

Mario Rinvoluceri

Pilgrims, UK

mario.rinvoluceri@pilgrims.co.uk



Synergies Europe n° 4 - 2009 pp. 167-172

Résumé : *En partant de l'observation des processus conscients et inconscients que la simple activité d'écoute normalement déclenche dans l'esprit de tout auditeur, l'auteur souligne le caractère inné de la créativité chez les apprenants et la nécessité pour les enseignants de favoriser et soutenir cette caractéristique, pour ne pas courir le risque de la sous-estimer voire même de la bloquer. La contribution offre aux enseignants des techniques de classe et des idées pratiques.*

Mots-clés : *processus d'écoute créative, monologue/dialogue intérieur*

Abstract : *Starting from the observation of the conscious and unconscious processes that the very activity of listening will mostly set in motion in the listeners' mind, the author underlines the innate character of learners' creativity and the need for teachers to foster and scaffold this feature, and thus avoid running the risk of underestimating or even blocking it. The contribution provides foreign language teachers with some practical classroom techniques and ideas.*

Keywords : *creative listening process, inner monologue/dialogue.*

If I tell you a story you will do a variety of quiet, internal things that are totally normal parts of the human listening process.

Firstly you will **delete** many of the details in my text that do not seem relevant or important to your unconscious mind, these will simply go unrecorded in your mid-term memory. This process of deletion is normally below the threshold of your conscious awareness. You have asserted your autonomy as a listener and have taken a first step in creating your inner representation of my text as it reaches you through your ears.

If I tell you a story you will most likely **generalise** from the details you retain. Such chunking up is a bit like electronic compression of a text prior to sending it as an attachment. The generalisation is easier to hold in your mid-term memory: it is somehow easier to think of a forest than of 5526 trees!

If I tell you a story this or that element of the story may turn out to be a sort of key concept in your mind which may then make you apprehend the whole narration differently. Let me offer an example: Suppose I describe the protagonist of the story as “humble” and suppose you equate the word “humble” with a queer kind of arrogance, you could well apprehend the whole of my text very differently from the way I intend. This “invasion” of my text by a key concept from your schemata may radically alter your overall perception of my story. The technical word for this process is “**distortion**”. Once again this creative re-adjustment of my text in your mind takes place normally out of consciousness.

If I were to tell you a story you would very likely enrich it by creating your own pictures, your own world of sound and your own affective matrix. Most people listening to a half well-told story will create their own sensory space in which the story happens.

The listeners’ text elaboration is not confined to the sensory area because some people will be anticipating the next steps in the plot, they will be guessing what the denouement is likely to be. Others may listen to the story through a moral filter and read in a philosophical colouring undreamt of by the teller.

In summary, the creative listening process, which takes place largely in the unconscious mind, will normally include **elaboration**, **distortion**, **generalisation** and **deletion**. As a story teller there is one thing I can be one hundred percent sure of: the word patterns I offered the listeners have now vanished and have been replaced by a radically **different** story in each person’s mind. This a normal, everyday expression of listener/student creativity.

If what I have outlined above is the ineluctable reality why does the F.L language teaching tradition regard the “good” student as the one who has eidetic auditory recall of the text exactly as it was told so that s/he can then answer “comprehension questions” on the original text with 100% accuracy? I would suggest that both our normal classroom practice with listening passages and what we ask of the students in listening exams is a very **specialised** form of listening that focuses mainly on **information** and on eidetic memorisation and is therefore quite different from normally creative listening. The language teaching tradition, embodied in course book culture, denies the everyday creativity of the listener. I would suggest that it is us, language teachers, who bottle up and suppress our students’ natural creativity as listeners.

You may feel that what I have suggested in the first part of this article is all very well when dealing with listening to a story but that it does not apply to, say, newspaper reading. I want to suggest to you that reading a political text provokes and draws out the reader’s inner schemata in the same creative way as happens in story listening. Reading any text is just as individual, subjective and creative as listening to a story.

Take the political text that follows:

Reading

“ In calling on French car manufacturers to withdraw production from countries like Slovakia in Eastern Europe, the French leader President Sarkozy, has ruffled many feathers across Europe. It turns out that his demand for French investors to think of French workers first has fallen on deaf ears since wages paid in Slovakia, for example, are half what they are in France.”

If aristocratic, former President Giscard d’Estaing reads the passage a key word for him might be **Sarkozy**, a man of immigrant background who has rudely grabbed power from under the noses of the French traditional grandees.

If a person from Ljubljana reads the passage a key word for her could be **“Eastern Europe”** as she thinks of her country, Slovenia, as being part of middle or central Europe-she objects to her country being seen as belonging to the same grouping as Ukraine and Belarus, real Eastern European places.

In my case, when I read the passage, I was stuck by the phrase “ruffled many feathers”. I got a strong picture of hens having a dust bath, I was brought up on a hen-farm!

