LISTENING STRATEGIES

A number of specific strategies for helping students to develop skills in listening follow.

Total Physical Response (TPR)

TPR or Total Physical Response is a systematized approach to the use of commands developed by the psychologist James Asher in the late 1960s (see Asher 1986). TPR has become a common and effective means of introducing children and adults to a foreign language, and in particular to listening—especially in early stages of instruction.

In TPR, teachers interact with students by delivering commands, and students demonstrate comprehension through physical response. The following sequencing is recommended by Berty Segal (no date); examples have been added by the authors.

1. **Commands involving the entire body, large-motor skills**
   - Point to your ear.
   - Put your left hand on your head and turn around three times.
   - Walk backwards to the front of the class and shake the teacher’s hand.
   - Clap your hands for Mary. She did a good job.

2. **Commands involving interaction with concrete materials and manipulatives, beginning with classroom objects**
   - Take the red circle and place it in the wastebasket.
   - Pick up your green crayon and lay it under your chair.
   - Walk to the chalkboard, take a piece of yellow chalk, and draw a picture of the sun.

3. **Commands relating to pictures, maps, numbers, and other indirect materials**
   - Go to the map and trace the outline of Paraguay.
   - Go to the picture of the bathroom and (pretend to) brush your teeth.
   - Go to the wall chart and point to a food from the fruit and vegetables group.

When giving a command for the first time, the teacher models the desired behavior, removing the model after several repetitions of the same command. After students respond confidently to a single command, the teacher begins to combine commands in original and unexpected ways, leading students to discover that they can understand and respond to language expressed in ways that they have never heard before.
Students are not expected to respond orally until they feel ready, and early responses involve role reversal (a student takes on the role of the teacher and gives commands to others in the class), and some yes-no and one-word replies to the teacher’s questions. This strategy involves little or no pressure to speak in the early stages.

Some very important aspects of the strategy include the creation of the combination of commands so that students perform several actions in sequence. The sequence of commands must never become predictable, and students must be confident that the teacher will never embarrass them.

In its simplest terms, TPR seeks to teach new concepts through the body. Students discover that they can make the connection themselves between new language and its meaning, without translation into English or explanation by the teacher.

The Natural Approach

The Natural Approach (Krashen and Terrell 1983) is an effort to apply the insights of second-language acquisition – and especially Krashen’s five hypotheses – in the beginning language classroom. Curriculum and activities are designed to be compatible with the stages of language acquisition as outlined in the chart below.

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In this approach the teacher seeks to help students “bind” new language by providing experiences and associations with vocabulary in a meaningful context, thus making the language both more meaningful and more memorable. Extended listening experiences are provided during Stage 1 of language acquisition, drawing on TPR, use of vivid pictures to illustrate concepts, and active involvement of the students through physical contact with the pictures and objects being discussed.

In Stage 2 students are drawn into oral participation by means of yes-no questions, choice-making, and open-ended statements. The Natural Approach outlines a useful sequencing of teacher questions to help move students from a listening mode to a speaking mode:

**Step 1: Students Respond with a Name**
Who has the cheese?
Who forgot his pencil?

**Step 2: Yes-No Question**
Does Helena have the cheese?
Did Duane forget his pencil?

**Step 3: Either-or Question, Using Nouns, Verbs, Adjectives, Adverbs**
(The student answer is contained in the question)
Does Helena have the cheese or the bread?
Is the cheese Swiss or cheddar?
Did Duane forget his ruler or his pencil?
Is the cheese on the bread or on the floor?

**Step 4: What, When, Where, Who Questions**
(Students answer with a single word, moving toward a phrase answer)
What does Helena have?
What kind of cheese is this?
Where is the cheese?
What did Duane forget?

