

Activities for Listening & Speaking

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Abstract

This paper focuses on speaking and listening activities designed for upper intermediate language learners. All the activities herein discussed rely on the ABC television series *LOST* for content material. The author provides a detailed blueprint of four lesson plans for four listening/speaking activities, all of which include the goal, learner description, time required to complete the activity, materials needed, preparation points, procedure, and caveats. Second Language Acquisition rationale for each activity is also provided. The paper is productive in that it suggests an alternative and innovative approach to conducting otherwise familiar EFL activities.

Key Terms: Listening, Speaking, Activities, Goal, Procedure, Authentic media, Dictogloss, Role-play

Introduction

Folse (2006) tells us the “ability to put together a series of good tasks” is perhaps one of the most important skills for a language instructor to have (p. 29). After a number of years teaching both listening and speaking to advanced language-learners in Japan, I have developed what I believe to be “a good series of tasks” to help cultivate students’ abilities in both output and input. In this paper, I will discuss this package of tasks as I implemented it in a year-long listening and speaking course at an international high school in the Kansai region of Japan.

During the span of each year-long course, I recycled four simple tasks week after week. At first glance, it would seem that utilizing and re-utilizing four tasks to fill a year-long course would be insufficient and perhaps monotonous for both teacher and L2 learners. However, the class only met once a week for fifty minutes at a time, and I would conduct each task only once every three weeks. Therefore, in the end, I actually only administered each task six times per semester. Here it should be noted that although the task-types remained the same, the learning material changed with each usage of each task. Naturally, over the course of the year the students became adept at performing each task. As a result, instead of taxing their cognitive capacity or working-memory to comprehend and perform various kinds of tasks every week, they were able to focus more on building their listening and speaking skills. As Chandler and Sweller (1991) argue, “information should be presented in ways that do not impose a heavy extraneous cognitive load” to facilitate skill acquisition (p. 295).

As already mentioned, then, the four tasks were administered on a tri-weekly basis. The first task, administered on week one, was an audio-visual task. It would include the viewing of a fifty-minute episode of Bender’s (2004) award-winning American television show *LOST*, with the use of traditional, bimodal, and reverse subtitles, interspersed with teacher-pausing (teacher-led mini-discussions on the more complicated language in the episode). This process/activity always carried over into the first ten to fifteen minutes of week two, altogether requiring approximately 65 minutes of class time (students would not perform any particular activity during this time except to focus on absorbing the content of the show). The second task, administered on week two, would include a clozed activity utilizing a ten-minute segment of the episode viewed the week prior. The third task, administered on week three, would include dictoglossing – a speaking task where students listen to a text and reconstruct it. Finally, the fourth task, also a speaking task administered on week three, would require students to conduct role-plays using characters from the show. After the completion of one cycle in this manner, I would repeat the same process using a successive episode from the same television series. Every time I taught this course, I was able to present at least one-half, or twelve episodes, of the first season of *LOST* to my students.

I am a big proponent of using pop-culture, both music and film, in the language classroom and the use of an American

television series lends itself to activities like clozed tasks and dictoglossing. I find that these kinds of fill-in-the-gap and reconstruction activities, respectively, keep learners in a much-desired state of focus and awareness that is especially difficult to achieve with young learners. Finally, in terms of administering role-plays, there is value in how they allow students to flex both their creative as well as L2-building-skill muscles.

The Rationale

Naturally, before using an activity in the language-learning classroom, a teacher should have at least some sense or notion that the activities will yield results. In addition to the fact that I have witnessed first hand the effectiveness of each of these activities, I have accessed readings in the field of second language acquisition, which exhibit the efficacy of each one.

Using a Television-Series:

The usage of television series like *LOST* in L2 classrooms has a number of benefits. Dornyei (2001) and Gardner's (2001) thoughts on integrative motivation and Rost's (2002) discussion on authenticity, genuineness, and video or multimedia, serve to highlight these benefits.

