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# Listening Comprehension in a First-Year Spanish Comprehension Course: Background and Activities

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LISTENING COMPREHENSION IN A  
FIRST-YEAR UNIVERSITY SPANISH COURSE:  
BACKGROUND AND ACTIVITIES

by  
Lois F. Lafferty

Submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for  
the Master of Arts in Teaching degree at  
the School for International Training,  
Brattleboro, Vermont.

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This project by Lois F. Lafferty is accepted in its present form.

Date \_\_\_\_\_

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ABSTRACT

LISTENING COMPREHENSION IN A  
FIRST-YEAR UNIVERSITY SPANISH COURSE:  
BACKGROUND AND ACTIVITIES

Lois F. Lafferty

The importance of the role of listening comprehension in the study and teaching of a foreign language has received ever more attention during the past decade. This essay expresses one new teacher's preliminary views on incorporating some of the beneficial facets of a comprehension-based approach to classroom teaching. It draws on previous exploratory work done by others in developing and using listening comprehension tasks in varied settings. The major part of the paper is devoted to a recounting of a number of activities used during the internship period and a discussion of the focuses of the given tasks, the responses required of those undertaking the tasks, as well as the listening strategies needed and the results of the students' performance.

ERIC descriptors:

Listening Comprehension  
Listening Skills  
Second Language Instruction  
College Second Language Programs  
Classroom Techniques

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
CHAPTER	
1. Introduction: Background on the Course .....	1
2. Theoretical Readings & Materials on Listening Comprehension .....	7
3. Activities Relevant to the Current Context .....	16
4. Further Application .....	35
WORKS CITED .....	38

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction: Background on the Course

I taught a Spanish 102 course during the spring semester of 1987 at the University of Nevada-Reno. This was my first experience teaching a course at the college level. It also served as my second internship for the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) Program at the School for International Training.

The text for the course is organized largely around an extensive list of carefully-sequenced grammatical patterns; cultural information and contexts are also woven throughout each chapter providing a backdrop. I wanted to explore some preliminary phases of my own emerging pedagogical bias toward the usefulness of an emphasis on comprehension in the early stages of learning a foreign language. I therefore decided to focus much of my energy on listening comprehension components which were already a part of the course and also to incorporate additional materials which I thought would serve to complement these existing elements. Combined with this motivation was my strong interest in songs and in their use as a tool in the foreign language classroom.

My goal as a teacher was multi-faceted. In addressing the task of listening comprehension, I set out to do a number of things: (1) explore a variety of ways of presenting selected materials to the students, (2) develop/adapt and implement

tasks which would require a range of listening strategies from the students and a corresponding range of responses in expressing or demonstrating their understanding of the aural input, and (3) begin developing my own criteria for assessing the value of listening comprehension activities for potential classroom use in terms of their seeming benefits to the students.

There is currently no foreign language requirement for admission to the university; there is, however, a requirement for a minimum of four semesters of foreign language study for students enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences as well as for geology and journalism majors. So, as one might well anticipate, students enter the beginning language courses with varying degrees of prior language exposure and study, aptitude, and interest.

The 101-102 course series is designed to cover to a large extent the full gamut of basic Spanish grammar along with an extensive vocabulary. During this current spring semester of 1987, there are eleven sections of the 102 course. Dr. Petersen is assigned to coordinate these sections; the syllabus and tests provide for some uniformity in the course coverage and grading policy. Within the framework of this prescribed course content and schedule, we are free to implement the teaching styles and approaches of our choosing. We are, in fact, encouraged to be innovative, and the coordinator expressed to me that he enjoys observing other teachers and learning from their classroom techniques.

The syllabus designates the section/s of a given chapter



which is/are to be covered during each class period as well as the dates when tests and quizzes are to be administered. Since there are such a large number of sections, it is important that the testing be done on the same day to ensure fairness; care is taken also in preparing two versions of the test for use in alternate sections. Dr. Petersen distributes the exam preparation assignments to the teaching staff well in advance of the tests, and he then compiles these items in formulating the two distinct versions to be used.

The course itself has a number of components which are designed to enhance and assess each student's listening comprehension skills. Much of the in-class work--including pattern practice drills, sentence completion exercises, dialogs, games, and questions accompanying each section of the text--requires some degree of aural comprehension; without this skill, a student is left as an observer only rather than being a full participant.

The course progresses at quite a rapid pace, so it seems apparent that a considerable amount of learning must take place outside the classroom as well in order for any degree of mastery of the skills and material to be achieved. The text has a companion tape and lab manual series designed to recycle the material in a broad variety of contexts. I will give a more in-depth description of some of these listening activities later in this paper.

Each of the tests (compiled departmentally) and quizzes (prepared by the individual instructors) has a few oral

questions drawn from the topics and structures in the current chapter/s. Students are required to listen to these, given only twice by the instructor, and to formulate a written response. This task gives an indication both of the student's comprehension of what was asked and of his/her ability to think of a response in Spanish and express it in writing.

Midway through the semester and again at the end, students are interviewed individually and assessed for their speaking skills. It seems apparent that the students must first be able to understand the questions and comments addressed to them before undertaking a response.

