

# **THE IMPORTANCE OF AUTHENTIC MATERIALS IN DEVELOPING APPROPRIATE AND EFFECTIVE LISTENING SKILLS**

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## **Abstract**

There has been a growing interest in using authentic materials for the teaching of listening. In order for learners to acquire the target language, teachers need to present the real listening situation of the language. Although authentic materials have positive impact for learners and teachers, they may give difficulties for listeners to catch and understand the text. Thus, some considerations should be taken in order to develop appropriate and effective listening skills.

*Keywords* Authentic materials

## **Introduction**

The use of authentic materials in teaching English as a foreign (EFL) or second language (L2), especially in teaching listening, has become a popular issue in recent years. This is due to the concern that teaching listening should have a connection to the real listening-life. (Field, 1998:111). Furthermore, the edited materials that are proposed for teaching listening skills in the classroom do not or less present the real situation of the language. For example, when learners listen to a recorded listening material, the speech used is more formal which is not portray what commonly appears in an ordinary conversation as it is attended for laboratory practices only. Porter and Roberts (1981: 38) point out that language hints such as hesitation, ‘normal attention signals (mm’s and uhuh’s)’ and informal words are often found in actual speaking. However, in an edited listening, these features are missing.

Berardo (2006: 64) notes that one of the reasons why authentic materials are employed in the classroom of English language teaching is to make a close contact with the target language as much as possible. It means that learners are intended to have a direct experience of how the language works in the real

situation. Researchers (Peacock, 1997: 144; Porter and Roberts, 1981: 39) found that the more students interact with the real of the target language in the classroom activities, the higher their interest in learning.

Aligned with this, Nuttal (1996: 172) points out that authentic text can be motivating because they are proof that the language is used for real-life purposes by real people. Moreover, authentic listening texts are effective for all learners, not merely to advanced level, if the model of the material is adjusted to their level of language proficiency (Morrison, 1989: 14). Therefore, in teaching-listening skills, teachers do not only rely on the prepared texts, but also need to search and explore various materials which expose the real environment, up-to-date, and appropriate for students.

Even though most teachers and authors agree that authentic materials give benefit to teaching listening skills, some researchers still argue about their effectiveness in developing aural skill. These kinds of texts have a range of restrains; thus, can give 'limited' advantage to teaching language skills (Hinkel, 2006: 117). This is because the language in these materials is aimed specially for native speakers (L1) in which the language difficulty is higher and may not appropriate for use in the classroom of L2 or EFL and for all learners' level. For instance, in a L1 conversation, the speed of speech is very fast and the language used is normally standard English or informal language. This is also supported by Joiner, Adkins and Eykyn (1989: 429), who note that learners can be very frightened because of the high speed of authentic speaking. Therefore, if learners of L2 or EFL are given this kind of material, they will find difficulty in catching and understanding the listening text.

Although there are two contradictory opinions about the effectiveness of using authentic materials for teaching listening skills in the classroom, researchers agree that these texts should be presented with proper strategies and approaches. Furthermore, the level of learners should also be taken as consideration in order to take full advantage of the materials.

### **Definition of Authentic Materials**

The term authentic is originally used to identify any real or natural communication contexts. As Kramersch (1993: 177) points out that authentic refers to everyday language used, it is not intended to academic purposes. The term of authentic materials or authentic texts refers to any 'written or spoken texts' which are commonly not intended to language teaching (Tomlinson, 1998). Similarly, Wallace (1992: 145) defines authentic texts as 'real-life text, not written for pedagogic purposes'. Therefore, these materials are likely not provided or designed for teaching English especially to non-native speakers. They are initially not proposed to foreign learners (Porter and Roberts, 1981: 37; Harmer, 2002: 205).

Moreover, in teaching listening skills Miller (2003: 16) points out that authentic texts are any oral texts that are often transferred through electronic instruments such as radio, television, and the Internet or 'CD-ROM'. This definition gives example of resources of authentic listening material that are likely employed in the classroom. In listening, however, real materials are not only delivered from technology devices but also from real situation such as lecturing and note taking.

Based on the explanation above, it can be concluded that authentic listening material can be obtained from any other sources as far as they represent natural speech or the authenticity of the language. For listening instruction, teachers often use a variety of authentic texts such as songs, news, weather forecast, interviews, films, note taking, telephone messages, etc.

### **Advantages and disadvantages of authentic materials in listening**

Previously, it has been pointed out that researchers still argue about the effectiveness of applying authentic texts in teaching listening lesson in the classroom. Even though these texts are still in debate, they are still chosen and presented in teaching listening in the classroom.

