

HOW CAN FLEXIBILITY BE ACHIEVED IN ADOPTING RISK STRATEGIES IN NEGOTIATED INTERACTION

Berhanu Bogale

"To communicate we need to co-operate. But co-operation involves risks."

Widdowson, 1990: 109

Abstract

In this study, an attempt was made to look into the listening strategies used by university 4th year students. Particular focus was made on the types of risk strategies and means of dealing with communication trouble spots used in negotiated interaction. To examine these issues six students in three groups, namely, top ranking, middle ranking and bottom ranking were given three listening tasks. Analysis of the data from the tasks showed that the adoption of high or low risk strategies consistently was not good since the most successful student, as far as completion of the tasks was concerned, was the one who adopted flexible risk strategies. The results indicated that students need to be given opportunities to practise handling varieties of activities and that direct strategy training be introduced.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide an introductory/brief discussion of what second language learners do or can do to deal with language they do not initially understand. As indicated in the title of the paper, I am concerned with what learners do/can do in learner-learner, learner-teacher face to face spoken communication in negotiated interaction. The term 'negotiated interaction' refers to what Widdowson (1990:107) calls 'reciprocal negotiation' (where there is, in the speaking-listening process, turn-taking of talk) as opposed to non-negotiated or non-reciprocal interaction (where negotiation by means of active and reciprocal participation is not possible. In a reading text, for example, there is interaction but the reader and the writer cannot work together to direct the course of the communication). In most forms of negotiated interactions, participants may take the primary role of a speaker or a listener or may shift from listener to speaker and back again. In this paper, I am mainly concerned with what learners do when they play the primary role of a listener.

While taking part in negotiated interaction, listeners may or may not understand the speaker. In this paper, again, I am mostly concerned with what listeners do when they feel that they do not understand the speaker. This is where the question of 'risk' comes in. When listeners feel they have problems, they may take a risk and continue with the problem or they may try to negotiate with the speaker in order to minimize the problem.

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So, I am concerned with:

- 1) Face to face spoken communication, negotiated interaction,
- 2) Participants playing the primary role of a listener,
- 3) What listeners do when they do not understand the speaker.

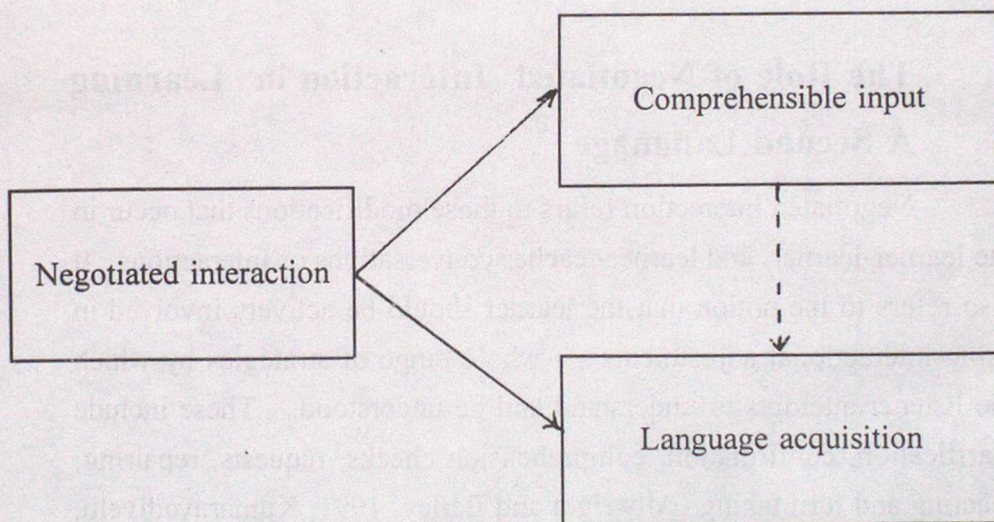
In line with this, the paper tries to give brief answers to the following questions: a) What does the role of negotiated interaction in learning a second language appear to be? b) What risk strategy style should students/learners try to achieve in order to minimize or solve the problems they face as listeners in negotiated interaction? c) How can they achieve this?

