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IMPROVING THE LISTENING SKILL OF B1 LEVEL STUDENTS THROUGH THE AUDIO-LINGUAL METHOD

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Abstract. This article examines the development of listening skills in students with a B1 level of English proficiency, using the audio-lingual method. It outlines the objectives of a listening course, the content of instruction, and the role of the teacher. Key techniques of the method—such as dialogue repetition, the discrimination of minimal pairs, and structural drills—are described, and a sample lesson is provided. The article also discusses resources, assessment, and the limitations of the method.
Keywords: listening, B1 level, audio-lingual method, dialogue, structural drills, English language teaching methodology.

Introduction.

Listening is the skill that learners at B1 level often find the most frustrating. Native speech seems fast, words run together, and students who easily understand a sentence on paper may fail to recognise the same words when they hear them. The Common European Framework describes B1 listeners as able to understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 66). Many learners, however, reach this level in reading and grammar long before they reach it in listening. This article describes how a university teacher can improve the listening skill of B1 students and argues that the audio-lingual method, with its intensive and structured oral practice, is a suitable single method for building the first stage of this skill: the accurate recognition of sounds, stress and common patterns.

Learners and aims of the course

The course is designed for B1 level university students. They know the basic grammar of English and a few thousand common words, and they can follow slow, carefully spoken English. Their difficulties appear in connected speech. They do not hear word boundaries, miss weak forms such as the reduced and in bread and butter, confuse words with similar sounds and cannot keep up when the speaker does not pause. Many also try to translate each word in their heads and therefore fall behind the recording. Unlike reading, listening cannot be controlled by the learner, because the speaker decides the speed and the listener has no second chance in real life.

Typical listening lessons make the problem worse. The teacher plays a recording once or twice and asks comprehension questions, which tests listening but does not teach it. The aim of the course described here is different. By the end of the course students should be able to recognise the main sounds and stress patterns of English, understand short everyday dialogues at normal speed, identify

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the main idea and specific details, and respond to what they hear. These aims are specific and can be measured, which matters for the method chosen below.

Content of the listening course

Three areas of content form the core of the course. The first is sound perception: the difference between similar sounds, word stress, sentence stress, weak forms and linking between words. The second is high-frequency patterns and phrases: question forms, requests, offers, polite replies and the functional language of everyday situations. The third is the understanding of short dialogues: finding the main idea, catching specific details such as numbers, times and places, and choosing an appropriate answer. These areas correspond to the B1 descriptors for listening comprehension (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 66). The topics are everyday situations in which students will need to listen: travel, shopping, eating out, making appointments and university life. Vocabulary and grammar are not taught as separate lists, but as part of the dialogues that students hear and repeat.

The audio-lingual method in the classroom

The method chosen for the course is the audio-lingual method. It developed in the middle of the twentieth century from structural linguistics and behaviourist psychology. Language learning is seen as the formation of habits: the learner hears a stimulus, gives a response, and correct responses are reinforced immediately. Language is presented first in spoken form, the skills are developed in the order of listening, speaking, reading and writing, and new material is introduced through dialogues that learners repeat and memorise (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, pp. 53–69). Because listening comes first in this sequence and the method relies on constant aural input, it is well suited to training the ear of B1 learners.

Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011, pp. 35–50) describe the typical techniques of the method. Learners listen to a dialogue and repeat it in chorus, in groups and individually. Long sentences are built up from the end, which is called backward build-up, so that learners can reproduce the rhythm and stress of the whole sentence. Teachers use repetition, chain, substitution and transformation drills to practise patterns, and minimal pairs to train learners to hear small differences between sounds. Finally, learners complete or change a dialogue. For a listening course, the activities are adapted so that the main task of the learner is to hear, discriminate and respond to what is said, and the teacher or the recording is the model that sets the standard of pronunciation and speed.

A sample 80-minute lesson shows how the method works. The topic is booking a table at a restaurant, and the dialogue begins with the lines Do you have a table for two? and Yes, we do. Would you like to sit inside or outside? In the first stage (10 minutes) students listen to the dialogue twice with books closed, and then once more with the text. In the second stage (15 minutes) they repeat the lines in chorus and in groups, and the longest line is practised with backward build-up. In the third stage (15 minutes) the teacher says pairs of words such as thirteen and thirty, can and can't, or ship and sheep, and students show whether the words are the same or different. In the fourth stage (15 minutes) the teacher gives a prompt, for example a table for three, and students change the pattern with a substitution drill. In the fifth stage (15 minutes) pairs change the dialogue to a hotel or a cafe, while the other pairs listen and note down the key information. In the last stage (10 minutes) students complete a short listening check: they decide whether five statements are true or false and write five key sentences from dictation.

The roles of teacher and learners are clearly defined. The teacher is a model and a conductor of the lesson. The teacher speaks clearly at normal speed, controls the pace of the drills and gives

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immediate feedback: correct answers are praised, and incorrect answers are corrected at once with the right model, which the learner repeats (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, pp. 53–69). Learners are respondents. They listen carefully, repeat accurately and respond quickly. Pair work gives them a chance to listen to each other, not only to the teacher, which is an important preparation for real conversation.

Over a unit of four weeks the lessons can be sequenced from sounds to texts. In the first week learners work mainly on sounds, stress and weak forms, using minimal pairs and repetition. In the second week they learn the functional patterns of shopping and travel through short dialogues and drills. In the third week the dialogues become longer and the speed of the recording increases. In the fourth week students listen to a new dialogue with the same language that they have not heard before and answer questions on it. If equipment is not available, the teacher can read the dialogues aloud, or students can use recordings stored on their phones.

Resources and assessment

Three books support the course. Richards and Rodgers (2001, pp. 53–69) explain the theory and the procedure of the method, Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011, pp. 35–50) describe the techniques used in the classroom, and the Common European Framework (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 66) provides the level descriptors. Classroom materials are simple: short recorded dialogues from the course book or from graded readers with audio, word cards for minimal pairs, a speaker and a phone for recording.

Progress is checked in three ways. First, a sound discrimination test in which learners decide whether ten pairs of words are the same or different. Second, a short listening test with a new dialogue, true or false statements and questions on specific details. Third, dictation of key sentences from the dialogues, which shows whether learners can hear word boundaries and weak forms. Comparing the results at the beginning and at the end of the unit gives evidence of improvement. Students also complete a short self-assessment, for example, I can hear the difference between thirteen and thirty.

Limitations and conclusion

The method has important limits. It has been criticised because drilling and memorisation can produce mechanical habits and little ability to use the language in new situations, and because meaning receives less attention than form. Learners may also become bored with repetition. For listening, this means that the method develops accurate recognition of sounds and patterns well, but it does not by itself teach learners to listen to long, unprepared speech or to guess meaning from context. For this reason it is best used at the first stage of the course and then supported by listening to new recordings. Because the article proposes a course design, it reports no learner data, and the results should be checked with the tests described above.

In conclusion, B1 students need to train their ears systematically, not just to test their understanding. The audio-lingual method offers a clear structure for this: a model dialogue, careful repetition, discrimination of sounds and practice of patterns, followed by immediate feedback. When it is used with short everyday dialogues and followed by listening to new material, it can help learners recognise what they hear more quickly and accurately.

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