There are some reasons why authentic texts are applied in listening lesson. One of the main reasons is to experience a close contact with the real-life of target

language. These materials can facilitate learners in learning foreign language. Listening materials in existing textbooks or recorded texts, on the other hand, are very different from a real language situation. This is because they do not represent what occur or how language employed in a natural communication, which is more spontaneous. Morrison (1989: 14) claims that 'non-authentic' texts are likely improper in reflecting cultural knowledge, difficult to adapt to syllabus, high cost and rarely available. This means that authentic materials are invaluable because they are not only easy to obtain and low cost, for instance a radio, but also can give a wide range of listening materials which are needed for students' aural skills improvement. However, not all of the resources from technology devices that present authentic materials are affordable, for example television and computer, which are high-priced.

For teachers, they are given an opportunity to choose a variety of teaching listening materials which they think may be appropriate for their students. It is also a challenge for them to design a good lesson plan in order to develop effective listening skills and apply it in language classroom.

There are some advantages of employing authentic listening materials in the classroom (Peacock, 1997; Porter and Robert, 1981; Morrison, 1989; Guariento and Morley, 2001; Mishan, 2005). The advantages of authentic materials are as follows:

1. It can increase students' motivation and independent learning because they can easily obtain these materials from radio, movies, or television.
2. Students can have meaningful experience with a real language
3. It present cultural understanding
4. It can provide various kind of texts and sustain a small amount of materials in listening
5. The topic can be more interesting and relevant to current issue
6. It makes teacher more creative in designing the lesson
7. The visual listening models can develop learners listening skills in richer language contexts

A part of their advantages, authentic materials also have weaknesses to teaching listening comprehension (Morrison, 2005; Hinkel, 2006; Hoven, 1999). The disadvantages of authentic materials are:

1. It can be too difficult. For example, the speed of the speech, hesitation and repetition can confuse lower level
2. It sometimes does not provide appropriate language model for learners
3. It is time consuming in preparation. Because authentic texts are generally not proposed for teaching language, teachers have to design their own lesson plan and make it appropriate to students.
4. Different accent, colloquial language and pronunciation can cause problems for the learner. In real life, people speak different English accent and use informal language which is hardly found in an edited textbook.

#### **Authentic materials in different teaching contexts**

When discussing about language teaching, the term of context is commonly used by researchers. Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000: 11) define context as all the aspects and components that are 'nonlinguistic and nontextual which influence individuals spoken or written'. This definition means that there are external factors which involve in language and give effect in communication. Some factors such as 'the age, gender, dialect, and occupation' are examples of situational context (Crystal, 1999: 71). In the context of using authentic materials, learners' language proficiency is chosen to be discussed.

In teaching language process, there are commonly three levels of learners, that is, beginner, intermediate, and advanced. Learners of elementary level have the lowest language competency among others. Because of their limitation, such as lack of vocabulary, listening activity might be very difficult for them. They can merely do a very simple instruction of language task. (Guariento and Morley, 2001: 348).

Regarding to the practice of teaching authentic listening materials, researchers are still debating about at which level of language learners that these kinds of materials can be applied. Some researchers argue that authentic texts may not be appropriate to apply to learners whose language proficiency is low or under

intermediate level. Guariento and Morley (2001: 348), claim that authentic texts are appropriate for ‘post-intermediate level, because for beginner level ‘even with quite simple tasks’ they may feel discouraged and bewildered when these materials are employed.

On the other hand, Morrison (1989: 14) claims that authentic materials can be used from elementary to advanced learners. He also gives examples of lesson plans of how these texts can be applied in these levels of learners. As a model of authentic materials in teaching listening, he chooses radio broadcast. At lower level class, he provides six stages of authentic listening activity and five stages for advanced students.

It can be concluded that authentic listening materials are likely to be applied not only to higher level learners but also to beginner. However, the level of difficulty of authentic materials has to be taken into teachers’ consideration. For example, if lower level students are asked to listen to a weather forecast programme for their listening activity in the classroom and without giving pre-listening instruction, they will be confused and demotivated. Therefore, authentic texts can enhance learners’ ability in listening as long as teachers can provide materials that are appropriate to learners’ language proficiency and the purpose of the listening activity is not for total listening comprehension. In addition, a clear instruction and support for authentic listening tasks may also develop effective teaching learning. ‘Pedagogical support’ is really needed by learners in listening authentic materials (Kilickaya: 2004, <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Kilickaya-AutenticMaterial.html>)

1. Examples of authentic listening materials for beginner level

- **Activity 1: Listening authentic material using news broadcast**

Listen to the broadcast. Make a note of any places or people you hear.

For this activity, learners of low level are asked to write down name of places or people that they hear from the listening material. Before they listen to the radio, teachers give them pre-listening task such as practise the alphabet, for instance, the names of countries

that will be mentioned in the radio. After that teacher can give task activity and later post listening. For this level of learners, listening is not for full understanding.