A person running a language school in Slovakia, that makes a living from teaching French to Peugeot Slovak employees may have negative feelings towards Sarkozy for demanding the repatriation of French car manufacturing but will perhaps feel reassured by the second part of the article. This person may also feel nationalistically bad at Slovakia being known internationally as a place that pays low wages.

The reading process, like the listening process, is creative in the sense that the reader, like the listener **deletes** , **distorts** , **generalises** and **elaborates**. The above examples of reader reaction show how variedly even a single paragraph can enter a reader’s mind. Everything we read is a “territory” and yet each of us makes an idiosyncratic “map” of this territory.

Surely the right thing to do in a reading lesson is to forget about “normal” comprehension questions and get the students to describe their “maps” of the reading they have just done. This sort of lesson procedure honours their normal, everyday creativity.

The creativity of inner monologue/dialogue

While in the area of listening and reading the F L teaching tradition ignores everyday creativity by imposing a reversion to the source text at the expense of the creatively deleted, distorted, generalised and elaborated texts in the students’ minds, the area of inner voice is one we language teachers largely ignore.

The interesting thing is that good language learners instinctively harness this inner language resource and use it to improve their grasp of the F.L. How many low level learners standing in a station ticket queue in the L2 country will rehearse what they hope to be able to say when their turn comes! I had a friend

who was learning Japanese and on his way to work on his bike he would chant a commentary on what he saw:

*Kono ki-wa midori des!
That tree green is!*

When I go to a country where I speak the language but which I have not visited for some time, I consciously talk to myself in the language on the plane there. This is an efficient way of re-awakening that language's patterns across my brain circuits. I instinctively feel that my command of an FL is strangely mixed up with the way I use in communication with myself.

Are there ways in which we can respectfully stimulate the use of inner voice in our students' learning of language. Here are some practical ideas:

A. Ask low- level students to talk the L2 to themselves on the way to school and ask them to remember words or phrases they could not find in L2. In class help them with this as yet not known vocabulary.

B. Tell the students they are going to give 2 minute speeches in class on a topic they choose. Send them out of class to go for a walk and to prepare the talk in inner monologue. If you are working in very collaborative societies (say Azerbaijan or Brazil) tell them that talking to others is strictly forbidden! Tell the students to come back in 10 minutes.

On their return to class ask them if they need vocabulary help.

They then give their 2 minute talks- (15 talks in a little more than 30 minutes)

C. Ask the students to write an account of a row they have had recently. Tell them no one will read what they write and that you will not see it. This is a fully private diary entry.

D. Give the students envelopes, ask them to write their own names on the envelopes.

Tell them to write a letter to themselves in two weeks' time. They write

Dear + own name, and they sign the bottom of the letter with their own name. Tell them to write at least one page and to imagine their own mood and state of mind in two weeks' time. Tell them to write something that will be of interest
To them in two weeks' time.

One of the students collects the letters in the sealed envelopes and brings them back two weeks later for each person to read.

No one but the writer reads the letter.

E. In each class allow 5 minutes for students to write a diary entry in L2. This will not be seen by anybody else.

F. Choose a collection of short stories for an upper intermediate class to read. In teaching English I have sometimes used Dahl stories.

Ask each student as homework to read one story from the collection that you designate.

Ask each student, having read their story, to commit its plot to memory by mumbling it through to themselves.

They should **write nothing** but mumble the story through two or three times while jogging, having a shower etc. Of course they may need to occasionally go back to the book and re-read bits of their story.

In the next class seat the students in circles of 6, each student with a different story.

Number them off, one to six.

Ask all the students in all the circles to start mumbling their story from the beginning - tell them to do this very quietly.

When you say "Number One", all the students Two to Six in each circle stop mumbling and "hold the story" while Number One carries on telling **their story aloud**.

Allow the Number Ones to produce 2-3 sentences and then say "Number 5". The Number Ones fall silent and the Number 5's carry on with their story from the point which they reached, speaking aloud, until you stop them.

You then call out the other numbers so everybody in each circle has heard a snatch of all the other 5 stories.

Let all go back to mumbling their stories from the point they had reached and you them to do this for another 2 minutes.

Once again you call out the different numbers and the students say snatches of their stories aloud. At the end of this second round of "snatches" you tell people to gather round the teller whose story they liked best and to listen to it told aloud from beginning to end.

This mumbling technique, (which I learnt from Anne Pechou) is a marvellous way to introduce a new collection of stories to the class as it whets their appetite to read the whole book of stories for themselves.

What I have offered you in this third part of my article is a modest attempt to bring together a set of techniques for helping students to use their inner voices more constructively in learning L2.

Conclusion

In my mind the everyday, completely normal creativity of my students is always there. My task as a teacher is to **notice** how their creativity works and to work

with it rather than **against** it.

If this means abandoning time - hallowed exercises, so be it!

If this means stepping beyond course book prescriptions, so be it!

If this means devising new exercises in areas like “inner voice” that are not yet part of teaching tradition, so be it!

My job is to ease, help and facilitate the expression of my student’s creativity and not to take absurd professional pride in blocking it.