A TEACHER-PRODUCED MONOLOGUE AS A FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHING LISTENING

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Abstract

The article describes a framework for teaching listening to a group of Academy of Economic Studies undergraduates. In the first part the article explores teaching listening by means of an original monologue and then highlights the pedagogical benefits of the approaches, illustrating it through a teacher-produced monologue adapted from a published English textbook. The article also includes a survey of the lesson stages and the teaching activities built around the teacher-produced monologue, as well as a brief discussion of the ways in which the listening practice can be integrated with the development of other skills.

Keywords: teacher-delivered monologue, receptive skills, productive skills, integrated
            approach

The teaching situation

The monologue lying at the core of this paper was prepared for a group of first year undergraduates of the FABIZ – Business Administration in Foreign Languages – Department of the Academy of Economic Studies. In this department business education is conducted entirely in English, therefore the students' level of English proficiency can be safely described as upper-intermediate. English is part of their curriculum in the first two years of study and year one is dedicated to expanding and consolidating their grasp of business skills and vocabulary. This is quite an ambitious goal given their 80-minute session offered every week.

Their main needs – comprehensively assessed through student interviews and questionnaires administered in the opening session, performance in class and quality of written homework over the first 4 sessions – appear to focus on improving listening comprehension, developing professional communication skills, presentation skills included, and overall academic skills.

Given the perceived student needs above, we need to become aware also of the logistic challenges that the language teacher in charge of the language instruction of FABIZ students commonly faces on account of the specific campus layout and access to resources. The FABIZ Department is off the main campus where the

teaching equipment is available. As a result, creative solutions involving teacher and student resources are the preferred approach adopted in order to overcome this temporary drawback.

As a result, a teacher-generated monologue is always a handy solution in teaching environments where access to resources is temporarily limited. Such solutions are convenient in that they meet their pedagogical goals, although they unfailingly add additional pressure on the teacher, as the following sections will reveal.

Objectives

The listening session under focus was designed to meet the students' needs in terms of language skills development and ESP content acquisition. Therefore the main objectives included developing global listening comprehension, identifying relevant information from the flow of speech, developing listening comprehension strategies, including prediction and meaning inference from the context, ultimately developing associative thinking skills.

In this particular case the development of what is traditionally referred to as receptive skills appeared to be closely interrelated with the improvement of academic skills, e.g. understanding a lecture on a specialized topic, developing the ability to transfer information from an oral text to a graphic representation of it and back to the oral channel. Actually the ultimate intended aim was help the students develop the ability to talk through a graphic representation so as to make a short presentation of some professional issue relying on the information presented in graphic form.

In addition, the session was intended to further the integration of linguistic skills, e.g. taking notes while listening to a monologue, thus providing comprehensive practice of the productive skills – speaking and writing – for effective communication in a professional environment.

Lesson stages and tasks. Rationale

The stages of the lesson were intended to ensure the students' progress from known linguistic information to new one, from the development of the receptive skills to that of productive ones. Therefore the lesson was sequenced so as to enable the learners to build on previously acquired information in English and on their background knowledge in the mother tongue. The opening stage of the lesson also served the purpose of motivating the students by announcing the objectives of the session and clarifying the focus, thereby highlighting its relevance to the students' needs.

As the teacher-delivered monologue moved towards the presentation proper, the lesson entered a new stage intended for developing receptive skills for global

listening comprehension. Certain parts of the monologue also offered practice opportunities for listening for specific information, details or specific terminology, that is bottom-up listening practice. The middle section of the lesson combined eliciting and predicting, followed by listening to check predictions, thus attempting to develop strategies – listening and thinking strategies – as well as integrated skills. At a later stage the focus tended to shift towards developing productive skills, eliciting not just items of information and vocabulary as before, but also small stretches of discourse, such as brief descriptions produced by following the pattern made available in the teacher's monologue.

The final stages of the lesson were meant to further learner autonomy by inviting the students to engage in activities leading to the development of productive skills, such as transferring information or interpreting tables; at this stage the students were no longer expected to follow the pattern originally produced by the teacher, but to come up with whatever patterns they deemed adequate for serving their respective linguistic purposes. The productive stage was concluded by micro-presentations relying on information transfer. The final stage provided further opportunities for productive skills development by means of the writing activity included at the end of the lesson.