In order to prepare for this rite of passage, the teachers receive copies of questions which may be asked, and they in turn pass these sheets on to the students. The questions, drawn directly from each of the chapter themes, include health and the body, life at home, and festivals and celebrations. Approximately eight questions are listed under each theme, and one question from each of the four or five topics is posed by the teacher once the interview is under way.

Class time is allotted prior to the week when interviews are scheduled in order to encourage students to practice these questions and their answers in pairs. This enables them to develop their familiarity with what will be asked of them during the interviews.

I talked with the students about how they prepared for these interviews in order to determine what was helpful to them. Frankly, I was surprised by the broad range of strate-

gies. Some could seemingly perform the task in an impromptu manner and found that studying the questions and rehearsing answers served to put them at ease with the material; others needed to write out full answers to each of the questions; and still others found themselves bogged down in translating each question, thinking of an appropriate answer in English, and then translating their answers into Spanish to be memorized.

It seemed fairly evident to me that this reflected the students' comfort and skill in using the language; I also found a strong parallel between the relative ease with which some students approached the task and a number of other facets of their work in the course. Among these were: their participation, attention, and performance in class activities; their reported use of the lab materials; and lastly, their approach to the everyday optional homework assignments which were brief and were intended to serve as a means of practicing new concepts further outside class and of securing some feedback on their grasp of the material.

Those for whom the class periods served as the only consistent contact with the language seemed to have developed few demonstrable capacities for communicating in Spanish. Their listening skills in particular, as shown by their affective and verbal responses to the questions in the context of the interviews, seemed to be of little use in their attempts to understand my utterances. The other members of the class who spent time and energy in carrying out related tasks

throughout the week gave evidence of having cultivated stronger skills, and the enthusiasm which they applied to their work in the course was evident as well.

There was, of course, a middle ground consisting of students who had to struggle in coming to grips with the task and who were not highly confident in their skills yet who managed to understand my questions adequately and to formulate appropriate answers which conveyed information clearly and were imbued with imaginative spark.

## CHAPTER 2

## Theoretical Readings &amp; Materials on Listening Comprehension

My purpose in seeking out printed matter on my topic was two-fold. First, I wanted to find additional sources of materials which I could use or adapt for use in my class. In addressing a more long-range concern, I wanted also to familiarize myself with more of the work that has been done regarding implementation of comprehension-based approaches to instruction for foreign language students. I chose to focus on these aspects of my topic while acknowledging that the scope of literature in the field is much broader and that many of these concerns do spur heated debate.

Robbins Burling is a great proponent of comprehension-based language instruction and offers sharp criticism of what he observes to be the productive bias of most foreign language instruction. He faults this for fostering boredom and a frustration in students over their low achievement and also for the resulting decline in the percentage of American high school and college students studying foreign languages since the peak enrollments in 1968.<sup>1</sup> He is especially critical of two pedagogical assumptions which he views as implicit in this approach: that adult learners must rely on explicit instruction because they cannot benefit from unconscious

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<sup>1</sup> Robbins Burling, Sounding Right (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House Publishers, Inc., 1982), p. 1.

acquisitional processes, and that a student's productive skills should be at least as advanced as her receptive skills.

He contends also that the importance of age as a factor influencing one's success in learning or acquiring a second language is probably not nearly as important as the environment in which one undertakes this task; he points to the input received by children and its simplified elements which are conducive to their grasping of the messages. Burling also singles out the fact that children immersed in a new language context are often allowed to listen for a period and to begin sorting out elements of the language before demands for production are placed on them.

Most of us as educated adults readily acknowledge that our passive or receptive vocabularies even in our first language are more extensive than our active or productive vocabularies. This indicates that we have the capacity to understand and/or to deduce the meaning of some words beyond the scope of our normal usage. Why not appreciate and encourage this natural tendency in our students' experience of a new language as well? This prepares them in part for the demands inherent in any natural listening context where the vocabulary and style used by others may vary from the way in which they have learned to express themselves and would therefore require that they be versatile in their approach to interpreting heard discourse.

Robbins Burling discusses in depth in the fourth chapter of his book a project which he and some colleagues conducted

at the University of Michigan. Designed for beginning students of Indonesian, the lessons consisted of recordings made by native speakers and frames portraying sketches related to the taped messages. His work provides an excellent example of one means of isolating the listening skill. In response to particular messages, students were required to carry out tasks of discrimination in relating the message to the simultaneous frame. Burling and his companions used a set-up consisting essentially of a tape drive and a microprocessor used to carry messages back and forth among the tape drive, the signal lights, and the student.

The student would see a frame and hear a message and would then respond by pushing designated buttons to relay her answer. The task could be of a true-false nature regarding the comments made about a picture, yes-no in response to questions posed, choosing one of three proposed phrases in completing a sentence as it referred to a drawing, or indicating the number of the one picture from a set of nine alternatives which corresponded to spoken information. At times also, there was no demand for a response, and the student instead was presented with new vocabulary and concepts by means of a drawing with numbered items indicating the referents for these new terms.

This system was designed to provide the students with immediate feedback on the accuracy of their postulated answers. In the event that the student erred in her response, the machine would back up systematically to provide review.