2. The Role of Negotiated Interaction in Learning A Second Language

Negotiated interaction refers to those modifications that occur in the learner-learner, and learner-teacher conversations or interactions. It also refers to the notion that the learner should be actively involved in using interactional adjustments - a whole range of strategies by which the listener attempts to understand and be understood. These include clarification, confirmation, comprehension checks, requests, repairing, reacting and turn taking (Allwright and Bailey, 1991; Kumaravadivelu, 1994).

A number of different explanations have been proposed to account for the role of understanding spoken input and the function of negotiated interaction in language development. For Krashen (1981; 1985) the comprehension of input plays the central, and possibly predominant part in the whole process of language learning. In his own

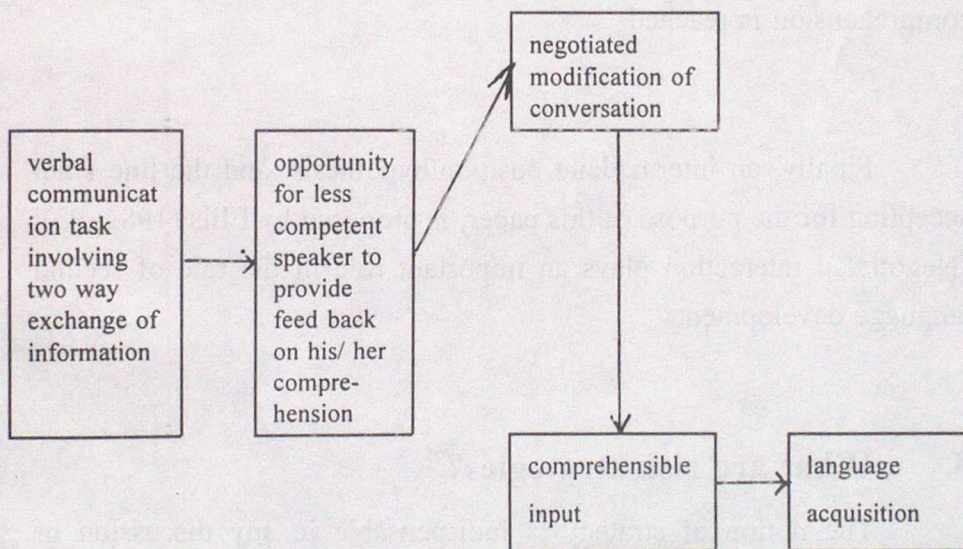
expression: "... comprehension may be at the heart of the language acquisition process." For Allwright and Bailey (1991), however, the concept of comprehensible input is only "intuitively appealing" and "problematic in a variety of ways." The main criticism they make of Krashen's position is that it is difficult to see how mere exposure to input, even if comprehensible, actually promotes language development. One possibility they suggest is that it is the effort made by the learner to comprehend the input, the process of negotiation, that brings about development. Allwright and Bailey (1991: 123) have diagrammatically represented this hypothesis as follows:



The broken line shows the possibility that comprehensible input might still make a direct contribution to language acquisition. However, it also indicates that they feel there is still doubt about the relationship between comprehensible input and language acquisition.

Long(1983), however, is of the view that the effects of interaction and comprehensible input on second language acquisition are clear and can be seen or drawn indirectly in terms of a simple syllogism. That is, conversational adjustments (A) promote comprehension (B) - comprehensible input (B) promotes acquisition (C) - deduce that A (conversational adjustments) promotes C (acquisition).

Long considers interactional adjustments to be the most important influence for second language acquisition. The following figure accounts for the way in which he considers interactional adjustments in two-way communication aid second language acquisition.



Long's model, unlike Krashen's, emphasise the primacy of negotiated interaction and its role in getting comprehensible input. This relationship, however, is criticized by Allwright and Bailey (1991: 122)

who write that "... language acquisition can perhaps best be seen, not as the outcome of an encounter with comprehensible input per se, but as the direct outcome of the work involved in the negotiation process itself."

Similarly, according to Kumaravadivelu (1994: 34), there is enough evidence to suggest that learners need to be provided with opportunities for negotiated interaction in order to accelerate their comprehension and production. For example, studies by Pica et al. 1987; Pica, 1991 indicate that what enables learners to move beyond their current receptive and expressive capacities are opportunities to modify their conversation with their partners until mutual comprehension is reached.

Finally, an intermediate position/hypothesis, and the line I am accepting for the purpose of this paper, is proposed by Ellis (1984: 93): "Negotiated interaction plays an important role in the rate of second language development."

