Hidden Challenges that Radio DJs Present to ESL/EFL Listeners

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Abstract

Language learners can learn a lot by listening to radio broadcasts in the target language. With the spread of English worldwide through forces of globalisation, it is not uncommon for learners to have access to English language broadcasts from both local radio stations and international broadcasters such as the BBC. Language teachers often make use of radio broadcasts as sources of listening materials for their classroom activities. This paper considers one type of discourse commonly found in radio broadcasts yet rarely used as listening materials in language classrooms: DJ talk. For learners who spend hours listening to the radio, it is often DJ talk that interests them most. Such talk, therefore, merits closer consideration both as a discourse type, and as a suitable source of teaching materials. In particular, DJ talk can help learners develop critical listening skills, an important yet underdeveloped area of ESL/EFL teaching and learning. Using Goffman's (1981) theoretical framework for analysing radio talk, this paper explores the discourse of DJs and some consequent implications for language teachers.

Keywords: DJ talk**,** critical listening, ESL/EFL listening**,** Goffman

1. Introduction and literature review

It has been noted in the ELT literature that listening tends to be the neglected macro-skill in both listening comprehension research and in second or foreign language teaching (Graham, 2009). On the research side, notable works have included the survey of the field by Lynch (1998), Buck's (2001) account describing listening skills in order to enable their assessment, and Rost's (2011) authoritative account of both teaching and researching listening. Dunkel (1991) draws linkages between L1 and L2 listening with a view to informing L2 pedagogical practice. Brindley (1997) proposes a taxonomy of listening skills for language learners, adapted from those provided by Rost (1993) and Weir (1993). Field (1998) notes the importance of listening strategies and their compensatory role to listening skills; while Renandya and Farrell (2011) note the lack of evidence of success in following a strategies-based approach with lower proficiency learners. Field (2008) is explicitly concerned with what teachers need to do in terms of *teaching* listening comprehension skills in language classrooms.

In our view, the main problems in teaching listening to ESL/EFL learners can be summarised as (1) finding suitable materials; and (2) using those materials in a suitable way. In the case of the former, teachers often rely on course books (whose developers have themselves decided what counts as suitable materials) or they may be more concerned with particular target language use domains such as specific academic disciplines or professions, or teachers may draw from more general 'real world' discourse as found across a range of contemporary media broadcasts. In the case of the latter, teachers are concerned with the authenticity of the task (i.e. is it 'real-life' or 'artificial'?), and covering the range of skills (and sub-skills) commonly identified in listening skill taxonomies. One of the goals of this paper is to present an approach to solving a particular problem related to using listening materials in a suitable way. Before we address our specific concern, however, it is useful to first consider the wider context of teaching and learning ESL/EFL listening skills as understood from current theory.

Richards (2008) notes the practice of viewing listening skills as either 'bottom-up' or 'top-down', and the different treatment that each type receives in the language classroom. Bottom-up processing refers to the "use of input as the basis for understanding a message" (Richards, 2008, p. 4), which implies that comprehension of the input (words, sentence boundaries, contractions, individual sounds, and sound combinations) is through decoding – a difficult mental activity. Any activities that are difficult to process may aggravate the effects of classroom contextual problems (such as large class sizes and students' differing proficiency levels, motivations, needs, preferences, etc.) and may well demotivate students. Bottom-up processing also assumes that the things a listener needs to understand are all included in the input. However, decoding works well only when the learner has a large vocabulary and good working knowledge of sentence structure. In instances where learners have limited vocabulary and poor knowledge of sentence structure (as in the case of lower-level ESL/SFL students) bottom-up processing may not be an effective approach to teaching

listening. Indeed, bottom-up processing of input can pose a formidable challenge to ESL/EFL learners.

In top-down processing, the listener's knowledge-based schemata (such as cultural constructs, topic familiarity, discourse clues, and pragmatic conventions) are activated (Celce-Murcia, 1995; Hinkel, 2006; Mendelsohn, 1994; Rost & Ross, 1991). In other words, this approach relies on the "use of background knowledge in understanding the meaning of a message" (Richards, 2008, p. 7), and focuses on "teaching learners how to cope with authentic language and real life situations as part of the communicative approach" (Wilson, 2003, p. 335). (Hinkel, 2006) notes, however, that in the context of language classroom teaching and learning, these 'coping' strategies are often not actually geared towards language learning. Rather, they are 'survival' strategies that a language learner can use to pass examinations.

At present, teacher education textbooks covering the essentials of language instruction include material on how to address bottom-up and top-down abilities of learners (see, for example, Adger, Snow & Christian, 2002; Brown, 2001; Carter & Nunan, 2001; Celce-Murcia, 2001; Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Nunan, 1999, 2003; Richards, 2003, 2008; Wilson, 2003), but none of these books explicitly mention the development of cognitive strategies associated with *critical thinking*. Critical thinking is an individual "competence in whatever is thought about" (Smith, 1992, p. 103) (see also McPeck, 1981), and its inseparableness from language makes it an indispensable and crucial component to be addressed in ESL/EFL classrooms. Critical thinking provides an opportunity to explore meanings beyond what is visible/audible at the surface level in authentic language. The considerable progress gained in recent years from studies of spoken corpora and conversation analysis have been "illuminating the complexity of oral discourse and language" (Hinkel 2006, p. 117), which suggests that authentic listening materials (such as DJ talk) offer more than simply providing instances for learning L2 either through bottom-up or top-down processing. The complexity of oral discourse also presents an opportunity to develop critical thinking skills while listening, which is not provided by bottom-up or top-down approaches to listening.

2. Radio broadcasts as sources of listening materials

None of the published research referred to above has given much if any serious thought to the various discourses of ubiquitous radio broadcasts and the challenges they present to language learners. Learners of a second or foreign language have often found that listening to radio broadcasts improves their listening skills and comprehension. Indeed, their language teachers often use excerpts from radio broadcasts in their teaching (see, for example, Hafernik & Surguine 1979; Morrison, 1989). Language teachers also promote radio listening as a useful extra-curricular activity for students to take up. After all, it is cheap, it potentially offers a great variety of speaking registers, styles and accents, and it is often available to learners around the clock. The listening skills in French of one of the authors of this paper benefited enormously from listening to radio newscasts in that language when he was a lower-intermediate learner of French. That personal experience, and the published accounts

of the types of radio broadcast materials used in language classrooms highlight the fact that teachers tend to select for their listening activities broadcast excerpts which are generally accessible (for example, newscasts and certain types of advertisements), and avoid excerpts which are more challenging (for example, naturally occurring speech).

While it is true that using materials that are appropriately graded for language learners of a particular level is 'good' teaching practice, it also deprives learners of opportunities to improve their comprehension of more natural and difficult discourses which are also commonly heard in real life. Herron and Seay (1991) noted the improvement in listening comprehension of language learners who were exposed to unedited radio discourse, in contrast to learners who were not. This is an under-researched area of both the listening research literature and the ELT literature, and the purpose of the present paper is to consider the issue of radio discourses more fully, and what the implications for learners and teachers might be.

3. Problematizing DJ talk

According to Priestman (2004), DJ talk is contextualized such that it attracts attention, prepares ears for listening rather than just hearing, reminds listeners (e.g. of the station they are tuned in to), persuades listeners (e.g. to use a service or product) and engages the audience with conversations that sustain their loyalty. These various functions are achieved by a DJ's use of vocal timbre, colloquial speech, and a quirky or memorable style of address, which permit the DJ to display intimacies that appeal to listeners at an individual and personal level despite the fact that broadcasts are aimed at a mass audience (Coyle, 2000: 63). Indeed, as Rost (2011, p. 256) notes, "the listener plays a vital role in creating the meaning in all discourse situations [including] …indirectly, as in audience design used in preparing one-way discourse such as media programmes". These characteristics of DJ talk suggest a complexity in the discourse not immediately evident to the casual listener of radio broadcasts.

While language teachers who direct their learners to radio listening as a useful outside-class activity may have some concern about their students learning too much informal language or, by extension, misapplying an informal spoken register to situations where more formality is needed, they generally view radio broadcasts in English as unproblematic: a few people in the radio studio talk and many people across a city or country listen. While it is true that language learners stand to improve their listening comprehension skills considerably through listening to talk on the radio, as noted above the talk they hear is often not as straightforward as it may sound. (The focus of this paper, it should be stressed, is not concerned with the 'real but *unhidden*' challenges of naturally occurring discourse, such as speech rate, false starts, and idiomatic language). Indeed, it is quite likely that language teachers themselves may not be fully aware of aspects of DJ talk that make it particularly challenging for ESL/EFL learners to understand. To see why this is so, we can turn to sociologist Erving Goffman's theoretical framework for describing radio talk.

4. A framework for describing radio talk

Goffman (1981) investigates forms of talk, including a study of radio talk. In particular, he deals with examples of 'misspeaking' that sometimes take place in live radio broadcasts which, through their exceptionality, enable a lot to be said about what is 'normal' talk in everyday life. Goffman is particularly interested in unpacking the terms 'speaker' and 'hearer' because they mask different social roles taken up in interactional discourse. He provides two different perspectives on analysing what is said in radio broadcasts, the first being what he calls 'speech production bases', and the second being 'production formats'. Let us consider each of these perspectives in turn.

4.1 Recitation, aloud reading, fresh talk

Goffman identifies three speech production bases in radio talk: (1) recitation; (2) aloud reading; and (3) fresh talk. Recitation occurs, for example, when a DJ is providing program or station identification.

Example 1: You're listening to the Banana Zone on Love FM 97.5 in Phnom Penh, where we play the music that makes you feel great[1].

Aloud reading occurs, for example, when a DJ is reading an advertisement to his or her listeners.

Example 2: Well guys, just a reminder that we use TeleSurf at Love FM and you can too. Visit the TeleSurf website at www… and check out TeleSurf's new plans and promotion. TeleSurf – Value for Money.

Fresh talk is unscripted talk, and occurs, for example, between songs.

Example 3: Alright, there you go Lady Marmalade, hmm yeah, I enjoyed that song. That was pretty good. And you know what? The Sugar Babes, they did a pretty good job of that, but when LaBelle came out, wow, she just like brought it up about, well, a few notches, that's for sure. And you know what? She sounds like the same. She's much older now and boy she really kicks it out. She's like, the end of the song there, wow, look out, yeah LaBelle still rules!

Each of these three types of speech places different demands upon the listener, and these are essentially to do with the degree of 'scriptedness': recitation and aloud reading are highly scripted and, therefore, easier for a listener to understand. They recur in their same form on multiple occasions, sometimes even within a program of an hour's duration.

Fresh talk, by contrast, is essentially unscripted and therefore more difficult to understand. What is said is certainly not repeated in the same form, if at all. As illustrated in Example 3 above, because of its qualities as an unscripted utterance, there is redundancy, ambiguity and incoherence in the discourse. Indeed, language

teachers who have not given much thought to the quality of English that is regularly broadcast on radio might be alarmed by such speech and the possibility that their students might use it as a model for their own speech. The main point to be made here, however, is different. Being able to distinguish whether the DJ is reciting, reading aloud, or engaging in fresh talk is something that proficient listeners can manage without much difficulty; however, that may not be the case for the less proficient. At a minimum, they may be troubled by the fact that sometimes they are able to understand a DJ quite easily, while at other times, they struggle to clearly understand anything he or she says. This was certainly the case for the author in his own experience as a learner of French. In terms of self-esteem, radio-listening can both boost and crush students' morale.

4.2 Animator, author, principal

Let us now consider Goffman's other perspective for analysing radio talk. His 'production formats' for radio talk are also comprised of three categories: (1) animator; (2) author; and (3) principal. Unlike speech production bases which, as we have seen, are concerned with the degree of 'scriptedness', production bases are concerned with the notion of 'voice', and whose discourse the listener is actually hearing. Goffman defines 'animator' as the one who speaks, and 'author' as the one who scripted the speech. Thus, the DJ may be either simply animator or both animator *and* author. Referring back to Examples 1 and 2 above, in recitation and aloud reading we can see that the DJ is animator of someone else's script (unless, of course, the DJ is also engaged in writing the copy of jingles and advertisements). In fresh talk, by contrast, the DJ is clearly both animator and author since it is his or her voice we hear, and the script is 'written' as it is spoken, i.e. in real-time direct from the DJ.

The category of 'principal' presents a greater challenge, and is defined by Goffman (1981), rather vaguely, as the 'agent' '…whose position is established by the words that are spoken, someone whose beliefs have been told, someone who is committed to what the words say' (p. 144). Despite his interest in language, Goffman was not a linguist; and he did not exemplify this term in ways which would clearly facilitate a linguistic analysis. In essence we can say that the principal is the one whose position is supported by the speech and, with this definition in mind, some illustrations of principal can be quite clear. For example, when a DJ is *reciting* his or her radio station's identity, it is the radio station that benefits from this sort of 'reminding' to the listener that they are tuned to it and not to a rival station. By extension, the owners of the station also stand to benefit if a loyal listening audience can be retained since, among other things, this increases the station's attractiveness for potential advertisers who may pay a lot of money to have their products or services advertised on the station's broadcasts.

Let us consider two further examples of 'principal', each connected with the other types of production base. First, where a DJ *reads aloud* an advertisement, the principal is clearly the company whose product or service is being advertised. In this instance, the DJ is animator, the copywriter is author, and the advertiser is principal. Second, where a DJ in *fresh talk* is advocating a particular position or point of view, it is possible that she/he is invoking a principal even more hidden than those just

described in recitation and aloud reading. Referring back to Example 3's illustration of fresh talk above, it is quite easy to think that the DJ's enthusiastic endorsement of Patti LaBelle could, depending upon the influence the DJ has on his or her audience, result in an increase in record sales for that artist. Indeed, it is clearly the case that one of the principal roles of DJs is to *promote* the music they play, in order to generate increased sales of that music.

5. Hidden challenges presented by DJ talk

It should be clear from the above descriptions that Goffman's production format 'voices' are an important component of radio talk, and that an ability to fully understand such radio talk necessarily entails an ability to discern when the DJ is animating something authored by someone else and for the purpose of supporting yet another person's or corporation's position. Less proficient listeners of radio talk will hear the DJs voice, and may understand much of what is said, but they may have no appreciation of the fact that this sort of discourse is 'institutional' rather than 'everyday' talk, and that its production involves non-present authors and principals with agendas. It would be an unwitting mistake, therefore, for language learners to adopt the spoken manner of DJ role models without an appreciation of the fact that DJ talk is meant to sound natural and everyday (and DJs are very skillful in their ability to achieve this effect), but is actually a highly institutionalised discourse with its own set of social (and commercial) objectives (see, for example, Drew & Heritage, 1992).

To sum up, language learners who listen to DJ talk on the radio need to cope with two sets of phenomena: the scriptedness of DJ talk (recited; read aloud; fresh), and the voice behind the message (animator; author; principal). While these kinds of talk do also occur in face-to-face encounters in real life, the radio listener is at a disadvantage with scriptedness since he or she cannot see the speaker and, therefore, know whether the speaker is or is not reading aloud. Similarly, the radio listener is at a disadvantage with discerning 'voice' in DJ monologues since he or she cannot interact with and impact on what the DJ says, as would be the case in a face-to-face exchange where clarification could be sought as to the degree the animator has authored the utterance and for what purpose this was done. Clearly, then, speech production bases and production platforms provide evidence that listening to the radio can be a lot more challenging than meets the eye (or ear), and language teachers should be aware of this situation.

6. Implications for English teachers

The analyses of DJ talk presented in this paper have many implications for English teachers. Four of the most significant are discussed below.

First, the various taxonomies of listening skills (for example, Buck, 2001; Brindley, 1997) are useful in providing categorisations of skills and a discrete set of sub-skills that language learners undoubtedly need to develop and, therefore, that teachers need to cover. However, none of them seems to adequately account for the type of critical listening that is required for a more complete understanding of radio talk. For example, in Brindley's taxonomy, Goffman's category of 'principal' might

seem to fall within the category 'Understanding meaning not explicitly stated', or, it might equally be placed in the first category, 'Orienting oneself to spoken text', where it could be described as a new sub-category 'Identify underlying ideological stances of utterances'. Current taxonomies do not address critical listening skills adequately, in our view, because such skills are difficult to describe and therefore difficult to pigeonhole in a taxonomy. However, to the extent that they can be described, they can be taught and learned. If critical listening skills (or any other aspect of listening) are overlooked by a taxonomy-based syllabus then the learner is missing out on something that could turn out to be very important to them. While taxonomies have their uses, especially in declaring distinct and exclusive categories, they do not appear sufficient in themselves to identify all the listening comprehension skills required of proficient language users.