From: Morrison (1989:16).

- **Activity 2: listening authentic material using movie**

Watch the movie this weekend. Focus on listening instead of reading subtitles. Collect the information:

- what is the title of the movie
- what time is it on
- which channel is it on
- kind of movie (comedy, romance, action, horror).
- names of the main character (male, female, animal)
- where does the movie take place (inside, outside, on land, at sea, country)
- what is the main idea in the movie

From: Miller (2003: 17)

2. Examples of authentic listening materials for intermediate level

- **Activity 3: Listening authentic material using radio**

You will listen to a radio programme about Egypt. Try to listen for the main things the presenter recommends doing while in Egypt.

Before you listen, what do you know about Egypt? What would you like to know about Egypt? What kind of information do you think the presenter will give us?

After you listen, in groups discuss, would you like to go to Egypt based on what you just heard? Why or why not?

From: Miller (2003: 16)

3. Examples of authentic listening materials for advanced level

- **Activity 4: Listening authentic material using news broadcast**

Discuss about what is in the news. Listen to different version of the main stories. In your groups, discuss what the main news stories were. Then discuss your reaction to these stories. Consider how

important you think the item is and what this stories mean to you personally.

From: Miller (2003: 17)

### **Current approaches to teaching listening skills and strategies**

Listening skills have not been given a serious attention as much as reading, writing, and speaking in English language teaching for a long time. Comparing to other language skills, listening is perceived as the most frequent activity we do when we communicate (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000: 102). For instance, in teaching learning process, most students tend to activate their listening skill rather than their speaking, while reading and writing take the least interest. Approximately, we spend more than forty percent on this skill on our daily life (Burely-Allen, 1995, as cited in Miller, 2003: 16). Because of its common use, it seemed that there was no deep discussion needed, and the study of listening skills was likely less interesting for researchers. In addition, this condition was not only influenced by researchers but also policy makers who design the curriculum of the language teaching study that studying listening is limited. Both institutions tended to give less concern with this skill and gave more focus on speaking which was considered more important subject to be taught in teaching language than listening (Andrews, 2001: 37). As a result, the number of studies in listening was quite small.

Nowadays, however, there is a significant awareness of the important of listening skill. There is also an increase in listening publication. Because of ‘a significant debate about its validity’, researchers now pay more attention to the crucial of listening comprehension toward the successful of teaching language learning (Vandergrift, 1999: 168; Miller, 2003: 16). Even though this skill is often regarded as a passive skill, it is obviously not a simple activity. It involves cognitive aspects. It is also a difficult process and needs a serious study. As Vandergrift (1999: 168) emphasises that listening is a complicated skill and demands more intentional study. For example, when learners are listening, they have more than one activity to be master and activate. This skill entails the ability



to recognise and differentiate sounds, understand the meaning and grammatical rules, and other language competence. It also needs a good coordination between hearing and thinking.

Regarding to listening skills, the aspect that usually involves in listening approach is bottom-up and top-down activities. Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000: 103) explain that bottom-up process which 'is assumed to be automatic' involves knowledge of the language system such as grammar, phonology and syntax, and top-down activity involves schematic, which is divided into content and formal schemata, and contextual knowledge. Both bottom-up and top-down processing are often used in listening tasks. For example, when learners do listening exercises such as gap filling, listening for details, and dictation, they activate bottom-up activity. In top-down approach, the listening tasks that they often do such as looking at pictures, looking at key vocabulary and making predictions. Top-down tasks usually occur when they do listening task in pre-listening activity, which ask them about their previous knowledge about a topic. However, there is evidence that both these approach are fail in the practice of language teaching (Hinkel, 2006: 117). This is because learners fail to apply top-down along with bottom up processing. Lynch (2005: 44) emphasises that if learners put higher attention in bottom-up activity, they tend to be weak in top-up processing.

Based on the study, this condition is often experienced by students of foreign language. Listening activity especially using authentic materials is more difficult and complex because they not only have to understand language but also cultural context that they are not familiar. They have to activate both cognitive aspects and cultural awareness. Ridgway (2000: 180), points out that listening is a difficult task for foreign learners, thus requires serious study. Because of this fact, learners are necessary to overcome and compensate their difficulty in understanding listening tasks with training their abilities.

However, the definition of strategy itself is still ambiguous among researchers. They still argue whether strategies are conscious or unconscious. This is because the differences between those are not obvious. Even though there is

no definite explanation about strategy, Ridgway (2000: 179) suggests that teachers have to focus on the training of conscious.