3. What are risk strategies?

The notion of strategy is indispensable in any discussion of second language learning. The term makes it clear that learning is an active process and that learners are "not empty vessels into which some substance is poured" (Willing, 1989: 140) nor are they "mere sponges acquiring the new language by osmosis alone" (Chamot, 1987: 82). On the contrary, learners are depicted as employing a number of specific

means to construct meaning and learn. The word strategy refers to those means (Willing, 1989) or to specific actions or techniques employed in the reconstruction of meaning (Wenden, 1987; Oxford, 1990). Or, according to Kumaravadivelu (1994: 35), it refers to operations, steps and routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information.

For the purpose of this paper, risk strategies may be defined as means of dealing with communication 'trouble spots', such as not knowing a particular word, misunderstanding or not understanding the other speaker. In other words, risk strategies are conversational strategies that are particularly used to change instances of misunderstanding or non-understanding into acceptable understanding. Research in the past decade and half has identified three major types of such risk strategies: a) Asking for repetition - when listeners have not heard or understood something, e.g. "Pardon?" or "Sorry, what was the last word?" b) confirmation checking: reformulating the speaker's message to check understanding, e.g. "You mean ...?", or "So are you saying that ...?" and c) Asking for clarification e.g. "What do you mean?". Whenever a listener has taken a turn to use one of these strategies, then he/she can be said to have taken a clarification/problem oriented move. Moves, in this paper, refer to the turns taken only by the listener when acting as primary listener in an interaction.

In any particular interactional activity a learner may use risk strategies very frequently, frequently or less frequently. In this paper, I shall use the term 'Risk Index' to measure the frequency of clarification or problem oriented moves in any negotiated interaction.

The risk index of listeners in different interactional activities may be obtained by subtracting from one what is obtained by dividing the total clarification oriented moves by the total moves. This is given by the formula below (mine).

$\text{Risk Index} = 1 - \frac{\text{Clarification/problem oriented moves}}{\text{total moves}}$
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When comparing different subjects/listeners a higher number (the highest being one and the lowest zero) indicated by the risk index shows a listener adopting higher risk strategies and a lower number indicates the adoption of lower risk strategies. Listeners in any segment of interactive discourse may adopt high-risk, or low-risk or flexible risk strategies. Listeners who adopt high-risk strategies assume that the new information needs no change or minimal change. In other words, they are less likely to negotiate with the speaker by querying discrepancies or uncertainties. On the other hand, listeners who adopt low-risk strategies want to be assured that their current understanding is as close as possible to the speaker's intended meaning or to a targeted (100%) understanding. The following table (based on brown et. al., 1985 - cited in Rost, 1990: 228-229) indicates what listeners adopting high-risk or low-risk strategies do.

Table 1
Two types of risk strategies

Low-risk strategies	High-risk strategies
1. Check that all entities are unambiguously identified (e.g. by name, location, etc.)	1. Assume maximal identity of information - e.g. assume mentioned entity is the one you have in mind.
2. Require exact specification of descriptions	2. When detail is lacking, use a best-guess tactic
3. Check that the speaker knows what you understand	3. Assume your information is secure and ignore incompatible information
4. If necessary, recapitulate your movements	4. Only process speaker's turn in terms of what you know - do not request additional information, give minimal feedback.
5. do not make any new interpretation until you have the required information	
6. Move minimally away from current focus	
7. Be prepared for your partner's understanding to be different from your own	
8. Constantly test speaker's representations	
9. Remind speaker of your goals	

A further high - risk strategy that appears to be used by second language learners involves recognising that their interpretation may be/is likely to be different from that of the speaker, but not requesting additional feedback. The use of high-risk strategies by our students may at least partly reflect a preference for accepting uncertainty rather than being embarrassed in front of their friends by appearing to be ignorant.

Another notion/term related to the risk index of a listener is the risk index of different listeners: Average Risk Index. Average Risk Index indicates to what extent high or low risk strategies are utilized by students to carry out an activity. Average risk indices may be used to compare the average frequency of clarification/problem oriented moves learners employ to perform different tasks or activities. Let us compare three different activities and see the relationships between the risk indices of six listeners in carrying out these three tasks and the average risk indices of listeners across all tasks. I provided six students at Addis Ababa University (fourth year students from the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature) with three different types of activities. The activities were: 1) a discussion activity (students discussed with their advisers), 2) a map task (students were told to trace the route on a map - from a set of instructions), and 3) a pie-chart task (students were required to listen and complete a diagram).

