

Embracing the Challenges of Movie and Television Listening

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Hoping to bring authentic listening material into the classroom and give students a bit of real-world experience, a teacher plays a video of a famous movie about a pair of adult brothers, one of whom happens to be an autistic savant, getting to know each other for the first time. The teacher was expecting a movie full of reasonably comprehensible discussions between the brothers, but instead finds that the opening scene is a complete mess, utterly impenetrable to native speakers, much less language learners. For the first 3 minutes, the viewer faces an aural assault as three characters sitting in a makeshift office inside a warehouse simultaneously engage in separate phone conversations. The other ends of the conversations are inaudible, so each of these discussions is incomplete. What's more, one of the conversations is partly carried out in Italian! Such is the opening scene of *Rain Man* (M. Johnson & Levinson, 1988). Is it teachable?

A teacher in this situation may consider skipping the scene or seeking a more appropriate film altogether, but in so doing, major opportunities for students' listening strategy development would be missed. Using the first scene from the movie *Rain Man* as a point of reference, this chapter explores techniques for addressing such difficult situations.

CONTEXT



The approaches discussed in this chapter were inspired by and adapted to the needs of learners in a variety of contexts, beginning with adult English as a second language (ESL) learners at Cambridge Schools, an intensive English program in New York City, and further developed for workshops at Teachers College Columbia University, and numerous TESOL conferences to address the range of classroom situations of the novice and experienced teacher participants. Most recently,

these principles were modified to train students of English as a foreign language at various ability levels to use video for self-directed learning at Kanda University of International Studies, in Chiba, Japan.

CURRICULUM, TASKS, MATERIALS



Directors of movies and television programs often make careful use of camera angles to give the viewer different perspectives on a scene. Whereas a close-up shot can provide great detail at the micro level, a distant wide-angle shot can offer a sense of the big picture, showing how the action fits into its surrounding context. This chapter shows how use of movie and television material for listening instruction can effectively follow similar patterns, from both the bottom-up approach of decoding individual words and the top-down approach of using prior knowledge to aid comprehension. Classroom use may focus on the story and language in close-up, with the individual details parsed out and analyzed for the sake of understanding virtually every language feature. On the other hand, the wide-angle perspective can be used to encourage students to work toward a broad understanding of gist, developing confidence in their ability to understand and enjoy the material as an entertaining form of listening practice.

The Wide-Angle Approach

With the right techniques, even the viewing of potentially frustrating scenes such as the beginning of *Rain Man* can be turned into satisfying experiences that provide useful listening practice. Although turning on the subtitles may seem to be the obvious solution, doing so might actually be of little use for dealing with the chaos of the introductory scene. Indeed, it will only reveal the disjointedness and incompleteness of the conversations and the disproportionate use of uncommon vocabulary such as *fuel emissions* and *EPA*. A more rewarding approach might be to help learners approach the scene for the first time in the same way that native speakers would.

It is relatively rare for people to spend their money to see a film without first having an informed expectation of what it is about. Trailers, television commercials, and other forms of advertising do their best to raise the profile of specific films, and newspapers and magazines make a business of reviewing the latest movies to help the public make educated decisions about where to invest their time and money. In a sense, it is therefore unrealistic for language learners to be expected to understand a movie from the start without such background knowledge. A movie's trailer (often included on a DVD's extras) can be used effectively to provide an introduction to the subject matter, simultaneously offering excellent listening practice on its own merits. The short length of trailers makes them ideal for repeated viewings with different wide-angle listening purposes, such as identifying tone, making inferences, getting the gist, and making predictions. In

the process, schema are activated that can scaffold students' comprehension of the film itself.

After viewing the trailer, language learners are armed with the background knowledge of a typical moviegoer. They are ready to watch a scene, such as the opening of *Rain Man*, and speculate about the director's or writer's intentions, asking themselves, "Is it critical to understand all the details from this opening cacophony of three simultaneous phone conversations? Or am I only supposed to get a broad sense of the emotions and relationships?" In other words, is it necessary to get a close-up perspective, or is a wide-angle view sufficient?

Another way of activating schema and helping learners listen for general information is to raise awareness of the support given by the visuals. Muting the sound during repeated viewings can often be a great way of boiling a scene down to its essence. Silently viewing the first scene of *Rain Man* reveals ample information about who the characters are, how they are related to one another, and what sort of day they are having. By removing distracting and potentially overwhelming aspects of the aural input, students may find it easier to intuit the broad brushstrokes of the scene, and they may also feel greater freedom to take chances and make guesses about the story, because they have less input to potentially contradict. From a classroom and time management perspective, this technique can be a good way of helping students feel satisfied that they have understood enough to be able to proceed with watching the movie, rather than getting bogged down looking for answers to countless questions that may ultimately prove irrelevant. Even if many of the details remain inscrutable, the students will understand enough and still have plenty of energy left to invest in other scenes more worthy of their efforts. It can be helpful to remind learners that,

listening in their native language, people never hear all the information in a message, and they do not need to; proficiency in comprehension is the ability to fill in the gaps and to create an understanding that meets one's purpose for listening. (Peterson, 2001, p. 88)

The Close-Up Approach

Naturally, detailed analysis of movies and television programs can also reveal memorable examples of everyday vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar, giving language learners valuable experience with English as it is typically spoken. In a cacophonous scene like the one in question, a strategy of "divide and conquer" can be used to break the listening task into distinct parts, providing learners with opportunities to interact and help one another come to a better understanding of the material. Students can form groups of three that are assigned to focus on listening to a specific one of the three characters. These individual listening tasks can be focused further through the provision of corresponding cloze activities or lists of specific things to listen for, such as particular grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation items of interest. After the viewing, the group members should

have time to compare notes and reach consensus on the best responses to the questions that target their particular focus. Then new three-member groups can come together in jigsaw fashion to share their distinct insights, all with the aim of generating accurate responses to a new set of questions about the bigger picture.

