

# ***Narrow Listening and Audio-library: the Transitional Stage in the Process of Developing Listening Comprehension in a Foreign Language***<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

Narrow listening is an approach to developing listening skills at intermediate to advanced language levels. Narrow listening considers recent findings in L2 listening and reading research and is based on the concept of extensive listening and the principles of repetition, language authenticity, information, and topic familiarity. Drawing on the similarities that reading and listening seem to bear, this study proposes a three-stage sequence in the development of L2 listening competence: (1) Pedagogical material (intensive listening), (2) Authentic pedagogical material (Narrow listening), and (3) Authentic material (extensive listening). Current practice in language instruction has focused on the first and third stages, but the second, transitional phase, has been largely bypassed. It is argued here that narrow listening can fill this gap. Narrow listening can be implemented successfully as an audio-library which allows students to choose topics freely, to listen for content, to progress at their own pace, and to be exposed to the real personal experiences and linguistic diversity of various speakers. A description of the rationale and implementation guidelines for using narrow listening and an Audio-library are presented.

## **Introduction**

All four language skills are necessary components of any foreign language program, but it is by means of the receptive skills, listening and reading, that language students are provided with meaningful language exposure for the development of a foreign language. Researchers in L2 acquisition have claimed that listening plays an essential role in the process of acquiring a foreign language (Asher, 1977; Krashen, 2003, 1982; Potovsky, 1975; Rost, 2002; Thompson, 1995; among others); convincingly, a positive correlation between listening ability and L2 acquisition has been suggested (Feyten, 1991; Vivas, 1996; Weyers, 1999). In teaching practice this claim should translate into a major focus on, or an increased interest in, listening activities in the foreign or second language setting. Many language teachers are convinced of the crucial role of listening in the process of L2 acquisition (Berne, 1998) and the need for teaching listening as a separate skill (Mendelsohn and Rubin, 1995).

The listening material currently available in the foreign language classroom usually consists of what may be referred to as *pedagogical* material and *real world* material. Pedagogical material is tailored specifically for students in a foreign language program. Examples of this material are the tapes, CDs, and videos that usually accompany language textbooks. Authentic or real world material (TV, video, and radio) is made by and for native speakers of the target language for purposes quite different from language instruction. Campana (1984) reports that the use of real world material in the classroom is restricted or almost non-existent, especially at the intermediate level. Although the situation nowadays has changed as com-

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<sup>1</sup> This is a refereed article.

pared to twenty years ago, authentic material is not yet a regular component of the curriculum. The reasons could be a lack of material that is both authentic and interesting (Aston, 1980; Liskin-Gasparro and Veguez, 1990), a lack of ready-to-use material that actually satisfies students' needs, or the fact that providing authentic listening material and making it accessible for language students is complicated and time-consuming<sup>2</sup> (Weissenrieder, 1987). Thus, current practice in language instruction shows that language students are generally forced to jump from pedagogical material, here identified as stage 1, to real world material, stage 3, without a proper transition. In this paper I propose to bridge the gap by introducing narrow listening (from now on NL) as stage 2.

In the present article I will first review the definition and availability of listening material in a Foreign Language (FL) classroom. Then, I will elaborate on a narrow listening approach and its theoretical foundations. Finally, I will introduce a pedagogical proposal for developing listening skills at an intermediate level and its implementation in a foreign language program.

### Types of listening material in an FL classroom

As mentioned above, the listening material used in a foreign language classroom usually falls into either of these two categories:

Listening material used in an FL setting	
Pedagogical	Unauthentic: textbook tapes or CDs
Non Pedagogical	Authentic: TV, radio, video

Unauthentic material is represented mostly by listening tapes or CDs that accompany foreign language textbooks and lab manuals. The target language used is often scripted and therefore not spontaneous. The language is generally aimed at what the students' language level is believed to be, for which it is also edited grammatically and lexically in order to introduce particular vocabulary and to comply with the objectives of a lesson plan. The speakers recording the listening passage are actors who read a prepared script. Listening practice is usually focused on specific information, the listening is 'intensive', and vagueness in interpreting a passage is not allowed. Classroom listening of the passage is likely to be interrupted several times by the teacher in order to search for specific information<sup>3</sup>. These are common features of the listening material tapes that accompany textbooks:

Textbook tapes or CDs	<p><i>Material:</i> pedagogical, unauthentic, edited, non-real.</p> <p><i>Focus:</i> specific information.</p> <p><i>Activities:</i> specific content (true/false, multiple choice, matching items)</p> <p><i>Topic:</i> related to the textbook; selected by the teacher.</p> <p><i>Strategy:</i> stop and listen during the passage. Intensive listening.</p>
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The other type of listening material is *authentic material* that comes with the use of the media: TV, radio and video. Glisan (2002) indicates that authentic texts run along a continuum between material that requires life experience and little

<sup>2</sup> Nowadays, the access to authentic material is easier due to the wide use of the Internet.

<sup>3</sup> This is just a report of how unauthentic listening material is generally exploited. The author does not necessarily endorse this practice.

knowledge of the language (e.g. commercials that are accompanied by contextual visual aids, conversations on familiar topics) to material, such as TV news programs and talk shows, in which the student needs to actually understand language more than simply to rely on supporting background knowledge. These samples of real world situations could entail a degree of comprehension as demanding as that regularly required of native speakers. In working with authentic material, the listening activities usually focus on content and information. The features of this material are:

TV, radio, video	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Material</i>: authentic, unmodified, spontaneous.</li> <li>• <i>Focus</i>: general information.</li> <li>• <i>Activities</i>: get general information. personal reactions.</li> <li>• <i>Topic</i>: personal interest, usually selected by the teacher</li> <li>• <i>Strategy</i>: extensive listening</li> </ul>
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The use of the term 'authentic' requires clarification. 'Authentic text' has been defined in the literature in different ways. Galloway (1998) defines it as "written and oral communications produced *by* members of a language and culture group *for* members of the same language and culture group" (p. 133). Rogers and Medley (1988) state that authentic texts "reflect a naturalness of form and an appropriateness of cultural and situational context that would be found in the language as used by native speakers" (p. 468). Geddes and White (1978) define an authentic text in terms of its pedagogical purpose, distinguishing between (1) *unmodified authentic discourse*, which refers to language that occurs originally in a real act of communication, from (2) *simulated authentic discourse*, which is language produced for pedagogical purposes, but which exhibits features that have a high probability of occurrence in real communication (p. 137). The simulated authentic discourse mentioned by Geddes and Whites (1978) makes use of semi-scripts for which the speaker follows an outline of the information, vocabulary, and grammar structures he/she should incorporate in the discourse.

According to these definitions, then, the concept authentic has been used in terms of its source (produced by a native speaker or not), purpose (pedagogical or not), and quality of the target language (natural vs. unnatural). The three criteria for a characterization of authentic texts are shown in Table 1.

<b>Text</b>	<b>Source</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Quality of Language</b>
	Native	Pedagogical	Natural
Authentic	+	-	+
Pedagogical Authentic	+	+	+
Unauthentic	+/-	+	-

**Table 1. Characteristics of a text regarding source, purpose, and quality of language.**

Consequently, an *authentic text* is one that is prepared *for* and *by* native speakers, doesn't have a linguistic pedagogical purpose (the intended audience is native speakers or target language speakers) and whose language is considered natural. An *unauthentic text* could be prepared by either a native or non-native speaker of the target language but the intended audience is always L2 learners, and the language does not seem natural. In between these two types of texts, another possibility can be considered: a *pedagogical authentic text*, which is prepared by

native speakers, and whose language is considered natural, but is still pedagogical because the intended audience is an FL learner. A good example of *pedagogical authentic material*<sup>4</sup> is an audio-library used with a narrow listening approach. Narrow listening combines a pedagogical purpose—the material is prepared for a non-native speaking audience—and speech authenticity, i.e. a sample of real, spontaneous speech produced by native speakers. The characteristics of a narrow listening approach implemented in an audio-library are:

Audio-library & narrow listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Material</i>: pedagogical, authentic, spontaneous and brief.</li> <li>• <i>Focus</i>: general comprehension and practice in listening skills.</li> <li>• <i>Activities</i>: get general information; formulate a personal reaction.</li> <li>• <i>Topic</i>: personal interest; selected by the listener.</li> <li>• <i>Strategy</i>: <u>rehearing</u> a single segment. Extensive listening focused on a single topic.</li> </ul>
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We can conclude that the differences among these three types of material revolve around the quality of the listening material (authentic vs. unauthentic; edited vs. unedited; spontaneous vs. non-spontaneous), the focus of the listening (general vs. specific information; extensive vs. intensive), the selection of the topic (by the listener vs. by someone else, usually the teacher), the strategy followed when listening to the text (re-listening, repetitive listening or interrupted listening), and the length of the listening material (short, brief, or long). Table 2 introduces narrow listening in an FL setting with regard to the purpose, the kind of text, the primary strategy for listening and the type of material used.

