



Why don't they understand? Using listening difficulties productively

Chiara Bruzzano, University of Leeds
c.bruzzano@leeds.ac.uk /  @chiara_bruzzano

A listening dilemma



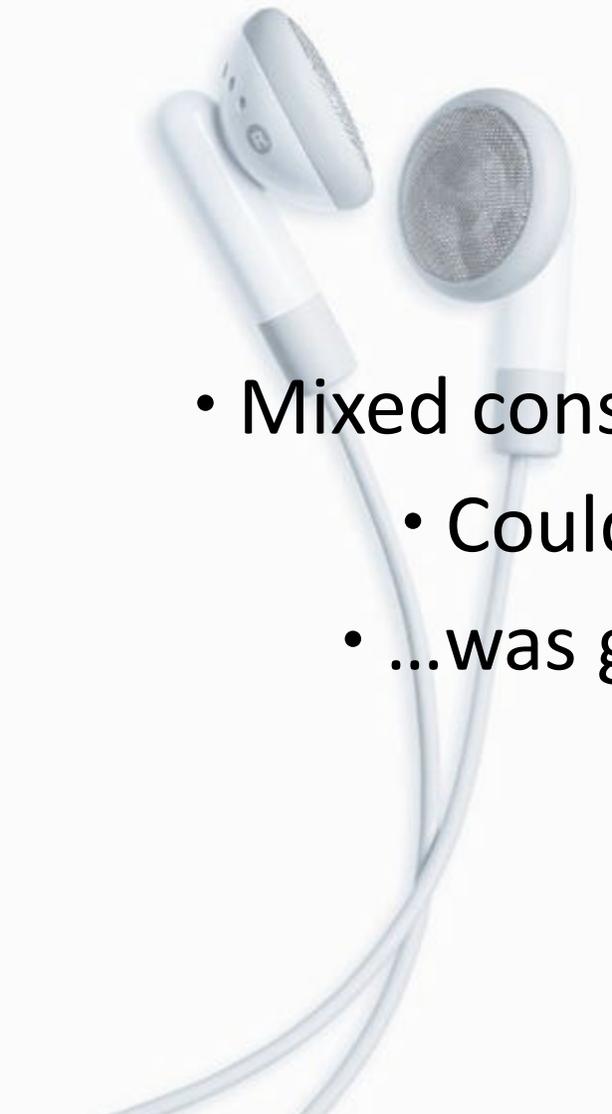
- <https://youtu.be/VbfpW0pbvaU?t=163>

Needle in the... what?



Needle and the thread
Gotta get you out of my head
Needle and the thread
Gonna wind up dead

What kind of difficulties was I having?

- 
- Couldn't hear sound /θ/
 - Mixed consonant cluster /θr/ with /br/ or /b/ (bread? bed?)
 - Couldn't decide between “and the” and “in the”
 - ...was getting increasingly frustrated with the singer

What could have I done to understand?

- Draw upon semantic association: needle + thread
 - Concentrate harder on just the missing sound
- Connect to the general theme of the song: “stitches”



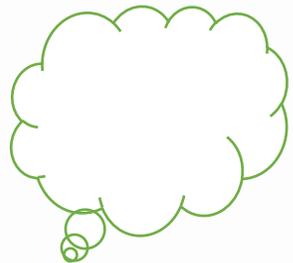
..ultimately, what counts is what I did in my listening

So how do we listen in a foreign language?



Decoding: translating the acoustic cues into sounds, words and phrases in the target language and then into an abstract idea (literal meaning)

