

Developing Listening Skills in EAP contexts. An interview corpus-based approach for university students.

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been a reassessment of the value of listening instruction within a communicative framework. This paper describes the design and implementation of an interview-based corpus aimed at enhancing the listening skills of undergraduates at Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (Spain), as well as fostering their intrinsic motivation. We suggest that the role of schematic and contextual knowledge can be instrumental in the effective use of authentic audiovisual materials for listening instruction.

The learners' perceptions of the value and effect of using this approach are reflected in the results of the questionnaires conducted over a three year period at the Escuela Técnica Superior de Topografía, Geodesia y Cartografía, as well as in the responses gathered at the end of a listening session at the Facultad de Ciencias de la Actividad Física y Deporte, both schools attached to Universidad Politécnica de Madrid. A further report of the lecturer at the Facultad de Ciencias de la Actividad Física y Deporte, who participated in this action-research project, provides some insights into the value of this methodological approach to listening instruction.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decades, the growing importance placed on the skill of listening among second language learners has been reflected in a great deal of theoretical, empirical and practical papers which have attempted to describe the different factors affecting listening comprehension, including the main areas of difficulty among learners, such as lack of prior topic or vocabulary knowledge, anxiety or unrealistic expectations, among others (Oxford 1993; Rost 2006; Chang & Read 2008). The need to develop both bottom-up processes, such as recognising consonant or vowel linking, and top-down processes, i.e. activating appropriate schemata, has also been emphasized, as has been the importance of a strategies-based approach to the teaching of listening (Lynch 2002; Vandergrift 1999; Gogh 2008).

Furthermore, the literature (Anderson & Lynch 1998; Underwood 1989; Morley 2001; Rost 2007; Hedge 2008) indicates that listening has not only increased its status in and of itself, but has also been valued by the influence it exerts upon the other communicative skills, particularly upon the skill of speaking. In this respect, Nunan (1989: 32) has pointed out that, in addition to fluency and a range of specific skills (e.g. managing interaction and negotiating meaning), an effective oral communication involves conversational listening skills. In Nunan's words: "*Successful conversations require good listeners as well as good speakers*" (*Ibid.*).

More specifically, in the context of ESP, applied linguists such as Celce-Murcia (2001), Alcaraz (2000) and Lynch (2004) have stressed the fact that listening plays a crucial role in the development of the student’s communicative competence, especially if the target language is to be used in academic contexts. These authors have also underlined the need for ESP lecturers to design appropriate teaching materials aimed at enhancing the undergraduates’ listening skills.

Yet, in the field of ESP, the vast amount of research in the area of listening has not been equated by the number of courses specifically geared towards improving this skill. One of the reasons may be, as Field (2008) has noted, that as far as oral communication in a second language is concerned, the actual practice of listening seems to have been eclipsed by the relevance attached to the ability to speak both fluently and accurately, hence the scarce amount of time devoted to listening activities in the language classroom. In this regard, it is worth noting that in the specific area of EAP, academic listening has been given prominence to the detriment of conversational listening (Flowerdew & Peacock 2001).

Lastly, a further point to bear in mind is that when EAP students are exposed to conversational listening, the materials, more often than not, actually come from textbooks. However, the claim has been made that simplified listening texts actually remove from the contents the very language elements which L2 learners need to be exposed to if they are to acquire the target language (Oxford 1993; Field 2002; Rost 2006); such a view concurs with Hedge’s (2008: 240), who has highlighted clear differences between spontaneous, informal talk and textbook recordings. These dissimilarities are shown below.

Spontaneous informal talk	Recordings for English language learners
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • variations in speed of delivery, often fast • natural intonation • the natural features of connected speech, e.g. elision • variety of accents • colloquial language • incomplete utterances • restructuring in longer, more complex sentences • speakers interrupt or speak at the same time • speakers use ellipsis • background noise present 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • slow pace with little variation • exaggerated intonation patterns • carefully articulated pronunciation • Received Pronunciation • more formal language • complete utterances • grammatically correct sentences • speakers take careful turns • ellipsis infrequent (i. e. sentences usually complete) • background noise absent.

In short, in contrast to the stilted tone prevalent in commercial materials, authentic video recordings expose the students to natural usage of the language.