**Step 5: Students Answer with the Entire Sentence or Action.**
What did Duane do this time?

Through the use of context and personalization, the listening and speaking practice of Stage 1 and Stage 2 are made meaningful rather than mechanical. Only at Stage 3 does communication really begin to take place, after language and meanings have been acquired and nurtured over some time.
**Gouin Series**

With this strategy, the teacher prepares a series of six to eight short statements describing a logical sequence of actions that takes place in a specific context – getting up in the morning, cooking a meal, using the library, making a phone call. These statements should all include concrete action verbs and use the same tense and the same person throughout. The teacher presents the statements to the class orally, accompanying them with pantomime of the actions involved. It is useful to have simple props and visuals for at least some of the activities.

The class responds first through pantomime, first as a group and later as individuals. As with TPR, it is important for the teacher to stop modeling the actions as soon as students can be expected to respond to the language alone. Later students imitate the statements while doing the actions.

Here are some examples:

**Making Fondue**

I take the fondue pot.
I plug it in.
I pour the chocolate.
I put in some cream.
I stir it.
I smell it.
I taste it.
I say: “Yum, yum it’s good!”

**Going to Class**

I look for my materials.
I go to class.
I take off my hat.
I take out my gum.
I greet the teacher.
I sit down.
I hear the bell.
I take out my homework.

In her workshops for teachers, Constance K. Knop has identified the following values of the Gouin series in language instruction:

1. It links language to action and visuals, leading to improved comprehension.
2. It teaches appropriate verbal and physical behavior, making it especially useful for teaching cultural behaviors, as well as for shaping classroom behavior.
3. It is easy to recall because it has multiple meaning reinforcers.
   - Physical actions
   - Visuals and props
   - Logical sequence
   - Appeal to several senses
   - Beginning, middle, end

The cultural potential of Gouin series is illustrated by the example below, intended for a German classroom:

“Eating a Sandwich the German Way”
“Oh, I’m really hungry!!”

1. I lay my hands on the table.
2. I take my fork in the left hand.
3. I take my knife in the right hand.
4. I stick my fork in the sandwich.
5. I cut (a piece of) the sandwich with the knife.
6. I eat the sandwich.
7. I say, “That tastes good!”

Audio-Motor Unit

This strategy incorporates elements of TPR and him Gouin series. The teacher creates a series of commands that evoke a sequence of actions taking place in a specific context – for example, a French picnic, a visit to a café, making a (foreign) telephone call, and so forth. These commands are recorded on an audio tape, preferably by a native speaker. The teacher plays the tape in class and pantomimes the actions in sequence as they are commanded. The class then joins the teacher in the pantomime on subsequent hearings of the tape. Later, the commands can be recombined, and students can proceed to role reversal and other forms of active use of the language (Kalivoda et al 1971).

Descriptions. The teacher describes an object or a picture, preferably one in color, that has high interest and vivid action and/or cultural value, constantly using gestures and elements from the object or the picture to make the meaning clear. Listening comprehension is checked through yes-no, short-answer, or either-or questions, or by means of pointing or otherwise identifying information from the picture.

   Point to the cap on Whistler’s mother.
   Is the woman standing by the chair?
   Put your thumb on the rocking chair.
   Hold up a picture of your mother.
Demonstrations. The teacher or a guest (or native) speaker gives instructions on how to complete a task or recounts an experience, making heavy use of props, pictures, pantomime, and other visual aids to comprehension. For example, the teacher might demonstrate the steps in setting the table in the foreign culture, or a guest speaker might describe how to tie-dye fabric. There should be frequent rephrasing during the presentation, just as it might occur in real conversation, and regular comprehension checks throughout. The following steps are recommended.

1. Make the presentation.
2. Rephrase the presentation.
3. Check student comprehension.
   - Yes-no (true-false, logical-absurd)
   - Either-or
   - Short answer

Storytelling. Storytelling is a natural choice as a listening activity for the K-8 foreign language classroom. In the story many values come together: Egan (1979, 1986) identifies the story form as one of the most effective tools for communicating new information to young learners, and Bruner (1990) makes the even stronger claim that our perception of the world is shaped by the stories to which we are exposed and that we have internalized. Certainly the myths, folk tales, fairy tales, and legends of a culture constitute a direct and pleasurable means of communicating cultural ideas and values, and in the foreign language classroom these stories an give children a cultural experience in common with children living in the target culture.