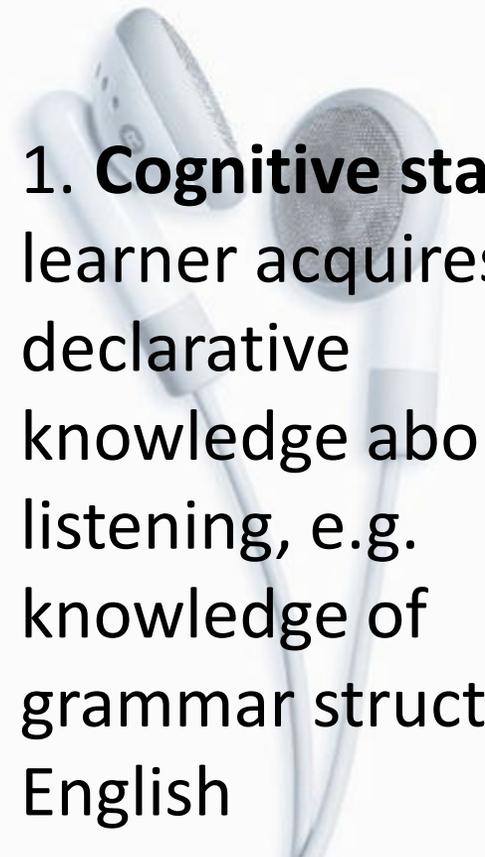
→ /θ/? /b/? /br/? *Thread? Bed? Bread?*



Meaning-building: drawing upon knowledge of the world, the speaker and what has been said to enrich the literal meaning derived from decoding

→ *Song theme = stitches*

How do we learn to listen?



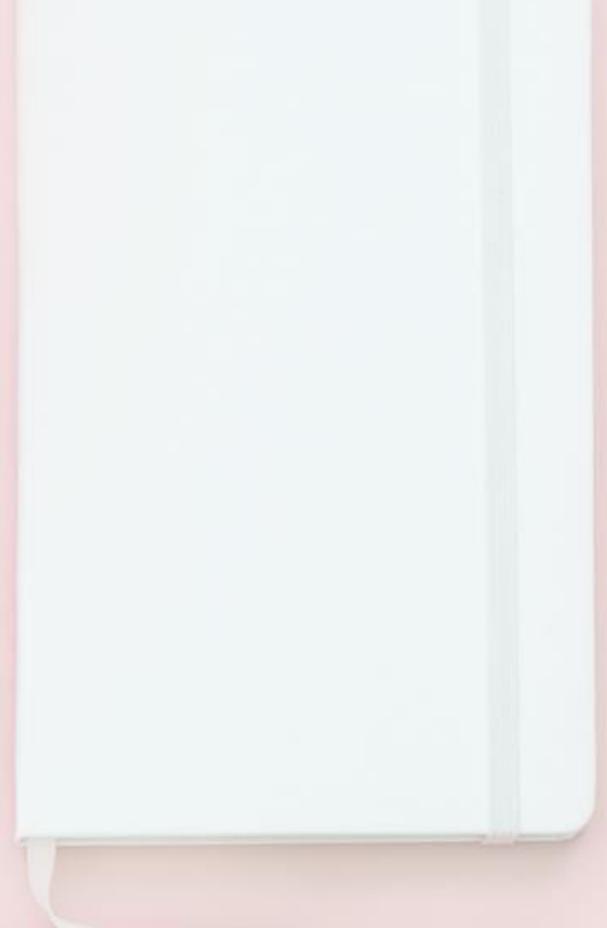
1. Cognitive stage:
learner acquires
declarative
knowledge about
listening, e.g.
knowledge of
grammar structure of
English

2. Controlled stage:
learner gradually
proceduralises
declarative
knowledge, e.g.
knowing –ed =
placing events in
past

3. Autonomous stage: learner
processes listening
input
automatically,
requiring less
mental space and
attention

Automatic listening
Less cognitively demanding
Decoding-driven

How do we teach listening?



Stitches by Shawn Mendes

Listen and fill in the gaps

I thought that I've been hurt before
But no one's ever left me quite this sore
Your words cut _____ than a knife
Now I need someone to breathe me back to life

Got a feeling that I'm going under
But I know that I'll make it out alive
If I quit _____ you my lover
Move on

You watch me bleed until I can't breathe
I'm shaking falling onto my knees
And now that I'm without your kisses
I'll be _____ stitches
I'm tripping over myself
Aching begging you to come help
And now that I'm without your kisses
I'll be _____ stitches

Song

Listen..

→ fill in the gaps

→ check as class

→ teach vocabulary

Typical format - listening

Pre-listening

pre-teaching vocabulary
setting context / introducing topic

While-listening

1st listen: gist
2nd listen: comprehension questions

Post-listening

checking answers
teaching vocab
speaking task



Typical format: potential issues

Pre-listening

pre-teaching vocabulary
setting context

- Too long
- Distracting

While-listening

1st listen: gist

2nd listen: comprehension questions

- Focus on testing
- Cause anxiety
- Can be hard to follow
- Involve other skills

Post-listening

checking answers
teaching vocab
speaking task

- No use of answers
- No differentiation

Listening “for” something else

Why are we “doing” listening? Some preliminary research findings from Italian secondary schools

- ✓ To convey content
- ✓ To teach vocabulary
- ✓ To spark discussion





How much are the students
really understanding?



