Lesson Share

Eavesdropping
by Titus Green

Age: Adults
Level: Intermediate +
Time: 50 minutes
Objectives: To develop skills in listening for gist; to develop learners’ confidence in extracting the main topic and message from rapid conversational/colloquial speech
Key skills: Listening
Materials: One copy of the task sheet per student; one set of role cards per group of three students

Rationale

Listening practice all too often uses unnatural, scripted language delivered in RP and simplified to assist learner intelligibility. The ersatz nature of this input can leave learners feeling lost, frustrated and demotivated when faced with real-life communicative situations, because the disparity between the recordings (with their carefully enunciated, precise and frequently slowed-down speech) and authentic speech (with its false starts, abandoned ideas, repetition, redundancy, conversational overlap, grammatical ‘slips’ and so on) is so great.

This lesson is intended to provide a motivating alternative form of ‘active’ listening practice for learners. It gives learners a set of listening tools that they can apply in situations where they overhear native speakers’ conversations.

Procedure

1. Write eavesdropping on the board and ask if any of the students know what the word means.

Ask students if they think of eavesdropping as something positive or negative. The worldwide news focus on the monitoring of private emails and telephone conversations by governments might make them think of it as negative. However, you can point out that there is arguably nothing wrong with listening in on conversations taking place in public places – as long as it is not made obvious!

2. Put learners into groups of three. Give two of the students one set of role cards. Ideally, no other pair should have the same topic, although, if you have more than 12 students, you will either have to repeat role cards or write your own additional cards. Tell the students that, in a moment, they will have to have a conversation based around the topic on their card, developing the conversation in any direction they wish. The other student in the group receives the eavesdropping task sheet, which directs them towards the kind of information they are trying to capture. Give groups time to process and understand the instructions. Circulate to help and answer questions as required.

3. Now, tell the class to imagine that they are in a public place, such as on a train or bus, or in a supermarket. The eavesdroppers should focus their attention on the conversations they overhear to get the information specified on the task sheet.

4. Each pair has a conversation based around the topic on their card. The eavesdropper sits unobtrusively and makes notes as guided by the task sheet while the pair talks.

5. Ask the pairs to close their conversations after a given time.

6. The eavesdroppers then move on to listen in on the conversation of the next pair. Repeat the exercise.

7. When they have listened in on all four conversations, the eavesdroppers go back to the first pair they eavesdropped on and conduct a debriefing – the eavesdropper reports back on what they believe to have been the main topic of the conversation, the relationship between the interlocutors and the tenor of the conversation. The pairs then tell the eavesdropper how accurate (or not) their interpretation of the conversation was. The eavesdropper then conducts a similar debriefing with the other pairs whose conversations they overheard.

8. Now, eavesdroppers and speaking pairs change roles. Redistribute the materials and repeat the activity.
**Note:** If possible, get a colleague at your school to demonstrate the activity with you at the outset as a 'live listening', because this would expose learners to the authentic conversational language they will be attempting to decode during listening activities 'in the field'.

**Extension activity**

Set the learners an eavesdropping homework assignment, where they listen in on a conversation while travelling on the bus, walking in the street, shopping etc. Students should make notes on the task sheet unobtrusively so that the people being overheard don’t feel that their privacy is being intruded upon. When the class reconvenes, students can get into small groups to compare their success/failure and share any interesting vernacular language they overheard. Short presentations can be made in class.
ROLE CARDS – SET 1

Person 1
You are Person 2’s best friend. You rent a flat in town and are complaining to your friend about some unreasonable demands made by your landlord. For example, you could say he has demanded a 30% rent increase and he expects you to allow him to store his own belongings in the flat.

Person 2
You are Person 1’s best friend. You listen sympathetically to their problems with their landlord and try to make helpful suggestions.

ROLE CARDS – SET 2

Person 1
You are the parent of a teenager who wants to go to a party at a friend’s house out of town this coming weekend. They want to stay overnight at the friend’s house. You worry that drinking, smoking and possibly other ‘corrupting’ activities will happen at the party and you are not going to give your child permission to go. Your child is trying to persuade you to change your mind and say yes.

Person 2
You are 16 years old and have been invited to a party out of town where you can stay overnight. You really want to go, but your mother/father won’t let you and you think they are spoiling your fun! You must try to change their mind.

ROLE CARDS – SET 3

Person 1
You are telling your friend about a very funny episode from a situation comedy or comedy film that you saw last night. It was hilarious! You describe the characters, the jokes and the setting because you think your friend would enjoy the film, too.

Person 2
You are listening to your friend’s description with interest. Smile, laugh and respond with some questions about the episode or film. Then tell your friend about your own favourite situation comedy or film.

ROLE CARDS – SET 4

Person 1
You are annoyed with your boyfriend/girlfriend because they have suggested you should make more of an effort with your appearance. Nobody has ever told you this before and you did not expect to hear such a remark from somebody who is supposed to love you. They have really hurt your feelings. Tell them how angry you are!

Person 2
You think it would be a good idea for your boyfriend/girlfriend to make more of an effort with their appearance. You have told them this, even though you know your partner is very sensitive about their appearance. Be ready to take the consequences of your ‘advice’!
### Lesson Share

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>TASK SHEET</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conversation</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship between the speakers</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Topic of the conversation</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Key words and phrases</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Mood of the conversation</strong></td>
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