Firstly, watching a television series can do wonders for promoting integrative motivation. Dornyei (2001) tells us, integrative orientation "reflects a positive disposition toward the L2 group and the desire to interact with and even become similar to valued members of that community" (p. 16). Gardner (2001) (as cited in Ortega, 2009), asserts that a heightened degree of integrative orientation, is likely to reside in those learners who ultimately attain native-like competence (p 171). If this is true, then it behooves L2 instructors to incorporate ways to strengthen this motivational antecedent in their students. I have found that presenting L2 western-based pop-culture to my Japanese students does more to inspire integrative orientation than anything else. Watching *LOST* is a good example of this: enjoying the action, watching the fashion on the hottest new movie stars, hearing the latest music, and having access to the most recent American slang (etc.), all bring about a positive disposition toward the L2 culture. This inspires or motivates the students to listen to and focus on the episode and to partake, often wholeheartedly, in the activities we do afterwards.

Secondly, utilizing a television series provides for the benefits that accompany the use of 'authentic' and or 'genuine' materials in the classroom. Rost (2002) tells us "language input should aim for 'user authenticity', first, by aiming to be appropriate to current needs of the learners, and second, by reflecting real use of language in the 'real world'" (p. 125). He goes on to say that it should also "aim to be 'genuine', i.e. involving features of naturally occurring language with and between native speakers: speed, rhythm, pausing, idea density, etc." (p. 125). If we are to accept Rost's conceptualization of authenticity and genuineness, then, a television series is, arguably, as authentic and as genuine as one can get. It provides students with all the features of native-speaking language. And, while even the most advanced learners may have difficulty grasping a fifty-minute television show in its entirety, students at least get a chance to see authentic language at work. This is an opportunity they do not normally come across in their listening textbooks.

Rost (2002) also asserts "The most compelling reason for using video is its immediate possibilities for engagement: it can provide high-quality, authentic listening and viewing material for a range of teaching purposes" (p. 151). To be sure, much like Rost said it would, using authentic material like *LOST* provided high-quality fuel for all the activities (or teaching purposes) I used for the course I am discussing here.

Using Clozed Activities

In any listening course, teachers should pay at least some attention to form, what Rost (2002) calls 'intensive listening' (p. 138). Rost (2002) informs us that, "Intensive listening refers to listening for precise sounds, words, phrases, grammatical units and pragmatic units" (p. 138). Clozed activities, which require students to complete passages by filling-in-the-blanks as they listen

closely to L2 material, provides the perfect opportunity for students to do intensive listening. Rost (2002) argues, “The *ability to listen intensively whenever* required is an essential component of listening proficiency” [his italics] (p. 138). Again, this type of activity helps language-learners exercise said ‘ability’ to develop said ‘listening proficiency’. An example activity is available in Appendix 1.

Using Dictogloss and Role Play Activities

In a listening and speaking course, obviously, students cannot simply receive input. They must also produce meaningful output. For my purposes, this was achieved through the use of dictoglossing and role-play. First, dictogloss requires students to listen carefully to L2 material, take mental notes of what they hear, discuss this material in pairs, and together reconstruct/summarize the material in spoken output. Second, role-plays encourage students to interact with each other based on a particular premise presented to them at the beginning of the activity. During this interaction, students must produce language in real-time. Students will have no way of knowing what their interlocutors will say to them, so they must produce language in real-time in response to the input they receive from their interlocutors. If at times students do not understand each other, they must negotiate meaning for clarification.

Justification or grounds for these kinds of activities can be found in Merrill Swain’s conceptualization of *pushed output*. Swain (as cited in Ortega, 2009), “proposed that ‘producing the target language may be the trigger that forces the learner to pay attention to the means of expression needed in order to successfully convey his or her own intended meaning’” (p. 62). Ortega (2009) tells us that, “This is particularly true if interlocutors do not understand and push for a better formulation of the message, if learners push themselves to express their intended meaning more precisely” (p. 62 – 63). In other words, if students do not understand each other it forces them to negotiate meaning with each other and make themselves understood. Dictogloss and role-playing activities provide the opportunity for students to produce the kind of output Swain has described as will be made evident toward the end of the following section where the details of dictoglossing and role-playing will be presented in full.

Activities in Lesson Plan Format

Activity I: Viewing the Episode (Week 1 of tri-weekly cycle)

The Goal:

The goal of this activity was to provide students with authentic listening/viewing material. It was mainly a listening-for-meaning activity.

