

Using Radio Programs in the EFL Classroom

I have been a regular listener to Voice of America (VOA) radio for eleven years, first as a student and then as a teacher of English. My experience suggests that, if appropriately exploited, radio can bring authentic content to the classroom, especially in the EFL environment, where it may not be easy to meet and talk with native speakers of English. Radio can be especially useful in developing countries, most of which have access to shortwave transistors and tape players but lack other equipment that could be used to show students authentic English-language content, such as videotape recorders or film projectors.

Teaching a language through content is more efficient than teaching the structures of the language out of context. Furthermore, it is well accepted that language is better acquired or learned where the focus is on interesting content, and radio can certainly provide interesting content. In EFL settings, where authentic materials are scarce and students are rarely exposed to the natural pace of native speakers of the target language, the radio can be a valuable source of

input and highly relevant to language acquisition.

Radio programs on every aspect of life are available, making the medium particularly useful for content-based foreign language instruction. From the radio, teachers can draw content about any topic or theme of interest to learners. Thanks to the Internet and the advent of high-tech tape recorders, teachers can now download the scripts of various listening passages, select any program on the site of a native-speaker radio channel (notably VOA), and connect the computer's speakers to a tape recorder, using recording wire. Where these technologies are not available, teachers can order a free schedule of programs and frequencies from VOA, tune in to selected programs, and record them in the traditional way. (For a list of programs and VOA links, see the Appendix.) Of course, the content shouldn't be used passively; students should be assigned genuine and relevant tasks to do while listening.

Below are samples of the many activities that can be organized around radio programs. All can be adapted to meet specific needs.

Activity 1:

Level: Low and low intermediate

Material: VOA Special English programs (Environment report, American stories, news, etc.)

Before listening

On the blackboard, write a list of words related to the topic of the listening passage. Ask the students to guess what the passage will discuss. Give the students a script of an English-language passage that they are about to hear delivered at a slow pace. (This can be taken from the VOA program called “Special English,” which is aimed at low-beginner listeners of English. See the Appendix for details.) The script should include spaces where words are missing. Below the script, provide definitions for the missing words. Ask the students to read the script and definitions. Tell them that as they listen to the recording, they are going to fill in the blanks in the script.

While listening

The students now listen to the passage with the aid of the script. Thus the vocabulary is explained through context as the students listen to the passage. After that, give the students a list of definitions for other vocabulary, but this time in random order. Play the remainder of the program without giving the students the benefit of a script and have them identify the words defined in the list. The absence of a script requires further concentration in order to recognize the words and match them with their corresponding definitions.

Higher level students may be able to do this activity while listening to a faster-paced passage.

After listening

To ensure that the students can use the words they just learned correctly in context, have them create sentences using the words.

Activity 2:

Level: Intermediate or advanced

Material: Radio interviews

Many radio programs feature interviews with scientists, politicians, movie actors, and other people well known in their fields. Such interviews are excellent for helping students practice listening and speaking skills. The choice of interview topic should reflect the learners’ interests, and the pace and length of the passage should reflect their abilities. “Talk to America” on VOA is a good choice for stu-

dents because it features guests discussing highly motivating current issues.

Before listening

Before playing a tape of a radio broadcast, ask the students what kind of public figure (for example, politician, athlete, or singer) they would like to interview if they were radio journalists. Then ask them what type of public figure they expect to hear in the taped interview they are about to listen to.

While listening

Play and replay the question asked by the interviewer until students understand it. Then ask the students to guess what the interviewee’s answer would be. Have the students compare their answers to the actual answer given by the guest of the program, ensuring that all students have an opportunity to participate in discussing the answers.

After listening

After playing several of the interviewer’s questions, you may organize a general discussion about the theme of the interview or about the difficulties the learners faced in understanding the speech or in anticipating the answers.