Moreover, Field (2008) has gone on to argue that a lack of understanding of how real spoken language works may prevent second language learners from engaging in natural conversations, thus constraining them to communicate in tightly structured scenarios. Indeed, this is arguably the skill for which it becomes more difficult to bring the real world to the classroom, since, in contrast to written information, where authentic materials are more readily accessible, real oral production is more difficult to obtain. Still,

some recent studies on the use of real listening materials for learning purposes have shed light on their effectiveness, both inside and outside the classroom (Kavaliauskienė, 2008; Blasco Mayor, 2009; Cross, 2010).

Furthermore, in addition to the benefits gained from exposing second language learners to real audio materials, using authentic audio visual materials in university environments can work as a highly motivating factor, as they provide young adults with complete cultural and cross-cultural references, both essential components of communicative competence.

However, for authentic video recordings to be used successfully in the classroom, they need to be made accessible to the learners. In this regard, the use of advanced organizers in the pre-listening stage as a way of helping the learners' to build their mental scaffolding may be an invaluable tool for improving their listening performance (Vandergrift 2004). These advance organizers include processing tasks focused on background knowledge, key concepts and relevant vocabulary.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

In the last decades English has consolidated its status as the lingua franca *par excellence* in the field of higher education. In fact, the globalization of education at tertiary level has become one of the major drivers of Global English (Graddol 2006). The pressure to compete at an international level has had a great impact on technical universities in Spain: on the one hand, the number of technical subjects taught fully in English has significantly increased, mainly at masters level; on the other hand, there has been a shift from EAP courses geared towards written production to communicative syllabuses with an emphasis on oral communication. More specifically, as a result of the recent European Higher Education Area curricular renewal, Madrid Polytechnic University (UPM) has recently seen the implementation of a new compulsory course across all its faculties and schools--*English for Professional and Academic Communication*--, designed to enable the students to interact successfully in both professional and academic environments.

The aforementioned changes have clear implications for a suitable approach to oral communication instruction, which implies building the undergraduates' self-confidence as well as providing them with adequate pedagogical materials to develop effective learning strategies. Therefore, teaching the oral skills in contexts as close as possible to the real world is a priority in these university courses where the students' current and future needs are the focus of language learning.

SYLLABUS DESIGN

In order to improve our undergraduates' listening skills, we set out to design a listening course based on authentic video recordings from the Programme **Hard Talk**, with the following aims:

- To make listening instruction more appealing to university students by exposing them to relevant content, thus fostering a greater cognitive challenge.
- To shift the goals of listening so that the listening materials can be used to explore cultural themes as well as linguistic features, thereby imbuing the listening activities with a dynamism which goes beyond the verification of true or false statements.

- To give the students a better understanding of spoken discourse and increase their appreciation of different varieties of English.

In the planning stage, the students' level- ranging from B1 to B2- was taken into account. After an initial phase which involved the recording and screening of 50 interviews, a final selection of ten interviews was made, covering a range of language functions (e.g. disagreeing, suggesting, speculating), different varieties of modern English, as well the topics most likely to appeal to the students; these include the world of literature, music, design, cinema, science and sport.

Next, we took on the task of transcribing the pre-selected and selected interviews, which gave us a sound basis for both analysing the dialogues and choosing the most relevant extracts for their pedagogical exploitation.

Our third step involved editing the interviews together with video clips on related topics from a variety of BBC programmes and BBC news; to that end, we relied on the expertise of an audiovisual technician at the UPM. The importance of these additional materials lies in the fact that they can work well as brainstorming exercises, providing the students with a suitable context as well as raising their interest in the interview themes.

Finally, a syllabus was developed by presenting the specific goals of each unit within the wider framework of the course aims, i.e. improving the listening skills of the learners. The broad themes of the listening syllabus are grouped under five headings:

- 1) *Talking about work experiences.*
- 2) *Describing professional projects, short and long term.*
- 3) *Narrating personal experiences related to personality development.*
- 4) *Describing scientific endeavours.*
- 5) *Using the language of oral reasoning and argumentation.*

CHOICE OF MATERIAL. THE PROGRAMME HARD TALK. USEFULNESS

Hard talk is an in-depth interview programme broadcast on BBC News 24 and BBC World, and aimed at a global audience. Launched in 1997, the programme has featured high-profile international personalities such as Al-Gore, David Miliband, or Doris Lessing in its fifteen year span. Between 2004 and 2009, the show branched out to include two variants, *Hard Talk Extra* and *Extra Time*. Following a similar format to *Hard Talk*, the former is entirely devoted to the art world, whereas the latter focuses on sports personalities. Due to their potential interest to young university students, most of the interviews chosen for our pedagogical exploitation belong to the subcategory *Hard Talk Extra*.