Purpose	Text	Focus & Strategy for listening	Material
Pedagogical	Unauthentic	Intensive listening	Textbook tapes/CDs
	Authentic	Narrow listening	Audio-library, TV, radio, video
Non Pedagogical	Authentic	Extensive listening	TV, radio, video

**Table 2. Listening material in an FL setting.**

Since narrow listening is a novel concept and approach, I will now present what narrow listening entails and what its theoretical foundations are.

### **Narrow Listening And Its Theoretical Foundations**

Narrow listening is an approach to developing listening skills at intermediate and advanced levels.<sup>5</sup> Narrow listening refers to listening to a single segment several times for the purpose of meaning (i.e. the focus of the listening activity is getting information). Narrow listening material consists of short samples of real speech by native speakers. The listening samples can be collected from TV, radio, and video sources, or contained in a collection of audio-library material in which speakers talk freely and spontaneously about a topic of interest. This approach can be defined by

<sup>4</sup> Narrow listening material cannot be considered Simulated Authentic material (semi-scripted) since the speaker's speech does not follow an outline of the vocabulary or grammar structures to be used.

<sup>5</sup> For the distinction of the students' levels (beginner, intermediate, advanced) I am following practice as revealed in American college language programs (i.e. beginning: 1st - 2nd semesters; intermediate: 3rd to 6th semesters; advanced: 7th semester and up)

the responses to three primary questions: *Why listen?* (To get information, for the content); *How to listen?* (Extensively and by re-listening to the same passage non-stop, from beginning to end); and *What to listen to?* (Authentic speech samples of short duration about topics that are familiar and interesting to the learner).

The term narrow listening<sup>6</sup> is an extension of Krashen's (1981) narrow reading proposal. Narrow reading is defined as reading the work written by a single author or reading various texts about a single topic. The idea is simple, but, as shown by Lamme (1976) and Cho and Krashen (1994), it makes reading in the L2 highly effective. By focusing on a single author or topic, a reader becomes more familiar with a particular writing style and is exposed to contextual repetition that leads to a better understanding of meaning, and then ultimately to an awareness of form, in a very natural way.

Narrow listening is based on research findings on the receptive skills: listening and reading. It is based on the concept of extensive listening (listening in great amounts and for content) and the principles of repetition, authenticity, listening for information, and topic familiarity. In the narrow listening approach presented here, comprehension is enhanced because subjects can listen to the same input several times. *Repetitive exposure* to a listening passage has been found to be a very effective means for improving listening comprehension. Studies that have pointed out the value of repetitive exposure to language input are Blankenship, 1982; Pica, 1987; Lund, 1991; Cervantes and Gainer, 1992; Chiang and Dunkel, 1992; Terrell, 1993; Berne, 1995; Bygate, 1999; Krashen, 1996; and Gass, Mackey, Alvarez-Torres, and Fernández, 1999. From a pedagogical point of view, Chambers (1996) points out that the repetition technique reduces the students' level of anxiety because the listener knows that he/she can listen to the segment as many times as desired. Moreover, subjects studied by Rodrigo and Krashen (1996) reported that, when rehearsing a single listening passage several times, the speakers on the tape seemed to the listeners to be speaking more slowly, when in fact they, the students, were listening to the same, unaltered passage. They also appeared to distinguish sound sequences more efficiently into more and more meaningful words and chunks/phrases, thereby improving their level of comprehension with each rehearsing.

