

Learning Matters

It ain't what you listen, it's the way that you hear

Russell Whitehead

I was indirectly asked something the other day that I hadn't been asked for several years: 'How can I improve my listening?' I used to be asked it what felt like constantly in the days when I worked in self-access centres.

Actually, I could often get a toe-in to the answer from the more exact question, which was usually from a selection comprising such promising material as: 'How to improve listening?'; 'I want improve my listening!'; 'What best way improving the listening?', and so on. This would enable a short reflective exchange to take place. My point was usually that you can't understand what you don't know. If your grammar isn't up to asking a fairly simple question in an accurate way, then the way you understand the grammar embedded in things you listen to will be affected. Does that matter? It depends...

The idea that listening could be seen as an independent (as in separate, discrete) activity or skill seemed to be strangely compelling. The fact that there

were (and of course still are) exams (or assessment products, as I currently delight in calling them) that had apparently separate listening components added to this notion that listening was somehow something you 'could crack, get the knack of, sort out, get on top of,' etc.

This could lead to a little exploration of what you hear when you listen (or is that vice versa?). Let us consider the small list above. *Could crack*: what does this sound like? Well, if your listening is fit for purpose, then you can deftly handle the fact that this *oul* produces the same vowel sound as *oo* in *wood* (and of course *would*) and the *u* in *put*. Football fan or not, you easily deflect the potential distraction of the *oul* in *foul*, the *oo* in *shoot* or the *u* in *cup*. Oh, but hang on: this all only works if you're listening to someone like me with my standard southern kind of British English. In real listening, you will have to be able to handle a wide variety of accents that will wholly unsettle the delicate systems of understanding you have painstakingly constructed. On top of that, most people

using English around the world aren't native speakers, so you will also have to handle the fact that their pronunciation may at times appear inexplicable and unstable. They will produce versions of vowels that aren't in any of the textbooks, and they will change these same vowels during the same conversation. Oh, and then there's *crack*. OK with the *c* at the start, but what's that one at the end? Do you hear the *c* or the *k*, or *ck*, but if it's *ck*, then what's the difference between *c*, *k* and *ck*?

Will the next item on our short list (and that's different from our shortlist, is it?) help to clarify? Let's see: *get the knack of*. Do you know, I honestly think this *c* and *k* and *ck* thing's getting worse. I'm none the wiser about *ck* and now they've introduced *k* as in *kn*, but I can't hear it – except when I speak to many foreigners, who do actually seem to pronounce the *k* of *kn*, which I think is clearer but wrong. As I struggle away with all this, I dimly grasp that some bespectacled pedagogue by a whiteboard is muttering away about language change and the introduction of printing and how letters that used to be pronounced stopped being pronounced but by then printers had fixed forever the spelling system. But that's no use to me, because I don't understand why the assistant in the shop couldn't listen to me properly when I asked for some /k/, which surely how you should pronounce *CK*, which is the

perfume I wanted to buy as a present. Right, I need to re-focus. Listen again. Listen and repeat. Ah, I got it all wrong. Actually, it's something about a *cough*. I think. *A-no-cough? Cough* – like *coffee*, of course. This listening stuff isn't getting any better.

Let's try the next ones. I've had to use my dictionary here, but I think I've cracked it. *Sore tout*, is it? Or *sought out*? Or *saw tout*? I'm really in the dark. And then there's something about a Russian called Tontopov, perhaps from a fairy tale or something.

This is all completely daft. If you seriously intend to have us all speaking English as a lingua franca, why did you put all these phrasal verbs and idioms and odd spellings in?

Well, yes, why indeed, but there they are, beautiful, difficult, illogical and muddy, just like the countryside: jolly nice, but you wouldn't want to live in it.

So what is this listening ability that I feel I must improve? How will I know if I have improved?

The Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) seems to have seeped into all our lives over the last few years. Its descriptions of language ability (applying to any language) in terms of lists of quite detailed Can-do Statements concluding in bands A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2 is a useful focus for all sorts of associated activity. Employers can use it

to specify what they need staff in certain roles to be able to do linguistically. Different assessment products in different languages can be matched to it. Publishers can say that Italian learning book X is equivalent to Arabic learning book Y. And so on.

