

Techniques FOR New Students TO THE Language Lab

With the outset of a special four-year plan (2000–2004) in the education sector in Myanmar, the teaching of English at the tertiary level has been transformed. Before this plan was implemented, Myanmar EFL students made satisfactory progress in reading, grammar, and writing, but they rarely developed their listening and speaking skills because most of the students in the country had never been in language laboratories. In 2000, thirty-four universities and colleges throughout the country were equipped with language labs. In addition, materials were provided to the respective English departments by the English Task Force at Yangon University in the capital. The responsibility of exploiting the language labs fell totally on the shoulders of English teachers. Over the past three years, we have been making great efforts to meet the challenges of communicative language teaching in the new labs.

Although our students are unfamiliar with native speaker voices, authentic materials, and using a language lab, they are very excited and enthusiastic about coming to the labs to study English. My colleagues and I at Hinthada University, in the southern part of the country, have developed different techniques for improving the communicative competence of our students new to working in language laboratories.

The objectives of the lab activities include exposing students to a range of purposeful listening experiences and building students' confidence

in their own listening abilities. We have designed activities that expose students to formal and informal language spoken by native speakers and fluent nonnative speakers with a variety of listening materials, such as drills, stories, songs, and conversations. Realistic listening activities are integrated with other skills practice and with the main course materials. Teachers assign pair- and group-work to eliminate feelings of isolation and anxiety, and give immediate feedback to students while the listening text is still fresh in their minds. Each student does two hours of lab work per week for a total of 64 hours per academic year, in addition to their regular English classes.

Lab sessions have different purposes. A motivational session is intended for first-year students who are excited about using the equipment in the lab but are unfamiliar with native speaker voices. During this initial session, the teacher explains some of these features of spoken English using sample voices on a tape:

1. Hesitations and fillers

When fluent speakers are thinking of what they want to say, often they use expressions such as “er,” “um,” “well” “I mean,” and “actually.”

2. Unfinished sentences

If a speaker changes her mind about what she is going to say or how she wants to say it, she may start a completely new sentence without finishing the previous one.

3. Repetition and rephrasing
Speakers may summarize and/or repeat the most important point of what they've just said.

4. Incomplete sentences
A fluent speaker frequently uses incomplete utterances (such as "Dinner?" with rising intonation) instead of saying a complete question ("Do you want dinner?")

5. Grammatical errors
Fluent speakers focus on ideas and information and in doing so, they may make grammatical mistakes.

We encourage students to get confidence in listening to English by reminding them not to try to understand every word and to concentrate on the message. This first session can help reduce students' worries and anxieties and get them accustomed to working in the language lab.

Every lab session begins with a song, which is enjoyable. Popular songs in English are played on cassette. As soon as the students enter the lab and put on their headphones, they begin singing together with the music. Although this warm-up activity lasts only about five minutes, the students feel happy and a pleasant atmosphere is created in the lab. Students are motivated to do more challenging listening practice.

After the song, students are introduced to the pre-listening activities, which prepare them to achieve the most of their time in the language lab. One pre-listening activity is to look at pictures and discuss them. These pictures contain vocabulary related to the main activity. Sometimes the students are simply given a list of vocabulary items that they have already studied in order to refresh their memories. Another warm up that students appreciate is reading the text of a listening passage before they hear it. This makes them feel more secure while listening because they can check the printed text. As a predicting activity, the teacher can give students a list of comprehension questions based on the listening passage or some information about the topic and speaker. This helps them guess what they will hear.

While listening to the tapes, students are given different kinds of tasks to perform. They listen to the tape two or three times, depending on the task. Some of the simpler tasks are:

1. Students do pronunciation drills to practice stress and intonation.
2. Students are given a set of pictures and have to arrange them in the correct order according to the instructions on the tape.
3. Students complete a worksheet of true/false questions based on information presented in the listening passage.

Other listening tasks are:

4. Students fill in blanks in a cloze exercise.
5. Students are given a work sheet with the main points of the passage in jumbled order. As they listen, they determine the correct order, and afterwards they check their work with classmates. This task combines listening and oral discussion.
6. Students are given some important vocabulary from the passage and asked to paraphrase the main ideas using those words. This task combines listening and writing.

After listening to the tapes, students can give oral or written summaries using notes they took while listening. This can be done in pairs or small groups. As each pair or group retells the story or information presented on the tape, the rest of the class listens and corrects any errors or omissions.

Students are required to do listening practice outside of class. Once a week, they are asked to write about it in a chart on the wall in the language lab. In the last ten minutes of class in the language lab, the teacher selects some students to do brief oral reports to the class about what they listened to during the week.

English teachers at the Hinthada University believe in the value of listening practice in the language lab and have been conducting listening lessons enthusiastically. Students develop strategies to improve their listening comprehension and become better listeners. Moreover, with the purposeful sessions in the lab, students become more confident in their listening skills and take greater pleasure in practicing their English. By the end of the four-year plan, universities and colleges will be graduating students who are proficient in the four language skills. 🌿

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