Narrow listening also requires authentic listening material, which, as with all authentic texts, focuses on culture as a natural informational context facilitating the language acquisition process. The benefits are numerous. *Authentic material* provides adult learners with an opportunity to work at a higher cognitive level (Byrnes, 1984 and Swaffar, Arens, and Byrnes, 1991) and, consequently, to develop target language skills in a more meaningful context. Authentic material, thus, leads to more effective listening skills and to cultural awareness. The use of authentic listening material, and hence of spontaneous speech by native speakers, has been recommended by several researchers (Meyer, 1984; Liskin-Gasparro and Viguez, 1990; Lund, 1991; Herron and Seay, 1991; Bacon, 1992; Harlow and Muyskens, 1994; and Schmidt-Rinehart, 1994; Omaggio, 2000).

Similarly, *topic familiarity* has been shown to aid listening comprehension by allowing language learners to more accurately predict the unknown content of a passage as they establish links between what is familiar, i.e. background knowledge, and what is new. Several researchers report that topic familiarity has a

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<sup>6</sup> The term narrow listening was coined by Stephen Krashen (1996).

positive effect on listening skills (Gass and Varonis, 1984; Glisan, 1988; Altman, 1990; Lund, 1991; Chiang and Dunkel, 1992; Dunkel, 1986; Schmidt-Rinehart, 1994; Bygate, 1999; and Gass, Mackey, Alvarez-Torres, and Fernandez, 1999). Finally, if a language teacher has succeeded in helping his or her students to *focus on meaning and information*, (i.e. listening for content, extensively and allowing for the possibility of not completely understanding every single word in the recorded passage), they will not be concerned about form, and consequently, they will be more likely to apply top-down strategies, as used by effective listeners. For a more detailed account of the benefits of a focus on information and general meaning in language acquisition see Cook, Dupuy and Tse (1994), Day and Bamford (2000), and Krashen (2003, 1993).

### **Pedagogical proposal: narrow listening as a transitional stage**

The pedagogical proposal introduced in this section is a consequence of research on reading. Researchers have realized that the language decoding processes underlying the tasks of listening and reading in L2 are remarkably similar. Because of this, it has been suggested that the findings in research on reading be extended to the treatment of listening (Glisan, 1988; Lund, 1991; and Krashen, 1996). Cook, Dupuy and Tse (1994), Rodrigo (1995, 1997b), and Krashen (1997) suggest that the ability to read literary works effectively in L2 results from a gradual process comprising three stages: graded books or readers, light reading, and, finally, literature<sup>7</sup>. In this article, I extend this proposal to listening and introduce a three-stage model in the development of L2 listening skills. The model incorporates three stages in order to account for a noticeable gap between the two already existing levels: stage 1, with a focus on intensive listening<sup>8</sup> and controlled language exposure by means of pedagogical material; and stage 3, with a focus on extensive listening and real world material. The second stage of the model is based on narrow listening. Table 3 presents the three parallel stages in the development of reading and listening skills.

	<b>Reading</b>	<b>Listening</b>
<b>Stage 1: Initiation</b>	Graded books	Pedagogical
<b>Stage 2: Transitional</b>	Light reading	Pedagogical authentic, Narrow listening
<b>Stage 3: Final</b>	Literature	Authentic

**Table 3: Stages in developing receptive skills: reading and listening in L2**

Table 4 introduces the three stages in more detail. Although there is a sequence in the use of the material, there is actually no rigid dividing line separating them.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Graded books are those that have been edited and/or simplified so that they can be used at beginning levels. Graded books turn out to be an excellent reading source and help students build their reading competence. Light reading refers to unabridged reading that is not a piece of classical literature. Light reading consists of children's books, adolescent fiction, comics, magazines, and newspapers. Literature comprises more complex unabridged readings such as classical literature, books for adults, biographies, history, and technical books.

<sup>8</sup> The terms intensive/extensive/narrow make reference to the way a text is treated.

<sup>9</sup> The use of authentic listening material can be found in all three stages, depending on the simplicity of the segment and the task.

