

Phonology for Listening

This is a new branch of phonology and which, if we embrace it, will revolutionise our teaching of listening in the ESOL class. At its heart lies a response to the dilemma of one student, Ying, who cannot bear the fact that teachers of English play a recording, ask a few questions on it, perhaps do some pronunciation on it, and then move on to the next activity. Ying wants to know about all the things she doesn't understand in a recording – the differing soundshapes, rhythms, stepping stones and drafting phenomena of first language speakers.

These aren't Ying's descriptors of course. She doesn't know that it is differing soundshapes of words that are causing her problems. Rather these are the descriptors used in the *Phonology for Listening* that guide the language teacher to eat away at Ying's problem.

Published in 2013, *Phonology for Listening* (author **Richard Cauldwell**, available from **Amazon** and www.speechinaction.com) tells us practitioners that it is time to get hold of our learners' difficulties with listening and teach them how to listen. It tells us that as far as listening is concerned we are doing a good job at testing but makes a strong argument for doing a whole lot more – such as closing the gap between how first language speakers use English, what they do to words when speaking at different speeds, and what we do in the classroom.

This article aims to look briefly at what that 'whole lot more' involves and looks at how I have adapted the ideas for my own use in the ESOL classroom.

Let's start with how we can do more using the traditional listening activities in the classroom and then move on to using a clip from a TV programme.

So, if we take the idea of soundshapes to start with. *Phonology for Listening* takes us through 3 stages of speaking: 1) the greenhouse stage where everything is said clearly. Take Unit 3 of ESOL Skills for Life materials on some/any. This recorded material is carefully spoken to be comprehensible to ESOL learners at Entry 1. The greenhouse is the 'citation' level of pronunciation and is used always at this level. 'Some' is said clearly and 'any' is said clearly. But there are other ways of saying these words that also need attention. 2) There is the 'garden' level where the word is clearly said but joined to

other words and therefore the pronunciation is a little different, as in, for example: haven't you got any shoes to put on, (tennyshoes). 3) Then there is the 'jungle' where everything is jangly-tangled and may only be a flicker or a whisper of a sound or it could be an almighty gut-busting sound, such as: 'Why haven't we got A-N-Y bread in the bloody house?' Back to the idea of a flicker or a whisker of a sound, just try saying this really quickly: We need some cakes. It could sound as unclear as: neeskaes. I have no doubt in my mind that we need to teach students even as low as Entry 1 the varying ways that they might hear these words.

I am relieved to say that when I was OTL'd the manager was happy that the work done on listening was demanding for the students but she did not consider it overly so. In other words she felt that learners coping with first language learners speaking at normal speed was a worthwhile area of language learning to explore.

This is what I did in part of the lesson. I played a Youtube clip of a Robert Peston programme on 'Shopping'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJzQ1xJkdd4>

It fits in comfortably with Unit 3 Entry 1 'Shopping' and I think that Robert Peston is a useful tool in language learning as he enjoys rolling words around in his mouth as well as accelerating up from a low to high pitch and then landing very slowly on words. The other speakers are also useful as they highlight different soundshapes.

The instruction to students was to not listen to what they were saying but to listen to **how** they were speaking. The question I wrote on the board was: What are the speakers doing with their voices when they speak? Even the very low level learners understood this after I had carefully repeated the question. They also understood that there was no need to try to understand any of the meaning.

I then played the link and was pleased with the response to my question from learners: words such as warm, excited, slow, relaxed and quick/fast were offered by students. I wrote these on the board and underlined the key two that I was interested in: slow and quick.

This became my starting point as this was what had been picked up by my students. If they had said: up and down voices then that would have been my starting point. In other words, this can easily be a student-led activity. I used the same clip for higher levels, level 1 and 2, and worked on pauses, filled pauses, intonation, rhythmic balancing, slowing down, fast speaking and pulling out of words and the different ways of pulling out words and the reasons for this, what *Phonology for Listening* calls ‘stepping stones’.

Back to the Entry 1 class, I then played part of the video again, this time in very small sections, with students listening for fast and slow speaking. I then brought in the idea of a moment of silence just before a word was said slowly and students listened for that as well.

Preparation for this kind of listening takes a little time. For example, I noted in advance where the clip was clearly slow and fast. Below are some of the soundshapes I looked at, where they came in the clip and how the words were said:-

<u>Time in clip</u>	<u>What said</u>	<u>How said</u>
2.18	Take this shop	slow
	My local grocer	quick
3.02	We excel at retail	slow
3.44	We fell in love with shopping	Low and quick
3.58	Any time soon	Slow (high to low)
4.12	World class	slow

For Entry 1, I concentrated on the last few minutes of the recording as that was where there was the highest cluster of slow and fast sounds. What I wanted to achieve was for students to have a sense of what first language speakers do when they speak English – a purely listening outcome for our learners. You can see that at 3.58 there is the phrase ‘any time soon’ with the word ‘any’ being in the citation form. This is interesting for our Entry 1 learners as within the stream of speech where much is too fast for them to pick out words, our target word from the previous exercise: some/any is clearly highlighted.

Future classes with Entry 1 will seek to explore the 'garden' and 'jungle' versions of some/any in other clips from Youtube.

But within our purely listening outcome there are a number of enjoyable classroom activities. Here are some examples, again at Entry 1.

1. Listen and repeat the slow speaking, copying the first language speaker.
2. Then add to the slow speaking by saying one or two of the fast words before the slow speaking, and make a strong difference between the two. For example (not taken from the clip):-

Shopping for any food is (said quickly)+ pause + *very easy* (said loud and slow). At level 1 and level 2 you can also add in the exaggerated hanging on of the 'v' sound in 'very' pushing air out of your mouth as you do so which gives you the mondegreen 'ferry' , which works well for emphasis and which first language speakers do naturally when they are stressing this word.

3. Only listen to the fast speaking – a very small section. Say what sounds you can hear. Gradually build up from the blurred sounds and pick out bit by bit until something sensible can be heard. Like this:-

1)ionrillylieshoin. 2) i don rilly lie shobbin. 3) i don rilly lie shoppin 4) I don't really like shopping **(From an idea by Sue Sullivan, New Zealand).**

So, to wrap up, these listening goals I have added in to my classes every week in various ways, one of which – the youtube clip - I have described in some detail here. This branch of phonology is innovative (from *Phonology for Listening*), has a strong and wholly positive impact on all my classes, is successful with my students (noted positively in their ILPs) and can have the added benefit of improving students' own speaking. I have also used the techniques learnt from *Phonology for Listening* in my English classes with first language speakers to help them improve their own delivery when it comes to the formal speaking of their exams. So it can be useful not only in the ESOL class.

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