Students could repeat an entire tape as often as they chose, and they were thus encouraged to work at their own pace. The goal of this year of listening was to develop a strong foundational knowledge of the syntax and phonology of the language as a basis for forming a sense of what "sounds right" prior to the commencement of explicit instruction.

Some productive use of the language was begun during the second term of the project, and Burling points out the absence of any serious pronunciation problems in addition to the "transparently easy" appearance of the syntax that was progressively used. He does relate the need which some of the students felt for written support of the taped lessons, and in acknowledging the literacy of the learners and its influence on their learning styles, he concludes that this support may in fact have enhanced the rapidity and efficiency of their progress.

Other researchers have done work comparing the performance of learners who receive different types of instruction. Postovsky conducted experiments with adult Americans studying the Russian language through the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California, in an intensive course which met for six hours daily. In targeting one group of students who observed a silent period for the first month and gave written responses only, Postovsky found that they subsequently outperformed in both their pronunciation skills and their control of Russian grammar those students who had been made to speak



from the beginning.<sup>2</sup> These findings were first reported by Postovsky in 1974 and 1977.

James J. Asher recaps the results of an experiment he and colleagues had conducted in order to test their hypothesis "that input and output from the right brain is the optimal arrangement for accelerated comprehension, long-term retention, and the understanding of novel sentences."<sup>3</sup> He defines a novel utterance as "a recombination of constituent parts of utterances heard in training...."<sup>4</sup>

This was implemented by having two college students sit, one on each side of the model, and listen to a taped command given by a native speaker of Russian. For the purposes of the study then, some of the students acted out the commands with the model and others of them simply observed as the model alone carried out the action called for by the taped instruction. This step constituted the input phase of the project.

This hypothesis was studied in contrast to others which called for input to and output from the left hemisphere only or for input to the left brain and output from the right, or

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<sup>2</sup> Marina K. Burt and Heidi C. Dulay, "Optimal Language Learning Environments," in Methods That Work: A Smorgasbord of Ideas for Language Teachers, ed. John W. Oller, Jr., and Patricia A. Richard-Amato (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House Publishers, Inc., 1983), p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> Harris Winitz, ed., The Comprehension Approach to Foreign Language Instruction (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House Publishers, Inc., 1981), p. 199.

<sup>4</sup> Winitz, p. 200.

vice versa. Input to the left brain consisted of oral translations of the Russian taped commands into English. Output from the left hemisphere took the form of written or oral translations into English.

The training was administered over a four-day period. Retention tests were administered immediately following the training and again after twenty-four hours, forty-eight hours, and two weeks. Each student listened and responded to the tapes alone during the retention testing. I am including here the findings from this training and testing because I think they give dramatic support for Asher's original hypothesis.

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AVERAGE LONG-TERM RETENTION OF RUSSIAN TWO WEEKS  
AFTER TRAINING

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Groups	Complexity of Russian Utterances				
	Single	Short	Long	Novel	Total
1. Act-Act R-R	1.00	.99	.92	.87	.95
2. Observe-Act R-R	1.00	.97	.94	.92	.95
3. Observe-Write translations R-L	.95	.90	.75	.68	.81
4. Act-Write translations R-L	.94	.88	.69	.56	.76
5. Orally translate-Act L-R	.90	.83	.63	.60	.72
6. Orally translate-Orally L-L                      translate	.85	.69	.53	.46	.61
7. Orally translate-Write L-L                      translations	.77	.55	.50	.48	.55

Note: R-R means input to and output from the right hemisphere;  
L-L, left hemisphere, etc.

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Source: The Comprehension Approach to Foreign Language Instruction (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House Publishers, Inc., 1981), p. 200.

Asher concludes that long-term retention of the new language, following instruction designed exclusively for the right hemisphere, was near the maximum of approximately 95 percent. Instruction which provided input to one hemisphere and required output from the other in the retention tests resulted in a decrease in long-term retention to approximately 75 percent. Finally, when instruction and testing dealt with the left hemisphere only, long-term retention dropped significantly further to about 50-55 percent. This points to the advantages of using an approach which engages students in observing and/or participating fully in motor acts as a part of their language training.

Penny Ur in her book entitled Teaching Listening Comprehension begins with a discussion of some of the characteristic features of our everyday listening activities. Although some of these characteristics may be absent in particular listening contexts, she points out that rarely are they all lacking, and she goes on to discuss the application of these features to the development of classroom listening tasks. Her list consists of:

1. We listen for a purpose and with certain expectations.
2. We make an immediate response to what we hear.
3. We see the person we are listening to.
4. There are some visual or environmental clues as to the meaning of what is heard.
5. Stretches of heard discourse come in short chunks.

6. Most heard discourse is spontaneous and therefore differs from formal spoken prose in the amount of redundancy [the addition of extra information], 'noise' [gaps in the conveying or reception of meaning due to outside disturbance, a lapse in concentration, unclear or unknown elements, or other interfering factors] and colloquialisms, and in its auditory character.<sup>5</sup>

Penny Ur includes a section on the planning of exercises for the language classroom; she addresses work in an ESL classroom, but many of her ideas are transferable. The bulk of her manuscript is devoted to a clear and extensive taxonomy of listening activities arranged according to the progressively more extensive or productive responses required of the student. I have found her analysis of tasks and responses to be very thought-provoking, and her creative tasks, use of visuals, and thorough explanations serve as good models and tools for exploring a wider range of activities geared to a specific skill level.