Below is a table showing the Risk Index or the degree of risk taken by individual students in carrying out activities one, two, and three-discussion, map task, and pie-chart task, respectively.

Table 2
The Risk Index of Six Students in Three Different Types of Activities

Student	Risk Indices		
	Act. 1	Act. 2	Act. 3
T ₁	0.97	0.61	0.55
T ₂	0.98	0.73	0.78
M ₁	0.85	0.492	0.49
M ₂	0.87	0.494	0.58
B ₁	0.87	0.43	0.49
B ₂	0.97	0.47	0.57

where T means top-ranking, M- middle ranking, and B - bottom ranking according to CGPA.

Remember that a high score, e.g. 0.97 indicates that higher risk strategies were employed, or a higher level of risk was tolerated, whereas a low score, e.g. 0.47 shows that lower risk strategies were employed, or a lower level of risk was tolerated by the listener.

The figures in the table above may also be changed into percentages. Thus in activity 1, T₁'s risk index is 97%. This means that 97% of the total turns taken by this student show no indication of problems of understanding. Or, 3% of the total turns are clarification/problem oriented.

Once the risk index of each student is obtained, it is simple to calculate the average risk index students employed in carrying out an activity. The Average Risk Index can be obtained by dividing the sum of the Risk Index of each student by the total number of students - six in this case. Thus:

Average Risk Index	=	$\frac{\text{The sum of the Risk Index of each student}}{\text{The total number of students}}$
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The Average Risk Index employed by all six students in carrying out each of the three activities is thus:

For Activity 1	=	$\frac{0.97+0.98+0.85+0.87+0.87+0.97}{6}$
	≈	0.92
For Activity 2	≈	0.54
For Activity 3	≈	0.56

The above figures show that different activities require students to adopt different levels of risk-taking. If we compare the average risk index for activities one and two, the discussion activity indicates a higher figure than the map tasks. This means the discussion activity has led students to adopt higher risk strategies (a lower number of problem oriented moves) while the map task encouraged the use of lower risk strategies (more problem oriented moves).

Let us now look at the risk indices of individual participants in one of the activities - Activity 2/the map tasks. The table on page 8 shows that the highest risk index was recorded by T₂ and the lowest by B₁. It is interesting, here, to look at excerpts from the transcriptions of these two students:

I (instructor) - so we come out of the palace

T₂ - uhm

I - we come out of the palace right? and we go down the road and we go to visit the national monument

T₂ - okay

I - alright?

T₂ - Okay

I - we have about twenty minutes for photographs and the bus takes us down that road ... and first left to the market

T₂ - ahha okay

Extract 1 - From task 2

The extract shows that T₂ assumed that the information he had was consistent with what the speaker (I) was saying. But the student's task sheet shows that he took the 'museum' for the 'National Monument' - the result of which was confusion in the completion of the task. This student was definitely adopting a high-risk strategy.

Following is a different degree of risk adoption employed by another student - B₁.

- I - now okay right we have about an hour's tour at the mill
B₁ - at the factory?
I - yeah
B₁ - and at meal?
I - at mill
B₁ - okay.. we have had a lunch or what?
I - no no we just go round and look at the mill
B₁ - oh yeah
((moves head up and down))
I - right .. and the bus will come to us
B₁ - is it the grinding factory?
I - textile

Extract 2 From Task 2

4. Flexibility - Why?

The above extract (extract 2) shows that the listener was adopting a low-risk strategy. This student was one of the most successful students as far as the task performance was concerned. Here it is worth noting that though low risk strategy is often valuable to successfully accomplish a task, it is often unnecessary to maintain a low-risk strategy throughout an interaction for it slows down the discourse and occasionally assumes absurd dimensions (Rost, 1990).

On the other hand, students who adopt high-risk strategies may save time and speed up the discourse but at the high risk of successfully accomplishing the task given. Extract 1 and the risk index of T₂ show

that this student adopted a high-risk strategy. The performance result shows that this student was the least successful of all the subjects/participants.