Why don't they understand?

What kind of difficulties do your students have with listening?

Very frequently cited issues

**1.
Accents**

2. Vocab

3. Speed

Input-blaming?

A closer look at..



Accents:

- What's in an accent?
- Individual physiological characteristics
- Personal variations in style of delivery



A closer look at..



Vocabulary:

- Word knowledge alone cannot explain listening proficiency
- “knowing” a word does not guarantee you’ll hear it – rather, it’s WRS: Word Recognition in Speech

A closer look at...



Speed:

- What do learners mean when they say speed? Might it be related to features of connected speech rather than actual words per minute?
- Learners do not necessarily prefer slower speech (Derwing and Munro, 2001)

Identifying learners' difficulties: variables



- Text (vocabulary, grammar, syntax)
- Task (gap-fill, comprehension questions)
- Speaker (accent, speed, hesitations)
- Relevance to learner
- Surroundings (background noise)
- Affect (anxiety, concentration)

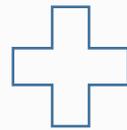
Field's (2008) proposal



A process approach to
listening

Diagnostic

Tackling difficulties as
they arise

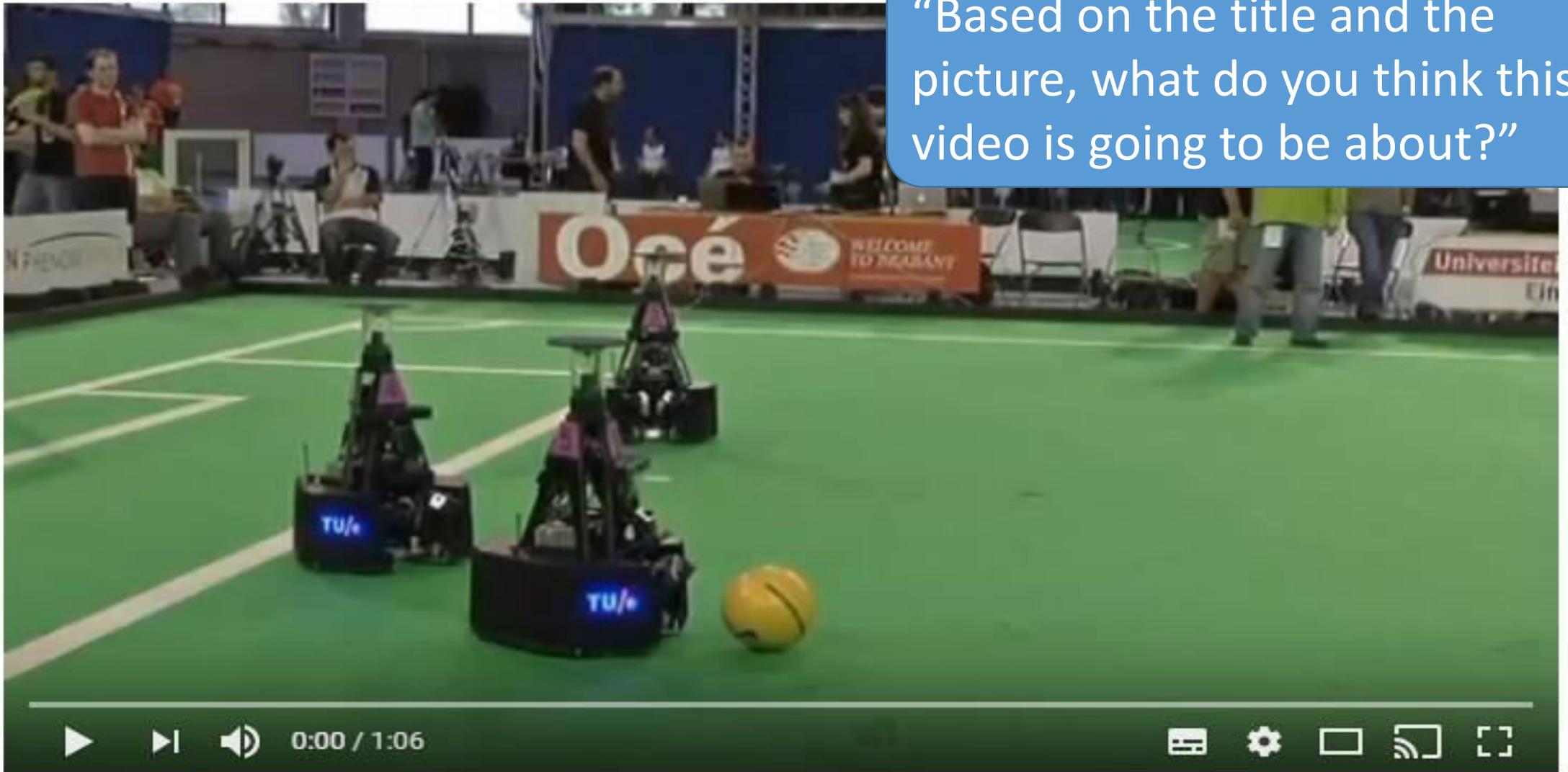


Prognostic

Anticipating difficulties

What would you do before playing this video?
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nwefNs-PrDA&t=1s>

“Based on the title and the picture, what do you think this video is going to be about?”



Robocup: The robot football world championship gets underway in the Netherlands



Pre-listening

Task A: What might be the advantages of this pre-listening task?