It means you can work out what it is that you want to achieve in listening, and then put together a plan of how to do it. There's a slight caveat here, which is that you need to be au fait with the kinds of speak that the descriptors are composed in. As you try to decide whether B1 or B2 should be your target, you need to process this kind of thing: 'Can understand straightforward factual information about common everyday or job related topics, identifying both general messages and specific details, provided speech is clearly articulated in a generally familiar accent.' (B1 Overall Listening Comprehension) Hm, that's taken me back to CK; dam, I mean damn. It's a bit rich, isn't it, the very suggestion that anything in English can be seen as 'clearly articulated'? Well, it's a complex world, and most of the people I deal with aren't native speakers with clear articulation, so I think I'm going to need to up my ambition a bit. Let's try something from B2. 'Can understand the main ideas of propositionally and linguistically complex speech [ah yes, this is the kind of thing...] on both concrete and abstract topics [yes, yes...]

delivered in a standard dialect [oh no...], including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation.' Search as I like, I don't seem to find a descriptor to do with coping with the speech of foreign business contacts.

Never mind. I shall seek solace from the EFL daddy of them all, Louis Alexander, who in 1995 published the suite of Direct English materials with Longman. (Incidentally, the first books I was commissioned to write were two preparation courses for Cambridge ESOL's Business English Certificates (BEC) to form part of that suite, but they were never actually published, and the Direct English venture is now owned by Linguaphone.) The different levels follow the fortunes of various characters, giant amongst whom is the hotel management intern Dean Johnson. 'Now we can go over your job description,' says Anne Holland, the general manager. 'Can you speak any foreign languages?' Dean's reply says it all, as far as I'm concerned. 'I speak a little Spanish, but I can't understand a word.' Billions of people around the world smile in wry sympathy at this perfectly succinct definition of A1 level. The listening isn't even at the races. Put away your presentation slides about productive knowledge being smaller than receptive. All wrong. You can't understand what you don't know. You can't listen to what you can't hear.

As it goes, all is far from lost for Dean Johnson, who – and here the language teaching community will sigh a very deep collective sigh – is told by the general manager: ‘But maybe you can help us understand our computers.’ Dean’s income presumably at least trebles instantaneously as he replies, ‘I can do that.’ That’s a really proper Can-do Statement.

So far, we have established that you need knowledge of language to listen to it successfully. The more you know, the more you will be able to listen successfully. It’s not like music, where everyone gets something out of it, however much or little they know about music. Indeed, classical musicians I know sometimes seem to be hindered rather than helped in their enjoyment of performances by being unable to switch off technical monitors in their heads. With language, if you don’t know the meaning of *saw* or *sore* then you can’t really listen to them.

Shelley in ‘Ozymandias’:

‘I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: two vast and trunkless legs
of stone
Stand in the desert...’

Travellers from (as in having been to) the weird land of learning English will have been challenged by in fact three trunkless legs in their endeavours to improve their

listening ability: the interactive, the locative and the emotive aspects of listening. These three will be addressed in the next couple of issues of *Learning Matters*. To myself, trying really to hear what those earnest students in the self-access centres wanted (desired, intended and lacked), I used to call it ‘Listening Syndrome’. Yes, these students were marvellously independent, searching out material autonomously, setting themselves targets, etc. But there’s no point in autonomous learning if it’s based on unachievable targets. You could almost smell the cognitive dissonance: the more they listened to practice listening material, tests, and so on, and noted their marks, the further away from understanding the barman’s responses in the local pubs they seemed to get. Shelley got it right:

‘... Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and
bare
The lone and level sands stretch far
away.’

Oh dear, I seem to have written us into a rather gloomy-seeming corner. I’ll try and write us out of it next time. Meanwhile, here’s the best advice, from Father William in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*:

'Do you think I can listen all day to
such stuff? Be off, or I'll kick you

downstairs!



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His new website is now live at:

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