

Controlling the teacher

Paul Nation describes an activity where the students take control and play an active role in improving their listening.

Teaching listening often becomes testing listening because the spoken word is so transitory that it is gone before we can help our learners to perceive and comprehend it. The use of tape recorders gives learners some control over what they hear because they can stop the tape or play it back when they need to. The exercise described here is an attempt to turn the teacher into a flexible and intelligent tape recorder so that the learners gain control of the listening material. When the learners have this control, listening exercises can become learning exercises. Let us look first at an example of the exercise and then examine its features, variations, and benefits.

The controlled listening procedure

The teacher makes sure that the learners know the following sentences and if necessary writes them on the blackboard so that they can be seen during the exercise.

Stop please.

Please say the last word (sentence/paragraph) again.

Speak more slowly please.

What was the word in front of king?

What is the meaning of convince?

How do you spell apply?

Then he/she tells the learners that he/she is going to read a passage aloud for them to listen to. He/she tells them that after they listen to the passage he/she will check their answers to some questions about the passage. The teacher gives the learners copies of the questions or writes the questions on the blackboard. He/she also tells the learners that at any time during the reading of the passage they can ask him/her to stop, read more slowly, repeat, go back to the beginning, spell a word, explain the meaning of a word, or read more quickly. Then, the learners look at the questions and listen. But, the teacher deliberately reads the first two sentences of the passage too quickly for the learners to follow. Then he/she stops, and looks at the learners for instructions. He/she does not do anything further until the learners give him/her instructions. When the teacher finally reaches the end of the passage and the learners have no further instructions for him/her, he/she asks the learners for the answers to the questions.

Learner control

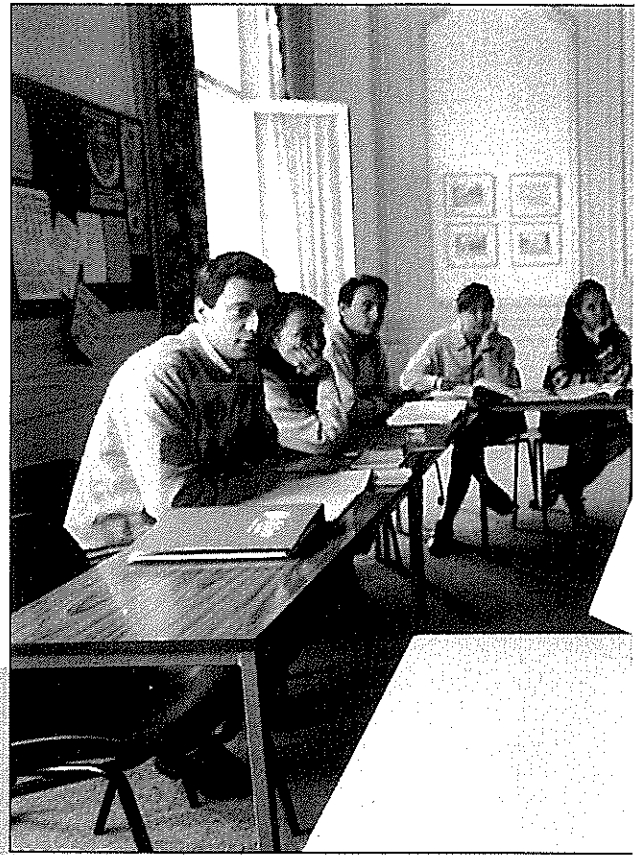
The purpose of the exercise is for the learners to take control of the delivery of the

information. They do this by telling the teacher what to do, to slow down, repeat, explain and so on. In this way the exercise becomes a true learning exercise and not an excuse for a test. The most difficult part of the exercise for the teacher is encouraging the learners to control the presentation of the passage. The teacher can use several ways to encourage the learners to give instructions.

- 1** The teacher deliberately reads too slowly or too quickly.
- 2** After every sentence, two sentences, or paragraph, the teacher stops reading, and looks at the learners for further instructions.
- 3** The teacher asks certain learners questions like, *Did you understand all of that? Do you want me to repeat? Can you answer the first seven questions now?* If the learners answer that they do not understand or that they want to repeat, then the teacher says *Well, please tell me what to do* and waits until the learners tell him.
- 4** The learners know the questions they will have to answer when the teacher finishes reading and when they have no more instructions to give. So, this encourages the learners to ask the teacher to repeat, spell, explain and so on, so that they can answer the questions in the test. Encouraging the learners to control the teacher's reading is an amusing activity but it is also extremely important.

Testing with controlled listening

- 1** The teacher tells the learners what the test will be.
- 2** The teacher reads the material while the learners control the reading by asking



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'Please say the last word again.'

the teacher to slow down, repeat, go back to the beginning, re-read the part containing the answer to question 10 and so on.

3 When the teacher finishes the reading and there are no more instructions from the learners, the learners are tested. In the illustration given above, the test consists of the teacher checking the answers to the questions.

Variations: To vary the exercise, the teacher can read the passage several times, each time with a different purpose and thus with the learners seeking different information.

The test at the end of the controlled listening exercise can be:

- 1** a recognition and spelling test of words in the passage;
- 2** a multiple-choice or translation test of some of the vocabulary in the passage;
- 3** a sentence-repetition test where individual learners repeat sentences from the passage after the teacher says them;
- 4** a question and answer test (as described above);
- 5** a dictation test of part of the passage;
- 6** a sentence analysis test where the teacher says a sentence and the learners write the subject and verb;
- 7** a cloze test where the learners are given part of the passage with words missing;
- 8** a summary of the main ideas in the passage.

Benefits

Controlled listening has the following benefits:

- 1 The learners are not passive. They must ask questions and take an active part in the lesson to ensure that they get the necessary information. Hopefully this attitude to learning will transfer to other parts of the English lesson and to other subjects.
- 2 The exercise provides the opportunity for repeated attention to spoken language. This attention is purposeful and highly motivated.
- 3 The learners can give their attention to what they find difficult. Thus they can make efficient use of their learning time.
- 4 The learners are helped to master a strategy that will help them in their learning and use of language.

Controlled listening is an attempt to put some of the control of learning where it is needed – with the learners. When the learners have control, they can adapt the pace, repetition, and explanation of material to their own requirements. In this way, listening becomes a learning activity.

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