Teacher: so based on the title, what do you think this video is going to be about?

Learner: erm... when I was in computer science engineering, we had a robot, we had a robot, and some colleagues of my university worked about this robot, okay, because they... we are programming the robot to play in... football, and this was in 1998

T: that's pretty cool!

L: I don't remember where the competition... the championship, soccer competition was in 1998, perhaps in France, on a football... field?

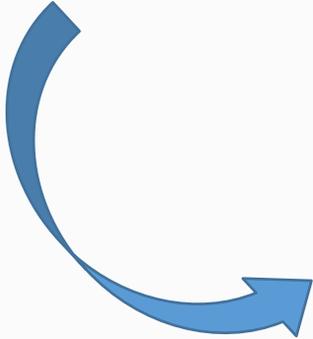
T: yes, a football field, a football pitch

Pre-listening

- *Teacher*: so based on the title, what do you think this video is going to be about?
- *Learner*: erm... when I was in computer science engineering, we had a robot, we had a **robot**, and some colleagues of my university worked about this robot, okay, because they... we are programming the robot to play in... **football**, and this was in **1998**
- *T*: that's pretty cool!
- *L*: I don't remember where the competition.... the **championship, soccer** competition was in 1998, perhaps in France, on a **football... field?**
- *T*: yes, a football field, a football **pitch**

Comprehension questions

1. What is Robocup?
2. What is the aim of Robocup?
3. According to the technician interviewed, to what other fields can the technology be applied?
4. What long-term goal has Robocup set itself?



Giovanni had no
answer

A **diagnostic** approach: (almost) zero-prep ideas for diagnosing difficulties & practising

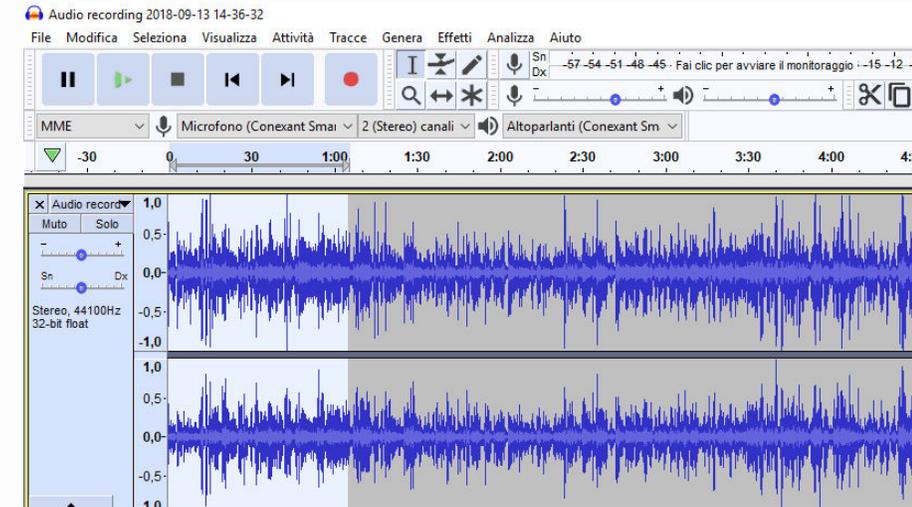
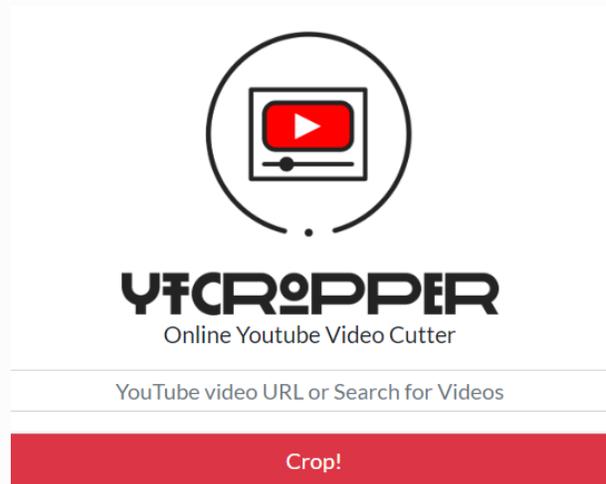
- Which part caused the problem?