	<b>Text Characteristics</b>	<b>Material</b>
<b>Stage 1: Initiation</b>	Unauthentic	Textbook tapes, CDs and video
	Authentic	Video and audio with familiar and simple topics (i.e. commercials)
<b>Stage 2: Transitional</b>	Pedagogical authentic	Audio-library
	Authentic	TV, radio and video (short or edited for length)
<b>Stage 3: Final</b>	Authentic	TV, radio and video

**Table 4: Continuum for developing listening skills in L2.**

Next, I will introduce the characteristics of each stage on the continuum:

### **Stage 1: Initiation**

The initiation stage primarily involves the use of pedagogical material. The initial stage is, obviously, ideal for beginners who need to build up basic comprehension skills in the target language. Examples of this material are the audio cassettes, CDs and videos that accompany language textbooks. Some authentic listening material can also be introduced at this level if the material is short and simple, such as cooking recipes, radio and TV commercials, headline news stories, music video clips, etc. The initiation stage needs material that is simple enough to prompt the beginning student to listen to the text and understand it. Understanding could involve just getting the main idea, knowing what the topic is, or matching pictures with objects or actions. In the initiation stage what is most important is that the student feels comfortable with the language and he/she builds confidence in dealing with it (Glisan 2002). It should be noted, nonetheless, that the language instructor has to be careful when using authentic material at beginning levels (Dunkel 1986) since it may result in far more difficult input than Krashen's recommended  $i + 1$  provision (Krashen 1982), and, consequently, authentic language can create anxiety and frustration in the listener. It is well known that when students are frustrated due to lack of understanding, they are discouraged and quit their efforts to continue to learn.

### **Stage 2: Transitional**

Narrow listening is introduced in stage 2. Narrow listening is ideal for students who have already acquired basic listening skills but who find casual, uncontrolled conversation too difficult to follow (Rodrigo and Krashen 1996). At this point, the students are certainly not yet ready to undertake listening of real world material by themselves without experiencing frustration and anxiety. However, they may be prepared to listen to unedited and spontaneous speech by native speakers of the target language by using the suggested narrow listening approach. An example of the material suitable at this stage is the use of an audio-library and media material, provided that the speech samples are short or edited for length (e.g. a segment of a movie, TV or radio program). Listening passages have to be carefully selected to be of interest to students. Although the speech samples in this stage of the listening process are unmodified and spontaneous, they are also controlled by a focus on a single topic and natural repetition of both content and form. Through repeated lis-

tening and topic familiarity, the listeners can cope with the passages and even become familiar with different speaking styles and accents, and get a glimpse of cultural diversity. As a result, students can be better prepared to deal with the target language in the real world.

The repetition principle is implemented in two ways: (a) the listening is usually not interrupted, especially the first few times the listening is done. Students listen to a passage from beginning to end without pauses. The process is repeated until students achieve a reasonable level of comprehension which will vary according to the students' level in the target language. Students also have the option of abandoning the passage entirely if it is too frustrating or boring. Thus, comprehension is achieved by means of rehearing rather than by translating, slowing down, or breaking the language input into many smaller segments.

In a linguistically diverse context such as this, the comprehension task must be undertaken *extensively*. When listening extensively, students listen as much as possible, and select their assignments according to their personal interests so that they can, ideally, listen for pleasure. The practice of an extensive listening modality provides an optimal situation for guessing meaning from the context; while vagueness is accepted and even encouraged. An extensive listening strategy will help language learners develop vocabulary<sup>10</sup>, and an ability to cope with unfamiliar material. This is a more effective way to help students to deal with the real L2 world while preventing or reducing the levels of frustration.

Although narrow listening works optimally at the intermediate and advanced levels, it would not be wise, as mentioned above, to establish rigid limits between the three stages. After all, the degree of difficulty of a particular passage is variable, as it largely depends not only upon the task being carried out but also upon students' proficiency level in the target language as well as upon the topic, students' background knowledge, and the speaker's speaking style. For instance, a given topic will require specific vocabulary (concrete-abstract) and/or fairly specific structures (simple-complex), and, secondly, speaker diversity will result in a variety of speaking styles (individual rhetorical strategies, voice tone, enunciation, the speaker's nationality, and the like). Topic familiarity and interest—ensured when students are asked to choose the topics they want to listen to—guide a learner through a narrow listening experience in which he or she encounters authentic and spontaneous native speaker L2 speech.