Participants who do not treat all listening tasks with same risk orientation - high or low risk - but adopt them with flexible orientation, depending on purpose and need are considered competent listeners. From the data and Table 2 it was seen that one student (T_1) was adopting flexible risk strategies - asking for clarification or confirmation when necessary (and indicating understanding when there were no problems of understanding). Thus the risk index of this student was not as high as T_2 's - the highest risk taker, nor was it as low as B_1 's (the lowest risk taker). Yet, T_1 was the most successful listener of all. This also shows that success is not necessarily related to low - risk adoption.

5. Flexibility - How?

The ability to handle interactions in various circumstances clearly requires practice. Such practice appears to be related to the provision of activities which require learners to become used to dealing with the kinds of unpredictable problems which negotiated interaction brings in different contexts. Two-way tasks (activities in which both participants have information to give in order to reach a solution) generate more talk, and more use of negotiation procedures than do one-way tasks (activities where only one of the learners has information to give) Bygate, (1987), Anderson and Lynch (1988) have in fact developed a technique for making one-way tasks more interactive. They have done

this by building a number of "problem points", into the task, which are designed to increase the negotiation demands on the learners. Look at the adaptation from one of Anderson and Lynch's task - illustrated by the Genet City Tour map task, in the Appendix.

If different activities require different levels of risk adoption, providing students with varieties of activities may give them chance to practise using a variety of risk strategies including those that are relatively high or low. This may, in the long run, lead to students' adopting risks with flexibility. Activities for training students to handle interactions can be designed from a wealth of activities given in, among others, Bygate 1987; Ur 1981, 1984; Klippel 1991; Harmer 1983; Littlewood 1981 and Parrott 1993. The following sample activities may be adapted to train students:

- a) Information - gap activities
- b) Jigsaw activities
- c) Guessing activities
- d) Problem-solving activities
- e) Role play activities
- f) Group discussion
- g) Project based activities

Such activities, though more suited to smaller classes, can also be used in quite large classes provided that there are enough teaching materials that may be handed out to each of the students, pairs or groups, as required. The teaching approach should also be considered here for the best effect.

In addition to engaging learners in negotiated interaction, the teaching approach plays an important role in helping students to adopt risk strategies with flexibility. Currently, there are two major approaches to teaching conversational skills: direct and indirect approaches. In the indirect approach conversational competence is seen as the product of engaging learners in negotiated interaction such as the activities listed above. The direct approach, on the other hand, involves planning a conversation programme around the specific microstrategies that are involved in fluent conversation. This approach appears to handle interaction more systematically than the indirect approach for it aims at developing the students' awareness of conversational rules, strategies to use, and pitfalls to avoid.

The direct approach also involves providing learners with specific language input: fixed expressions or conversational routines. These are, according to Widdowson (1990: 92), "a crucial component of communicative competence." Widdowson goes as far as to say that a great part of communicative competence is merely a matter of knowing how to use "partially preassembled patterns" and "formulaic or composite expressions."

Similarly, the view taken in this paper is that, in addition to being engaged in negotiated interaction, learners may therefore also benefit from direct strategy training. This may help them to know how to use strategies for accomplishing various activities, monitor their performance, and assess the outcome of their learning. Then, learners may be able to use strategies most successfully - with the required amount of flexibility.