The use of Cuisenaire rods in constructing models according to a description given by a teacher or classmate and the reordering of a series of pictures to coincide with the events in a story told by the teacher are among the early listening tasks she outlines as requiring no verbal response. Ur also discusses some uses for cloze exercises and gives some interesting examples of error detection games whereby the students view a picture described by the teacher or read along with a passage as the teacher deliberately deviates from some of the

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<sup>5</sup> Penny Ur, Teaching Listening Comprehension (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 9.

facts presented.

Dale Griffiee, a Summer MAT student at the School for International Training, conducted a workshop on uses for songs as a part of the 1986 Summer Language Teachers' Conference on the SIT campus in Brattleboro. He teaches in Tokyo and is currently compiling materials which he hopes to publish. Songs can serve as a springboard for discussions of values, of cultural observations, and of colloquial speech including slang and idioms. In teaching the structure and content of the language itself, Dale presented a series of means for dealing with the lyrics. Among these were: cloze exercises whereby selected words are deleted from the copies given to the students, similar exercises differing in the fact that the deleted items are given in a random order at the end of the exercise as an aid to the students, and exercises whereby the student must put the component phrases of a song in order based on listening to the recording.

These reports from my reading serve as one frame of reference for the work which I hoped to do with my students.

## CHAPTER 3

## Activities Relevant to the Current Context

In planning listening comprehension exercises for use in the class, I wanted to include some materials that would expose the students to local Hispanic media and cultural resources. This influenced my choice of source material. I found ample resources starting with the local Spanish television channel, KREN, Channel 27; Dr. Petersen has a number of videotaped commercials and other excerpts which are available for our use in the classroom. The campus film library has limited material suitable for newcomers to the language, but the film I did find was well-suited to the class level.

In addition to my own growing collection and that of Dr. Petersen and other colleagues in the department, the library has a small collection of Latin American music which is available to students and staff along with the equipment with which we can copy portions for our use. As an unexpected musical highlight, The Nevada Humanities Committee supported the hosting by the local high school and university language departments of a group of traditional troubadours called "La Tuna Universitaria de Cádiz" near the close of the semester. These men performed a number of traditional and modern tunes from Spain and Latin America; students who attended were offered extra credit applied toward the course for writing a few paragraphs giving their impressions of what they saw and

heard during the performance. The group's informal interaction with the audience was in a mixture of both Spanish and English, so those attending had the chance to deal with significant Spanish input in this setting.

As a final outside media source for this present consideration, the Keystone Cinema locally shows a number of Spanish-language films annually: a "Cinema of Spain" festival is held during the fall, and Latin American films are featured throughout the summer or in observance of the "Cinco de Mayo" celebration prominent in Reno honoring Mexican independence. These are all subtitled, yet they provide students with the opportunity to hear some targeted regional dialect and to test their grasp of what is being said. A small group of us from the class went to see Carlos Saura's El Amor Brujo (Love, the Magician), a Spanish film of Flamenco dance and tangled loves. Those who accompanied me mentioned how much they enjoyed hearing a number of familiar expressions used in the film, how the "accent" of the cast sounded to their ears, and how they appreciated the senses of humor which were portrayed in some of the prominent scenes.

Different pieces we worked with interested me for a variety of reasons. Some of the songs, for example, contained familiar lexical and grammatical material to which the students could relate, and I felt that this factor would heighten the interest and motivation of the students in approaching a given task. The focus of the commercial which I will treat later was a product familiar to the class, and I

hoped that having this "in" would give the students a head-start toward understanding the message of the ad itself. I felt that having some familiar elements embedded in the material we were using allowed the students to better work "from the known to the unknown".

In using the Shout laundry detergent commercial, I posed a task that required the students to listen for specific terms which were missing from the text I had given them. This commercial was recorded on videotape from Channel 27 and belonged to Dr. Petersen. I became aware of its existence when Raquel, a teaching assistant in the department, had it in the T.A. office one day and was practicing the use of the VCR system controls. Dr. Petersen had also prepared a transcript of the commercial, designed in a cloze format. This material seemed ideally suited to my purposes, and I was delighted to have the use of it.

I invite the reader to listen to the accompanying recording and to look at the transcription below in proceeding.

---

ANUNCIO COMERCIAL DE SHOUT Channel 27 de Reno, NV

Los niños no tienen que preocuparse cuando se mancha la ropa, pero Ud. sí. Por eso es importante saber que Shout es el sacamanchas que elimina hasta las manchas más difíciles. Sólo aplique Shout sobre la mancha, frótelo en la prenda antes de lavarla, y quedará satisfecha con el impecable resultado.

Cuando de manchas se trata, esa mancha la saca Shout.

