

Using the podcasts in class

For many students 'listening' is the most difficult skill. One of the reasons for this is that the word 'listening' is usually only used when referring to listening to a recording whereas students are, of course, listening all the time. "Now, we're going to do a listening," says the teacher - but haven't the students been listening to each other, or to the teacher?!

And on top of that the 'listening' is then presented in a format which is less frequent than in real life. Apart from the radio and on the phone, how often do we listen to people without seeing them speak? Not nearly as much, but in the class this is what students are expected to do. And if they do listen to a chosen channel on the radio, and certainly if they speak on the phone, they have a pretty good idea what they're going to hear.

So it's imperative a) to make students realize that speaking activities involves both listening and speaking, and b) to prepare the students as much as possible before listening to a recording to know what to expect. 'Activating schemata' is a way of aiding comprehension. The idea is that if you draw on students' prior knowledge of a topic and prepare them for any cultural differences, the easier it'll be for them to understand.

The worksheets that go with each podcast all have pre-listening tasks to activate schemata. However, decide first of all whether these are sufficient or appropriate. It may be enough for a European student to do a quiz on Spain before listening to a podcast about travelling there, but for students who have very little or no knowledge of the country this may not be suitable. Glance through the transcript - what can you do to help the students understand the podcast? What knowledge do the students have that can be used to aid comprehension? Remember that the podcasts are not made to test but to help students become better listeners, and better learners of English, so you want to support them as much as possible.

Let's say you're going to do the level 2 podcast: **The road to Damascus**. You could give students some questions the lesson before and ask them to find the answers on the Internet: Damascus is in which country? What is the main religion? What is Eid al-Adha? The phrase 'on the road to Damascus' refers to something - what is it? Find three things you think are interesting about the country. Complete this sentence: I would / would not like to go to Damascus because.... This information can be shared with the whole class before students listen to the podcast. Then it's not only going to be more enjoyable, it'll be easier to understand too. (There's a video that goes with this podcast, have a look at the information worksheet **Watching the videos** on the pie plus page which has lots of ideas how these can be used with your students).

The worksheets always include listening for gist tasks. These require students to listen to the whole podcast to get an overall idea of the topic before listening again.

Now in real life we usually listen to something just once, but that's because we know what we are listening to and why we are listening. Just as with reading many students attempt to understand every word. By doing this they can overlook the overall meaning of a text or conversation - they pay too much attention to individual words which are less important. So the students need to learn how to listen. To improve reading skills students are asked to skim a text, listening for gist is the same task. When choosing a listening for gist task we decide what we think the students should understand most about the conversation. They don't need to listen for specific details - especially if it prevents them from understanding the general meaning.

So don't be tempted to miss out this task and go straight to listening for detail - you're not helping your students. And don't be tempted to stop and replay for this task - students need to listen to everything in one go. However, having listened once (and done the listening for gist task) ask them to read the follow on questions and see how many they can answer. It doesn't matter if they can't answer any, or many. It will help them to understand what to listen for (reading questions and listening at the same time is difficult) and what's being spoken about.

Then why not consider letting the students control the stop, pause and replay buttons? Perhaps they can work together and help each other to answer the questions. Or they can work alone and then share their answers and listen again if there are differences.

Avoid letting the students read and listen at the same time. Many podcasting sites have the transcript on the screen - this may make the listening easier to understand but is it helping to improve their listening skills?

In addition, try to find ways for students to personalise the topics discussed. Have their views on Syria changed? Have they too had a bad experience with animals? Do they also think that smoking should be banned in public places? Are they addicted to their mobile phones? Can they predict the winners of the Oscars? Let these opinions lead into speaking activities (including debates), and why not get the students to record their own conversations too? Or make a video? Or a poster?

Finally, the vocabulary worksheets can be used for homework, and then the words or phrases recycled in the next lesson - activities can include 'back to the board', 'pictionary', charades, games with vocabulary cards, dictation activities, quizzes... look out for our forthcoming information worksheet on vocabulary tasks.

To summarise:

- Never start the podcasts without plenty of appropriate pre-listening tasks.
- Use the podcasts and the worksheets to *help* the students not test them.
- Give students time to listen to the podcast for gist.
- Allow plenty of opportunity for personalisation.
- Link the listening to other skills.
- Recycle the vocabulary in follow on lessons.

If you have any good ideas do tell us so we can share them with the other teachers who use the site.