Description of Learners:

The international school where I once worked, and with whose students I conducted this course, divides first and second year students into A, B, C, and D levels; A rates the highest whereas D rates the lowest in terms of English proficiency. Students there must take English courses in writing (twice a week), intensive reading (once a week), extensive reading (once a week), listening and speaking (once a week), and vocabulary (once a week) at their respective levels. The students in the listening and speaking course that I am referring to here were first and second year high school students at the B level. The only universal or known gauge I can speak of to demonstrate their ability or proficiency is their reading level: at that time, they all read comfortably at the 5th level (upper intermediate level) in the Penguin Readers series. This particular activity, then, though challenging, was not outside the scope of their ability. Each time I taught this course, there were approximately ten students in the class.

Time needed to conduct the activity:

This activity took fifty to sixty minutes to complete. This required that I utilize one full period and ten minutes of a subsequent class hour to show the entire episode.

Materials needed:

1. Episode summary handout (available online at any number of *LOST*-related websites)

2. TV and DVD player with remote control
3. Bender's (2004) *LOST* Season 1 box set with Japanese subtitles (purchasable online)

Preparation Steps:

1. Make sure to provide students with a summary of the episode one week prior to viewing the show.
2. Prepare the DVD before students enter the room.

Procedure:

On the first day and first ten minutes of the second day of each tri-weekly cycle, the students watched one episode of *LOST*. Because the students and I only met once a week, and because we had to complete an entire episode, I did not allot much time for schema building prior to watching the show other than to provide the students with the summary of the episode on a handout the week before watching each show. The instructor can recreate a summary which reflects their students' reading ability. For my students, I made summaries roughly half a page in length. The students were to read the episode summary for homework and come to class with some sense of its storyline. During the first five minutes of class I allowed students to watch the show using L1 audio and L2 captions, or what Rost (2002) calls the "reverse" subtitle variation (p. 151). This was simply to get students acquainted with the storyline. During the second fifteen minutes, I had students watch the show using L2 audio and L1 captions, or what Rost calls the "traditional" subtitle variation (p. 151). During the next fifteen minutes of the show, I had students watch using L2 audio and L2 captions, what Rost calls the "bimodal" subtitle variation (p. 151). Finally, during the last ten to fifteen minutes of the show, I had students watch using L2 audio and no captions whatsoever. Throughout the fifty-minute episode, I would pause the DVD in order to answer questions posed by students and to briefly clarify language or events that appeared to me unclear to them. I determined this by watching for obvious facial expressions of confusion or when students would seek clarification from their classmates using their L1.

Caveat:

It is best not to spend too much time on pausing for clarification. The main idea here is to get students to try and understand the gist of the episode, not all the details. If instructors spend too much time pausing, then it will be difficult to stay on track with the tri-weekly cycle. Staying on track is important in order to keep students interested. If they only get to watch one episode every four weeks, as opposed to three, their motivation wanes.

Activity II: Clozed Activity (week 2 of tri-weekly cycle)

The Goal:

The goal of this particular activity was to provide opportunities in intensive listening. Students listened for words and phrases.

Description of Learners:

See Activity I's description of learners.

Time needed to conduct the activity:

This activity can be completed in thirty-five to forty minutes.

Materials needed:

1. Transcripts of episodes (available at any number of *LOST*-related websites)
2. TV and DVD player with remote control
3. Bender's (2004) *LOST* season 1 box set with Japanese subtitles (purchasable online)

Preparation Steps:

1. Select a ten-minute segment from the episode presented the week prior.
2. Locate the transcript of the episode online and search for the section of the transcript that corresponds to the ten-minute segment selected in step 1.

3. Copy and paste the transcript segment into a Word document.
4. White-out or delete the words you want students to notice/focus on, leaving blank spaces in their place.
5. Make enough photocopies so that each student will have access to their own copy.
6. Prepare the DVD before students enter the room.
7. Present each student with a copy of the clozed printout.