By and large, the half hour interview revolves around the turning points of the interviewee's life, his/ her current projects, as well as future endeavours. Every now and then, the guest's views give rise to differences of opinion on the part the interviewer, sometimes with a marked argumentative tone, which may be used to exemplify the language of debates. The fact that *Hard Talk* is staged in a television studio, with no audience present allows for a more serious, candid tone. Moreover, the interviews can be used in the language classroom to illustrate different interaction patterns, contrasting lengths of turns, as well as richer examples of speech between the speakers than those provided by textbook interviews.

The additional material, consisting of video-clips from BBC news, on-line information and radio clips, as well as providing the necessary background to the interview, can also be used as a springboard for illustrating relevant cultural aspects of English-speaking countries, thus broadening the students' **cultural competence**. For instance, the interview with Gerald Scarfe, the prominent British cartoonist, takes us to the Houses of Parliament, whereas the interview with award-winning author Alice Walker, brings us closer to the inauguration ceremony of the first African-American president in the history of the US.

Likewise, the use of English as the international language of communication allows us to showcase **cross-cultural references**, such as Botswana's first centre for opera training, which complements the interview with Alexander McCall Smith, or India's booming Bollywood industry, which provides the backdrop to the interview with film director Shekhar Kapur.

As far as **linguistic competence** is concerned, the wide range of idioms present in the interviews, such as "*I don't wear my heart on my sleeve*", "*the elephant in the room*", "*go the extra mile*"...not only gives the students a clear indication of their usage in conversational English, but also makes them more aware of their metaphorical content, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of the target language. Moreover, phrasal verbs, such as "*hang out*", "*carve out*", "*squeeze out*", also feature highly in these dialogues, hence the show's potential for exposing the students to this characteristic of spoken English in real settings.

Regarding **strategic competence**, the interviews may illustrate conversational strategies, particularly those which tend to pose listening difficulties for language learners, including avoidance (the ability to avoid answers or to steer the conversation away from the topic), approximation (using an alternative term expressing the meaning of the target word) or the use of fillers and hesitation devices to fill pauses, among others (Dornyei & Thurrell 1994).

THE COURSE

Interviewing in English is a thirty six hour course, (two hours a week), lasting four months. The course is now in its fourth year; so far the participants have been surveying undergraduates in their final year, mostly Spanish, though there have also been some *Erasmus* students enrolled in this course. The majority are in their early twenties, with a level of English ranging from lower intermediate to upper intermediate.

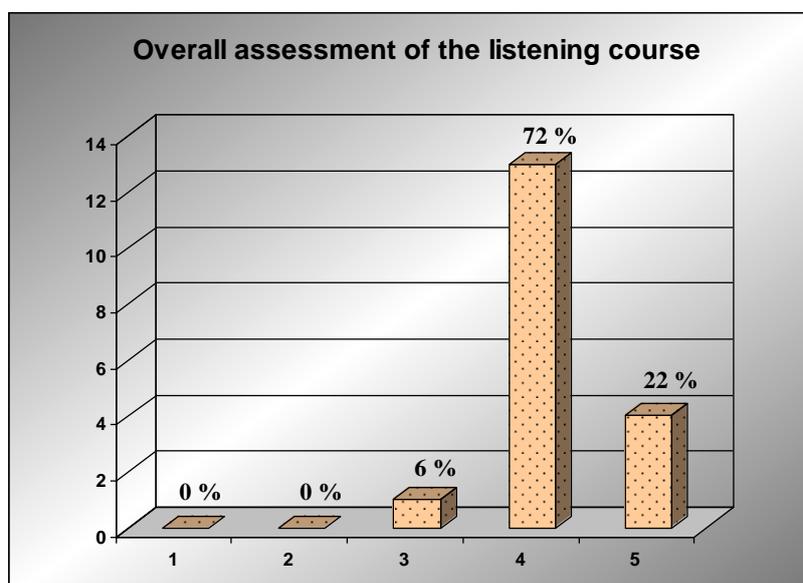
METHODOLOGY

When attempting to turn our selected interviews into useful listening materials, we have sought to promote the use of cognitive, meta-cognitive, as well as socio-affective strategies in the area of listening instruction (Oxford 1993; Vandergrift 1996). Such pedagogical guidelines have been applied within the framework of Meaningful Learning. As is well known, the construct, originally put forward by Ausubel (1968) and subsequently enhanced by Vygotsky (1978), Gowin & Novak (1984), is aimed at the development of life-long skills and strategies. Consequently, in our listening instruction we have included the use of processing tasks, essential to build the learners' mental scaffolding. These assignments involve **pre-listening activities**, designed to raise an interest as well as to provide background information on the main themes of the conversation, **while-listening activities**, such as checking guesses, and **post-listening activities**, for example, giving personal views after listening to the selected fragments of the interviews.