The actual tasks

As a pre-listening activity the students were handed a handout with the grid below and were invited to predict the topic of the presentation and the use they were going to make of the grid.

Type of business	Number of members	Source of capital	Profit	Legal requirements	Control	Liability	Examples

In the while-listening activity the students were instructed to use the grid in order to take notes while listening to a presentation on the types of on the business organizations in the UK.

The post-listening activities were meant to check listening comprehension and to induce student use of the listening input in speaking and writing activities. The activities organized at this stage of the session engaged the students in a range of tasks involving both group and individual work. A sample of the balanced mix of post-listening activities is provided in what follows:
  a. (group work) students compare notes;
  b. (group work) each group of four students are invited to deal with a hypothetical situation: they have the resources to set up a business and need to opt for one business type they learned about in the teacher's

presentation. The group prepares the presentation and then appoints a spokes person to describe the respective business organization to the class. If the presenter misses any of the major features mentioned in the original presentation, points will be deducted (one point per feature) from the presenter's score and they will be awarded to the group that provides the information. The winning group will have the highest score.

c. (individual work): students work individually on a 150-word writing assignment entitled "If I had a business, I'd like it to be a …". Students are invited to consider carefully all business types presented, to choose one and justify their preference.

The monologue: Final remarks

The listening text in this case was a monologue in the form of an informal lecture. The listening was developed from a reading text in Longman Commercial Communication. Student's Book (Stanton, A.J., Wood, L.R. 1994:34-5). Its content is mainly transactional although interactional language is also present, alongside other mode specific features that are aimed at facilitating listening comprehension and establishing a rapport between speaker and listeners.

In order to avoid reproducing the written language in the textbook that served as a source of inspiration, thereby producing a stilted monologue that sounds like a piece of written discourse read out to a captive audience, the teacher processed the reading text as follows: the information was first transferred into grid form which was used as the underlying ideational structure when actually producing the monologue. The use of the schematic notes in grid format made the actual translation of the information from the written mode to the spoken one quite effective, with the monologue conveying a sense of authentic spoken discourse. Although the initial text was designed to provide reading practice, it lent itself to smooth conversion into listening discourse by means of the teacher-developed grid.

As the teacher's purpose was "to prepare learners to be communicatively efficient" (Burgess, J. 1994. Unit 1:8), the teacher monologue designed for the purpose of teaching listening was delivered as authentic discourse, that is discourse that is authentic in nature. Consequently, the monologue consistently displayed the features of spoken language, thereby its instrumentality in furthering the development of the learners' ability to deal successfully with spontaneous, uncontrolled language. As a result, one can safely state that the monologue was authentic in nature and that it was employed for training listening strategies that are also authentic in nature. The monologue together with the ensuing activities fully met Underwood's requirement for authenticity:

It is important not only for students to hear language which sounds natural, but also for them to have listening experiences which are as authentic as possible, i.e. to do the kinds of things which listeners do in real-life situations, and not merely do exercises on the language which is used (Underwood, M. 1989:31).

In common with oral communication in general, the monologue as spoken discourse relying on written notes reveals a marked preference for simple coordination (mostly "and" and "but" were used as discourse linkers) and a simple syntax with little subordination. Discourse boundary markers like "OK" and "right", together with repetition and rephrasing, false starts and hesitations/fillers, granted the speaker the time necessary for interpreting the written notes and for monitoring her own speech as well as the students' listening comprehension. Instances of meta-language also occur (for example, "I think I've touched upon this already, "Let me see...", "I'm trying to spell out...") during the information transfer being performed by the teacher from her schematic notes to the spoken connected text.

In our specific case the students attending the listening session were never allowed to be mere eavesdroppers: they were consistently engaged in active listening; for example, in the very introductory stages of the lesson they were actively involved in identifying the aims of the lesson in relation to the relevance to their own needs and interests; through the feedback provided to the teacher, even when non-verbal, throughout the latter's monologue they helped the teacher adjust the pace of her presentation, as well as the techniques employed for granting listener support, mostly by means of rephrasing, repetition, pauses, etc.

The tasks

The tasks deriving from the monologue were also intended to help lower the listening challenge. For example the grid could be viewed as a tool for organising information that could assist the students in the process of filtering new lexical items. Grids are adequate for organizing the information derived from descriptive texts since the latter display attributes and the grids can help represent the performance of the objects under study in terms of the criteria selected. Grids also afford a correlative picture relying on various pieces of descriptive information.

