

# Pre-Listening Tasks to Improve ESP Students' Listening Comprehension

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Paper received 17.11.20; Accepted for publication 27.11.20.

<https://doi.org/10.31174/SEND-PP2020-239VIII95-02>

**Abstract.** The article explores some pre-listening tasks that could be offered to university students in the framework of a content-focused listening in the ESP classroom. The motivation stimulated in students by their familiarity with the topic addressed in an authentic listening material, as well as tasks in which learners can predict the contents of the following listening input enhances the comprehension of the text in question. The paper also discusses appeal of short videos accompanied by native speaker comments to university students due to the natural sounding, laid-back attitude, and a new perspective on familiar aspects of the students' subject matter, which such recordings can provide.

**Keywords:** *ESP, content-focused listening, motivation, listening comprehension.*

**Introduction.** It is difficult to overestimate the importance of listening skills for successful communication and professional career, therefore various activities aimed at developing university students' listening comprehension feature high on ESP syllabus. Developed listening comprehension expands a learner's arsenal of interaction patterns, boosts their communication confidence, helps to internalise new information and knowledge more effectively. Similarly to understanding a written text, making sense of listening input occurs as a result of two cognitive processes: bottom-up processing (knowledge of lexis and grammar), and top-down processing (knowledge of situational and cultural context, and background knowledge of the topic) [5, p. 41]. Thus, listening taught in any foreign language class should offer learners a set of tasks which would stimulate the above mental processes as well as, desirably, make students aware of corresponding techniques that they could apply in their self-studies. This is particularly important for the contemporary classroom, in which students are no longer viewed as passive objects of teaching but as agents who actively control the process of their learning and hence its outcomes.

At the same time, ESP listening is different from that conducted in a regular EFL classroom because practically all input materials in such classes are related to the students' subject matter, and the learners interpret them based on their professional background knowledge. For the most part ESP listening is content-focused, while the acquisition of new vocabulary often occurs as a by-product of this kind of tasks.

To facilitate ESP listening comprehension, a listening activity in the ESP classroom consists of the same stages as regular EFL instruction: pre-listening tasks, listening itself, and post-listening feedback. Pre-listening stage is indispensable to activate the students' background knowledge of the subject, fuel their interest in the forthcoming listening, and to switch on the learners' top-down processing. Lexis in the listening input that might turn out unfamiliar to the learners and could hinder their comprehension is also introduced and discussed at this stage. Before the actual listening occurs, the students should be provided with a list of tasks or questions the answers to which will have to be found in the listening material. To further enhance their comprehension, the students could be asked to predict the possible answers to these questions, as being immersed into the context of the listening

input benefits further understanding. Additional scaffolding can be provided by visual tools, for example in case listening is part of a video recording.

**A brief overview of relevant publications.** Kelly Congdon maintains that one of the basic pre-requisites of effective listening is active attention. Because listening is a complex mental process, involving cognitive and affective treatment of input material, educators' objective should be to stimulate the mental processes and skills involved in perceptive listening, such as memory, sense making, and evaluation [3]. ESP classes offer an opportunity to boost the learners' active attention by engaging them with authentic materials related to their subject matter, which usually arouses their keen interest. Youtube has become a rich source of authentic materials with a variety of channels offering videos for every academic field, including history. Authentic short films accompanied by native speaker comments can enhance students' motivation, liven up the pace of a lesson, making it more engaging and fun. A reason for that, mentioned by Rashed Alghamdy, is that multimedia learning materials "become understood easily thus allowing students to control and achieve their learning objectives" [1, p.2], which is an important incentive for self-study and learner autonomy.

Previous findings which discussed the benefits of interactivity for remembering information and comprehension showed that the combination of sound, video and oral text result in a so called theory of synergy [1]. It is believed that non-verbal features such as music, video and sound complement each other and promote a better comprehension of the oral text which they accompany, further the retention of the presented vocabulary, and thus enhance a learner's overall academic performance [4].