### **Stage 3: Final**

In stage 3, authentic and unmodified listening material is used. Students have had practice in the second stage and now they should be ready to cope with a wide range of situations in the target language, including samples of aural input from the media about a topic that they may not be familiar with. Also, in the final stage, the listening passages are samples of speech in real world situations; they entail a degree of comprehension ideally as demanding as that regularly required of native speakers: In addition, the listening passages are not edited for content, form, or duration. This is the last stage in the process of developing listening skills in L2. As in stage 2, the activities in stage 3 focus on content and information, the main difference being the way the listening itself is undertaken. For instance, in stage 2, a

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<sup>10</sup> Elley (1997) presents evidence for incidental learning of vocabulary and grammar through the listening and reading material that is authentic and interesting for the learner. The study considers L1 and L2 as well as children and adult learners.

movie or a complete newscast are not suitable for use due to their length. However, in stage 3, the repetition principle should not be a concern<sup>11</sup> since students should be better prepared to view a movie with no *major* difficulty. They would just view it for content and enjoyment, very much in the same way native users of the target language would, and with a certain level of acceptance of ambiguity in their comprehension.

### **Implementing narrow listening in a language program**

The value of theory, i.e. the previous sections, is its potential for enlightening practice. Consequently, in this section I will suggest guidelines for implementing narrow listening in a foreign language program or classroom setting. Certainly, almost any sample of authentic speech can be used in a narrow listening approach. However, the following methodological principles need to be considered. The guidelines below are intended as principles for generating material for classroom use within a narrow listening approach. For this, an audio-library modality—such as the one designed, classroom tested, and piloted by the author—is introduced.

The narrow listening audio-library is a collection of brief samples of speech produced by native speakers who speak freely and spontaneously about topics that are of interest to themselves and potentially to the language learner. Native speech is recorded and then arranged into one to three minute segments relating the speakers' opinions, points of view, and personal experiences. The segments are then grouped into topics the language instructor has determined will probably be of interest to his or her students.

The criteria underlying the audio-library described below have already been applied in a Spanish-as-a-foreign-language program. Needless to say, the recommended principles are not language-specific; they can be applied to the teaching of any foreign language.

### **Designing an audio-library**

In designing an audio-library within a narrow listening approach, a language instructor should abide by the following criteria:

(a) The topics have to be relevant and interesting to the students, and the students have to be familiar with the topics. The students also have to have several options so that they can freely choose what they want to listen to. In order for a teacher to focus on the students' interests more adequately, it is advisable to survey the students about the topics that interest them before the recordings are made.

(b) Every topic needs to be dealt with by more than one speaker so that students can be exposed to differing points of view as well as to diverse accents and speaking styles. The most important feature of the audio-library is that it provides an ample range not only of topics but also of speakers. Students can thus have freedom to select the speakers that are more appealing to them.

It should be noted that the audio-library modality provides an exceptional opportunity for exposing students to the many variants of a particular language which are spread across considerable geographical areas ( e.g. Arabic, French,

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<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that full-length movies, documentaries, and the like are not rare components in language programs at intermediate level. Yet, most of the time students are not ready for such an experience—not uncommonly an overwhelmingly frustrating one in the target language.

Spanish, and English). As for English, it would be ideal to have students hear native English as produced in different English-speaking countries (the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, India, etc.)

Recording and gathering the listening passages requires some patience and time. But, through team effort, several teachers, and even their students, can get involved in such a task. For the logistics of locating native speakers of the target language, sometimes not easily available locally, teachers could apply for scholarship funds or grants that could allow them to travel abroad. If this is not a possibility, and as a way of taking advantage of the technology currently available, L2 teachers could look for contact sources through the worldwide web and ask native speakers to make recordings on selected topics through this medium, or have the contacts abroad record other native speakers. The L2 teacher could also offer to do the same for his or her contact abroad in the language his or her distant contact wishes. This would be a very outstanding example of international cooperation not only across borders and cultures but also across different varieties of the same language.

(c) The speech of the speakers on tape must be authentic and spontaneous; therefore the speaker should only be provided with rough guiding questions about the topic to be discussed. (Sample questions for the travel topic: Please, tell me about your last trip. Where did you go? When did you go there? Who did you go with? and What did you do there?) No mention of the use of specific vocabulary or grammar structures should be made.

(d) The listening passages must be short, ranging from one to three minutes per speaker. A short duration ensures the students' concentration and, crucially, allows for the principle of re-hearing, or repetitive listening. When working on a topic from the audio-library, students should be allowed to listen to every passage (or speaker) as many times as the students feel necessary.

