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Defining Unknown Words From Listening **Beth Sheppard, University of Oregon**

I teach oral skills to IEP students in their last term before entering the university, and listening is often a bigger challenge for this group than speaking. When students reflect on why listening is difficult for them, one of their most frequent comments concerns vocabulary: “The speaker uses too many words that I don’t know.”

When listening, just as when reading, students need to accept some ambiguity and search for the main idea even in the face of a certain proportion of unknown words. Sometimes, however, students determine that a certain unknown word is important to their

comprehension of the passage, and they should look it up. Here, the situation of a listener is different than that of a reader. It is easy enough to look up a word seen in print, but how can students look up an unknown word that they hear, if they don’t know how to spell it?

Since students often face this situation, it seemed worth considering. In order to look up an unknown word from oral input, students first need a strong understanding of English orthography to make a reasonable guess at the spelling. When using the dictionary, making a good guess at the beginning of

the word is the most important part. Secondly, students need to know how to use the tools at their disposal to refine their guess to the written form of the word. Finally, once students look up the word they think they have heard they need to be able to use their global understanding of the co-text to check the result to see if the definition they have found makes sense.

This term, I had my students do a brief exercise to practice and develop all of the skills mentioned above. I start by selecting three to five words from sublists 9 and 10 of the Academic Word List (AWL). The words on these last two sublists are more infrequent and, therefore, likely unknown to all or most students in the class, but still likely to be useful to my students in their future studies. I ask my students to take out their phones or other electronic dictionaries.

I then dictate my short list of words, repeating each one three or four times. Students try to write what they hear. Then they put their best guess into their dictionary. If this guess is not a word, the phone will suggest possible corrections. I walk around the class and check on progress, repeating the words for individual students at their request. Occasionally I will offer a clue (e.g. “How else can you spell the /f/ sound?” “Try it with two Cs instead of the X.”).

When most students have found most of the words on the list, pairs compare their results and tell each other the definitions of the words they have found. Then I say a simple sentence for each word and ask pairs to

discuss how their definitions fit the context and then paraphrase the sentence using synonyms for the new word. Finally, I confirm the answers.

Another option is to copy or post simple sentences with blanks for potentially unknown words (e.g. “I am confused because this is an _____ (ambiguous) situation.”). Then I read the whole sentence a few times at a natural rate and students fill in the missing words, following the steps mentioned above. This variation allows students to check the meaning of the word as part of the process of considering possible written forms. It also requires students to perceive the unknown word in connected speech, which is a challenging but more realistic task.

It is best to repeat this activity throughout the term, and to make sure to give students opportunities to discuss strategies and reflect on what they learn about listening and about orthography in the process. The whole activity can be done in 5-15 minutes, depending on the number of words dictated, so it can easily fit into lulls or transitions during class. I find it helpful because it helps students better use the tools available to them, and it increases their confidence in their listening skills as they prepare to study at the university.

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