

TEACHING LISTENING COMPREHENSION: GRADING MATERIAL BY INTENDED LISTENER

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The article presents some information about students' listening comprehension. The material which is selected for a particular foreign language course is based on the criteria which are determined by its aims. If the course is supposed to enable learners to follow lectures in the foreign language, then they have to work towards coping with long transactional turns, and will need a note-taking component. Most materials currently on the market consist of recordings of individuals giving lectures/speeches, or of dialogues between two individuals. The problem with formal speech material is that it is often difficult in content. The problem with dialogues is a) that they turn the listener into an overhearer, and b) how to make their content in any way interesting. Dialogues prepare the learner to listen to radio/TV dialogue rather than to listen to normal spontaneous spoken language. It consists of written language read aloud, it consists of complete sentences, pausing at the end of the sentences, well-worked-out language, well-packed with information. It may bear little resemblance to spontaneous speech. So it cannot offer a substitute for training with real spontaneous speech.

If the course-structor decides to opt for spontaneous conversation, he meets a further problem. Most conversations are appallingly boring. It is the participation in conversations which makes us such avid talkers. You can listen to hours of recorded conversation without finding anything that interests you from the point of view of what the speakers are talking. Anyone who listens to a lot of recorded conversation turns into a conversation analyst and begins to use his analytic observation. Once this happens, any fragment of conversation becomes fascinating from the point of view of the interaction.

If learners find any interest in what are often extremely dull conversations, they have to be provided with tasks which help them to become conversation analysts too. There must be conversations which would be interesting to students, but finding interesting material presents the constant problem for the teacher. So the emphasis should be on doing interesting things with it which may be boring but strike a chord with some student; these materials should be chosen not so much on the basis of their own interest, as for what they can be used to do. 'Doing interesting things' is a stronger claim than anything we can suggest. It implies doing a much wider variety of things in the listening comprehension class and involving the listener in reacting to language rather than simply answering questions on what he has overheard.