UNIT I: UNDERSTANDING speech and writing

Unit Outline

* Introduction
* Section A. Listening comprehension skills
* Section B. Reading comprehension strategies

Introduction

In this unit you will learn about the main factors that make oral and written communication two different, although related, events. You will also acquire strategies to be applied in note-taking during lectures and strategies to be adopted so as to optimise reading, both in specialized topics.

Now, let us start by establishing the differences between oral and written communication. Which, do you think, are the main differences between speech and writing? Complete the table.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Speech** | **Writing** |
| Speech is… | Writing is… |
|  |  |
|  |  |
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|  |  |

Table 1. Differences between speech and writing

Section A. Listening comprehension techniques

**Topic activation**

1. How often are you exposed to oral input in English? Which sources do you listen to?

2. Write a list with the main problems/ difficulties you encounter when listening to oral input in English?

3. Do you apply any strategies in listening? If so, write them below.

**Topic information (comprehension difficulties)**

When listening to oral input in a foreign language, sometimes comprehension can be hindered or even blocked due to different reasons:

* We do not know the word.
* We know the word/s but we cannot identify them.
* We miss important words in the sentence, words that receive less prominence in speech, as they act as linkers or as function elements, if compared to main syntactic elements in the sentence that receive full intonation focus.
* We are unfamiliar with the topic and the kind of contextual elements.

To improve oral comprehension, there are **some strategies** we can adopt:

* Do daily **practice** (20’).
	+ Choose topics you like, or are relevant to you, so as to pull down affective filters that often reduce comprehension levels.
* **Never panic** if you feel you cannot understand; in such cases, relax and keep on listening.
* **Focus** on what you are required to understand, not on the whole.
* Do some **research** into the basic concepts you **expect** to hear and activate the topic by **contextualizing** (“Googling”) important ideas.
* Focus on **key concepts**, those which are recurrent, although they may take different forms.
* Focus on **discourse functions**
	+ The beginning, the transitions and the end so as to grasp the general structure of the talk.

Knowing the elements (known as **discourse markers or linking words**) that trigger off certain lecture transitions can greatly help identify discourse meanings and functions. Below is a table including some of these signals & their meaning.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Signal** | **Meaning** |
| To start with, firstly…today I will speak about…today’s lecture is about… | Introducing the topic |
| The lecture is divided into… | Tells the structure |
| Firstly, secondly, next, then, last but one… | Be ready for a number of points to be listed |
| However, nevertheless, on the other hand, conversely, on the contrary, despite, nonetheless… | Contrast or opposing information |
| In addition, in other words, put another way, also, as I mentioned before, moreover, furthermore… | Repetition, extra information or further evidence |
| For example, that is to say, such as… | What follows is an example |
| Especially, specifically, most importantly… | Important details will follow |
| Therefore, thus, because, consequently, as a consequence, accordingly… | Cause and effect relations |
| I’ll expand on this later on, I’ll give you more detail on this…. | Be alert and leave some space to build up on this point later on |
| Finally, in conclusion, in short, let me summarise, let’s recap, in brief, to wrap up… | These signals will often help you get the global picture |

Table 2. Discourse markers and their meanings

Aside from the strategies included in the table above, there are other **props** we can use:

* **Check** up **key concepts**/ specialized terms before listening.
* Use your **background knowledge**, and try to link it to what you are listening to, establish connections.
* Use your **knowledge of the world** in general.
* Re-activate your **expectations** about the topic. Write them in list-form, and then see if they match.
* Before listening, **read questions** and ensure you understand them all.

When **taking notes** (in lectures), we need to:

* Distinguish between **main and secondary ideas**.
* Select the **most important** information.
* Ignore **less important** or ancillary details.
* Identify **key points** and key words.
* Identify the type of **lecturing style** and adjust your notes to it.

After listening, we need to:

* **Reflect** on your notes.
* **Organize** the information.
* **Summarize** information.
* Develop a **critical stance**.
* Do **multi-tasking** by combining some of the above skills…

…so that the outcome from your notes is not mere copying, but a new text showing the essential information from the source in a new personal document.

Note taking can be done in different ways: Linear/ bullet points/ listing.

Grids/tables. Diagrams and concept maps. Sometimes, the nature and purpose of the information favours one specific way of note-taking over the rest. In all this process, the use of abbreviations and simplified grammar may help. There are some abbreviations in common use. However, any symbol that you adopt is valid as long as it serves your purposes. Here are some of them:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Abbreviation** | **Meaning** |
| e.g. | For example |
| i.e. | *Id est*, that is |
| Et al. | *Et altri*, and the others |
| N.B. | *Nota Bene*, note, important |
| Cf. | Compare |
| Viz  | Namely, that is to say |
| P | Page  |
| Sp  | Spelling |
| Para | Paragraph |
| C20 | 20th century |
| c 1965 | *Circa*, around |