*Robocup has **set itself a goal** that by 2050 a team of football robots must be able to beat the human world champions*

- Re-play short extract, ask students to:
 - Identify sounds → write hypotheses on board
 - Listen and make hypotheses in pairs
 - Identify the number of words
 - Hum along

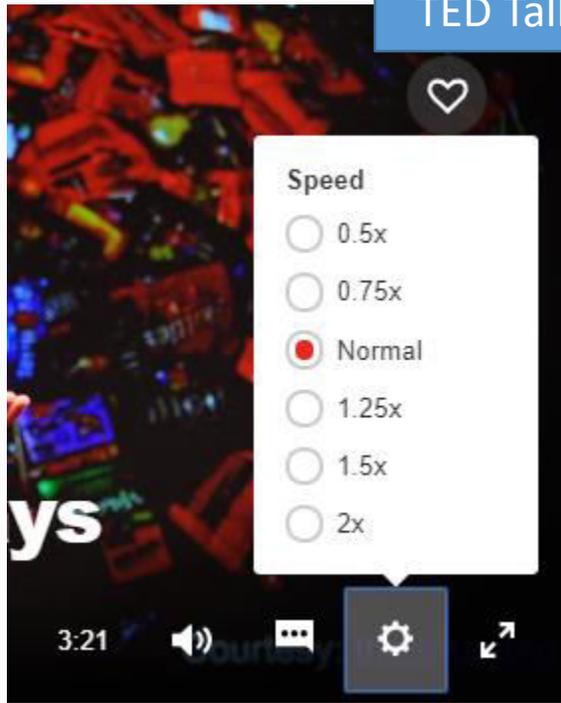
You can..

- Focus on short extract for intensive decoding practice
 - Audacity: cut extract
 - Youtube: *start from* feature
 - TED talks: click on phrase
 - Ytcropper



Tip: add at least one word before and after the problematic extract: the way a word is uttered depends on the surrounding words

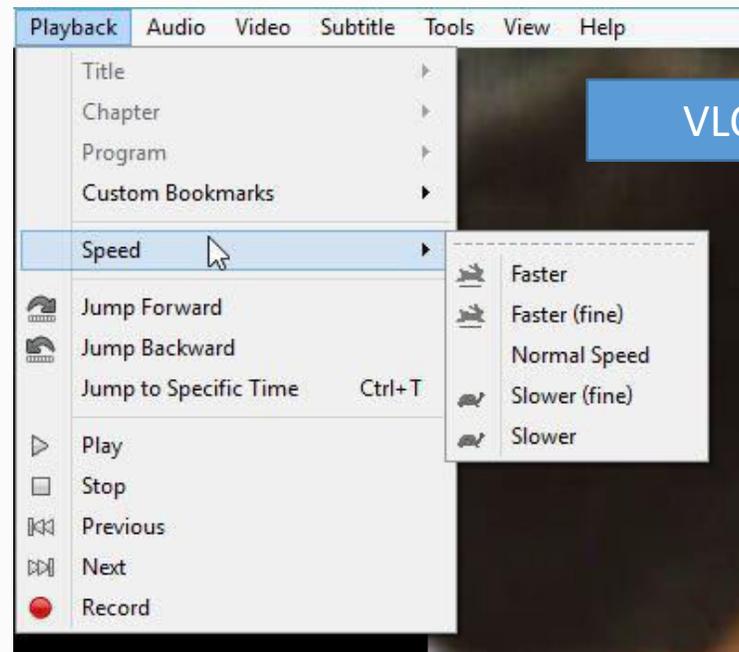
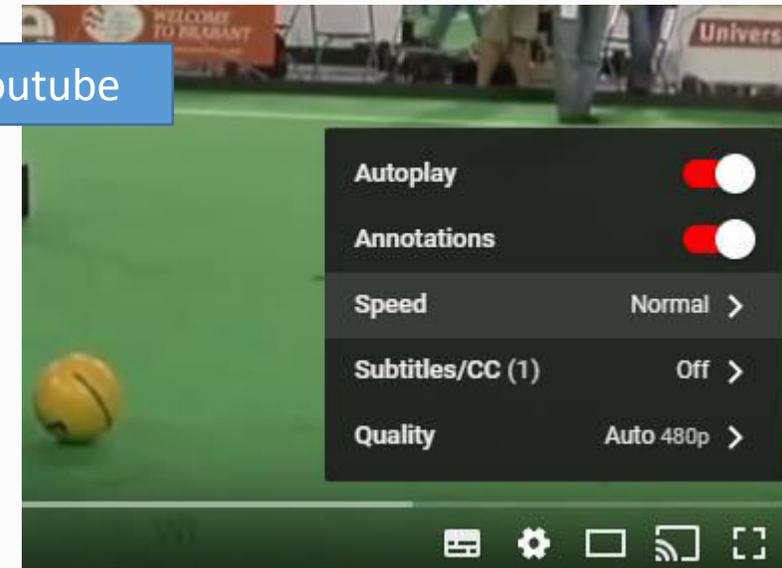
TED Talks