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We watched the commercial first without having the paper as a reference. Then the students read over the sheet in order to familiarize themselves with the text. We then viewed the ad three times, and the students proceeded to write their impressions of what they had heard. The students had a few questions about the passage, notably the meaning of the phrase "frótelo en la prenda" (rub it into the garment); we discussed these and then moved on to discuss the completion of the text. In order to involve the students and to give them a common point of reference, I asked for volunteers to go to the board alternately to share their answers. Pooling their ideas seemed to help, and only a little additional input from me was needed. Once we had finished this part of the activity, the students enjoyed hearing the videotape once more as a means of comparing what they had previously hypothesized with what had surfaced as a result of their combined efforts.

The video provided good visual support for the script and also stirred more interest, serving as a catalyst for a student-generated discussion of highlights of Channel 27 programming.

The lab tapes and accompanying manual present the students with a broad variety of input, and the students are asked to interact with the material and to respond in a number of different ways. I have chosen here to look at a sample chapter and to discuss its contents in terms of the way in which the student is asked to work with the material.

Chapter 13 addresses the theme of fine arts and literature; much of the vocabulary used and the situations presented therefore revolve around related concerns. Of the nineteen exercises in this unit of the lab manual, nine ask the student to practice one of the grammatical transformations included in the corresponding chapter of the text, namely the formation and use of the present subjunctive and of commands. Three more ask the student to do tasks of identification: to specify the context of a dialogue by choosing from two proposed options, to identify phrases as commands versus statements, or to evaluate proposed items as being possible or impossible in relation to a dialogue they have just listened to and read.

Looking specifically at the opening exercise of the chapter, let us consider what is presented to the learner and what she is asked to do with this information. I have recorded this section on the enclosed cassette tape; I ask that the reader listen to the recording at this time.

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#### LAS BELLAS ARTES Y LAS LETRAS -- VOCABULARIO

13.1 Listen to each dialog or description and determine what artistic or literary activity is involved. Then mark the appropriate choice below. Concentrate on the general idea of what you hear, without being distracted by unfamiliar vocabulary. First listen to the model.

#### MODELO

You hear: -De todos los cuadros de Miró, me gusta más éste. Míralo. Tiene muchos detalles, y mucha simetría. Y los colores también son como alegres.  
-Es bonita, pero prefiero aquella de Dalí.

You see and check:  una exposición de pintura  
 una escena de una zarzuela

1.  una obra de teatro  
 una sinfonía
2.  Una novelista explica su novela.  
 Una escultora habla con su modelo.
3.  Hablan dos escritores.  
 Hablan dos cantantes de ópera.
4.  Hablan de un pintor.  
 Hablan de un compositor.<sup>6</sup>

The learner is first given specific taped instructions outlining the task and suggesting an approach to the material. The learner is advised to adopt the strategy of listening for the general idea of the dialogue by attending to key words and phrases; furthermore, the student is asked not to fix attention on unfamiliar items but rather to allow for gaps in her understanding and proceed with a more general, global impression of what is being discussed. Once the student has listened to a particular scenario, she is asked to indicate a choice between the two contexts described on the accompanying page.

The remaining exercises in this chapter call for a variety of responses from the participant: she may be asked to identify phrases as belonging to one of two proposed categories; to listen and read along with a conversation and then to repeat targeted portions of it following the speaker; to

<sup>6</sup> Douglas Morganstern, Manual de laboratorio to accompany ¿Habla español?, 3rd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985), p. 141.

complete sentences where an opening clause is written, making use of the spoken information and of grammatical criteria presented in the course text centering on contexts requiring the use of subjunctive and indicative forms of verbs; to rephrase or respond to auditory input; or, lastly, to write responses to printed questions pertaining to a recorded scene from a drama. These demands require that the student apply a number of different listening strategies depending on the nature of the task. Some call for attention to specific verb endings in an attempt to grasp the subtler shade of meaning in the speaker's intent. Other activities rely on a more global understanding of the facts presented in a set passage and upon some short-term retention of detail. Others are geared toward pronunciation practice, and still others require that the learner get personally invested and respond to questions with a shift to her perspective.

The task of assessing the value of this labwork to the students is not an easy one, and I must rely on the reports of my students and my own observations as the basis of my opinion. Since the members of the class varied significantly in the extent to which they used the materials, the reported benefits also varied widely. For many of those who used the tapes and workbook infrequently, the task of comprehending the recorded speech often proved formidable. I observed a cycle whereby an early avoidance of the tapes resulted in a lack of familiarity and ease with the sound patterns of Spanish and with the rate of speech employed in the tape series.

Later these same students reported their frustration in using the lab materials, complained about the rate of the speech, and, judging by their reported attendance and completed lab manual pages, chose instead to avoid this component of the coursework.

For those who used these facilities more regularly, the benefits were evident. They were observably more adept at understanding my speech and that of their peers in the class. Their grasp of vocabulary items was firmer, due in part to the reinforcement and practice afforded by the labwork, and the tasks in the course which relied heavily on one's listening skills were carried out with considerably better results. The time they had spent in developing and polishing their skills proved fruitful. I cannot in this context isolate the variables which may have contributed to these students' success in this realm, so my claims are qualified with respect to establishing any firm claim to a cause and effect relationship in this instance. My interest is rather to report on the seeming boost which these activities fostered in the students' listening acumen.