Procedure:

To begin this activity, before handing out the transcript (see Appendix 1 for an abbreviated example), I showed the students a ten-minute clip of the scene corresponding to the clozed transcript. They watched this ten-minute clip in bimodal fashion, that is, with L2 audio and L2 captions. This re-familiarized the students with the content of the scene. Next, I handed out the clozed transcript to the students. Then, I played the ten-minute segment once more. During this second viewing they did not have access to subtitles. While listening and watching, they filled in the missing words on their handouts. Finally, as a class, we went over the answers to the clozed activity. Sometimes we did this orally or by scrolling through to the desired sections on the DVD and re-listening to the blank spaces on the clozed transcript. While going over the answers, students often asked questions on how to use certain grammatical structures or pronounce various words or phrases that they came across in the clozed transcript. While I chose the linguistic criteria or area of interest for each clozed activity, hoping that students would reach some form of noticing, I left it to the students to ask for clarification on said criteria.

Caveat:

It is probably best, depending on the level of learners, to avoid easy clozed transcripts. The clozed transcript should be somewhat challenging so as to promote focus. Having students listen for chunks, collocations, and perhaps even idioms might make the process interesting and gives students a lot to discuss during the correcting stage of the activity (See Appendix 1 for an example where I had students listen for idiomatic language).

Activity III: Dictogloss (week 3 of tri-weekly cycle)

The Goal:

The goal of this particular activity was to develop student confidence in speaking in front of an audience. In preparation for speaking, students were to negotiate meaning with each other.

Description of Learners:

See activity I's description of learners.

Time needed to conduct the activity:

This activity requires approximately 25 minutes to complete (depending on the size of the class).

Materials needed:

1. TV and DVD player with remote control
2. Bender's (2004) *LOST* season 1 box set with Japanese subtitles (purchasable online).
3. A stop-watch
4. Ten small pieces of paper (stubs) numbered one to ten (the number of papers should correspond to the number of students in the class).
5. A small plastic or paper bag for the pieces of paper.

Preparation Steps:

1. Select one five-minute segment (preferably not the same as the clozed transcript segment) from the episode watched in week one.
2. Cut up ten small pieces of paper and number them one to ten. The amount of numbered papers should equal the number of

students in the class. Place these stubs in a small plastic or paper bag.

3. Prepare the DVD before students enter the room.

Procedure:

I showed the students the pre-selected five-minute segment and told the students to take mental notes while viewing. Second, I divided the class into groups of three or four, providing roughly for three groups in total. I instructed the groups to reconstruct what they remembered from the five-minute segment. I then had each individual student summarize what happened in the five-minute segment in front of the class. I timed each student using a stopwatch. They were each allotted exactly one minute to present their summary. In order to make this process fair the sequence was decided by lottery. I would have students select a numbered piece of paper at random from a small paper or plastic bag. The student who randomly selected the paper stub with number one would speak first; the person who selected number two would speak second, and so on.

Caveat:

It might be best to avoid presenting segments that are too complex. This might best be achieved by showing a scene where a lot of action is taking place as opposed to complex storylines where the complexities of the characters are explored. This way, students can simply describe the order in which the action took place. It might be a friendlier approach in terms of cognitive load. Because there is a time-constraint in this particular activity, the complexity of the segment should be considered.

Activity IV: Role-play (week 3 of tri-weekly cycle)

The Goal:

The goal of this particular activity was to develop student confidence in communication with classmates using their L2.

Description of Learners:

See activity I's description of learners.

Time needed to conduct the activity:

This activity requires approximately 25 minutes to complete.

Materials needed:

1. Assorted pictures of characters from the film (available at any number of *LOST*-related websites)
2. Scotch-tape

Preparation Steps:

2. Prepare two questions and two scenarios to write-up on the whiteboard.
3. Prepare photos of the characters.

Procedure:

I wrote a scenario or a question on the board (see Appendix 2 for sample scenarios and sample questions). I then handed each student one of the photos of a character from the show. The students would then affix the photo of their character to the front of their desk using a piece of scotch-tape. I asked each person to think about how their character would respond to the question or scenario. I then gave the students 5 minutes to plan what their response would be. I also told them that they did not need to act like their character when presenting their answer, but they had to speak in first person singular as though they themselves were the character on their photo. After the planning time was up, I had everyone make a circle with their desks so that the photo of their character was visible to everyone in the group. I then posed the question to the class once again and in no particular order, everyone began to present their ideas. If one student did not agree or like what another student had to say, they were welcome to argue with and or ask questions of their classmates. I would allow the forum to move along on its own course until the discussion showed signs of completion. At this point, if time permitted, I would pose another question or scenario to the class.