Table 3. Standard abbreviations

Section B. Reading Comprehension techniques

**Topic activation**

1. How do you approach reading a text? Do you adopt any strategies? Write down your ideas.

2. Which from the following **reading skills** do you apply? Write a tick next to the skills you use:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 1. Identifying the rules of the sentence structure? |  |  |
| 2. Identifying the rules of punctuation? |  |  |
| 3. Identifying the rules governing the structure of paragraphs? |  |  |
| 4. Identifying the relations holding between the different paragraphs? |  |  |
| 5. Identifying the ‘glue’ words (discourse markers) that link them? |  |  |
| 6. Identifying text organization of contents, e.g. introduction, listing…? |  |  |
| 7. Identifying different writing styles? |  |  |
| 8. Recognizing different text layouts, e.g. reports, journal articles…? |  |  |
| 9. Identifying the point of view involved in a text? |  |  |
| 10. Going for the gist (the fundamental idea/s behind the text) |  |  |
| 11. Distinguishing between different text types, e.g. description, narration, exposition and argumentation?**\*** |  |  |

Table 4. Summary of reading skills

**\*** It is commonly admitted that text types can be classified into four general groups, each with specific discourse functions and an internal structure. These types, though, are seldom found in ‘pure state’, but rather they mix up. Common combinations are the mixture of exposition + description, narration + description and argumentation + the other types (that provide the grounds to support the argument). **The main characteristics of text types are:**

Exposition:‘explaining’. It is common in instructions and manuals. The order and sequencing of parts is clearly established.

Description:‘picturing in words’. Descriptions can be subjective or objective; they can proceed from left-to-right/right-to-left/up-to-down/down-to-up, or go from general-to-specific/specific-to–general. Description often relies on heavy use of adjectives.

Narration:‘retelling of events’ either real or imaginary. Narratives are mostly based on verbal processes, that is, the use of verbs that indicate the succession of actions. The typical internal structure of narration is: orientation-complication—resolution.

Argumentation:‘effort to prove/refute the validity of a central thesis statement’. Argumentative texts often follow the structure: establish thesis statement—argue grounds-formulate logical conclusion.

**Topic information**

Reading is a complex phenomenon involving different cognitive tasks. Becoming a trained reader partly depends on your cognitive and learning styles, and partly on the development of certain skills that require time and effort. The pyramid structure in the page below shows the steps to a proficient reading.

 

 Figure 1. Steps to successful reading

Once we have acquired and developed these strategies, there are some points worth considering. The table below elaborates on the things to do and the things to avoid when reading.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Dos** | **Don’ts** |
| Try to read fast by taking in the most information possible. Look at words from the corner of your eyes and/or focus your attention on key words dispersed in the text. Start with easy texts. | Avoid sounding out words in your head as you read. |
| Try reading a phrase at a time, and then move your eyes fast to the next full stop. | Avoid reading individual words. |
| Read difficult sections quickly twice. | Avoid going around difficult sections several times. |
| Try to recognise new terminology beforehand. |  |
| Approach the text with expectations about its content, structure and type.\* |  |

Table 5. Dos and don’ts of effective reading

\* In fact, most communicative exchange, be it oral or written, does not take place in a conceptual vacuum; that would entail a great cognitive effort. A lot of what we read or listen is incorporated into our brain structures, some preconfigured, some developed in time through social interaction. When approaching a text for the first time, we do so armoured with a set of expectations that activate previous knowledge and help us recognize, assimilate and build up the new information. Some props we often draw on when reading are:

* The knowledge of the world, our lifetime background experience.
* The knowledge of the specialized field and its terminology.
* The cotext (words surrounding other words in the text).
* The context of the situation.
* The knowledge of similar text types (description, narrative, etc.)
* The knowledge of specific discourse modes such as formal letters, curriculum vitae, summaries, reports, PhD dissertations or project specifications.
* The help of visual information.

 NOW PROCEED TO THE NEXT PAGES TO DO THE TASKS

**Practice section A.** Listening to specialized topics

In this task, you have to pick up specific information. Read the questions carefully and focus your attention on the details required. Click on the link below to watch the video. You should be able to do the task watching the video only twice.

‘Spinning tower in Dubai’

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bq-QUkE1DGM>

1. What is the architect’s definition/ name for his skyscraper?

…………………………………………………………………………...

1. How many stories does it have?...............................................
2. Where is it going to be erected?.................................................
3. When is construction due to start?...............................................
4. Are there any other projects to be developed by the same architect? Where?...............................................................................................
5. How is this skyscraper different from others?...................................
6. What is the effect of wind on skyscrapers?

……………………………………………………………………………………..

1. How will it be powered?..........................................................................
2. What is the price per foot for each condominium?....................................
3. What is new about the parking system?

…………………………………………………………………………………………………………….

1. Where will the building parks be manufactured?........................................
2. When will it be open?..................................................................................