I wanted to experiment with using a number of different activities based on songs. In contrast to the cloze activities which call for students to listen intently and to transcribe missing information, the idea of using a typed version of a song with the lines in a jumbled order seemed to me to pose a more relaxed task to the students and one which required a different type of concentration. This idea,

again, was presented along with many others by Dale Griffiee in a workshop given during the 1986 SIT Summer Language Teachers' Conference.

A student had loaned me a number of tapes recorded by Argentine artists, and I particularly liked this song for several reasons. First, there was a great deal of repetition which established a clear pattern to the lyrics. Secondly, the range of vocabulary was largely familiar to the students, and yet it was not artificially controlled or sheltered. Lastly, the song progressed at a very moderate tempo; this served to make the students' task more manageable and to convey the melancholy yet hopeful tone of the song.

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CUATRO ESTROFAS (Stanzas)  
-escrita por Alejandro Lerner

¿Listos? Vamos a escuchar la canción. Luego tenemos que poner en su orden las líneas que siguen. Escribamos los números correspondientes al lado izquierdo. ¡Adelante!

- \_\_\_ Ya estoy mucho más sola que mi canción anterior.
- \_\_\_ No me importa si no rima o si desafina al cantar.  
(is out of tune)
- \_\_\_ Tanta felicidad que ya no tengo.
- \_\_\_ Ni tampoco me lo digas para improvisar.
- \_\_\_ No me quedan más sonrisas para dibujar.
- \_\_\_ No me quedan fantasías para poder soñar.
- \_\_\_ En mi interior recuerdos. (inner)
- \_\_\_ No me quedan más lugares donde pod(e)ré escapar.  
(I will be able to)
- \_\_\_ Sólo un poco más esfuerzo para imaginar.  
(gives strength or courage)
- \_\_\_ No me quedan más palabras para no llorar.
- \_\_\_ Un poco más, un poco más.
- \_\_\_ No me quedan más disfraces para actuar.  
(disfraz - disguise or mask)
- \_\_\_ No me quedan más estrofas que inventar. (stanzas)
- \_\_\_ No me quedan más poesías para recitar.
- \_\_\_ En este mismo lugar volver a estar de nuevo  
juntos. (this same place; again; together)

No me quedan más bolsillos sin vaciar.<sup>7</sup>  
(pockets or pocketbooks)

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The students first read over the lyrics to familiarize themselves with the content and with their arrangement on the page. We then listened to the song twice, numbering the lines according to the order in which they were sung. In the future I think it advisable that I stop more frequently, perhaps after each stanza, and tell the students what number is coming up. This would serve to reorient them; since one slip in numbering can throw off all of the following numbers, this preventative measure is well worth the small amount of time it takes.

We discussed the poem itself and the emotions evoked by the song. In the interest of time, I collected the worksheets and looked at them outside the class, returning them later to the students.

This is more an exercise in identification and discrimination than in comprehension per se, and it calls for the students to recognize the written representation of the spoken word. As such, it has limited application. I do find it valuable as a change of pace and as a chance for students to identify some of their progress in listening proficiency as it relates to a grasp of Spanish phonology.

In using the song "Amor, Regresa a Mí", I had a very specific focus in mind: I wanted the students to recognize,

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<sup>7</sup> Sandra Mihanovich, "Cuatro estrofas," Sandra Mihanovich, Industria Argentina, CM-60.200, 1982.

in context, some of the verb tenses we had been studying at such great length.' A teaching colleague had used the song in her class, presenting a transcript of the words to the students to use while listening. She lent me her record and script, and I proceeded in formulating a new version for use in my section.

Leaving blanks where the verbs had been and supplying the students instead with only the infinitive forms, I asked them to read over the sheet and then to write in the corresponding form of the verb once they had listened to the song. I was asking them to use their own hypotheses and the oral rendition of the verses as a basis for their choices. This necessitated a reliance on the full extent of their understanding of these specific tenses, both of where they were appropriately used and of how they were formed morphemically. Please refer at this time to the lyrics below and to the cassette tape in proceeding.

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AMOR, REGRESA A MÍ

-cantada por Richard Yñiguez

Las palabras de amor que me _____	(decir)
_____ más.	(")
Las caricias de amor que me _____	(hacer)
_____ más.	(")
Ya hace muchos días que _____	(irse)
_____ a mí.	(regresar)
No _____ que _____ sin verte	(saber, hacer)
Te _____ más y más.	(querer)
Los días, los pasos tan tristes	
_____ sonreír.	(hacer)



Amor, amor... \_\_\_\_\_ besarte otra vez. (querer)  
 No pasa un día sin esperarte  
 Solo \_\_\_\_\_. (estar)  
 La luna me \_\_\_\_\_ en mi soledad. (acompañar)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ que \_\_\_\_\_. (saber, irse)  
 Te \_\_\_\_\_ por todo mi vida (amar)  
 Y aquí \_\_\_\_\_. (esperar)  
 Amor, amor...te \_\_\_\_\_ ver otra vez. (querer)  
 Ya hace muchos días que \_\_\_\_\_ (irse)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ a mí. (regresar)  
 No \_\_\_\_\_ que \_\_\_\_\_ sin verte (saber, hacer)  
 Te \_\_\_\_\_ más y más. (querer)  
 Te \_\_\_\_\_ por todo mi vida (amar)  
 Y aquí \_\_\_\_\_. (esperar)  
 Amor, amor... \_\_\_\_\_ besarte otra vez. (querer)  
 Gústame, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_... (querer, besar)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ a mí.<sup>8</sup>