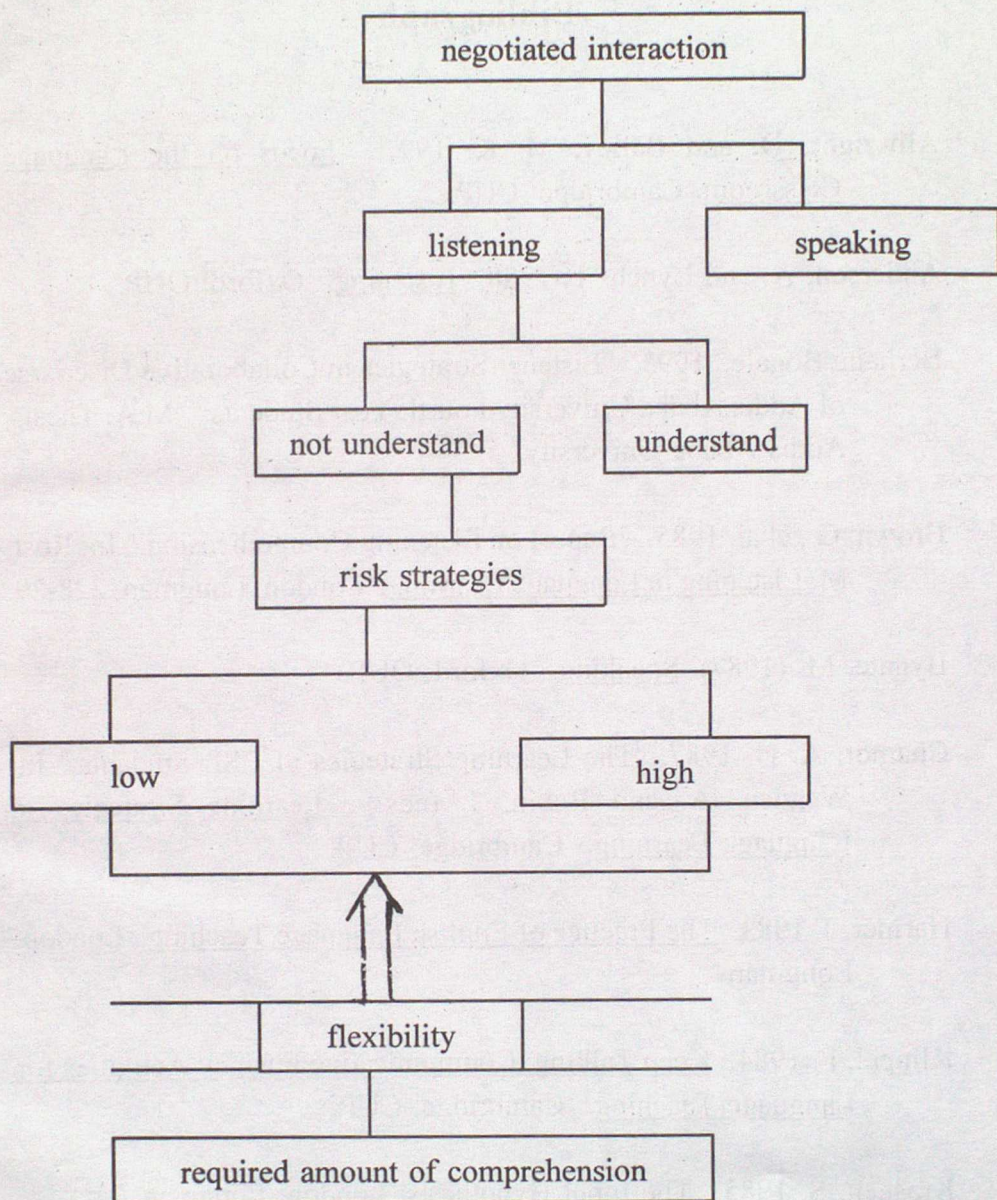
6. Conclusion

This paper began with the premise that negotiated interaction or negotiated communication plays an important part in the speed of second language learning and that communication needs co-operation which in turn involves taking risks. I have tried to show that the adoption of high or low risk strategies consistently/always is not advisable for different degrees of risk adoption may be required by students to carry out different activities. Moreover, both high-risk and low-risk strategies have their own disadvantages.

In this paper I have proposed formulae that a) indicate how high or low the risk a listener has taken is, and b) indicate to what extent high or low risk strategies are required by students to carry out an activity.

Then, I suggested that a) students be given opportunities to practise handling varieties of activities and b) direct/overt strategy training (as opposed to indirect/covert one) be introduced.

Finally, I would like to end my conclusion by presenting the following framework which summarizes what I have been trying to deal with in this paper.



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Appendix

Map Task

Instructions

"Right + the tour starts off from the hotel + and we go up as far as Progress Street + we turn into Progress Street + and then we take the first left and that's the first stop + St. Gabriel's Church)pause) we have about half an hour or so at the church + then we leave for the palace + that's down to Palace Road and then along (pause) after that we come out of the Palace and go down the road + we go to visit the National Monument (pause) right + about twenty minutes there for photographs + then the bus takes us on down that road and first left to the market + and we go into the market from round the back + that's the beach side (pause) you'll have time to do some shopping + then back to the bus and we go along Tewodros Street + and the next place we visit is the Nations Museum + you'll have plenty of time for a good look round and I'll be doing a guided walk for those who want it (pause) and then the last stop on the tour is the textile mill + that's along Tewodros Street and turn right (pause) we have about an hour's tour at the mill + then the bus brings us back to the hotel + left into Wingate Road + round the Corner + and we're back at the hotel (pause) and that's the city tour complete".