Thus, the **purpose of this article** is to discuss how ESP listening comprehension could be enhanced in the university classroom through a set of pre-listening activities, as well as due to the motivation that the learners feel thanks to the interactive nature of multimedia resources used. The lesson in question combined the use of traditional pre-listening techniques to activate the students' background knowledge and fuel their interest in the topic under discussion with a relevant short video. Although the video presentation worked as a content-focused task, it was preceded by some focus-on-form activities, and later in the lesson the students used the lexical material encountered in the listening text in their post-listening dis-

cussion feedback.

**Description of the main material.** Introducing short videos in ESP classes of history students is often beneficial, as it changes the pace of the lesson, provides a new perspective for students to enjoy a format which has not yet turned into routine, and supplies them with more chances for concentrating on and retaining the vocabulary they encounter in the listening.

The episode featured here was a listening activity conducted in an ESP lesson of second-year history students, which discussed England and France in the High Middle Ages. In the focus of our attention was the remarkable fate of Eleanor of Aquitaine, a woman who managed to be queen of both countries, led a female squad in a crusade, gave birth to two prospective English kings, and lived up to the age of eighty-two. Stimulating in itself, the topic was further promoted by a youtube video which served as an authentic input material. The video, which can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X8D1m7mPFtA>, is 3:42 minutes long, and therefore easy to operate in the lesson, and is also beneficial due not just to the relevant historical subject it centres around, but also to the engaging way of presenting the material: the author speaks in rather casual English, makes jokes along the way, sounds ironic at times – all of these features contributing to effective engagement of the students' attention. At the same time, his speech rate and the use of lexis aimed at English language native speakers could pose some problems even for B2 level students. As V. Liubiniene observes, unlike the language lessons where listening materials tend to challenge the learners' language knowledge and skills and rarely put a burden on cognitive skills, the material at a content lesson addresses thinking processes as well [3].

To make sure the learners understand the jokes and allusions made by the speaker, and at the same time have a chance to enjoy the moment when they are actually made on the video, the following lexical items were pre-taught at the pre-listening stage: 1) it was elicited that symbol X could be read as Roman number 'ten' or English letter x (the symbol served as the basis of a pun on the video), 2) the word '*chunk*' was discussed as part of the word combination 'chunk of land' which the video refers to in the sense of 'territory', 3) 'a lady squad' was introduced and

the students were reminded that 'squad' is a commonly used synonym of 'team', originating from the word 'squadron'), 4) eliciting the meaning of 'incest' and its possible derivatives to prepare the learners to the phrase 'suspiciously or incestuously close to her cousin' which hints at Eleanor's frivolous behaviour, 5) adjective 'posh' had to be pre-taught so that the students understood the phrase 'posh dating school' by which the English court of those times is described, 6) 'philanthropist' so that the learners made out the joke of a philanthropist king who was not able to restrict his love to one woman. It should also be noted that the funny cartoon that accompanies the text is another facilitator of comprehension, as it simultaneously illustrates the points the speaker is making.

Thus, the pre-listening stage, in which we introduced the character of Eleanor and outlined the historical circumstances around her reign served as an activator of students' background knowledge, or schemata, and aroused their interest in the subject. Pre-taught vocabulary was aimed at further enhancing their comprehension but at the same time avoided presenting the students with the spoilers of actual puns or jokes the author was making to allow the learners to enjoy them on the video. The combination of the video's laid back manner of presenting the information on the historical subject, along with the cute looking heroes made the video more fun to watch and facilitated its comprehension.

**Conclusions.** To sum up, introducing authentic internet videos in ESP university classes can be viewed as a stimulating tool to motivate learners for receptive and productive tasks, as it combines a cognitive aspect with entertainment and fun. Multimedia turns out beneficial for university students as it can facilitate the comprehension of listening input which may otherwise appear too challenging due to the complexity of the learners' subject matter. Such sort of materials will often combine discussing a serious academic issue with a more 'lightweight' approach of animation, music, and texts, all being part of contemporary educational videos.

Further research can focus on a more detailed study of content-focused activities in the ESP classroom and the incidental acquisition of ESP lexis.

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