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I must confess that I expected the students' performance on this task to be much better than it turned out, in fact, to be. I lay part of the responsibility for this gap on the fact that I may have timed the activity poorly. We started the activity at the end of the night and during the last class before Spring Break. In hindsight, I believe that the students could have benefited more from the experience had it been undertaken at a time when we were not so fatigued and when people were less likely to be distracted with other thoughts and concerns. I feel that I handicapped our efforts and that I need to be more attuned to these factors in planning future coursework.

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Yñiguez, "Amor, regresa a mí," RICHROX Records, RR-1213, n.d.

I had hoped that the students would be encouraged by their grasp of this grammatical material with which they had grappled earlier in the course and that this exercise would serve as one example of just how far their understanding of Spanish had penetrated in making the meaning of such a composition accessible to them. In this instance, this was not the case. Nevertheless, I believe that it could serve just such a purpose in future cases provided that I exercise better judgment regarding the timing of this exercise with respect to the students' energy levels and powers of concentration.

After Spring Break, we viewed the film A Traveller's Special.<sup>9</sup> I found that this production provided an excellent glimpse of one American's first venture into a Spanish-speaking environment. It is highly simplified through the use of elementary vocabulary, repetition, and a high degree of visual reinforcement which is woven into the screenplay. It portrays an amicable set of encounters where the interlocutors need to communicate and where they work at negotiating and expressing their messages to ensure that the desired communication is achieved.

We viewed this along with the people in the other section of the course which met at the same time. Some of the students related experiences they had had while visiting other Spanish-speaking countries, highlighting how they had managed

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<sup>9</sup> Henry Bagdadi, creator, A Traveller's Special, An H.B. Production, 1972.

to communicate in certain situations. Mrs. Blomquist, the professor for this group, later told me that a number of her students were confident that their Spanish skills and communication strategies would enable them to fare as well as or better than had Mr. Miller in the film. Several of my students reported similar assurance.

As a follow-up to the film, I had prepared a game using a Jeopardy format. The game presented information extracted from the film under four different headings; the "questions" were covered with cards designating the point value of each, starting at 100 points and reaching 400 going down each column. The student who first formulated an appropriate question, stood up, and posed the question correctly was awarded the points. This sparked some very lively effort on the part of the students, and although the task was not an easy one for them, all were able to make some valuable contributions and to remain solvent on the scoreboard. The following illustration and the cassette portray the soundtrack of the film and the "questions" given to the class after the film.

RIESGO			
GENTE	PROFESIONES	LUGARES	NÚMEROS
Sr. Miller	la recepcionista	Nueva York	5 paquetes
Inspector Gutiérrez y Inspector Hernández	una compañía de teléfonos	México, D.F.	11:15
tiene una esposa y tres hijos	la policía	Tijuana	<del>60</del> 40 pesos
Sheila	de negocios y un poco de vacaciones	El Matador	20 pesos

I was eager to assess their understanding of the film albeit indirectly, and since the film itself had contained many similar questions, I reasoned that this task would require students to engage both these immediate memories and their overall knowledge of question forms prevalent in Spanish. The former proved to be an easier undertaking for most, as several attempts at times were necessary before the latter became smooth and viable. They had obviously understood the dialogue in the film.

In order to develop familiarity with the vocabulary words for a given chapter, I started using a format similar to that of a Bingo game. I would give the students a sheet of paper with a dittoed grid containing a random selection of twenty-five of the current words to be mastered, or I would give them a blank grid and ask them to fill in words of their choice from the chapter list and bring it for the following class. In proceeding then, after setting aside a time for students to review the arrangement of words on their particular grid, I would describe or define a given item, quality or action in Spanish using cognates where possible and lexical items suited to their level; I employed gestures and realia where possible as well. The students' task was to recognize what I was referring to and to locate the corresponding term on their respective grids, if it was there. The first one to complete a full line in any direction won, and that student was then asked to put her five consecutive terms on the board for the rest of the class to verify.

Many of the students found this to be a very beneficial review and were surprised at how much they understood. At the other end of the scale, there was one student who, upon seeing the winning combination of words, would often exclaim that he had those words on his sheet and that, had he understood, he would have won. I worked on negotiating meaning here as much as possible, almost as though I were circumlocuting an unknown term, and offered further angles in my descriptions until the majority of the participants demonstrated that they were satisfied they understood by ceasing their listening and seeking out their chosen terms on their grids.

I was pleased with this activity in the sense that it allowed the students to listen for content and general understanding and merely to mark some corresponding item in response. Although it was still very targeted and specific, I found that it asked for a different type of work from the students; in contrast to activities where input is to be precisely decoded and transcribed, here students could allow for gaps in the flow of what they heard and still reconstruct for themselves the gist of the message.

Exemplifying this contrast, one fairly regular feature of our class was a dictation. In this exercise, the students were asked to transcribe sentences which I repeated to them in phrases. I would generally draw the material for this from one of the dialogues given in the current chapter.