More skyscrapers resources

<http://skyscraperpage.com/>

<http://community.emporis.com/skyscrapers/>

**Practice section B.** Reading comprehension techniques

I. Below you’ll read a selection of 4 texts. Ascribe them to the corresponding text type or types and provide reasons to justify your choices.

On April 18, 1906, an earthquake estimated at 7.7 to 7.9 on the Ritchter scale rocked San Francisco, killing hundreds of people as it destroyed buildings, toppled trees, twisted streets, and broke gas and water lines. Fires broke out and developed into a firestorm. Without water, fire fighters dynamited buildings to level a firebreak and prevent the fire from spreading. The last flames were not extinguished until April 21. The earthquake and fire destroyed 28,000 buildings, including the homes of three quarters of the city’s population. More than 30,000 people died in the aftermath.

Text type/s:

Evidence:

Concrete is a unique material in that in can be fashioned into virtually any shape while still in the plastic state. It will then harden in that shape with the permanence of stone.

Finishing concrete is far more complex than generally realized. To the novice, finishing is merely the leveling and smoothing of a surface. To the qualified mechanic, finishing means many involved procedures in a carefully timed sequence.

To achieve a quality surface, several steps are necessary. Site preparation, placing, leveling, jointing, initial finishing, trowelling and curing.

Text type/s:

Evidence:

Call me naïve, but what I thought I saw was no more than the inevitable and unavoidable clash between freshly quarried stone and the weathered stonework which has been exposed to London’s malodorous atmosphere for a century and a half. Acid rain, diesel fumes and coal smoke have severely discolored the original Portland façade. Was I surprised when I saw it? No. Was I shocked to learn that the “inferior” French limestone had been used instead of good old British Portland Stone? Not really (…).

Text type/s:

Evidence:

On the pleasant shore of the French Riviera, about half-way between Marseilles and the Italian Border, stands a large, proud, rose-colored hotel. Deferential palms cool its flushed façade, and before it stretches a short dazzling beach. Lately, it has become a summer resort of notable and fashionable people; a decade ago, it was almost deserted after its English clientele went north in April. In the early morning the distant image of Cannes, the pink and cream old fortifications, the purple Alps that bounded Italy, were cast across the water and lay quavering in the ripples sent up by sea-plants through the clear shallows.

Text type/s:

Evidence:

II. Work on this text about Mexico City.

**1**. A centre of belated attention. The huge square known as the *Zocalo* is no longer the beating heart of Mexico City, as it was in Aztec times. But it is surrounded not just by a magnificent cathedral, but by nine square km (3.5 square miles) of Spanish-colonial houses, churches and public buildings, some dating back to the 16th century. This should be one of the most compelling architectural destinations in the Americas. Instead, much of it is a slum of gutted buildings, dark and dirty streets blocked by milling vendors, and garbage-strewn vacant lots.

**2.** The reasons for this sad decline are partly man-made, and partly natural. In the 1940s, the city government froze rents in the city centre. Tenants paying 50 cents a week in the 1950s were still paying the same in 1998, when the law was finally repealed. With no incentive to spend on the upkeep, landlords let buildings disintegrate. A 1985 earthquake added to the Beirut look. The result: 100,000 city centre residents, over a third of the total, have moved out in the last 20 years. By night, the area is almost deserted; fear of crime deters most visitors.

**3.** For a decade, attempts have been under way to rectify matters. Carlos Slim, Mexico’s richest businessman, has bought up and renovated some of the old buildings to prevent their collapse. Now the city government has started to dot its bit. Last February, it revamped the Historic Centre Trust, a quango, endowing it with a grant of 500 pesos ($55 m).

**4.** The trust has begun work on renovating 34 blocks in the heart of the historic centre, behind the cathedral. The streets are being dug up to replace the antiquated drainage system and to improve water supply. In an innovative move, an architect has been put in charge of each of the 13 main streets, charged with restoring the facades of more than 500 buildings. The makeovers have been designed in consultation with the residents. Last week, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, the city’s left-wing mayor, also announced the start of work on a new square.

**5.** Further ahead, the plan is to move the street vendors out of the area, says Ana Lilia Cepeda, the head of the Historic Centre Trust. That will be difficult: many of them bribe local officials to be there. The overall aim is to attract new residents to the centre, and with them cafés and restaurants—and a feeling of safety in numbers. If the promised street lighting, video cameras and paraphernalia of modern urban security duly materialise, such gentrification may indeed follow. After all, surely somebody will want to live in some of Latin America’s grandest housing.

1. Skim the text to find the main idea, then write a title that summarises the essence of its contents.

2. Underline the words or expressions you don’t know. First, if possible, try to infer their meaning using the co-text. For those whose meanings remain unknown, use a monolingual dictionary.

3. Write a list with 10 key words that act as focal meaning elements in the content.

4. Divide the text into content/meaning sections, such as introduction, exemplification, arguing grounds or reasons, conclusions, etc. and indicate the paragraphs.

5. The text is rich with the idea of “decline”; look for all the words and expressions that build this idea in the text.

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