Activity 3:

Level: Intermediate and advanced

Material: Interviews, speeches, drama

Before listening

To help the students achieve comprehensible pronunciation of English, have them listen to sequences from English-language radio programs that exemplify natural speech. Choose sequences containing specific linguistic issues that usually hinder a learner’s understanding of rapid speech, such as liaison, assimilation, and elision. Say a sentence or two in rapid speech that includes some of the aspects of pronunciation you would like to teach, and ask the students to transcribe what you said. Then write the sentence(s) on the board and ask the students to say which difficulties they faced in the transcription. Then explain that in rapid speech words are pronounced according to the words that surround them.

While listening

Play a short sequence and ask the learners to write it down as they listen. Play the sequence as many times as necessary to increase the students’ understanding of it. Then give students the script of the actual spoken passage

and write on the chalkboard the features of pronunciation that misled them.

Play the sequence again to give the students additional opportunity to notice the pronunciation of those features. Sometimes it helps to give students a phonetic rule. For example, during rapid speech, the “s” sound in “bless,” when immediately followed by the “y” sound in “you,” produces the “sh” sound, resulting in a pronunciation that sounds something like “blesha.”

After listening

Have the students work in pairs to create dialogues in which they include the aspects of pronunciation they just learned. Then have them practice the dialogues, speaking as rapidly as possible to produce natural speech.

Activity 4:

Level: all

Materials: stories, reports, news, etc.

Before listening

Ask a few Wh- questions (who, what, when, where, why) and start a discussion about the subject you are going to be dealing with in the listening phase.

While listening

Choose an interesting radio program with a special end, such as a consequence, opinion, or solution to a problem. Write the script for the first part of the program and design comprehension activities around it. These activities, which may include answering questions, anticipating, judging whether statements are right or wrong, or working on difficult vocabulary, are designed to help the students understand and get involved in the passage.

When students understand the first part of the program, play the remainder of the program and have the students take notes as they listen. If the passage is interesting, the students will be motivated to listen carefully to it because they will be eager to discover how it ends. Help them with short answer questions if necessary.

After listening

As a post reading and listening task, have the students write a summary of the entire passage, combining its two parts. If the passage is a short story or otherwise arouses feelings, have the students describe the kinds of feelings it aroused in them. Expand the discussion initiated at the beginning if it seems useful to do so.

Conclusion

We can use the radio to make our teaching creative and interesting. We can design many types of activities based either on live or pre-recorded radio programs assisted by the simplest equipment, such as a cassette tape player. Radio is accessible to most schools, including those in developing countries, and has the great virtue of exposing students to authentic English spoken by native speakers, which happens rarely in most EFL settings.

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APPENDIX |

Using Radio Programs in the EFL Classroom • *Atamane Bedjou*

The selection below gives a sample of links on the VOA website. The site, www.voa-news.com, is a helpful source of teaching materials because it provides access to listening passages (news, programs, interviews, and such), and the written version of most of the passages. I have used a number of VOA programs, and the fact that they feature English spoken by native speakers to an international audience has proven to be highly motivating for my students. Among the programs they especially enjoyed were those dealing with international politics, such as *Press Conference USA*, *Issues in the News*, and *News Review*. I taught Activity 1 in the late 1990s using a passage about the civil rights movement in the United States taken from the program *Special English*, which is delivered at a slow pace. The activity yielded considerable participation by the students, even the weak ones. Cultural programs also have captivated my students.

Talk to America is another valuable source of English. In this live program, public figures from a wide range of sectors are invited to talk and answer questions on the air from VOA journalists and listeners. The guests on this program include sports figures, politicians, and artists, among others.

As indicated earlier, *Special English* is a program in which English is delivered at a slow pace. It is aimed at low-beginner students of English and features documentaries having to do with such things as life in the United States, American culture and society, science, and technology.

A schedule of all the programs and when they are broadcast, along with details about radio frequencies and how to tune in to them, are available on the VOA website given above. To receive a catalog containing programs and frequencies by “snail” mail, write to VOA at the following address:

Voice of America
Washington, DC 20237
USA