of the dangers of smoking.)

Procedure: Students listen to a video in Turkish and teacher asks them what the main message is. They further discuss whether single words or overall meaning is important there. After they do that, teacher asks students listen to three public announcements to find the overall message in them (appendix 3). Then, another activity is given to show them when they need to focus on details in a listening situation (appendix 4).

Evaluation: English is classroom language and outside classroom is a non-English speaking environment, students fail to transfer their L1 listening strategies to L2 listening. Therefore, explicitly showing them how they listen in L1 and how they can

make use of it when listening in L2 may help them understand how to approach real life listening situations. As Porter and Roberts suggested they work with materials not specifically developed for language teaching, which helps them understand that they do not listen "everything" in real life (Brown, 2006).

Activity 3

Aim: To show low-level student the importance of strategy use

Material: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VS2mfWDryPE

(Approximately first two minutes of the video will be used)

Procedure: Pictures (appendix 5) are used to elicit information about an eating disorder, anorexia, its affects on the body and who might have this problem (in terms of occupation); and to teach content vocabulary. After they do that, they listen to a TV program about her for specific information (appendix 6).
They are also asked to fill out a short questionnaire to raise their awareness of strategy use (appendix 7).

Evaluation: Low-level learners do not know how to approach a listening text. Therefore, it is essential to raise their awareness on listening strategies, particularly activating schemata, making predictions before listening, and listening selectively according to a purpose (Goh, 2000; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). I have observed in my classes that guidance helps students, prevents them from losing their concentration, they feel more secure. Also, using this through authentic materials boosts their motivation and increases self-confidence. Also, seeing that they can achieve will boost their self-efficacy and lower affective filters like anxiety hindering their listening in L2 (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012).

Activity 4

Aim: To practice listening for gist and specific information

Material: https://www.ted.com/playlists/81/ted_in_3_minutes

Procedure: The website of TEDtalk is used to arouse interest and activate what they know about TEDtalks; and the picture of the speaker (appendix 8) is used to prepare students for the talk. Then, students are asked to predict about the content of the talk. After they do that, they make predictions using the activity in appendix 9 and listen for gist and for specific information with the handout in appendix 10. After doing all the activities and the follow up, students work on the handout in appendix 11 and share ideas with each other, which may be done as a milling activity.

Evaluation: TEDtalk may be considered challenging choice of listening and this activity may be a way of showing students there are some talks that they may benefit

from. The most important thing is to show them they can handle authentic material if they know what they are listening for (Goh, 2000; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012).

5. Conclusion

Listening in English is challenging for most students because of the problems mentioned earlier. However, it is possible to help students improve their listening skills by training them systematically about how to listen through the use of authentic materials. It may seem challenging when low-level learners are under question, but it is still possible to raise their awareness about what listening requires and show they ways to improve it, which will result in higher self-confidence. The activities suggested here may be a starting point for language teachers who seek ways to carry real life to their classrooms and may give them insights into how to prepare activities with authentic materials.

Appendix 1

You are going to listen to people talking about what makes them happy. Listen to the interviews and circle the correct answer. There is only <u>one</u> correct answer for each question.

1.	a) good weather	b) her son	c) friends
2.	a) good weather	b) family	c) food
3.	a) good friends	b) family	c) good health
4.	a) good weather	b) good health	c) friends
5.	a) football	b) friends	c) girls
6.	a) friends	b) chocolate	c) her boyfriend
7.	a) smiling people	b) good food	c) good friends
8.	a) nice weather	b) children	c) people

Appendix 2

Think about the listening activity and your performance. Read the statements below and decide which ones are *true* for you? Put a tick by them.

____ I tried to understand everything I hear.

____ Making my own list helped me prepare for listening.

____ I focused on the things on my list in the first listening, so I didn't worry about others.

____ I think I have performed well in these activities.

____ Pictures in the activity helped me listen better.

____ I worried about accents while listening.

____ I couldn't understand anything because of the background noise.

Follow up: Students talk about which of the ideas they agree or disagree and explain why.

Appendix 3

Activity 1

http://www.wrinstitute.org/radiopsa.aspx

(1.Take a walk, 2. Kids and Fitness, 3. Teen stress, 4. Family fitness)

Listen to four different public announcements and match them with the topics below.
Be careful! There is one extra topic.

Announcement 1 _____   a. Children should be active!

Announcement 2 _____   b. Take a walk everyday!

Announcement 3 _____   c. Deal with teen stress!

Announcement 4 _____   d. Lose weight with this diet!

                                               e. Do fitness as a family!

Appendix 4

Activity 2

Listen again and tick one detail that you do not hear in each announcement.

