

**"LISTEN FOR YOURSELF": A SMALL HANDBOOK FOR IMPROVING AURAL
COMPREHENSION OF ENGLISH WITHOUT A TEACHER**

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RESUME

Cet article décrit le contenu d'un fascicule d'une quarantaine de pages écrit à l'intention d'apprenants d'anglais souhaitant améliorer leur compréhension orale en dehors de la salle de classe. Il vise à leur fournir non seulement une batterie de techniques d'exploitation d'enregistrements d'anglais, mais également des outils leur permettant de diagnostiquer leurs problèmes et de choisir des activités et du matériel en rapport avec ceux-ci.

Over the last few years a number of practically-oriented books on learner - centred approaches to language learning have appeared on the market. (DICKINSON, 1987; ELLIS AND SINCLAIR, 1989; WILLING, (1989); HARDING, LITILE, and RILEY (1989). They have doubtless been welcomed by interested teachers in quest of "nuts and bolts" information on implementing learner-training in the classroom or resources centre.

The works mentioned above address themselves primarily or exclusively to language TEACHERS.

During the same period, however, projects for offering how-to-do-it advice directly to language LEARNERS have got under way (MOULDEN, 1987; LITILE AND SINGLETON, 1988) or have already borne fruit (HENSON, 1988). (DELECROIX and HUMBLEY, 1989).

Teach yourself packages for foreign language user/learners are nothing new. of course. One example is the handy phrasebook for the intending traveller abroad ("postilions and lightning"). Another. more elaborate. example is the home-study ("teach yourself") coursebook with or without cassettes. The latter offers a fully prescribed programme of work to follow in the form of graded texts or dialogues and exercises. But there have also been more broadly prescriptive works (such as RUBIN and THOMPSON, 1982) where the learner is given general advice and tips on language learning and left free to apply them as and where s/he chooses.

The projects we have just referred to above seek to enrich (or have already enriched) the last-mentioned category. They will do so by beginning to make available to out-of-class learners some of the information which hitherto was only to be found in any quantity and detail in teachers' cookbooks. Information such as: how to pep up dreary coursebook material, how to use newspapers and off-air recordings, how to make grammar and drills more fun, how to get lively oral exchanges going etc. etc.

Taking these projects one by one:

The C.R.A.P.E.L. "electronic helper" project for providing would-be self - directed language learners with computerized help in designing and running their own language learning programmes (MOULDEN, 1987) creeps on occasionally, but is more often at a standstill through lack of time.

LITILE and SINGLETON at Trinity College, Dublin, are preparing a manual which will offer second language learners information on learning and language together with "text exploitation recipes".

HENSON, working at the Centre de Linguistique Appliquée in Besançon. France, has produced an english language learning information service for french telephone subscribers with access to teletext (5 million so far). By dialling the appropriate number the french learner of English can access, on-screen, 100 techniques for using english newspapers, magazines, cassettes, radio and television broadcasts etc. to improve his or her performance in all four language skills.

Finally, DELECROIX and HUMBLEY (Universities of Reims and Nancy) have published a 134 page book which shows students of English how they can reach and exploit the rich learning potential offered by radio broadcasts in that language. A variety of exercises are described and much useful advice provided on overcoming likely difficulties.

Our own "LISTEN FOR YOURSELF" was written hastily during May/June 1989 to fill a long-felt in-house need for a small but reasonably comprehensive booklet of methodological advice for learners of English working on listening comprehension. Improvement in this skill is sought by most self-directed learners taking part in the C.R.A.P.E.L.'s SAAS system (see ABE and GREMMO; 1981) and is also an important feature of the learner-training course for Nancy

M.I.A. Ge. (computer applications in business management) students (see DUDA, MOULDEN, REES: 1988). In both training sectors it was felt by the helpers that the existing piecemeal (often oral) system for transmitting methodological information was not efficient enough. The breadth and depth of advice given was limited by shortness of time and often fell on deaf or forgetful ears (most helpers have difficulty recalling a learner who took notes at interview or in class). But back-up in the form of a handy take-home printed version of the helper's expertise which learners could browse through or consult whenever they wished might improve matters, it was thought. And it would be a quicker-to-produce and more generally accessible tool than the corresponding module of the long-gestating "electronic helper" mentioned above.

A possibly novel feature of "LISTEN FOR YOURSELF" is its attempt to supply not only a bank of exploitation techniques for audio and video foreign language recordings (transcribed preferably) but also easy-to-follow guidance on matching choice of techniques to individual needs. This guidance takes the form of a short chapter on the diagnosis of listening comprehension problems followed by a chapter containing - for each problem mentioned - suggestions as to which techniques may do some good. The rest of the manual consists of shorter chapters on the various kinds of listening, the choice of listening material, listening strategies and effective learning.