Caveat:

Teachers would do well to make sure everyone speaks. Depending on the size of the class, some voices may drown-out others. If this happens, instructors might spur the quieter voices on by providing leading questions to encourage language production.

Conclusion

I had a number of aims when teaching this course. First, I wanted to provide students with opportunities to listen to and watch authentic media. In so doing, I knew it best to work on both listening for meaning and listening for form. Second, I wanted to motivate students to get closer to their L2 culture and thereby motivate them on toward further language study. Third, I wanted to provide students with opportunities for pushed output. I felt that basing their output on an action-packed television show with love, a bit of horror, and comedy, would be a lot more exciting than basing that output on a dry novel or a series of language prompts, or even worse, a textbook.

I believe that using a television-series like *LOST* provided me with the avenue to achieve these aims. To be sure, the four types of tasks that I used, listening for meaning, clozed activities, dictogloss, and role-play, were more interesting to conduct using this authentic media.

References

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Example of clozed transcript for idiomatic language with answers filled-in

Episode 8 – “Confidence Man” (written by Damon Lindelof and directed by Tucker Gates)

[Shot of Kate walking up the beach with bananas. She finds Sawyer's clothes and Watership Down.]

SAWYER [from the ocean]: **Hell of a** book. It's about bunnies.

[We see Sawyer coming out of the ocean naked.]

KATE [looking Sawyer up and down]: Must be cold without your trunks.

SAWYER: You bet. How about you come a little closer and warm me up?

KATE: You sure know how to **make a girl feel** special, Sawyer.

[Kate walks away.]

[FLASHBACK]

[We see Sawyer in a hotel room in bed with a woman, Jess.]

JESS: You're incredible Sawyer.

SAWYER: I love you. Look at you. What do you want, right now?

JESS: How could I want anything else?

[Jess notices the time.]

JESS: Oh, uh-oh, baby.

SAWYER: Oh, what.

JESS: I thought you had a meeting.

SAWYER: Yeah, but it's not until 3:30.

JESS: Baby, it's 3:28.

SAWYER: Damn it. Damn it, baby, why don't you just, uh...

JESS: No, just go. You go, okay, I'll stay here -- order room service, get fat.

SAWYER: Why don't you order a chocolate sundae -- when I get back, I'll **use you as a dish**.

[Sawyer pulls a brief case from on top of the armoire and money spills out.]

SAWYER: You weren't exactly supposed to see that.

[Shot of Sawyer in the jungle. He hears rustling noises. He starts running and comes across Boone in his stuff.]

SAWYER: What are you doing in my stuff, son?

[Shot of Sayid being doctored by Jack.]

JACK: This is going to hurt. Ready to tell me what happened?

SAYID: We were trying to find the source of the distress call. I saw the flare from the beach and then the flare from Sawyer's position in the jungle. I switched on my antenna, activated the transceiver, and then darkness. Whoever hit me came from behind.

JACK: They destroyed the equipment?

SAYID: Yes.

JACK: Listen, we're going to **figure this out**, but don't do anything. . .

SAYID: I will do whatever I need to do to find the man responsible.

Appendix 2: Example Questions and Scenarios for Role-Play Activity

Sample Questions:

1. Who do you think should be the leader of our group?
2. Do you think Sawyer is dangerous? If so, should we confine him to a prison cell?
3. Is it safer to set up camp on the beach or in the jungle?
4. What is our most important goal right now? Focus on rescue? Or, focus on survival? Why?

Sample Scenarios:

1. We all seem to go to Jack and Rose for advice. If Jack and Rose were to die, who would you go to for advice?
2. We find a boat on the island. It is in good condition. If we use it, we can survive on it for four weeks. Only five people can fit on the boat. Those who stay will probably never be rescued. Who should go?
3. Jin is angry because he cannot understand English and everyone else can. How can we help him?
4. There is a monster on the island. Someone needs to find it and kill it. Who should do it? Let's choose 3 people.