(e) The rationale and guidelines for the audio-library as a narrow listening activity must be provided to the students so that they are aware of what they are supposed to be doing, how they are expected to do it, and why they are doing it. This is especially important if students are to be able to do narrow listening on their own. The criteria and guidelines<sup>12</sup> for narrow listening are presented in Appendix 1.

### **The use of an audio-library within a narrow listening approach**

Among the advantages of starting a narrow listening audio-library is that the teacher(s) or the language teaching program or institution can acquire a permanent collection of audio-tapes about topics that are interesting to their students. The material is flexible and recyclable—recorded segments can be deleted or added at any time--and will continue to serve current and future students.

There are two modalities of use for an audio-library:

*1. As self-instruction material.* In this modality students use the audio-library at their own convenience and are exposed to the target language alone, outside class-time and without teacher supervision. Students freely select a topic and/or a speaker they want to listen to (for topic suggestions to include in an audio-library see Ap-

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<sup>12</sup> The criteria and guidelines for narrow listening activities were developed by Rodrigo in 1996 and presented to an audience in Rodrigo (1997a). These guidelines were used by Dupuy (1999).

pendix 2). A language program could have a set of the audio-library CDs and/or tapes in the Language Lab for the students to check out as needed, for a specific period of time, or if they so choose, until they listen to the entire collection. In this modality of use, it is essential that students be made aware of, and follow, the narrow listening guidelines provided by the teacher or the lab staff. No report on the listening passage is required. Ideal users of the audio-library in this modality are the students who are really interested in improving their L2 skills or those who need additional exposure to the target language (for instance, for improving their listening skills and fluency) and do not have a chance to travel abroad or who do not come in frequent direct contact with native speakers of the language.

2. *As class-support material.* Though the inherent purpose of a narrow listening audio-library is the practice and development of listening comprehension skills, a teacher could also use a recorded passage for other goals. Listening to different speakers talking about a particular topic is, for instance, an ideal starting point for in-class discussion and for showing students how language is used in real and meaningful communicative contexts. However, when used as an activity for a whole class, teachers should not disregard students' individual differences (Galloway and Labarca, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Ellis, 1997; Omaggio, 2000). That is to say, teachers should realize that each student will understand the target language to the extent that is allowed by his or her language experience and level. A non-threatening environment should always be provided.

## Conclusion

In light of current research in the field of the receptive skills, an alternative approach to the development of listening skills at the intermediate and advanced levels seems highly advisable. Narrow listening is proposed as such an approach. Researchers have suggested that extensive and narrow reading successfully guide language students through the process of acquiring linguistic reading competence in the target language. Additionally, it has been suggested that acquiring native-like reading comprehension skills in a second or foreign language is a gradual process comprising three sequential stages. In the present article, it is proposed that these same criteria be followed in dealing with listening. In this case, three sequential stages along a continuum are also distinguished as inherent to the process of developing the listening skill. Practice, however, shows that, most of the time, only two of the three stages prevail in foreign language classrooms. Students jump from stage 1 (edited, pedagogical material) to stage 3 (authentic, real world material: TV, video, and radio) without adequate preparation by way of a transition. I propose *narrow listening* as the second, transitional stage to bridge this noticeable gap.

A narrow listening approach is based on extensive listening and on the principles of repetitive exposure to L2 speech, L2 speech authenticity, topic unity and familiarity, and speaker diversity. This approach can be successfully implemented by using media products, such as segments of news programs, video clips, etc., or by creating narrow listening material such as an audio-library.

In creating an audio-library, the following general criteria should be included: appealing topics, speaker spontaneity, speaker variety, authentic language, passages of short-duration, and a focus on content. More specifically:

1. A narrow listening approach should be student-centered:
  - Narrow listening provides students with an individualized learning experience; students practice and develop listening skills at their own pace.

- Listening is done in a low-anxiety, non-threatening environment. The activity is easily and naturally adapted to students' interests and linguistic level.

2. A narrow listening approach prepares students to undertake L2 listening in a real context:

- The students are better prepared to cope with the target language in the real world. Narrow listening is an optimal way of bringing the real world of the target language into the classroom because it exposes students to speech that naturally reflects diverse speaking styles and accents.