Announcement 1: Take a walk

_____ losing weight

_____ lowering your cholesterol

_____ curing headache

Announcement 2: Kids and fitness

_____ reduce heart disease

_____ decrease overall mood

_____ lower anxiety

Announcement 3: Teen stress

_____ family problems

_____ dating

_____ pressure of school

Announcement 4: Family fitness

_____ play soccer

_____ ride bike

_____ run everyday

Follow up: Students work in groups and decide on an issue that they can prepare a public announcement. They prepare a poster and write a script to be read to the class.

Appendix 5

Pictures that are used to elicit information activate their schemata and teach content words.

Picture 1:

Teacher asks students:

"What is anorexia?

Who suffers from anorexia most?

How does it affect health/the body?"

Picture 2:

Teacher asks students:

"Why is this picture taken?

What is the message given?"

Note:
Picture 1 is taken from:
http://www.nwzonline.de/panorama/nur-noch-31-kilogramm-mager-model-gestorben_a_1,0,705229903.html
Picture 2 is taken from:
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/12/29/isabelle-caro-dead-anorexic-model_n_802424.html

Content vocabulary to be taught here

Disorder	*Lose weight*
Disease	*Anorexic*
Campaign	*Illness*
Raise awareness	*Kilogram vs pounds*

Appendix 6

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VS2mfWDryPE

(Approximately first two minutes of the video will be used)

Activity 1

(The indicated part of the video is played here: 0:00- 0:45.)

(Important: The video is for listening not watching.)

You are going to listen to a program about the model Isabel Caro. Read the sentences below. What information is needed to fill in the blanks? Work in pairs and make predictions. Then, listen and fill in the blanks.

1. Isabel Caro is a poster girl who weighs less than _____ pounds.

2. A picture of her was on billboards in _____ last month.

3. The picture was taken to _____ _____ of the disease in the fashion industry.

4. The model, Isabel Caro, says she doesn't _____ for posing for the campaign.

Activity 2

(The indicated part of the video is played here: 00:45-1:53.)

(Important: The video is for listening not watching.)

Read the questions first. Work in pairs and make predictions about each question. Then, listen and answer them.

1. How long has she been anorexic?

2. Why is there a lot of criticism about the photo?

3. What does she think about the picture now?

4. What effects does anorexia have on her body? Circle the ones you hear.

eye disorders	dry skin	losing several teeth
fallen breasts	broken bones	horrible headaches
sore throat	bad hair	smelly mouth

Follow up: Students talk about what they find the most interesting and least interesting in the listening in groups. Then, they discuss the good and bad eating habits they have.

Appendix 7

Which of the following was helpful in doing the activity? Circle the relevant number from 1 to 4:4 very helpful – 1 not helpful at all

1. talking about anorexia before listening	4	3	2	1
2. learning some content words about anorexia before listening	4	3	2	1
3. my background knowledge about anorexia	4	3	2	1
4. the questions in the activities we did	4	3	2	1
5. listening with a purpose	4	3	2	1
6. my L1 listening strategies	4	3	2	1
7. the pictures we talked about	4	3	2	1
8. making predictions before listening	4	3	2	1

Discuss your answers with a partner.

Appendix 8

https://www.ted.com/talks

Picture taken from:

http://laurencebradford.com/my-first-ted-talk-experience-i-thought-i-would-walk-away-with-a-clear-answer

Matt Cutts: software engineer / computer scientist / worked for Google for 15 years / have time off from work

Picture taken from:

http://www.dptechgroup.com/chicago-seo/matt-cutts-google-seo

Appendix 9

Exercise 1 – Listen to the talk. What is the overall message? Circle the correct answer.

A. Subtracting a habit from life is easier than adding a new habit.

B. Working as a computer scientist is harder than you can imagine.

C. Making small changes may have a positive effect on people's life.

D. Sitting in front of a computer all day may harm your health.

Appendix 10

Exercise 2 – Listen and decide if the following is **TRUE** or **FALSE**. Before listening, underline the key words and make predictions about the answers in pairs.

1. Matt thinks 30 days are just enough to add a new habit in your life.   T / F
2. Taking a picture everyday made his life more memorable.   T / F
3. The changes in his life decreased Matt Cutts' self-confidence.   T / F
4. Matt used to be more adventurous in the past.   T / F
5. Matt says you can do everything if you want it a lot.   T / F
6. Matt thinks he wrote a great novel in one month.   T / F
7. Matt says small changes are more likely to stick than big changes.   T / F

Follow up: What do you think about the challenges Matt has taken in his life? Which one seems to be more interesting the other one? Why? Discuss with your partner.

Appendix 11

Decide which ones you can add (+) to or subtract (-) from **your** life for a month?
Then add two more habits/activities.
Discuss your answers in your group.

	Add (+)	Subtract (-)
Eating chocolate		
Taking 10,000 steps		
Playing games on your mobile phone in the classroom		
Speaking English only in the classroom		

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