Principles of Listening Task Design

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In planning exercises for listening lessons, Ur (1984) emphasizes the importance of including a task. In a task, students are "required to do something in response to what they hear that will demonstrate their understanding" (Ur, 1984, p. 25). Only a response can verify the effectiveness of the listening that has occurred. The listener response taxonomy provided by Lund (1990) gives a detailed breakdown of the categories of response that are possible in a listening task. Beyond the importance of including an opportunity for response, Ur (1984) draws attention to 6 additional features that should be addressed in listening task planning (p. 26-29).

1. **A pre-set purpose**: In real life interactions, participants have real purposes for listening (typically non-linguistic ones). Part of the purpose of using a task is to give students a purpose in the artificial environment of the language classroom--knowing that a response is required makes listening more focused and helps guide expectations about what kind of information to listen for.

2. **Ongoing learner-response**: Much real-life listening includes some kind of immediate response by the listener (often a spoken reply), but many listening activities in classrooms include responses that occur well after the text has been listened to and also, involve extensive reading and writing aspects. Also, it can be hard for a teacher to check the individual spoken responses of an entire class. When focusing on aural skills primarily (without involving others) and to facilitate the monitoring of the success of an entire class, Ur (1984) recommends the use of tasks that allow for ongoing, immediate responses that are simple and quick. The use of simple visuals (diagrams, grids, maps) and physical movement responses are examples of this. (Note: In lessons that seek integrated use of multiple language skills, extensive reading and writing response may be quite appropriate.)

3. **Motivation**: Teachers should consider students’ motivation for language learning when planning tasks (but without assuming to much). Of course, different things may motivate different students, but planners are advised not to ignore the importance of making activities interested, fun, and cognitively engaging--puzzle-solving and game-like features can be enjoyable for learners of all ages. Topic selection (especially with higher level students) can contribute to or detract from engagement, to the extent that the topic is something the students find interesting.

4. **Success**: Ur (1984) emphasizes that “tasks should be success-oriented” (p. 27). Exercises that are too difficult can end in frustration and harm motivation. Care should be taken to avoid making activities too easy, but from Ur’s (1984) perspective, these are less harmful since the class has still had a successful listening experience. When the activity is too hard, time-consuming, or complex, the students may spend more time unraveling the problem...
than actually listening. The purpose of the task is to train listening skills, not to test. Repeated failure is less productive from a training perspective.

5. **Simplicity**: Make the administration of tasks as simple as possible, given the aims. Activities with too many materials, equipment, or intermediate stages take too much prep time and may not justify the amount of practice that students actually get from them.

6. **Feedback**: In speaking and listening tasks, teachers should aim to make feedback as immediate as possible. Long delays may inhibit recollection of the error: the best time to correct is while the given response is still in mind and corrections and mistakes can be gone through in detail and worked out when there is a breakdown in understanding. The wanting to know the answer will likely diminish with time.

**References**