You can..

- Play (or have students play individually!) the short extract at *slightly* reduced speed:

Youtube



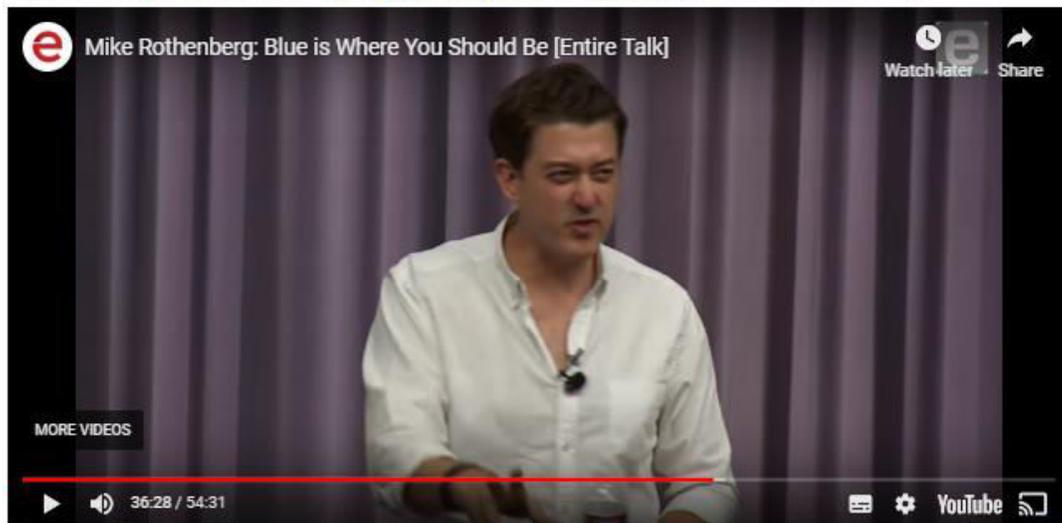
VLC

You can... search how a phrase is pronounced in connected speech

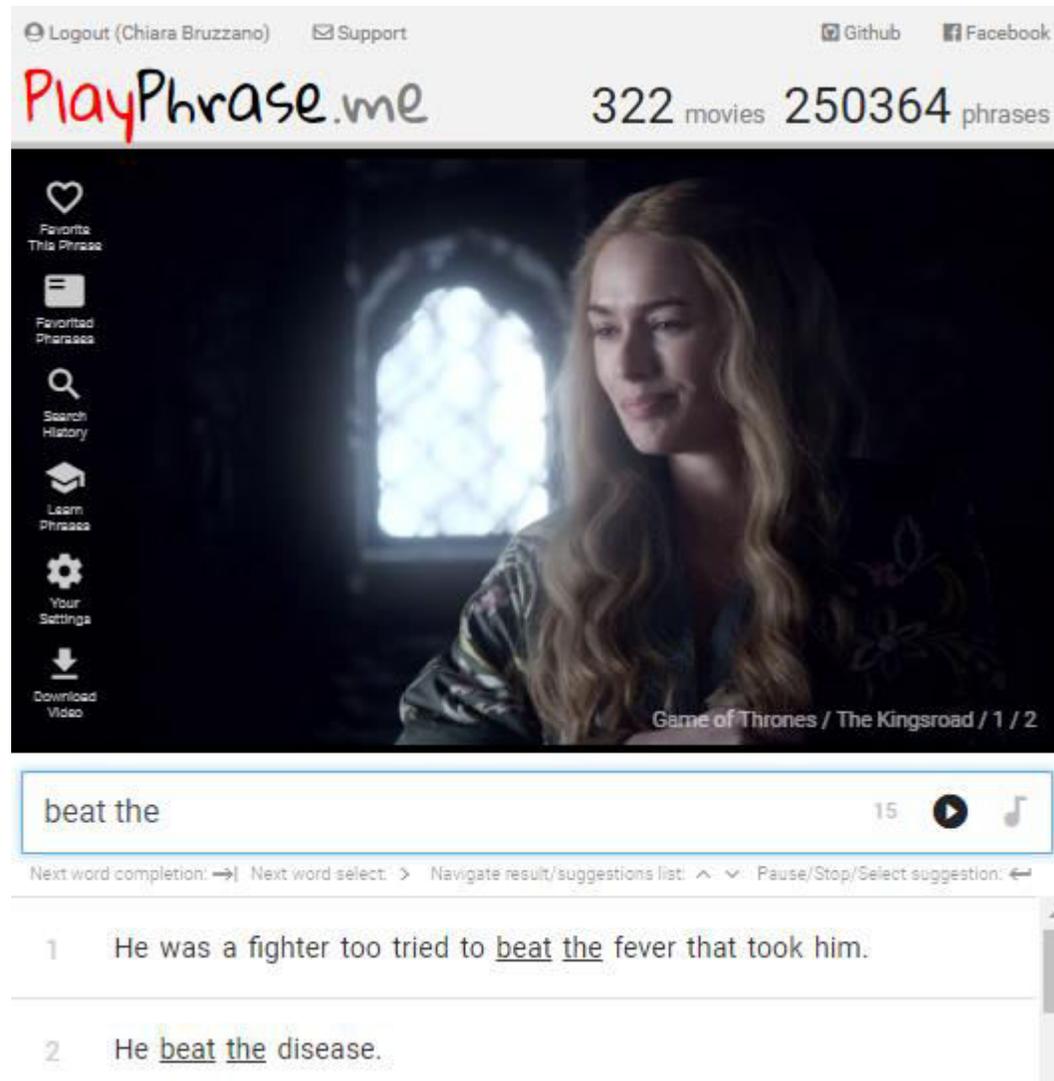
..to beat the..



How to pronounce **to beat the** in English (3 out of 1275):



you got **to beat the** market.



PlayPhrase.me 322 movies 250364 phrases

beat the 15

Next word completion: → Next word select: > Navigate result/suggestions list: ^ v Pause/Stop/Select suggestion: ←

- 1 He was a fighter too tried to beat the fever that took him.
- 2 He beat the disease.

You can..

- Identify and practise a feature of connected speech causing the problem
- Have learners reflect on how they got to the solution → metacognitive awareness

A prognostic approach: anticipating difficulties

What difficulties might your learners have with this video?

Task B: you can use the transcript to make notes

<https://youtu.be/rDujVSXYcrY?t=42>

Obama: if if I were able to run for a third term, hum, Michelle would divorce me
Jimmy Kimmel: [laughs]

Obama: so... I... and I... [laughs] so, so it it's it's useful that I don't have that choice to make

Jimmy: I know you have to leave, but can we keep her for another four years?

[audience claps and clamours]

O: she is... she is spectacular, but I was telling somebody backstage: Michelle was never wild about politics.
Michelle... once explained to me, I try to organise my life not to have a lot of mess around and politics is just a big mess.

J: yeah

O: she said... but she... [laughs] I still remember when I was thinking about running for president, she said you know, I think you would make an outstanding president... and I would work so hard to, to make sure you were president, you're the kind of person we need, if I weren't married to you!

A prognostic approach: ideas for working on expected difficulties

Speaker variables (hesitations, accent)

- Gap-fill focusing on hesitations and fillers
- With transcript, identify pauses that you can use to re-focus when you lose track
- Compare how Obama, with a rhotic accent, pronounces “would divorce me” as opposed to a non-rhotic accent

Relevance variables (interest, relevance of topic to learner)

- What question was Obama asked? When do you think this interview took place?
- Focus on world knowledge: what world knowledge helped you understand this video?