Furthermore, in contrast to the usual emphasis on time-constrained tests in which there is, inevitably, an element of pressure, we have sought to raise the students' interest and motivation by clarifying both the purposes and the reasons for listening so that they could focus their attention on learning about the interview topics rather than struggling for the correct answer.

COURSE ASSESSMENT

At the end of the courses, back in February 2009, 2010 and 2011, the students were asked to complete questionnaires (see Appendix 1) on their perception on the usefulness and value of the listening course. They were also encouraged to carry out self-evaluation regarding their own performance, as well as their overall improvement of oral skills.

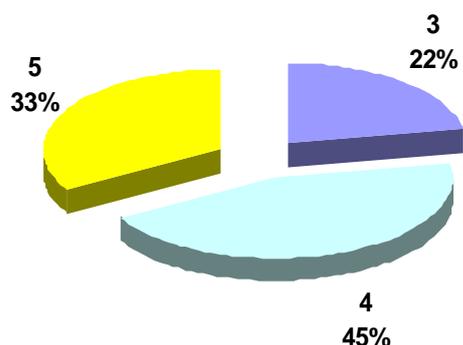


The total number of respondents from the three listening courses was twenty.

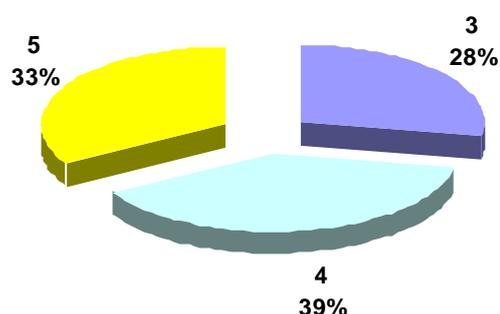
Assessments were given of different aspects of the course and the course overall, on a five point Likert scale, from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1).

The results of the bar chart show that the students' **overall assessment** of the listening course was either good (72%) or very good (22%). The majority of the students (86%) agreed that the course had **met their expectations**. A large proportion of the students (78%) held positive perceptions about the **effectiveness of the course on their improvement of listening skills**, with a high (45%) or very high degree (33%) of satisfaction with the course. Interestingly, an equal proportion of students (78%) stated that an **appropriate methodology** had been used. Almost three quarters of them (72%) declared that the **teaching units** had proved either useful (39%) or very useful (33%). Moreover, almost nine tenths of the students (88%) stated that the course had enabled them to better **understand different varieties of English**, their degree of satisfaction either high (49%) or very high (39%). Finally, as far as perceived **improvement of oral skills** are concerned, a large majority (67%) reported either a high (50%) or very high (17%) degree of satisfaction.

Perceived improvement in listening comprehension skills.



Usefulness of teaching units.



DATA ANALYSIS

For three consecutive years, the results of the listening course evaluation questionnaire have been clearly positive. The answers to the questions have confirmed our belief that, as well as providing a clear set of expectations, the additional course materials have helped to facilitate the undergraduates' listening comprehension. In all cases, the majority of the students felt that the course contents were adequate.

FINDINGS

Overall, the listening extracts from the interviews have made the learners more aware of recurring conversation strategies, such as those outlined above, on page five.

Although some of these strategies might pose problems for learners with a lower level of proficiency in English, causing them to lose the thread of the argument, on the whole, the majority of the students were appreciative of the considerable advantages of listening to these real conversations. Additionally, image seems to make listening comprehension easier to highly visual students, since the meaning of words and the tone of the conversation can be inferred through body language; in fact, even turn-taking is made clearer when interruptions do occur.

Among the specific difficulties faced by the undergraduates when listening to the interviews was the rate of delivery, sometimes perceived by them as very fast, especially in the initial sequence in which the interviewer summarises the milestones in the guest's life in the short space of 25-28 seconds.

Some of the **benefits outlined by the students are the following:**

"The background information given before the interviews regarding both context and vocabulary has provided me with a suitable framework; this, in turn, has greatly increased my listening comprehension".