Students will be better prepared for future conversational situations with native speakers of the language. Since interaction in conversation requires understanding one's interlocutor, students who develop effective listening competence by listening to native L2 speakers should be better prepared to interact with and understand them in a real life situation. Greater comprehension of the input leads to greater language acquisition.

3. A narrow listening approach naturally introduces the target culture and information into the classroom setting:

- Students are provided with first-hand information about the target language's diverse culture. Students are exposed to L2 native speakers' real personal experiences.

4. Finally, a narrow listening approach can be used as a self-instruction tool:

- Narrow listening as self-instruction helps students improve foreign language competence without necessarily infringing upon class-time.

In sum, narrow listening provides students with the tools they need to initiate their contact with the L2 world, i.e. language and culture, without necessarily being in an L2 speaking country. Ultimately, narrow listening lays the foundations for a smooth transition from the foreign language classroom to the real world of the L2 culture.

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Criteria for narrow listening activities**

The effectiveness of narrow listening activities is enhanced when all the following criteria are met:

1. The listening activity is **for meaning**, not form. Students want to listen to a passage because they are curious about what the speakers on the tape have to say. Students should concentrate on the speakers' ideas and comments.
2. The more often students listen to a particular segment, the more they will understand.
3. Students should not expect to understand every word the speakers say. Students don't have to stop the tape to listen again to a part they missed. Indeed, they should be discouraged from doing so.
4. The listener can listen to the tapes at his/her convenience: while driving, when out for a walk, before going to bed, etc.
5. The listening passages represent **real** situations since native speakers talk spontaneously about their own experiences. These are not edited or graded conversations.
6. The listener will be exposed to **different accents** (in the case of Spanish: from Spain, North America, South America, and Central America) and different styles of speech.
7. The **degree of difficulty** will vary according to the topics and the speakers: some speakers' speech will be more comprehensible than others, some speakers will be more talkative than others, and some will be more interesting than others. Of course, some topics will also be more inherently interesting for the students than others.
8. Listeners should do the activity **for themselves**, for the improvement of their own communicative skills.
9. Listeners should not be discouraged if it is hard to understand the first time. They should **keep trying**. It takes time to train one's ears to understand speech in another language. However, if the narrow listening segment is clearly incomprehensible for the student then the student should switch to another topic or another speaker.

### **How to carry out the activity. Narrow listening guidelines for students**

As suggested by research on L2 listening, students should be given clear guidelines on how to complete narrow listening activities. This will ensure the success of the activity. The following are some recommendations for students on how to complete a narrow listening activity:

1. **Select topics** that are interesting and/or familiar to you.
2. Listen to **one speaker at a time** and listen to whole segments. Do not stop the tape until the speaker finishes talking (at least during the first two listenings). Try to get the gist of the speakers' accounts.
3. **Repeat** a particular segment several times before moving on to the next segment. If the topic is interesting to you, listen to the other speakers that

talk about the same topic. If it is not interesting, find another topic, and follow the same procedure.

4. **Move on** to another speaker or topic if you understand almost everything, if you get to a point when you do not understand anything, or if you are getting bored or tired.
5. The **process** of understanding is **gradual**. Research shows that students usually increase their understanding of a listening passage each time they listen to it. At first, you will be able to recognize some words. Then try to pay attention to the words surrounding the words you already recognized in order to discover new words and to understand more of the utterance.
6. As you **become more familiar** with the activity and your auditory senses become accustomed to English or the foreign language, you will understand more.

## **Appendix 2**

### **Sample List of Topics for an Audio-library**

#### **Personal topics**

1. Personal descriptions
2. Your family
3. How do you spend your weekends?
4. Traveling
5. Your house
6. Movies and TV
7. University life

#### **Speculative topics**

1. Your ideal job
2. What three wishes would you ask the genie Aladdin?
3. What is your ideal man/woman like? Does a perfect date/partner exist?
4. What will life be like in the future?

#### **Controversial topics**

1. Is there life on other planets?
2. Is our environment in danger?
3. Bullfighting
4. Euthanasia

#### **Informative topics about the speaker's home country or region**

1. Our music
2. Our food
3. Traditions
4. Personal experiences of culture shock
5. Family values

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