Teaching Advanced Learners Post 4: Listening
Rachel Appleby

Got a favourite song?

We’ve all tried writing down lyrics, word for word, so that we can sing along to a song. Somehow, it’s empowering, and all the more so in a foreign language. But very often we end up with something very different from the original. Do you know Guantanamera? It became a hit when sung by the Sandpipers, and I thought at the time they were singing “Once in a meadow”, perhaps indicative of my naïve, or even idyllic youth. Some 30 years ago, Abba singing Dancing Queen was famously misheard as, “Dancing queen, Feel the beat from the tangerine, oh yeah, … “, instead of “Feel the beat from the tambourine”. We do our best, and sometimes it doesn’t matter, but most importantly, doing this requires very intensive listening, over and over again, to get the words down. These days it’s probably considered “geeky”, and, in any case, we can find the lyrics online.

In the classroom ...

But this is the kind of listening that tends to be missing from classrooms. I’m not suggesting you throw out your syllabus and start teaching Abba lyrics, but encouraging students to work on very short audio extracts, ideally of their choice, may well heighten their awareness of aspects of language they haven’t otherwise considered, for example: how words sound when spoken very fast; noticing and understanding chunks in context; and anticipating what words might come next. At advanced levels, this can be a refreshing change from a listening task which focuses only on content.

What you can do

You could start by eliciting examples of TV series your students know. ‘How I met your mother’ is a favourite with some of my students. It has some fun characters, humour, and plenty of everyday (American) English. Use only a very short extract. Start by getting students to write down the conversation word for word. There are likely to be plenty of colloquial expressions, and you can take this a step further by focusing on word stress, sounds, and linking sounds. Try writing a few of the phrases in phonemic script, and getting students to match them to what they’ve heard, e.g. I can tell you’re really busy, so I’ll let you go = /ɪkɑnteljʊˈrɛliˈbɪzɪəwəˈlejəɡau/. Give students time to find the individual words, and then find out which sounds are articulated, and which are ‘swallowed’ or said fast. Then give them the chance to listen again.

You can then get students to shadow this (speak simultaneously with the characters as they watch again). This could be done in pairs or threes, each person taking a different role, if done in class. I don’t think it matters if the subtitles are on at this point: emphasis is on how the words are said.
It obviously depends on what you choose, but advanced students of mine who watch English TV series say that after a while they can anticipate what certain characters are going to say. You can help promote this by pausing the video at key points, and eliciting their ideas. Throughout this process, students will also subconsciously be internalising the pronunciation, articulation and speed of what is being said.

A follow-up stage to this could be to ask students to choose three phrases they could try out outside the classroom. Even for those not living or working in an English-speaking environment, this isn't impossible: I often listen in to conversations on public transport, and imagine what I could say if I joined in, using a new foreign language word or phrase I've learnt. It can be fun, if you like geeky games like this!

Even though visual clues obviously aid understanding, you can use these ideas with the audio recordings in your course book, which might save any potential technical hitches.

**Conclusions**

When doing this, your main aim is to increase students’ confidence to listen to very authentic audio; and as students understand more, and begin to recognize chunks of text, they will feel better about their English, and have the courage to try out more words and phrases. It’s surprising how their spoken English improves when you spend time on detailed listening, and pronunciation work.

*Rachel Appleby has taught English for International House and the British Council in the UK, Spain, Portugal, Slovakia, and Hungary, where she now lives. Since 1993 she has focused mostly on teaching in-company and university students (on the BA and MA programmes at ELTE).*