A prognostic approach: decoding practice

Decoding

- Transcript with multiple choice between different but similar phrases/words

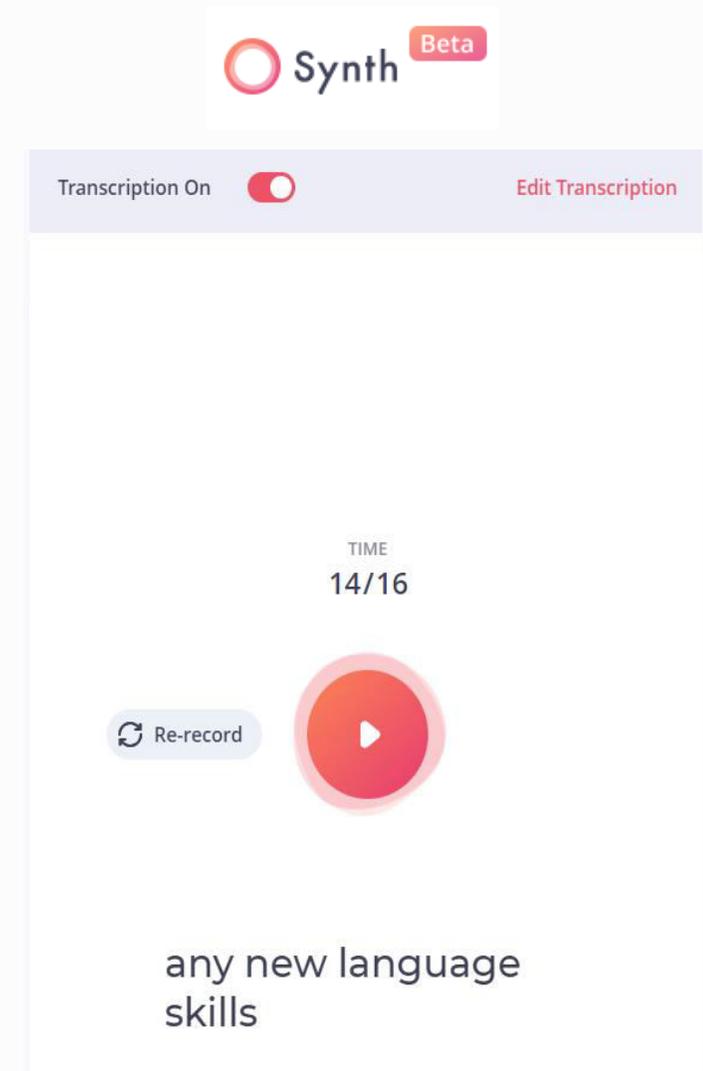
If I were able to run for a third *term/turn/erm*

Michelle was never *wide/wild/wine* about politics

- Replay difficult bits with weak forms (*not to have a lot of, I still remember when I was*) & ask to transcribe
- Gap-fill not focussing on key words but on difficult bits with weak forms
- Focus on frequent grammar words: oral realisations of *were/weren't*

Decoding practice (cont'd)

- Record yourself reading the speech at normal pace
 - Learners compare their understanding
 - Learners correct mistakes in transcript
- Diagnostic dictogloss:
 - Listen for general understanding
 - Listen and make notes
 - Reconstruct text in groups
 - Listen again and discuss in groups
 - Read transcript
 - Classify difficulties (more on this on website)



Finally, a few million-dollar questions

- Have learners had enough **time** (to normalise voices, read comprehension questions, work out answers)?
- Am I using learners' **difficulties** or am I just moving onto something else?
- In what ways am I helping learners develop **autonomous listening**?
- To what extent am I relying on the hope that listening will take care of itself, perhaps with **extensive practice** at home?



Million-dollar questions (cont'd)

- **Where are the answers coming from?** Comprehension, deduction, luck, world knowledge.. myself?
- Learners **want to understand** every single word: how do they feel if I tell them just to focus on key words?
- In what sense do the learners “know” the **vocabulary** in the listening? Can they recognise it in speech?
- **The biggie: how much are they *really* understanding?**

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**Thank you for (successfully applying your
decoding and meaning-building skills to)
listening!**

Find me on Twitter @chiara_bruzzano

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