The grids the students were invited to fill out during the while-listening activity proved useful also in developing their prediction skills, in that such a type of ideational structure arouses expectations of descriptive language, with multiple instances of adjectival expressions attached to link verbs.

Integration of skills

In line with the authenticity tenet advocated previously, the monologue as a listening activity intended for training the students to acquire and react to its transactional content can generate activities than can promote the development of other macro skills. Just like in real life: we retain information communicated orally only to share it with somebody else, either verbally or in writing. Given the communicative and holistic nature of our teaching approach, it is but natural for our monologue-based listening session to allow for the students' progress from linguistic reception to production. In the actual listening session the information was first acquired from the teacher's monologue and then used in subsequent speaking and writing activities. The monologue provided generous input for extensive speaking and writing practice, that is listening turned into an effective means for reinforcing the other skills. Consequently, we can safely conclude that the session afforded effective macro skills integration.

In retrospect, the main merit of the monologue was that it made for the progression from the practice of receptive skills to that of productive skills. There were also instances providing opportunities for developing transfer skills, that is transferring knowledge acquired in the mother tongue, that is background knowledge.

Another merit was that it offered students the opportunity to engage in authentic listening, despite the technical limitations of language classes at some of the new teaching locations off the main campus.

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Annex: Tapescript of the monologue

In the first part of our session we're going to look at types of business organizations. I know we've touched upon this issue previously and you've raised lots of questions. I'll present to you four types of businesses and I'll invite you to fill in the characteristics of each type in the grid in your handout. Please take a look at it.

As you can see, the grid gives you the rubrics for organizing the characteristics of each type of business. Please copy the grid in your copy books. Are you clear about the way you'll go about sorting the information I'll provide on each type of business? … Do you have any questions about the wording of the rubrics? OK. What can you notice? The type of business is mentioned in the grid, you only need to write down the characteristic features of each type.

What will you need these for? Any guess? … At the end of my presentation I'd like you to compare notes in your group of four. You'll have 10 minutes for that. Then we'll have a contest in which each group will make a presentation of one of the types of business you've got information about from my presentation. Let's say you have the money, the vision, the drive, … everything it takes to start a business. Will you go for this type or that? In your group you'll need to agree upon one type and then justify your choice in terms of the facts and features available in my presentation. Of course you will work on the presentation as a group, so you'll need to appoint a spokes person. If the presenting group misses any of the features mentioned in the original presentation and the groups in the audience can provide the respective information, points will be deducted (one point per feature) and they'll be awarded to the groups that have been listening closely to my presentation.

Now a few words about the prize that the winning group will get. What is it? What? … Precisely what each of you dreams of: a beautiful handout with additional information on this very topic. This additional information will come in

handy when writing your homework. I mean really extensive information for the winning group and basic stuff for the other groups. You'll surely go for the extensive information. It's so good!

Now before we start I'd like to make sure that you can read the grid correctly. When you look at differences between types of business organizations you'll surely focus on several major issues. Let's mention them briefly: the source of capital, that is where does the money to start the business or to expand it come from? Next, who owns or who has control of the company? Then what happens to the profit? We'd also need to know if the company has limited or unlimited reliability. And finally what legal requirements must the company satisfy? You'll need to look at all these issues when starting a business, don't you?

Let me see now… What's the simplest form of business organization? … Correct, it's the sole trader or sole proprietor. What does the name tell you about the ownership? …If you think that one person provides the money needed to start the business – what do you call that? – of course, capital, so one person puts up the capital, you are correct. This sole proprietor has complete control of the business, keeps all the profit or, if the business fails, does what …? Yes, this sole proprietor bears the loss if the business doesn't perform well and, what is even worse, has unlimited liability. As you can imagine, it's easy to start this type of business and there are no special legal requirements except that the name of the business must be registered if it is different from the owner's name. And it's not necessary to publish the accounts. Nice, isnt' it? However, it can be difficult to compete with large firms. Any guess why? … Yes, it can be very difficult to raise money for expansion. Do you know any such businesses?

(The presentation continues along similar lines and focuses, in turn, on partnerships, private limited companies and public limited ones.)