Very Narrow Listening

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Dr. Krashen recently posted an article entitled « The Case for Narrow Listening. » (http://sdkrashen.com/content/articles/the_case_for_narrow_listening.pdf)   I was immediately intrigued because I often feel that we do not devote enough attention to listening, whereas it is obviously an important skill if we are expecting our students to acquire a language through comprehensible input.

The question is: how do we teach our students to listen? I know how the textbooks teach it. They have students listen to recordings that are largely incomprehensible and train them to guess at meanings. Many authors have made money by selling books that claim to prepare students for listening tests, such as TOEIC, TOEFL, Cambridge, etc. I haven't been impressed by the results I've seen. Often all the "listening practice" does is convince the students that they are nowhere near the level they should be at after *x* years of English classes. They are told that to improve they need to practice more. As Michael Jordan once said, "If you practice something wrong, you get very good at doing it wrong." When students do the practice, which is set up like the exam, they are stressed and their affective filters are very high.

Dr. Krashen describes Narrow Listening as follows: "In narrow listening, acquirers collect several brief tape-recordings of proficient speakers discussing a topic selected by the acquirer. Acquirers then listen to the tape as many times as they like, at their leisure. Repeated listening, interest in the topic, and familiar context help make the input comprehensible. Topics are gradually changed, which allows the acquirer to expand his or her competence comfortably."

Dr. Krashen considers narrow listening to be mainly a strategy for independent learners, (personal correspondence) but that it could be adapted to the classroom.
When I first began teaching in France my British colleague was using a video series for English learners put out by BBC called "Follow Me." I convinced her to use something a little more modern the following year, but I did like the cloze exercises which accompanied some of the scenes. Students had a script with blanks and were asked to fill

in the missing words. Of course, the missing words were the vocabulary that had been introduced previously.

I wanted to use authentic films for my more advanced classes rather than videos specially made for language learners. In my opinion the films were highly compelling, whereas the videos were rarely interesting and often tacky. I used films with and without subtitles in English, my target language. I never used them with French subtitles, because, although I am fairly bilingual, I found that I could either listen to the English or read the French, but I could not do both simultaneously.

At first I modeled the activities I associated with the films after those that had been used with the BBC series. True/false questions, putting phrases in order, recognizing words and phrases and checking them off a list, etc. But I found that my students especially enjoyed the cloze exercises once I had made a major modification. I did not introduce a list of vocabulary before showing the students the scene we were working on. I did not expect them to recognize words that were new to them. The blanks had to be words that they were familiar with, words that I expected them to know; in short, high-frequency words that had already been acquired.

Over the years, I refined what I was doing, to make it more effective. When I discovered TPRS, I continued using cloze exercises, but introduced some new techniques such as Circling. (Asking yes / no / either / or questions that contain the target vocabulary). I often proceed as follows. I show the scene with no subtitles, and we discuss what they think is happening, what they think the characters are saying. Then I give them the script with blanks and the students listen again, focusing on new vocabulary, and after the second viewing, I explain any words that they don't know. Step one of TPRS: establish meaning. If I consider the word high frequency or useful for the rest of the film, I dwell on it for a while and "Circle" it with some Personalized Questions and Answers (PQA). If not, they merely write the definition in the margin and we go on.

Then I ask students to put down their pens and we listen to just a few lines from the beginning of the scene. I stop the film after the first speech or the first part of a speech, and I ask them if they grasped the word or words in the blanks. Remember that the words will be things like house – man- because – after, etc.;, words that I have chosen because I'm convinced they are familiar to my students. What I am asking them to do is to _recognize_ familiar, high frequency words in the context of fairly rapid native speaker speech. This is far from easy and often we have to listen to the sound bite many times before they do recognize the missing words. Once one of the students recognizes the word, the others can then hear it. It fascinates me to see that many students have a false mental image of the sound of a word, which keeps them from recognizing it when they hear it. Once we have filled in all the blanks in the short bit of the scene I've played, I check for comprehension. If they are not certain about the meaning, we translate it. If there is an idiom that is not comprehensible, I will circle it and do some PQA.

Then we go on to the next few lines of dialog. It may take an hour to work our way through a three minute scene. I let them decide how often they want to listen and if I see that they are stuck, I apologize, saying that I chose the wrong word for the exercise, and give them a hint or, if necessary, give them the missing word. A word that seems absolutely transparent to me may be difficult for students to decode because of the actor's pronunciation, a background noise, etc. When this happens, I always modify my exercise so that I don't repeat the error. What I see in my students is complete engagement. Every student in the class is motivated to help the group find the missing words. They don't want to stop and the entire class feels gratified when one student identifies a word that has been difficult for them. That student becomes a kind of hero, and I've often noticed that students who tend to get good marks on tests are not necessarily the best listeners. Weaker students often do the exercises with fewer preconceived ideas about what the word "should" be, and come up with answers that stump the star students.

Once we have completed filling in the blanks and discussed the meaning and implications in the scene, I play it through one last time and the students listen with their scripts turned face down. There is a wonderful moment of catharsis. That may not be the right word, but it is what it feels like. I've had students say, "It's magic. The first time we listened it was just a lot of noise. Now I understand everything they say."

Of course, this exercise is rarely adaptable for beginners and can be discouraging if it is introduced too soon. But once students reach the Intermediate level, they enjoy doing this kind of activity and progress rapidly. I believe that the blanks and missing words are merely distracters. While the students are focused on understanding one word (that is already familiar to them) they are repeatedly hearing all the rest of the conversation, a conversation spoken at normal speed and which is comprehensible, because meaning has been established.

How does this kind of cloze listening exercise in class correspond to Dr. Krashen's "Narrow Listening"?

He suggests using:
"Brief tape recordings of proficient speakers" The scenes I use are generally 2-5 minutes long. The speakers are professional actors.

"A topic selected by the acquirer". I give the students a choice of films, explaining the subject matter and also the level of difficulty. Often they are well known films that the students have seen dubbed. I always accept their choice, but if we later discover that it's not working, that the film is too difficult or not as interesting as they thought, we can drop it.

"Repeated listening" I play the sound bites as many times as the students want. So they are hearing them over and over and over, at their own request.

"Interest in the topic"   The students chose the topic, the type of film. Talented actors, script writers and directors make the scene highly compelling.

"Familiar context"   This is why I like to work on an entire film, following the plot from the beginning to the final scene. It may take many sessions, but the context becomes extremely familiar to the students.

"Topics are gradually changed, which allows the acquirer to expand his or her competence comfortably." As the plot of the film develops, new characters, new situations and new conflicts are gradually introduced. The student's ability to understand expands, relying on what has been acquired previously. There is a basic setting, a prison , a love story, a detective mystery, a western, etc. which becomes a familiar context in which new and surprising things happen.

For some time I have been trying to explain to other teachers what I do with films. I've called it "Beyond Movie Talk" or "Reading a Film." Intermediate students are capable of listening to original sound tracks, if they have the right type of support and are not discouraged by more difficulty than they can handle. I believe that this kind of cloze exercise matches Dr. Krashen's description of narrow listening. I could call it "Very Narrow Listening."