"The variety of topics and guests on the programme broadens the typical textbook settings, which makes the listening course more attractive to us".

"The teaching units highlight useful dialogue expressions that we can put into practice in everyday conversations".

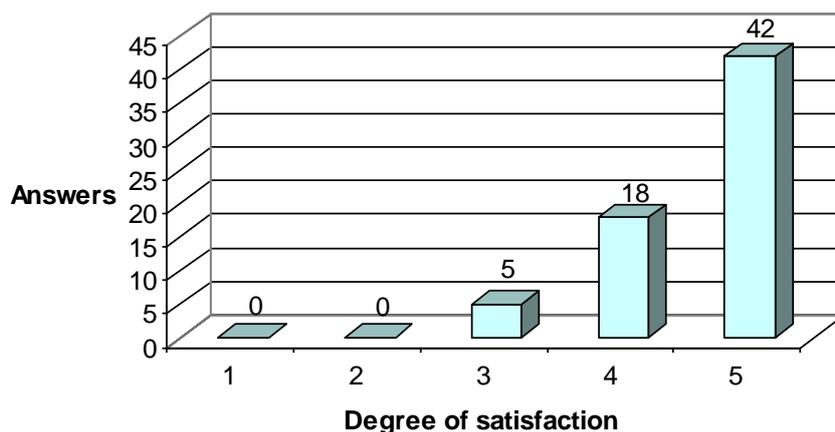
"A very down-to-earth and novel approach to the teaching of oral communication".

"For once the listening focus has been on learning rather than testing, which is very encouraging".

SPORTS FACULTY RESULTS

A similar questionnaire conducted at Facultad de Ciencias de la Actividad Física y Deporte, sought to reveal the reflections of the undergraduates who participated in the screening and subsequent pedagogical exploitation of the *Hard Talk* interview with Monica Selles. Assessments were given of different aspects of the session on a five point Likert scale.

Overall satisfaction with the listening session



As can be seen from the graph above, the majority of the students expressed either a very high (42%) or high (18%) degree of satisfaction with the listening session.

Moreover, a substantial percentage of them considered the topics of the interview either very interesting (85%) or interesting (15%). As far as methodology is concerned, the results reveal that a large percentage of students were either satisfied (28%) or very satisfied (64%). Significantly, all the students either strongly (77%) or somewhat (23%) agreed that working with these kinds of interviews could improve their listening comprehension. Therefore, we can conclude that the undergraduates' overall satisfaction with the session was closely related to their interest in the themes of the interview, as well as their satisfaction with the methodology adopted.

Further feedback was provided by the English lecturer at that faculty on the participants' reaction and their degree of involvement during the session. She reported the following:

“By personalising the listening contents, the students were able to get more easily involved in the listening tasks. The variety of topics, such as self-discipline, team work, parental support, overcoming hardships, the need to adapt to a different culture... have not only engaged these undergraduates, but have also proven to work well as a way of sparking discussion, giving rise to a great deal of classroom interaction. In this respect, the additional materials also gave the students the opportunity to reflect on their own personal experiences and on how these events have shaped their personalities and contributed to their choice of studies. One particular topic that generated a great deal of interest was the inclusion of video-footage illustrating Roger Federer's life, from his early days on the junior circuit, to his rise to stardom against the iconic backdrop of Wimbledon”.

CONCLUSION

The results suggest that our approach, even if it presents the obvious constraints of non-participatory listening instruction, does enable undergraduates to engage in a more competent way with the kind of language they will be encountering outside the classroom in professional environments. Moreover, the results of our research-action project seem to confirm the notion that exposing the learners to authentic audiovisual materials can help them increase their self-confidence in their listening skills. This can best be attained by facilitating appropriate mental scaffolding through the use of processing meaningful tasks aimed at raising a real interest in the topics of the interviews.

As experience widens, there is increasing evidence of the plethora of assets that designing listening activities based on authentic video recordings can bring about to L2 learners. At the same time, the challenges of such endeavour cannot be underestimated. However, it is expected that the results of this small-scale project may go some way towards increasing ESP lecturers' willingness to work in that direction.

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APPENDIX 1 QUESTIONNAIRE administered to students at ETS TOPOGRAFIA; GEODESIA; CARTOGRAFIA

As part of a more comprehensive questionnaire, our key research questions were the following:

- Overall, how satisfied are you with this listening course?
- To what extent has the course helped you improve your listening comprehension skills?
- To what extent has the course helped you enhance your oral performance?
- Has the course enabled you to better understand different varieties of English?
- Do you think that an appropriate methodology has been used?
- To what extent have the teaching units been useful for acquiring new vocabulary, particularly idioms?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the course?
- Would you recommend this course to other students?