Storytelling has additional pedagogical values for the foreign language classroom. Wajnryb (1986) identifies the following reasons for telling stories in the language learning classroom:

1. The purpose of telling a story is genuinely communicative.
2. Storytelling is linguistically honest. (It is oral language, meant to be heard).
3. Storytelling is real! (People do it all the time).
4. Storytelling is sensual.
5. Storytelling appeals to the affective domain.
6. Storytelling caters to the individual while forging a community in the classroom.
7. Storytelling provides listening experiences with reduced anxiety.
8. Storytelling is pedagogically sound.
Wajnryb suggests several steps in the storytelling process that will help beginners to prepare successfully. After choosing a suitable story, the teller can “skeletalize” it – write out the major features and characters of the story in the order of the action, but in words and phrases. This information serves as a reminder of the story line, yet allows the teller to narrate in a natural oral style, adapting to the responses and the understanding of the learners. Ryerson (1992) would add at this point the incorporation of specific vocabulary or linguistic features to be emphasized through repetition, in order to intensify the opportunities for acquisition of useful language. Wajnryb then suggests developing some form of advance organizer, perhaps presenting or recalling key vocabulary using visuals, physical actions, or other devices and then setting the stage for the action to follow. Then the storyteller begins the tale, using visuals and dramatic expression, and involving learners through actions and prediction whenever possible. Once the story has been told, many follow-up activities are possible, depending on the story itself and the aspects to which students have responded most enthusiastically.

Storytelling can provide “input” for children at even very early stages of language acquisition when the stories meet the following criteria:

1. The story is highly predictable or familiar to the children from their native Culture, with a large proportion of previously learned vocabulary. In early stages it is especially helpful to choose stories that include vocabulary representing the home and school environments of the children.
2. The story is repetitive, making use of formulas and patterns that occur regularly and predictably. In the best story choices, these repeated elements will provide language that children can later use for their own expressive purposes. Storybooks like Brown Bear, Brown Bear (1983) or When It Rains, It Rains (1970) by Bill Martin Jr., written for American children, are good examples of this type of story.
3. The story line lends itself to dramatization and pantomime.
4. The story lends itself to heavy use of visuals and realia to illustrate its content and progress.

Authentic stories from the target culture, when they meet the above criteria, are the ideal choice, because they provide cultural as well as language input. All stories that meet these criteria can be presented without use of English, relying entirely on visuals, pantomime, and the children’s existing knowledge of the story or the situation to make meaning clear. “The Three Bears” is an example of a story containing all of the above features. The teacher may check comprehension during or after the telling by using physical responses (point to the big bear, hold up the little bowl), yes-no questions, and other levels of the Natural Approach sequence described above.
After the story has been told several times, children may pantomime the story as the teacher tells it again. This “physical story telling” can be carried even further, as the teacher recombines previously learned TPR commands with familiar story material to create a new story that the children act out as the teacher tells it.

**Story Reading:** Reading stories aloud has the additional benefit of connecting narrative with the printed page. The teacher can successfully read very familiar stories aloud at an early stage of language acquisition, especially if the book is heavily illustrated. While reading aloud, it’s helpful to point to the words or lines as they are read, to emphasize the connection of oral language to print, even before learners are actually reading. Most primary school teachers follow a pattern of introducing the book by title and identifying the author and the illustrator, and then reading dedications aloud, so that children think of books as communication created by real authors and artists, often with a specific audience in mind. During the reading the teacher may pause frequently to comment on the illustrations or the action, to involve students in reactions or predictions, or to clarify some aspect of the story.