I would assign numbers to the sentences in the dialogue,

dividing the passage into parts of relatively equal length. I would read each item phrase by phrase, repeating each phrase twice and then giving the sentences in their entirety upon reaching the end of a sentence. After responding to requests for repetition or clarification of parts not initially understood and allowing a few moments for the students to read over what they had written, I called on students by assigning them numbers and asking them to put their interpretation of what they had heard on the board.

As a group we would then go over this boardwork together, making changes where necessary. We would follow this with a discussion of the passage in order to ensure a full grasp of the meaning. This task required that the students listen for very specific phonological information and focus on the words themselves in order to reconstruct the content mentally and then graphically. This seemed to me to be one effective means of learning from the students just what they thought they were hearing and how they were formulating this aural input into larger blocks of language. This process of decoding the material perceived through the auditory sense involved both a recognition and recall of familiar structures and some attempt at synthesizing unfamiliar components into meaningful patterns based on one's previous experience of the language. The process also provided students with the chance to risk making public these verbal interpretations of theirs and to gain feedback on their work and hypotheses by checking them against the final group effort.

A portion of the class performed consistently well on this exercise, while others carried it out with great difficulty and performed poorly. Regardless of the students' current demonstrated ability in decoding and transcribing these specific messages, I believe that the practice was valuable as a tool in developing the students' aural comprehension further and that this skill would prove to be both necessary and useful in oral testing within the course framework and in using the language outside the parameters of the classroom.

Finally, there were a number of informal activities which we used periodically as a part of the class content. As part of our interaction as a group and as a means of providing extra listening practice, I would ask the students questions requiring a simple yes-no answer or short reply; these were often centered on the members of the class themselves and could serve the additional purpose of recycling familiar vocabulary and structures. Later on in the course, some of the students joined me in posing questions to their peers. Examples of questions useful for this purpose included:

Are Cecilia's shoes yellow?  
Whose shirt is blue?  
Is Gabe's book open or closed?  
Is that your bag?

In asking students to demonstrate their comprehension without asking that they speak or write in doing so, I would issue a series of commands. Once in asking students to point to specific parts of their bodies during a unit on body parts, I began by telling them to close their eyes; I wanted them in

this instance to work independently and not to be distracted by or reliant upon the actions of their neighbors. Familiar classroom commands were given in Spanish throughout the course.

These last two activities were always enjoyable and light yet challenging to the students. Student interest was high since the topic under consideration was very personal to the group, and students were eager to participate in these varied activities. These also allowed the students who wanted to benefit from further listening since few productive demands were placed on them, and those who wanted to extend their participation to another level were free to do so as well. This freedom to involve themselves in a way that best suited their preferred learning styles added to the students' enjoyment of the activities described.



## CHAPTER 4

## Further Application

In looking ahead, there are many ideas that I have yet to explore. I especially want to develop and try out more activities which require no verbal response from the students. I have ordered my Cuisenaire rods for use in construction games, command sequences, and other imaginative activities including story-telling and the building of models as a basis for shared experiences in creating a common frame of reference. Earl Stevick talks about related ideas in Chapter 11 of his book A Way and Ways, as does Donald Freeman, a member of the SIT faculty. I hope to invite and inspire more student-generated work along these lines with some students initiating activities once they are ready to do so and others listening and following along with whatever manipulations of realia are called for in the task at hand.

I am also developing a picture file to be used in class. I plan to put together tasks calling for students to identify certain pictures or certain elements within a picture based on information gleaned from an oral description. Some tasks of error detection could also be generated around these same depictions. I want also to use some of the pictures as I see fit in addressing rather basic questions to the students, questions requiring yes-no, true-false, choice, or short answers. Especially in the early stages of the course, I

hope to use cognates as much as possible as a bridge into Spanish for the students, and I want to place few productive demands on them during selected activities. I also want to try out more specific activities that use story-telling, description, and impromptu speech in addition to further taped activities.

Since composing written or spoken expressions in response to aural input calls upon the student to put into play additional skills, I want to refine my skills in planning a balance of activities to allow for differing modes of demonstrating comprehension. By eliciting some type of nonverbal response, I can be sure that my assessment of the student's listening comprehension skills will not be colored by her skill level in some expressive means of using the language.

I, and I feel safe in saying my students as well, have enjoyed my initial explorations into using techniques which enhance and tax listening comprehension skills. I am developing a keener awareness of gauging the appropriateness of a given task in relation to a group's skill level(s) and their energy level at different times. These factors merit my further consideration, and their effect on the success of an activity in terms of its benefits to the students cannot be ignored or played down in planning.

In the context of this course I cannot say that I have used anything close to a full comprehension-based approach regularly in the classroom. This was not my intent. I would like to work, on my own and with colleagues, on questions

concerning our skill in using this approach and its application in more detail for use within the present structure of this existing university course framework. While acknowledging that this is not an easy task in light of the course pace and content, I and others hope to apply our efforts and creativity further in planning strategies which will incorporate more fully our choices and beliefs about what can enhance our own effectiveness as teachers and, correspondingly, the success of our students in these language courses.

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