"LISTEN FOR YOURSELF" can be used either serendipitously or systematically. Learners with no firm learning project can experiment with the techniques bank in a "suck it and see"¹ mode. The hope here is that they will at least discover a few techniques which they feel are useful (or even enjoyable). In doing so, they may eventually run into language problems which will induce them to turn up the problems chapter and then, by degrees, find themselves carrying out more purposeful work. Learners, on the other hand, who want to use a systematic approach right from the start can do so.

(1) Feature dear to the heart of Michael REES, who took part in the planning stage of "LISTEN FOR YOURSELF".

The layout of "LISTEN FOR YOURSELF" is as follows:

Chapter

Page

1 How to use this booklet.....	1
2 Different sorts of listening.....	3
3 How to choose a recording to work on.....	5
4 Listening strategies for understanding more.....	7
5 Diagnose your problems.....	12
6 What you can do about your problems.....	20
7 Three dozen ways of using a recording to improve or practice listening comprehension....	29
8 Working effectively.....	37

Appendix I: Different ways of spelling English sounds

Appendix II: Radio, TV and cinema as sources of spoken English.

(The Table of Contents above - and all other extracts from the booklet given in this paper - are in English. In the original, however, all text is in the language of the user. i.e. French.)

We shall now comment briefly on the contents of each of the chapters.

1. HOW TO USE THIS BOOKLET:

The two possible modes of use (exploratory and systematic) are described and for each the relevant chapters are pointed out and their function briefly characterized.

2. DIFFERENT SORTS OF LISTENING:

Listening for gist, listening for detail and selective listening are described. It is stressed that all three of these subskills (and not simply the second one) are legitimate areas in which to seek improvement. In addition, it is suggested that the reader's chances of making progress will be maximized by:

- being clear about which skill or subskills s/he is working on
- choosing techniques which give practice in using that subskill or subskills
- AND choosing techniques which bear as directly as possible on the problems s/he has in that mode or modes

3. HOW TO CHOOSE A RECORDING TO WORK ON:

Various choice criteria are presented but the main points made here are that subject matter should match one's objective or interests and that recordings should not (in general) be TOO easy to understand and should, wherever possible, be accompanied by a transcript.

4. LISTENING STRATEGIES FOR UNDERSTANDING MORE:

Strategies for gist listening and for listening for detail are presented.

The gist listening strategies are preceded by an attempt to convince the reader via written texts:

- that global comprehension of a recorded text is possible even when a considerable proportion of the words in it are not heard or not understood
- that the meaning of unheard/unknown words can sometimes be guessed

This is followed by succinct advice on coping with gist comprehension in real time and signposts to relevant techniques described further on in the booklet.

The chapter concludes with tips on listening for detail both in real time and in situations where it is possible to go over tricky passages as often as one wishes. Again, pointers to appropriate techniques are provided.

5. DIAGNOSE YOUR PROBLEMS:

This chapter is divided into 3 parts:

- a numbered list of common listening comprehension problems (see Appendix I for the start of the list)
- instructions allowing the reader to diagnose his or her major listening comprehension problems
- information to help the reader identify sub-problems within the broad categories of problems he or she has diagnosed above

Thus the chapter can either be used (the first section) to see quickly whether the booklet will be able to give help with a problem in which the reader is interested, or as a diagnostic tool prior to planning systematic work (the second and third sections).

6. WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT YOUR PROBLEMS

Here, the problems listed in the first section of the previous chapter reappear in the same order but accompanied, this time, by advice together with numerical references to appropriate remedial techniques in the following chapter (see Appendix II).

7. THREE DOZEN WAYS OF USING A RECORDING TO IMPROVE OR PRACTICE LISTENING COMPREHENSION:

This is the techniques bank. There are two sections. The first section contains the techniques which can be used to WORK on various listening comprehension problems. The second section comprises techniques which give PRACTICE in using (successively) gist listening, listening for detail and selective listening.

The binary organization of this chapter is intended to remind readers that both work on problems and practice of target skills are needed in a balanced work programme.

More methodological "elbow jogging"² appears in the first section in the form of groups of numbers accompanying each of the techniques (see Appendix: III). These numbers indicate which problems (in the list in Chapter 6) can be worked upon by using the technique in question. The hope here is that readers who are simply browsing through the techniques will notice that they are more than just "things to do with a cassette".

(2) Another contribution from Michael REES.

8. WORKING EFFECTIVELY:

This, the final chapter, tries to reiterate the message that simply doing any old activity with a cassette from time to time is not likely to be the most productive way of going about things. Keeping an eye (ear) on where one has problems and regularly doing something about them and revising what one has done will work better than just listening and waiting passively for improvement to come.