Regarding to less bottom-up processing, Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000: 103) point out that learners are necessary to use metacognitive and listening strategies. Taking out an important point, looking for a general idea, and prediction are kinds of strategies in listening. In addition, researchers recommend three main types of listening strategies. The first strategy is cognitive strategies which related to how to understand listening such as using prior knowledge or knowledge background (Lynch, 2005: 42). The second is metacognitive strategies. Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000: 103) notes that these listening strategies include planning for listening, self-monitoring, self-monitoring the comprehension process, evaluating comprehension and identifying comprehension difficulties. According to Vandergrift (1999: 170), the continuous use of metacognitive strategies is preferable to working only on listening skills, and it also give a good impact in developing learners listening comprehension. However, he also adds that metacognition tends to restrain if the employment of cognitive strategy is inappropriate. This states that metacognitive strategies cannot work alone without building up a good cognitive strategy. For the third category, researchers add socio-effective strategies. These strategies focus on learners learning activities in the classroom such as working together with classmates, asking for clarification, or employing particular techniques (Vandergrift, 1999: 170).

Shifting to listening ability, which is often considered as one of the aspects that has an effect to learners' language learning, researchers divide it into two subskills regarding to its level, higher and lower stage. The higher level involves the ability such as presumption, 'interpretation, and critical evaluation'. Another subskills ability such as translation and identification are examples of lower stage subskills (Lynch, 2005: 42). Both subskills play an important role in teaching listening process in selecting appropriate materials especially using authentic texts.

In teaching authentic listening materials, Miller (2003: 16) suggests three stages in developing learners' listening skills which have verified beneficial in listening tasks, they are, 'Pre-listening, While-listening, and Post-listening'. In Pre-listening activity, learners are generally asked to give opinions and discuss about a topic that they are going to listen to. In this

level, learners activate their schemata of their prior knowledge about the topic, what they have already known about the content of the text. It is expected that in this stage learners have a background of what they are going to look for. Next, in While-listening they collect all information from the listening text to help them for a later discussion. Then, in the last stage, Post-listening, they give comment to what they already listen to and this activity may be focus on individual comprehension. These steps in a listening activity can be used to help students to minimise the difficulty of listening authentic tasks. Vandergrift (1999: 172) notes that the continuous use of this series can help students develop their listening comprehension. In addition, Hinkel (2006, 119) states that listening lessons that focus on bottom-up and to-down processing may be beneficial for lower and intermediate level of language proficiency, and for advanced learners they need to employ cognitive strategies.

A part of using strategies to compensate learners' weaknesses in understanding listening, Ridgway (2000: 184) questions about their effectiveness. He argues that strategies are impossible to apply in reality because there is no time for conscious process. Therefore, it is no use to spend time in teaching listening strategies while learners naturally use their predictions and guessing. He also emphasises that the most important thing is practice listening activities intensively.

To sum up, understanding listening of foreign language is difficult for foreign learners. This is not only due to their different level of language proficiency in understanding listening, but also listening process demands difficult activities to cope with. Thus, to compensate listening difficulties and weaknesses in understanding listening, certain strategies are needed. For examples, cognitive and metacognitive strategies. However, it is important to note that the use of

listening strategies might not be able to assist learners in developing their listening skills if they do not keep practicing themselves. Practices will help learners in remembering and getting acquainted with the context.

### **Conclusion**

Authentic listening materials are likely now regarded as one of the resources of teaching listening skills for EFL and ESL. Most researchers and teachers agree that these texts can give benefit to teaching listening skills. However, some authors still argue about the effectiveness of these texts. Because this listening texts employ a real oral communication in which have different characteristics to recorded listening, it tends to give constraints to learners in listening comprehension. The speed of speech, the use of colloquial words, hesitations, false starts, and empty pauses are some examples of the features of authentic materials. Therefore, these kinds of materials sometimes are not appropriate for all level of learners. For example, for beginner level, listening to authentic materials can be very difficult for them to cope with. On the other hand, for other researchers, these features can give benefit to learners because of their authenticity.

Regarding to their advantages, authentic listening materials play an important role in developing appropriate and effective listening skills of the learners because of their authenticity.

In addition, authentic materials can give advantages to both learners and teachers. For learners, these materials can give experience of a real context of the target language. They will be introduced how a conversation in a natural situation of native speakers occur. Furthermore, the most important advantage of these texts is that they can motivate learners in learning language especially listening. Because of their interesting features, authentic materials are likely can attract learners to have further learning of listening autonomously. This means that these texts can give a meaningful learning. For teachers, these texts offer a wide range of listening materials. They can also give a challenge to teachers to design a good listening material for students.

From what have been explained previously, it can be concluded that authentic materials play important roles in developing appropriate and effective listening skills as evidenced by several studies. However, it should be noted that the use of authentic materials in listening study must consider the learning strategies and contexts as well as the learners themselves.

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