

Abax - Review

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Top Up Listening 1




There are many listening books on the market, but few actually attempt to teach rather than test listening. Exercises usually consist of listening first for gist then intensively for specific information, the assumption apparently being that listening comprehension will simply improve with practice. The Top-Up Listening series is different; it sets out to teach elementary to low-intermediate students how to listen, by demystifying aspects of spoken English that present problems to the learner.

The title implies attention to both aspects of the listening process: top down--using background schematic knowledge to infer meaning from the context; and bottom up--paying attention to the individual sounds (phonemes), as well as syllable stress and intonation. The series consists of three books, each attractively designed with a clear, uncluttered layout and coloured illustrations, and a CD containing all the listening material inside the back cover. There are downloadable Teacher's Notes, as well as answer keys, although I noticed a few errors and discrepancies.

This review will focus on Book 1. The 15 units cover a wide range of topics, about a third travel-oriented, designed to provide between 25 and 40 hours of material. The English is American, but other accents are included. Underhill (1994, p. 59) distinguishes between two pronunciation styles: "careful colloquial speech" and "rapid colloquial speech," suggesting that the former is useful as a target for learners to aim for in their speaking, and the latter for their listening skills. The language recorded in Top-Up Listening 1 is not authentic rapid colloquial speech, having been graded for the elementary learner; however, it contains some erms and uhs to simulate natural speech, and its speed certainly challenged my students.

In each unit, the same listening material (usually three short conversations, but occasionally monologues - as in a radio sports broadcast) is revisited three times. Two Listening Clinics present the unit's phonological point. Rather than use technical terms like elision, assimilation, and liaison, the Listening Clinics call them lost sounds, changing sounds, joined sounds and helping sounds. They also focus on contractions, weak forms, stress and intonation. The first Listening Clinic in each unit demonstrates the language point overtly, with an example, then a short dialogue in which students are asked to notice and mark the feature where they hear it follows.

The second Listening Clinic, near the end of the unit, consists of six discrete sentences, rather than a dialogue. Students are asked to predict where they may hear the feature then listen to see if they guessed right. My students needed a lot of support to accomplish this task. I found they could better recognize a feature introduced in a Listening Clinic if I could



reinforce it with additional authentic material such as songs. For example, the chorus of The Police's Message in a Bottle is ideal for joined sounds (where 'an SOS' sounds like 'a-nes-soh-ess'). I also exaggerated the features and encouraged practice: students enjoyed saying "a cuppa coffee 'n' a donut" or "Coujew (could you) repeat that?" I hope that attention to and practice of such features will lead to greater success in future listening tasks. Before, between, and after the listening exercises are a number of speaking activities. Let's Start uses discussion questions to lead into the topic. Practice features the language point in a dialogue which students can practice and adapt. Try it Out encourages role play in a less supported activity, while allowing them to review and recycle the vocabulary and pronunciation features encountered. Each unit ends with In Your Own Time, which aims to develop student autonomy by suggesting they listen to the recordings again on their CD, as well as complete the unit's word list at the back of the book.

This contains words plus definitions, some of which are missing. Students are supposed to supply the relevant word to fit the definition, or write a definition for the targeted word. This was beyond my students' ability, particularly since the words chosen were not very high frequency and, in some cases, only found in the recording, which meant they had to search in the transcript to find it.

My students' opinions of this book were mixed. Although they found it difficult, everyone agreed the Listening Clinics were helpful and at times even fun. By combining familiar exercises using top-down processing with activities focused on phonological features to help decode the spoken language, Top-Up Listening 1 represents a valiant attempt to provide students with the tools to improve their listening comprehension, and is therefore a welcome resource.

Reference Underhill, A. (1994). Sound Foundations. Oxford: Macmillan Heinemann.

Reviewed by Fiona MacGregor

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