"LISTEN FOR YOURSELF", as described above, is simply a first draft. There are major omissions (advice for beginners, more explicit information on carrying out the techniques described and maximizing learning output from them, a section on progress assessment). The field trials which are just beginning have revealed awkwardnesses, silly patches and unsatisfactory advice on problems. Its appearance has little eye-appeal. All these deficiencies we hope to make good in a second edition.

But the first edition has already done valuable service as a source of mix 'n' match methodology exercises in learner training and as a source of ideas for groups of M.I.A.Ge. students working on listening comprehension without a teacher. Judging from the results of the latter's end-of-course theory paper in self-directed learning, appreciably more of them are leaving us with a reasonably filled "toolbag" than was previously the case.

Finally, here are some questions we would like to answer concerning "LISTEN FOR YOURSELF":

Do learners who have a choice use it regularly? If not, why not?

Can learners be given it as it stands, or do they need some sort of preparation? Which parts of it are used the most, the least?

How do learners use it? Does the way they use it evolve? What is the advice it gives worth?

Does it lead to learners becoming better learners?

APPENDIX I

EXTRACT FROM CHAPTER 5 ("DIAGNOSE YOUR PROBLEMS").

THE FIRST 14 OF THE 33 PROBLEMS

Problems

1. I mix up sounds and words that are alike.
2. Some of the words I hear, I don't know what they mean even when I see them written out.
3. Sometimes I hear a word that I don't know, but then I have a job finding it in the dictionary because I don't know how to spell it.
4. Sometimes I can't find the word in the dictionary even when I feel sure of the spelling.
5. I have difficulty picking out the words.
6. I have a job remembering the words I've just heard.
7. By the time the end of the sentence comes, I've forgotten the beginning.
8. I don't find it easy guessing the meaning of a word I don't know or didn't hear properly.
9. Sometimes there are strings of words that I know, yet I can't work out what they mean.
10. Sometimes there are references to people or things I don't know.
11. Sometimes I have the feeling a sentence means something different from what it seems to mean.
12. Sometimes I can't see the connection between one sentence and the next.
13. I can't get the gist of what's being said because there are too many words I don't know.
14. When there's a word I don't understand, I spend so much time thinking about it that I miss what's said afterwards and finish up by losing the thread completely.

APPENDIX II

EXTRACT FROM CHAPTER 6 (“WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT YOUR PROBLEMS”)

13. I can't get the gist of what's being said because there are too many words I don't know.

Remember you don't need to understand ALL the words in order to understand the general picture. Far from it. See Chapter 4 (p.7).

To train yourself in getting the gist of a recording from the bits and bobs you've managed to hear, try techniques 11, 14, 15, 16,.

To expose yourself to new words (to note and LEAM), try techniques 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 29.

If the recording is really very difficult then look for something a bit easier. But remember that it will do you good to face up to hard stuff regularly (in small doses). If you persist (AND keep working at the vocabulary) you will find that understanding will gradually come.

14. When there's a word I don't understand, I spend so much time thinking about it that I miss what's said afterwards and finish up by losing the thread completely.

See the first few pages of Chapter 4 for strategies for "keeping afloat".
Techniques 11, 14, 15, 16 will give you practice in filling in gaps in your understanding by making sensible guesses.

APPENDIX III

EXTRACT FROM CHAPTER 7
("THREE DOZEN WAYS OF USING A RECORDING TO IMPROVE OR PRACTICE LISTENING
COMPREHENSION")

9. Once again, make yourself (or get someone else to do it for you) a "black-out" puzzle from a transcript. This time the words blacked out will be words you are particularly interested in ("connectors", numbers, words "deformed" by a regional accent, words which gave you trouble when you listened to the recording before). (Helps with problems: 2, 5, 13, 23).

10. Choose a recording which isn't too difficult to understand. Play it a few words at a time. Write down what you hear. Check what you have written against the transcript. (Use a paper window - see technique 4 - to reveal the transcript bit by bit.) As soon as you are regularly remembering all the words you hear, lengthen the duration of the segments you listen to. (Helps with problems 6, 7).

12. Listen to a recording. From time to time, stop it and try to guess what word (or words) will come next. Check your prediction by listening to what DOES come next. If you are listening to a dialogue, you could try getting into the skin of one of the characters and predicting how they will finish what they have started to say. (Helps with problems: 2, 6, 8, 13, 14, 15).

12. Use a recording of somebody with an accent and use the transcript to identify which sounds are pronounced differently. (Helps with problems: 5, 23).

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