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THE CASE FOR NARROW LISTENING

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In narrow listening, acquirers collect several brief tape-recordings of proficient speakers discussing a topic selected by the acquirer. Acquirers then listen to the tape as many times as they like, at their leisure. Repeated listening, interest in the topic, and familiar context help make the input comprehensible. Topics are gradually changed, which allows the acquirer to expand his or her competence comfortably. Narrow listening is a low-tech, inexpensive, and pleasant way to obtain comprehensible input, and is also an easy way to get to know speakers of other languages. Copyright © 1996 Elsevier Science Ltd

It has been suggested that narrow reading can be very helpful for language acquisition (Krashen, 1981). Narrow reading means focussing on the work of a single author or reading a great deal about a single topic that the reader is interested in, rather than attempting to read a wide variety of texts. This suggestion runs counter to current pedagogical practice in which we expose students to short reading selections and surveys of literature. Narrow reading, it was argued, is better because it helps ensure that the input is comprehensible; the reader has the advantage of the previous context to help him or her understand the current text.

Empirical evidence supporting the narrow reading hypothesis is the finding that better readers tend to read more books by a single author (Lamme, 1976) and books from a series, a result that many readers of this paper can identify with, former devotees of the Nancy Drew series, the Bobsey Twins and the Hardy boys. More recently, Cho and Krashen (1994) reported considerable enthusiasm for reading and substantial vocabulary development among adult second acquirers who read books from the Sweet Valley Kids series. Several subjects reported that they had never read a book in English before, but became fanatic Sweet Valley fans.

My purpose in this paper is to extend the idea of narrow reading to narrow listening. Narrow listening, I propose, will be most valuable to second language acquirers who find uncontrolled casual conversation too difficult to understand. Acquirers at this level can benefit a great deal from language classes, but beginning language classes tend to move from topic to topic fairly quickly, which does not allow students to take advantage of their background knowledge in aiding comprehension. In addition, students will probably not be interested in every topic covered in class.

I discovered the value of narrow listening in Mexico. My level of Spanish was exactly as described above; some competence in Spanish, but not enough to understand free conversation. I had read some Mexican history and was fascinated by the story of Cortez. This became one of my topics of conversation; I asked many people the same question: Was Cortez a good man or a bad man? I found that nearly every Mexican I asked had an opinion, and it was always quite interesting; I was interested in the topic and so were they. In addition, I understood a great deal of what they told me, because I had read about Cortez in English.

Recently I have expanded on this technique by using a tape-recorder, explaining to the speaker that I am trying to acquire their language, and would appreciate about 2-3 min of their time. I began by asking people to talk about their childhood and their family. I then played back the tape at my leisure, usually while driving. Once this topic became comprehensible, I moved on to other topics. At times I have not revealed that I was interested in my own language acquisition, but said I was interested in something else: in Mallorca, I asked several people about their language, Catalan, explaining that I was interested in it and wanted some samples. This was the truth, but I also got a great deal of comprehensible input in Spanish. (The residents of Mallorca speak Catalan, but are usually bilingual and speak Spanish as well.)

I have found that I enjoy listening to the same descriptions several times; this is because the descriptions are interesting and because I understand slightly more each time. As Smith (1985) has pointed out, children typically want to hear the same story again and again. There is good reason for this. Smith notes that human beings avoid confusion and boredom. Children are not being bored when they hear a story they request several times; they must be getting something new each time. I can attest that the same is true for narrow listening.

Collecting recordings for narrow listening requires a certain amount of trial and error. I have found, not surprisingly, that some people are more comprehensible than others, and some are more interesting to me than others. My practice is to utilize these people more, returning to them for input on different topics. And of course, some topics are more interesting than others. What is interesting for me may not be interesting to someone else.

Narrow listening, for me, produces a "din in the head" fairly quickly, and helps a great deal to alleviate the boredom of driving. It is a cheerful alternative to depressing news programmes and inane talk shows.

GUIDELINES

The guidelines for narrow listening that have worked for me are these:

- Second language acquirers ask native speakers of the target language to speak for 2-3 min on a topic that is of interest both to them and to the acquirer. Narrow listening should only be on topics that are of real interest, to ensure that the focus is on the message. Boredom sets in rapidly when listening is undertaken only because it is in another language. Of course, some speakers will provide a lot more than 3 min, some will be uncomfortable filling 2 min.

- The acquirer should already know something about every topic; one way of filling in this knowledge is to read about it in the acquirer's first language (e.g., aspects of the history of the country in which the second language is spoken). This will make the input much more comprehensible. This is one of the principles underlying successful bilingual education: Using the first language to provide the background knowledge that will make second language input more comprehensible (e.g., Krashen, 1991).
- The acquirer can ask several speakers about the same topic. This provides natural repetition and context, both of which help comprehensibility.
- If possible, sessions are tape-recorded, and listened to until interest starts to wane.
- Topics are changed gradually and the acquirer moves to related topics. This will help ensure comprehensibility of input and allows the acquirer gradually and comfortably to expand his or her competence. One might move, for example, from current events to history.

Narrow input of this kind is guaranteed to be interesting nearly all the time, because the acquirer chooses the topic. Here are some of the topics I have been experimenting with; they are, of course, idiosyncratic. Other people will be interested in other topics:

- (1) Your family background. Tell me where you were born, about your parents, brothers and sisters and early experiences in school.
- (2) Coffee and cigarettes. Do you smoke? Do you drink coffee or tea? Have you ever tried to stop smoking or drinking coffee? Do you think coffee is good or bad for you?
- (3) Sleep. Tell me about your sleep habits. How many hours do you sleep? Are you a morning person or an evening person?
- (4) Music. Do you play a musical instrument? If so, how did you learn? What kind of music do you enjoy listening to?
- (5) Language. Tell me about your language acquisition experiences. What languages have you tried to acquire and what success did you have? What advice do you have for those trying to acquire another language? (I have found that it is interesting to use this question with non-professionals in language education.) Related questions include: What is the best way to build a large vocabulary? What is the best way to become a good writer?
- (6) Do you believe in ghosts? Have you ever seen a ghost or a UFO?

Narrow listening can also be used in the classroom. One possible assignment is to ask each student to obtain three short recordings on a topic the class, or subgroup of the class, agrees upon. If 20 students do this, it will produce at least an hour of potentially comprehensible input, which students can share, and even exchange with other classes. The best segments can be copied and retained for a permanent collection.

Of course, for narrow listening to work, it must be fairly easy to find native speakers. In second language acquisition, and for some foreign language situations (e.g., Spanish in Southern California) this requirement is met. But for many foreign language situations, speakers are hard to find. Interviewing members of the teaching staff is a possibility, but it will soon put a huge load on them. Other possibilities include commercial tapes and exchanges with foreign language classes in other countries.

Commercial tapes would be especially good for shy people. Doing it oneself, however, is preferable, as it helps ensure interest and comprehensibility.

SOME PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Obviously, not everyone one asks will agree to be interviewed. One must be prepared for refusals. According to my experiences, chances of getting input can be increased by following these guidelines. They seem obvious to me now, but were not when I started out:

- (1) Don't ask people who are obviously busy or who can be interrupted at any time (e.g., desk clerks at hotels, waiters).
- (2) Don't try to eavesdrop on tape.
- (3) Honest compliments are helpful. For example: You speak English very well. Could you tell me how you acquired it? (Done in the target language.)

Narrow listening is fairly low-tech, inexpensive, and pleasant, and according to my experience, very effective. It is also an easy way to get to know speakers of other languages.

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