APPENDIX 2. INTERVIEW WITH MONICA SELES. SAMPLE LESSON EXERCISES

For reasons of space, we have only included only some exercises from the unit “Interview with Monica Seles”.

In this unit, two different sequences from this *Extratime* show have been exploited for pedagogical purposes. The first starts at 0:10 into the interview and ends at 5:00 minutes. In this clip, the nine time Grand Slam tennis champion describes her first memories of playing tennis, coached by her father. Being a professional cartoonist, he would devise creative ways of keeping her focused on the game, such as drawing her favourite cartoon characters, Tom and Jerry, on the tennis balls. In addition, he would compensate for the lack of tennis facilities in her hometown by stringing a net between two cars in a car park, which they would use as a tennis court.

The second sequence starts at 17:58 into the programme and ends at 21:50, which marks the end of the interview. This clip shows Monica playing with underprivileged children at the Laureus Sports Academy in the Bronx, in her capacity as a member of the Laureus foundation, thus giving the students a different perspective of this particular disadvantaged area of New York.

The goal of the lesson is to expose the students to the interaction between speakers of British and American English, as well as to raise the students’ awareness of the differences between these two varieties of English regarding pronunciation, vocabulary and idiomatic expressions. The lesson may be used with EAP students with a B1-B2 level of English proficiency.

TOPICS OF THE UNIT: professional development, current projects, future plans.

LANGUAGE FOCUS

A) DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BRITISH AND AMERICAN ENGLISH

Pronunciation

	British English	American English
Tournament	'tʊənəmənt	'tɔrnəmənt
Student	'stju:dnt	'stu:dnt

Vocabulary

British English	American English
car park	parking lot
mark	grade



WATCH THE FIRST SEQUENCES OF THE BBC DOCUMENTARY “ROGER FEDERER, THE RISE TO STARDOM” AND FIND THREE PARALLELS BETWEEN ROGER FEDERER’S AND MONICA SELES’ LIVES

C) WARM-UP QUESTIONS

- Is the name Monica Seles familiar to you?
- Where does she come from?
- Have you ever heard of the Bollettieri tennis academy? What is it famous for?
- Have a look at Monica Seles’ profile. In your view, what are the most remarkable turning points in her life?
- What do you know about the Bronx?

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WHILE-VIEWING ACTIVITY. COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS. First sequence-



CONNECTING INFORMATION

- What is the connection between these two animated pictures characters and the way Monica learnt how to play tennis?



- Was the lack of tennis facilities a hindrance to Monica when she first started playing tennis? Why?
- What was life like for Monica at the Bollettieri tennis academy? How does she describe it in the interview?
- Was being a non-native speaker of English an obstacle for her career?

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WHILE-VIEWING ACTIVITY. COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS. Second sequence

- At the time of the interview, what project is Monica involved in?
- How does she feel about this project?
- In which way do the kids taking part in this project benefit from playing sport?
- At that point in her life, is she ready to come to terms with the idea of not being number one anymore?
- Is Monica planning a future as a tennis coach?

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POST - VIEWING ACTIVITIES. EXPRESS YOUR VIEWS

- Do you find Monica Seles's accent difficult or easy to understand? Give some reasons.
- How does she come across in the interview?

PAIR WORK. DISCUSS WITH YOUR PARTNER THE TOPICS BELOW

- Is tennis an elite game? Why?
- Do you think that child sport prodigies are under a great deal of pressure to succeed in their careers?

LANGUAGE FOCUS. REVISION OF WOULD AND USED TO

In this interview, Monica Seles uses **would** plus a bare verb (infinitive without to), to talk about **repeated actions and habits in the past**. Both **would** and **used to** can be used to express **repeated actions and events** in the past, but **only used to** can refer to **past states**.

R.= Rob Bonnet, the interviewer.

M.= Monica Seles.

*R.-"And the balls... your father was a cartoonist, **he would beat the ball** with cartoon characters, wouldn't he?"*

*M.- Yeah,... **he would draw Tom** and, because that was my favourite cartoon and...or **he would do different things** for target practice.*

*M.- **He would put different teddy bears** on the corridor as he was explaining to me the technique.*

*M.- **He would draw a character and he would make it into an animation film**, so... for me there was never a dull moment and that made tennis fun".*