**Listening Activities Integrate with Other Language Skills.** The emphasis in each of these listening activities is on the development of associations between the language that is heard and the meaning that language communicates; at this stage students are not expected to imitate the language, just to understand it. In each of the strategies that emphasize listening, there is some provision for speaking, usually as a natural outgrowth of the communication that takes place within the activity. There is no emphasis on the direct teaching of oral skills. Reading and writing skills can be incorporated for many of the strategies as a part of the natural, communicative extension of the activity.
STARTING POINT: SPEAKING

In the communicative classroom oriented to the principles of second-language acquisition, acquiring speaking skills is not viewed as a separate category that receives isolated attention. Students begin to speak when they have acquired sufficient language through exposure to a rich and varied language environment – and when they have something to say. Once students begin to express themselves orally, it becomes the teacher’s task to provide them with encouragement and opportunity to communicate with one another and with the teacher in a wide variety of ways. Much of this book, especially Chapters 7, 8 and 14, is concerned with this task.

Within the communicative classroom environment, however, learners may need to be able to express some messages before they have had a chance to fully assimilate the language to the point at which oral language is ready to emerge. Many students want to be able to communicate very early in the language learning experience on topics that have meaning for them.

Classroom and School Survival

Teachers who intend to maintain a target-language environment will need to provide beginners with a number of basic expressions that will enable them to use their new language to meet basic needs in language class or during other parts of the school day. Use of these language patterns allows children to have a certain amount of control over their own environment and the conduct of the classroom. Phrases requesting permission to sharpen a pencil, to go to the bathroom, to get a drink of water, or to borrow a piece of paper and other such items – as well as requests for clarification, or questions and comments about homework and schedules – all need to be taught directly if they are to be available early in the language acquisition experience. Students also need to develop a repertoire of tools for conversational management, such as requests that the speaker repeat information or slow down, or devices for deflecting a question or “marking time” while they think of a response. In early stages many of these tools must also be taught directly.
Strategies for Essential Classroom Language

One popular and effective approach for teaching essential classroom language is the use of passwords and language ladders, often demonstrated by Constance K. Knop (1985) in workshops for language teachers. Passwords are phrases such as “Please, may I sharpen my pencil?” which are taught directly and then posted with some identifying visual to assist students in recalling the meaning connection. Passwords are frequently taught at the rate of one each day, and students are then required to produce the password before leaving the class for some desired activity such as lunch, recess, passing to another class, or going home for the day. When a learner struggles to express an idea contained in a password that has already been learned, the teacher can simply refer the student to the password posted on the wall and thus assist the student in recalling the information that has already been learned. These are examples of sample passwords:

- May I go to the bathroom (office, drinking fountain, cloakroom, etc.)?
- How do you say that?
- Can you help me?
- I can’t find my eraser (paper, book, homework, lunch ticket, etc.).
- Give me a jump rope, please.
- Please leave me alone.
- I have a stomachache (headache, sore throat, etc.).
- I am almost finished.
- May I get my coat (book, pencil, band instrument, etc.)?
- I need paper.
- I’ll help you.
- This is very nice of you.
- Hello. How are you?
- Close the door (window, desk, locker), please.
- Please pull down the shade.
- May I borrow that?
- That I mine. (That belongs to me).
- Don’t look at my paper.
- I’ll share that with you.
- My bus was late.
- Sit down next to me.
- He was sitting in my place.
- What are we having to eat?
- I was absent yesterday.
- I don’t know how to say that.
- I can’t say that.
- ______ is absent today.
- What time is it?
- May I have a tissue?
One good strategy for choosing passwords to teach is to listen to student conversations and note which expressions they use frequently but always in English. Passwords will be most effective if they are learned because of a real need to communicate the information involved.

Language ladders are similar to passwords in that they are also phrases taught one per day. They usually represent a series of different ways to express a similar idea or a similar need, often in different registers, degrees of politeness, or social context. For example, a language ladder might include levels of reaction to a homework assignment, or different ways of giving a compliment or encouragement to fellow group members in a cooperative learning situation. Language ladders, like the one which follows, are posted on the wall with accompanying visual cues, and they are usually sequenced or clustered to show their relationship and to assist the student in remembering their meaning.