Second, in terms of the ongoing debate about the use of authentic materials in language classrooms (see, for example, Flowerdew & Miller, 2005), radio broadcasts provide an easily accessible and limitless source of authentic listening materials. In contrast to the common use of unnatural, often decontextualized listening texts in ESL/EFL language classes, the use of DJ talk can help bridge the world of the classroom with the real world outside it. Goffman again is helpful in unpacking the notion of 'hearership' into ratified/unratified and addressed/unaddressed axes. As Flowerdew and Miller (2005) observe, learners often play the role of 'overhearers' (i.e. unratified and unaddressed) in most listening activities in ESL/EFL classes. That is, 'they listen to recordings of conversations between other people or monologues directed at audiences other than themselves' (p. 89). However, in the case of radio broadcasts, DJ talk *ratifies* listeners as part of the ongoing 'conversation', and provides learners with a more grounded experience of the target language as authentic rather than contrived for language learning purposes.

A third and related implication of this paper's analysis concerns the basis on which radio broadcast materials are selected for use in language classrooms. The preference of language teachers to use relatively easy-to-understand excerpts from radio broadcasts reflects a focus on ideational content rather than interpersonal relations. Montgomery (1986) notes that newsreaders are typically foregrounding the ideational aspect of *what* they say, whereas DJs are typically foregrounding the interpersonal aspect of *how* they say what they say. Language teachers who are more attuned to this distinction stand a better chance of addressing it in their selections of listening materials and in the tasks they set for their students.

Fourth, there is no reason why teachers could not use Goffman's framework in their teaching of listening skills if and when they use radio broadcasts as sources of listening texts. For example, students could be asked to listen to a radio segment and then judge whether the discourse was recitation, reading aloud, or fresh talk; and why they have thought so. Whilst such an activity might appear at first sight to be of little value to a language learner, in respect of mediated discourse (including radio, television and internet broadcasts) scriptedness is a distinctive feature that, if recognised, can assist the listener in taking their first 'critical' steps to more fully appreciate and understand the depth and complexity of meanings being conveyed. For the same listening segment or a different one, students could be asked to identify the

animator, author and principal, and discuss/defend their reasons in making those judgements. If ESL/EFL learners are to become 'critical listeners' they need to learn how the aural construction of interpersonal texts is positioning them at the same time as they are learning to access the meanings via the spoken language in English. Goffman's production formats (animator, author and principal) provide a framework for teaching critical listening where 'literacy' requires the literate consumers of text to adopt a critical and questioning approach through which listeners are encouraged to actively analyse text as a social construct for uncovering underlying messages. Critical listening skills are an important component in developing academic literacy yet, as with listening comprehension skills more generally, they remain under-researched and often neglected in classroom teaching. This is a pity because these skills stand to serve learners well as they make their way through the ever-evolving English-rich media landscape afforded by current technologies, and nurtured by the latest cultural practices.

7. Conclusion

The development of good listening skills is an indispensable need of all language learners. A good ability to understand spoken English broadcast by radio (and other media technologies) is, for many language learners, part of that need. Although teachers may well have their own preferences for the sources of listening materials they use in their teaching activities, they should give at least some thought to the preferences of their students. DJ talk is a type of radio discourse that many learners of English spend a lot of time listening to, and language teachers should accept and acknowledge this by, for example, drawing on DJ talks as a source of listening materials for teaching. While DJ monologues (and dialogues, for that matter) present challenges to learners in terms of their being natural spoken texts (for example, in speech rate; false starts; idiomatic language; and slang), these important aspects are outside the scope of the present paper which has attempted to show how Goffman's (1981) framework for analysing radio talk can contribute to a better understanding of DJ talk through identifying the hidden challenges such talk presents for ESL/EFL listeners, and suggesting how teachers can help their learners to better understand this type of popular discourse.

[1] All examples given in this paper have been drawn from broadcast data collected from a local radio station in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in January 2008.

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