Guidelines for speaker

The intended problem points in the script are given below - they are underlined.

We turn into Progress Street - turn right into Progress Street.

St. Gabriel - NB not St. George.

The National Monument - Statue on Hearer's map.

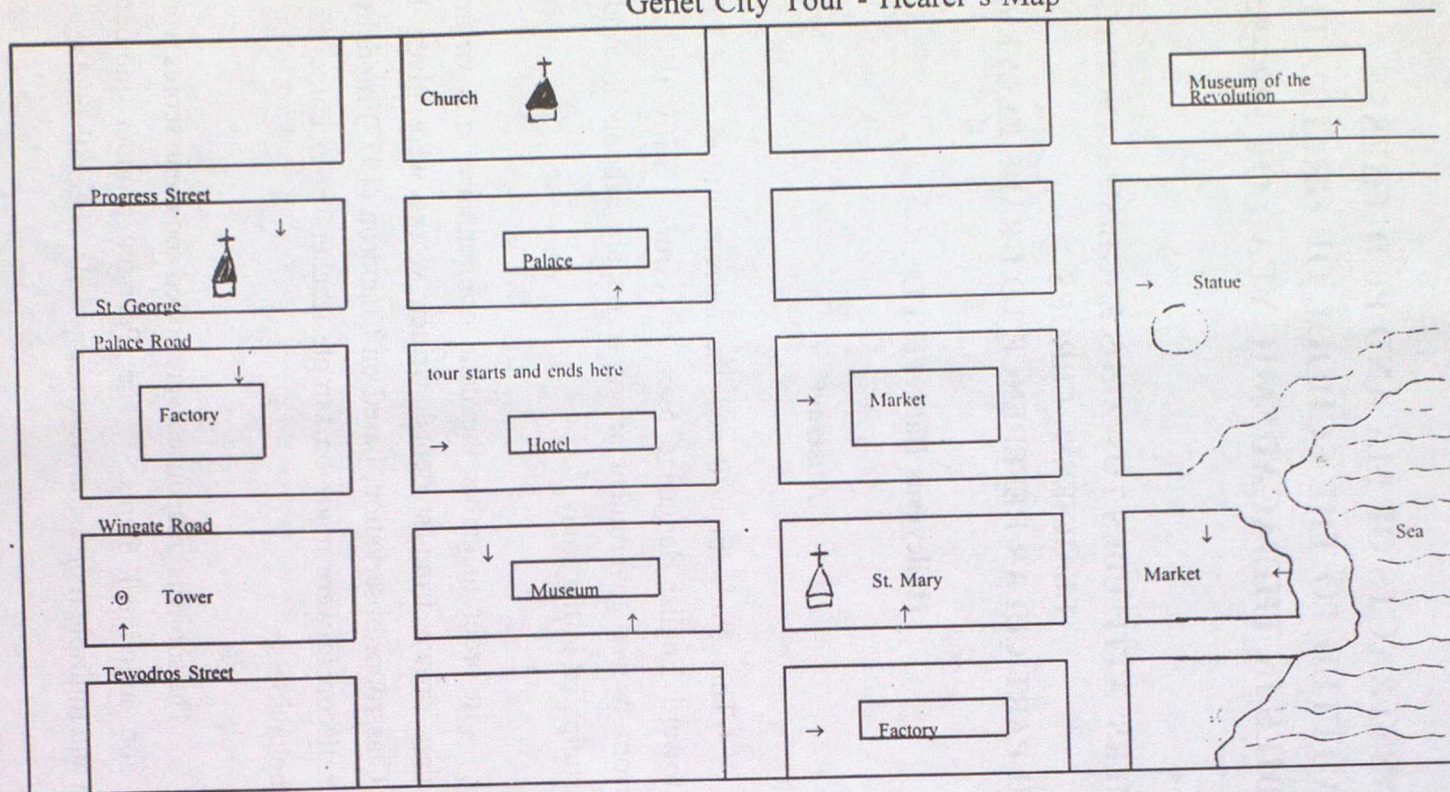
the market - the one the speaker means is the fish market.

the Nations Museum - museum on Hearer's map. Between Tewodros Street and Wingate Road.

the silk mill - factory at the bottom of the Hearer's map.

Task 1

Genet City Tour - Hearer's Map



Note:

When problems arise, you are free to stop and question the speaker - asking for clarification.