Dialogues, Songs, Rhymes, Pattern Phrases for Games

Some other components of the curriculum are also usually taught directly. The dialogue, long a component of elementary school foreign language instruction, can serve as a rehearsal of language that is useful in actual situations.

That’s a good idea!

Good job!

Good work!

That’s a good point!

The language ladder helps students to recall language they can use in managing their lives in the target language.
Songs, rhymes, and pattern phrases for games are also often the object of direct oral teaching and are not acquired after an extended period of exposure. Even elements that are to be taught directly, however, should include a large proportion of language that is already familiar through other communicative activities in the classroom, and the meaning of the language must be very clear to students before any practice is begun.

Especially in primary school, some count-out rhymes and singing games with short, rhythmic language content can be played without direct teaching of the phrases. The teacher begins by providing the language while the class plays along, and gradually the children begin to join in with the language as well as the actions. This strategy is most likely to be effective with action-oriented games that are highly motivating and call for many repetitions.

SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS FOR DIRECT TEACHING OF SPEAKING

While most aspects of audio-lingual methodology are a poor fit in today’s communicative climate, audiolingualism did lead to the development of several strategies that can be useful even now to assist with the direct teaching of oral skills. While most students speaking should occur naturally, in communicative settings, the teacher may want to use occasional practice activities; the following suggestions will help him or her to do so in an effective manner.

1. Teacher Repetition

During activities calling for a group or whole-class response, the teacher should never repeat a response with the students. It is very tempting for teachers to try to model a quick, clear, vigorous response by playing the role of cheerleader. However, students quickly become dependent on the teacher’s leadership. Moreover, teachers who speak with the students are not in a position to evaluate the quality of the student response and the degree to which students may actually have mastered the material.

2. Modeling

Teachers should always model the language with natural speed and intonation, especially in practice settings when they might otherwise tend to emphasize those components of the message that most require practice. When students seem to be having difficulty with a sentence, it is a better strategy to repeat the message several more times, using natural speed and intonation, than to distort the language by slowing it down or giving difficult segments inappropriate emphasis.
3. Backward Buildup

Most language in songs, passwords, rhymes, and dialogues should be simple and direct enough for children to understand and learn it in complete utterances. When an utterance is longer than about seven syllables, however, it is often necessary to teach the utterance part by part instead of in a single stream. Under these circumstances it can be helpful to segment the utterance into meaning units so that, for example, prepositions and their objects are not separated into different practice segments. It is also useful to begin teaching the utterance with the segment closest to the end. In the sentence “I wasn’t able to get my homework done yesterday,” the teacher might proceed as follows:

…..yesterday.
…..done yesterday.
…..my homework done yesterday.
…..to get my homework done yesterday.
…..able to get my homework done yesterday.
…..I wasn’t able to get my homework done yesterday.

Backward build up should be used only in very specific situations, with language that is understood by the children and highly motivating, such as a very important password, a song that is integral to the rest of the lesson, or the language necessary for a game or for expressing a message of considerable importance to the children.

4. Answer Precedes Question

When dealing with question-answer exchanges, it is useful to teach the answer first and then the question. For example, one might teach “It is three o’clock.” “Today is Wednesday.” “My name is Mary.” “I feel terrible.” All of these are statements that can stand alone and that clearly communicate information that might have value to the hearer. Once the answer has been learned, the statement can be cued with the question, and the question becomes a form of input: “What time is it?” “It is three o’clock.” As final step he question is learned, and the question and the answer can then be used together in natural settings. This is a much more natural approach than teaching the question first, since questions really cannot stand alone without an answer. When the answer is taught first, the question is always practiced in combination with an answer, thus creating much more meaningful, realistic practice settings. These experiences lead naturally to awareness of typical adjacency pair in the target language, typical questions and answers that always occur together.