An approach like this can also be used to help students become critical viewers of film and television, especially if the students in groups can be assigned to pay attention to such elements as the tone, rhythms, and intensity of the score, while others watch for lighting and color, others look out for interesting props and scenery, and so on. Sensitizing students to the various artistic choices that are made in a film can be an aid to listening comprehension insofar as it can help raise awareness of common cues that can scaffold understanding. Yet another variation on this task would be to allow each group to see one distinct segment of the scene, then have members of the groups mix into new groups to share what they caught in order to collaboratively reconstruct the story. Such an approach could be quite effective at getting learners invested in working together, establishing a sort of positive role interdependence that is a proven method for promoting high-quality learning (D. W. Johnson & Johnson, 1994).

When video material is to be used not only for its entertainment value but also for the sake of getting detailed information about story and language, it makes sense to support the listening tasks with subtitles. Of course, to ensure that listening rather than reading skills are practiced, it is probably best to begin by watching the scene without subtitles so that learners can have experience working out the meaning primarily on the basis of what they hear. Meara (2005) suggests then using subtitles in a principled fashion—first watching the scene in English with the native-language subtitles on, so as to understand what is happening, and then viewing the scene once more in English with the English subtitles on in order to catch precisely what is being said. Meara (2007) suggests finally watching the scenes with native-language dubbing and target-language captions in order to learn new ways of saying things they already know. The enhanced understanding that will come from these three steps will surely go a long way toward scaffolding students' understanding as they proceed with the rest of the movie. In addition, listening to the scene one more time with no subtitles and with target-language audio can be an important and motivating means of monitoring progress.

A final point about detailed analysis of challenging scenes in filmed entertainment: A close look at misunderstandings that occur between characters can often provide students with memorable examples of important distinctions among language forms. For example, in the television program *Friends* (Crane, Kauffmann, Chase, & Bright, 1997), dim-witted Joey is often confused by his misapprehension of things he hears. In the episode "The One Where Chandler Crosses the Line," Joey's friend Chandler advises him that it's time to settle down with one of the girls he's dating. "It's time to . . . pick a lane," Chandler says. Joey's response reveals a great deal about connected speech and the multiple meanings that can be mapped onto such output; he asks, "Who's Elaine?" In a similar case

from the beginning of *Rain Man*, analysis of a seemingly small misunderstanding between Charlie and his employee Lenny can lead to valuable insight about the distinctions between various verb tenses. Charlie instructs Lenny to tell a nervous investor that the cars they are importing *passed* inspection, but when Lenny picks up the phone and feigns confidence and cool, he says the cars *are passing* inspection. Upon hearing this modification, Charlie violently kicks Lenny's desk, and Lenny corrects himself by choosing a third verb tense: he says the cars *have passed* inspection. By noticing these language choices, students can get a better sense of the differences between simple past, past progressive, and present perfect than any textbook could offer.

REFLECTIONS



To establish learners' "successfulness" with the listening task, it is only natural for comprehension checks to follow classroom viewings of movie scenes. When determining the sorts of questions to ask, teachers should consider how their approach to these listening tasks will affect the way learners perceive their own ability to make use of authentic and challenging material independently. Reliance on detail-oriented close-up questions such as "What is Charlie's problem with the EPA?" can create the impression that it is necessary to understand every word of the film, thus setting unrealistic expectations for the learners. On the other hand, wide-angle questions such as "Who is the boss?" and "How could you describe the emotions in this scene?" can help make the viewing of scenes such as the opening of *Rain Man* empowering experiences, showing learners that they have sufficient ability to enjoy such material.

As an illustration of a key principle in the use of challenging video for listening skill development, let's consider a true story about one observer's experience visiting a low-beginner ESL classroom. To the observer's amazement (and mild concern), the teacher told the students to put away their textbooks and then distributed several copies of *The New York Times* to the students in pairs. What possible good could come from the use of such material for these learners? Clearly, *The New York Times* would be far too challenging for this audience, unless it had been significantly revised and simplified, but these newspapers hadn't been modified in any way. Asking learners to engage with material so far outside their ability was sure to cause great confusion, frustration, and loss of motivation.

"Remember today's grammar? Simple past?" the teacher asked. "Look at the front page of the newspaper, and see how many examples of simple past you can find."

The students dove into the task, and before long each pair had identified numerous examples of the target grammar, to their great satisfaction. By simplifying the task rather than simplifying the text, the activity had the opposite of the effect expected by the observer. Rather than frustrating the students, it empowered them, showing that they could handle the seemingly impossible task of

looking at a high-level newspaper and understanding something. As Field (2002) puts it, “in general, students are not daunted or discouraged by authentic materials—provided they are told in advance not to expect to understand everything. Indeed, they find it motivating to discover that they can extract information from an ungraded passage” (p. 244). Therefore, it is probably best for teachers and learners to focus primarily on understanding the main idea of challenging listening passages in movies and television, going into greater depth only when natural curiosity or specific purposes lead the way.

Christopher Stillwell has worked with authentic video as an ESOL language learning tool for 16 years in such varied contexts as intensive English programs in Spain and the United States, international conferences and Teachers College Columbia University workshops, and self-access learner training at Kanda University of International Studies, in Chiba, Japan.