

## **DRAWING ON THE FAMILIAR TO CREATE NEW LISTENING EXERCISES**

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**M**any times language learners are vastly deficient in listening mastery while stronger in interpreting the written word or in speaking. This negative situation is oftentimes the result of insufficient opportunities available, for whatever reason, to language learners. Repetitive listening on “familiar ground” might be one way to help improve this drawback. This article attempts to deal with that familiar ground by giving examples and pointers vis-à-vis how to incorporate local characters, local historical figures, and local history and geography into listening exercises. Using this approach, students can more easily recognize in the second language facts and other data they already know in the first language.

### **Introduction**

The saying is, “Necessity is the mother of invention.” Several years ago I thought about the need for more listening activities to be implemented on a regular basis to complement some of those already available. Then I thought about what students have access to or are engaged in nowadays. Movies, songs on the radio and on cassettes, readings done aloud, interviews, lectures, and conversation are some of the many options the language learner has at her/his fingertips today. So, in a sense, language teachers, materials developers and students have “come a long way.”

### **Plotting the questions and answers**

I had to take into account the varied age groups I normally teach in the course of a day

or week. For primary and elementary grades, roughly from Transition to grade Five, I decided on questions and answers a la “Brainquest,” but limiting these to items culled from children’s literature, the world of cartoons and movie books. So, to get things rolling, I invited my kids in third and fourth grades to “help me out.” We got busy creating questions and answers over our favorite characters and stories. In just a few “sessions,” we had created anywhere from fifty to one hundred “usable” questions and answers.

All the characters as well as sources were quite varied. I was pleased with the results and revised some of them by making necessary and/or judgemental changes then putting them on sheets of paper. Every four or five days I would take out the sheets and call on individual students to answer. Most of the time I found the kids interested in this kind of “break from routine.” Many enjoyed themselves considerably. Below are four sample questions and answers from children’s lit.

*From Casper*

What kind of ghost in Casper?  
Answer: A friendly ghost

*From The Lion King*

Who is Simba’s best friend?  
Answer: Nala

*From Bugs Bunny*

How does Bugs greet Elmer Fudd?  
A: "What's up, Doc?"

*From Alice in Wonderland*

What happens at the end of Alice's adventures?  
A: She is awakened by her sister.

**Reflection and assessment**

As one can see, the information can be varied by drawing on a wide range of sources. Hours have to be spent, of course, in the children's section of the library re-reading the old classics as well as reading for the first time all the "new" or updated stories, such as *Mulan* or *Tarzan*. Does the reading sound like such a bad deal?

Besides listening practice that isn't all routine, kids are learning new vocabulary, mainly by detection. For example, in the Bugs Bunny question above, many kids would not identify "greet" out of context; yet, in context, many kids can. Moreover, the teacher can allow for approximations in oral expression. This allowance ties in with Cárdenas' (2000) mention of not deducting points for grammar errors provided the "correct response" was intended. Also, the answer to the Alice in Wonderland question includes the word "awakened." Only a few children would come up with this word in their answer, so, if a child says Alice's sister woke her up in the first language, it could be an opportunity for a brief explanation or demonstration of the word awakened. Then the listening practice continues.

**Improvement**

After a year or two, I decided I was bored with my typed sheets of questions and answers, now dog-eared and containing about 350 to 400 items, so got the idea to put them on blank business cards in handwriting. The cards were then covered front and back with transparent Contact paper. This covering is a way to preserve them for a longer period of time. Additionally, the cards are more attractive than the old sheets and children can hold them and read from them while standing individually before the class. I found that they liked to do this and liked choosing who was going to answer their question.

**Beyond borders**

Of course, these cards are useful internationally since children all over the world like the same movies, songs, stories, etc. Sometimes, as mentioned already, I allow an answer in the child's first language to count since I know the child understood the question in the target language. For example, the Latin American learner of English might not know the word crab, but she/he knows Sebastian is a "crangrejo." Within two or three sessions more, the kids usually learn almost all the vocabulary in the target language. When we like and are familiar with the information around which many activities are centered, we perhaps remember more lucidly. I think so.

**Off to the left and right**

An extension of this listening exercise is the creation of other sets of cards involving nouns. These are "animal" cards and cards containing frequently-used nouns. I found it was almost effortless to come up with sixty or seventy animals by looking in dictionaries, almanacs, and other sources. Below are two examples each of animal cards and frequently-used noun cards.

In London you can ride  
it to work.

dreonuurngd

You hear it on stormy days.  
Isn't it loud?

rhutend

*Animal card examples:*

I wag my tail and love attention.  
I also like to gnaw on bones. Do you  
agree that I am man's best friend(or  
woman's)?

dog

I'm a horse but have no legs  
or feet. And I don't gallop on  
land. I can swim and have a  
tail, though. What gives?

sea horse

Only the noun cards have a front and back. The answers are scrambled. Sometimes this hint helps the student figure the answer out. In this case, underground and thunder. With the other cards, no visuals are present. There is only auditory input. Other card possibilities/

suggestions include yet more of the familiar. These are cards containing historical figures(both national and international) and Q-A's on the country and its history and geography. Some national and international sample cards are the following:

I left my English husband for this  
exciting Venezuelan-born leader.  
This man today is considered the fore-  
most liberator of South America.

Manuelita Sáenz

I was a famous children's fabu-  
list from Colombia. Some of my  
fables are "Michín," "Simon the  
Silly," "The Travelling Tadpole,"  
and "The Pool Old Woman."

Rafael Pombo

I was a clarinet player and formed a  
great dance band. You won't believe the  
hard work it took. I composed "Carmen  
de Bolívar." One of my wives was  
Matilde Díaz.

"Lucho" Bermúdez

In Scotland I'm a national hero.  
It's the north part of the UK. Maybe  
you saw "Braveheart," the movie  
about my life. I fought hard for our  
liberation.

William Wallace

Into which sea does the Magdalena River empty?

The Caribbean Sea

When Laureano Gomez won the presidential election, was he opposed or unopposed?

unopposed

Of course, the more difficult history and geography questions are for bigger students, even adult students. However, simplified history and geography questions can be created for children in the same manner. As can be seen, the possibilities and variety of cards are great.

### Listening phases

The three listening phases that Cárdenas refers to (pre-listening, while-listening, and follow-up) can be used with any of the cards at any level. In the case of the children's literature cards, the pre-listening phase could include talking about the kids' favorite books, stories, Disney movies and/or cartoons as well as asking why a specific one is the favorite, what they like most about it, etcetera. While-listening, in the case where a student cannot answer, could include the teacher's asking for a volunteer in the group. Furthermore, new and/or difficult words from the descriptions/questions could be listed on the board for visual reinforcement. Listening sessions should be limited to fifteen or twenty minutes, perhaps, in order to avoid boredom and to keep kids looking forward to the next session. One follow-up approach could be to pronounce aloud list words on the board

and/or assign some sort of notebook exercise concerning meanings, if desired.

### Conclusion

Listening activities should be a regular and consistent part of language learning. Indeed, if learners are going to become capable and move, by degrees, toward independence, listening activities must take on more importance. And the general aim, as Cárdenas points out, is for genuineness to correspond, eventually, to authenticity.

Preferably, there should be times when the activities are carried out as activities completely separate from any text or book. Is this approach not more in keeping with the way we learned the first language? Finally, I feel that listening activities do not have to be largely boring to students. They can be fun, stimulating, and even instructive.

### References

Cárdenas B., M. L. (2000) "Helping Students Develop Listening Comprehension." *PROFILE*. Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia.