

Fifty ideas to improve listening

Introduction

The primary form of linguistic communication is speech and so listening is the most important receptive (and learning) skill for foreign language students. An ability to listen and interpret many shades of meaning from what is heard, is a fundamental communicative ability.

Teaching listening involves training in some 'enabling skills' — perception of sounds, stress, intonation patterns, accents, attitudes and so on, as well as 'practice' in various styles of listening comprehension.

Acoustics

Our ability to hear is essential to our ability to listen. The first set of ideas concerns the production, corruption, transmission and reception of spoken language.

1 Clear Voice: The teacher needs to use a clear voice with good articulation and sufficient projection to be heard by all the students. The teacher's voice whether speaking or reading aloud is the first and most important source of listening material for students. A good voice is produced from the diaphragm and not from the upper chest.

2 Cassette or CD Player: A good cassette or CD player for classroom use will have a forward-facing loudspeaker slightly higher than the students' ear level so that the sound goes directly to the students. If your loudspeaker is too low and the students are sitting in rows, their bodies and the furniture will block the sound. If your player's loudspeaker points vertically upwards, the sound will be reflected off the ceiling and be distorted. Turn it, so it faces the students.

3 Distortion: The recording/playback heads of a cassette player get dirty in one month of normal use. This dirt distorts the sound of the cassette and makes listening more difficult. Clean the head every month using a cotton bud and de-natured alcohol. Distortion is also caused by the plastic case of CD and cassette players vibrating when played loudly. Put your hand on the case to reduce this vibration.

4 Outside Noise: Reduce the noise coming from outside the classroom by shutting the windows (or, in hot countries, turning off the air conditioning) while students are listening.

5 Inside Noise: The greatest source of noise which interferes with listening comes from the students themselves. Train them to keep quiet while listening by making sure that they have tasks which force them to listen carefully.

6 Closer to the cassette player: The 'hard' acoustics of many classrooms means that sound is reflected from hard walls, ceilings, floors and furniture. This can cause a great deal of distortion and makes listening to recordings very difficult. Ask the students to move closer to the player or use headphones when they are doing intensive listening.

7 Use the language laboratory: Earphones and headphones deliver undistorted sound directly to the ears. If you have access to a language laboratory, this provides ideal conditions for intensive listening. Don't spend all your language laboratory time doing structural drills. Use the time for intensive and extensive listening.

Organizing listening comprehension activities

As in reading comprehension, there should always be a 'purpose' in listening. In most cases, this will be some form of comprehension. You should establish regular 'procedures' for listening activities in which students will develop from general (gist) to specific comprehension through repeated listening.

8 Understanding the setting: After the first listening, students should be able to understand the setting of the recording — where the speakers are, how many speakers there are, the ages, roles, professions, moods of the speakers, etc., and what they are talking about. A good question is "*Are they standing or sitting?*" This encourages students to think about the setting so that they can go on to speculate about the content of what the speakers will say. This first listening allows the students to get accustomed to the voices.

9 Pre-teach difficult vocabulary? Teaching isolated and meaningless lists of words and phrases is probably not a good idea. Teachers may choose to introduce the setting before the students listen. This provides an opportunity to elicit or introduce and explain the sort of language we might hear in that setting. This language is listed on the board and students listen and mark what they actually heard.

10 Focused listening: Listening tasks give the students a reason for listening and focuses their attention. These listening tasks should be set before the students listen. We are practicing listening, not memory!

11 Graded listening tasks: We teach listening by building up comprehension from general understanding to identifying specific information. We can also grade the listening tasks from easy to more difficult by the form of questions we use. The simplest task is T/F (True/False) statements sometimes extended to T/F/DK (True/False/Don't Know). The next stages are Either/Or questions (Did the librarian ask for a book or a letter?) followed by Multiple Choice. Open questions (which start with What? When? Where? Who? How? Why?) are more difficult. Notice that the tasks become more difficult as we reduce the information given in the question.

*I keep six honest serving-men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who. [Rudyard Kipling]*

12 Sharing listening tasks: In large classes you will probably have different levels of competence. There is no reason why all the students need to work on the same task. Equally, if you have more than 6 questions, groups of students can be given questions 1-5, questions 6-10 and so on. After listening students share their answers.

13 Delaying the teacher's answer: When the teacher gives her answer to a question, the students stop thinking. After listening, let students share their answers but don't give your answers. Let the students listen again 'to check' their answers. This extra work is very valuable for students.

14 Keep the listening short!: Intensive listening requires intense concentration. We all know that students find it difficult to maintain this level of concentration for more than one or two minutes. If the recording is longer, split it into smaller sections.

15 After comprehension — analysis: After students have understood the gist and some important details of a recording, analyze it in more detail and investigate the way in which speakers have expressed the ideas. How much have they revealed their mood, their opinions and so on? Analyze the speed and style of speech, the use of hesitation, repetition, false starts, paraphrasing and so on.

Training listening skills

16 Early listening tasks: The basic rule is *grade the task, don't grade the text*. This means that, rather than oversimplifying the language of the listening text, it is better to simplify the task which students are set.

17 A great listening task: This a great listening task because of its simplicity and communicative reality. It comes from Unit 2 of *English Together*, so it is for young children who have just started to learn English. A group of children have arrived at Holiday House. They are collecting their room keys from the teacher. Students listen to the recording and write the room number beside each child's name.



Listen and write the number.

Name: Al
Room number: _____

Name: Emma
Room number: _____

Name: Beth
Room number: _____

Name: Joe
Room number: _____

Script

Teacher: Hello. What's your name?
Al: Al.
Teacher: Oh yes. You're Al. Al, your room is number nine.
Al: Number nine? Thank you!
Beth: I'm Beth! What's my room number?
Teacher: Beth ... Beth ... Yes, your room is number nine.
Oh, no it isn't. Sorry, it's six.
Beth: Six? Thank you!
Teacher: What's your name?
Emma: (quietly) Emma.
Teacher: Sorry?
Emma: (louder) Emma.
Teacher: Emma, your room is number eight.
Emma: Eight?
Teacher: Yes, number eight.
Here you are. (gives the key)
Emma: Thank you.
Teacher: And you're Joe?
Joe: Yes, I'm Joe.
Teacher: Your room number is seven.
Joe: Sorry?
Teacher: Number seven. (gives key)
Joe: (drops key) Sorry!
Teacher: (picks up key. gives key) Here you are.
Joe: Thank you.

Notice the natural repetition of children's names and room numbers within the script. Notice also the natural use of "Sorry?" to ask for repetition and "Here you are," when giving something to someone.

18 Listening to the teacher: Research has shown that students whose teachers speak only English in the classroom develop listening comprehension skills much faster than others. Students who listen to their teachers reading stories become better listeners and better readers! Teachers who use dictation (see further ideas below) train their students to concentrate silently and listen intently. If you are going to give the students a short 'lecture', write some questions on the board before you start. These will give the students a reason for listening and will help them to structure their comprehension.

19 Read exercises aloud!: When giving students a set of questions to answer, read the questions aloud to the class. This not only allows them to hear the questions but also gives them time to think about the answers.

Perception / Pronunciation

Accurate perception of the sounds of the language is the first stage which leads to interpretation and comprehension. When listening to a foreign language, we need to know the sounds, rhythms, tunes and stress patterns of that language. All the pronunciation work which you do will benefit the students' listening ability.

20 Phonetics: The sounds of the English language can be written down using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) which is used in all Longman dictionaries. Use minimal pair perception exercises (ship/sheep, ten /then) to help students learn the sounds of English.

21 Weak forms: The most important difference between English and Italian is that in English the vowels in unstressed syllable are usually weakened. Italian students expect the vowels to be unchanged. Studying weak forms, like /kən/ and /kən/, is very important for students. (For a complete list of weak forms, see Joanne Kenworthy's *Teaching English Pronunciation* page 84.)

Interpretation

We listen to interpret meaning. Most of the exercises which students will do focus on listening comprehension, that is, interpreting meaning from spoken language.

22 Listening to words: In written language, there are convenient white spaces between words. Spoken language is a continuous stream of sound. Students should learn that we don't say 'coat hanger', we say 'coa-tanger'.

Give student texts like this so that they can listen and then mark the spaces between words.

23 Recognising and interpreting stress: In questions like

- “**DID** Peter come to repair the freezer?”
“Did **PETER** come to repair the freezer?”
“Did Peter come to **REPAIR** the freezer?”
“Did Peter come to repair the **FREEZER**?”

each has a different meaning, because of the stressed word in the question. Students need to listen, mark and interpret the use of stressed words in utterances.

24 Interpreting structural patterns: In normal conversation, English speakers do not always use the ‘standard’ forms of questions (Do?, Did?, What?, Where?) but their utterances (Really?) often have the pragmatic value as questions. These need to be recognised and interpreted.

25 Searching for specific information: Train students to listen for specific information by writing down the numbers they hear in sentences like: “*The retail price-index has risen by three points.*” “*Coldplay is at number seven in the charts.*” “*Sixty-one refugees from the war arrived by boat last night.*” The students will not be able to understand the sentences but they should be able to hear and identify the numbers.

26 Listening for discourse markers: When people are speaking extensively, they mark their discourse with phrases like ‘firstly’, ‘next’, ‘on the other hand’, ‘as I said before’, ‘at the end of the day’, ‘finally’. These discourse markers indicate the ‘paragraph’ divisions in what they are saying. These are very useful when students are learning to take notes.

Listening and producing

27 Listen and write: In standard dictation exercises, students have to write down everything they hear. This can be done first as an individual task. After completing the dictation, give students a few minutes to work together, exchanging ideas and making changes to their scripts. This sharing of ideas extends dictation from being a pure listening task to an even more valid language task.

28 Listen and correct: Students are given the text of the dictation which contains specific mistakes. They must listen, identify and correct those mistakes. This activity is particularly good for very careful, precise listening.

29 Listen and complete: Students are given the text of the dictation which contains gaps. They must listen and complete the text. This is particularly good for focussing on the spelling of particular words.

30 Listen for the 'silent letters': Many English words contain letters which are not sounded: *know, debt, knife, write, plumber, doubt, chemistry, psychology, thumb, knee, Wednesday, hour, salmon, hymn, leopard, receipt, often, sword, fasten*, etc. Students write the words, (probably given in a contextualising sentence) or, if the words are given in a list, they write or choose the 'silent' letters.

31 Listen and punctuate: Students are given a text, such as the one below. The text is dictated (or a recording played) and students add punctuation where necessary.

are these toms shoes

no theyre black toms are brown

wheres tom

he isnt here today hes at his grandfathers house i think

32 Listen and put in order: Students are given a series of sentences describing key events in a story. They listen to the story and mark the sentences in chronological order. This and the following task, exploit longer texts than would normally be used for dictation.

33 Listen and take notes: Students hear a text which heavy in information containing dates, dimensions, numbers, etc. Students take notes (particularly of key information) and then, perhaps working in groups, try to reproduce the text.

34 Listen and draw: At the simplest level, this involves drawing a picture from a description. It can also involve following a route on a map or marking the rooms on the plan of a house. Students can listen to a story and link words or phrases to make a 'word map' of the story (an introduction to note-taking). At higher levels, listen and draw can involve listening to a technical description and draw a diagram.

35 Radio aerobics: Use a good musical background and an instructor's voice for an enjoyable and athletic listening activity!

36 Listen, repeat and record: Listen and repeat is not only a good pronunciation activity, it gives important listening practice. Most students have cassette recorders at home so why not ask them to listen, repeat and record dialogues from the textbook. Listen and repeat activities can also be used with poetry readings or recording of people with different accents. It is all valuable listening!

37 Listen and imagine: Using the power of the imagination to create pictures is a great way to help students to learn and remember. Students can listen to the soundtrack of video and imagine the pictures they will see. They can listen to descriptions from novels and imagine the scene.

38 Listen and sing!: Today EFL songs are very good but you can also use karaoke versions of popular English songs. This activity will help both comprehension and production and will also help students to listen to sounds.

39 Listen and read: Many graded readers (such as Penguin Readers) have dramatised recordings of the full text. These can be used (with books closed) for extensive listening or, they can be used (with books open) for 'finger reading'. This means that students listen and follow the text with their fingers. 'Finger reading' benefits both listening and (perhaps surprisingly) reading speed.

Challenges is a new series for Junior High Schools by Michael Harris and David Mower. The series has a very strong listening syllabus which combines *Everyday Listening*, *Listening for Gist*, *Listening for Specific Information*, *Careful Listening*, *Listening for pronunciation*, *Listening to check your answers*.

40 Everyday listening: These are authentic listening texts associated with everyday locations, situations or activities. These include listening to directions, announcements, weather forecasts, airport information, tourist guides, automatic telephone messages. These recordings are used for *authentic tasks*, that is for the same purposes as you need to listen in real life.

41 Listening for gist: These tasks focus on general understanding rather than specific information. A lot of listening in everyday life involves listening for gist.



42 Listening for specific information: In these tasks, students are prompted by a form or chart to focus on specific information within the text. This is *selective listening*, where the listener ignores a lot of information to focus on the information you need. An example would be a national weather forecast which describes many different areas. The listener concentrates only on the information relevant to the local area.

43 Careful listening: These tasks would include all those described in 27 -29 and listening for pronunciation below.

44 Listening for pronunciation: These listening tasks focus on the sounds we hear. They are useful for pronunciation, listening to different accents, listening for spelling, and listening for stress and intonation.

45 Listening to check your answers: After students have completed a quiz or written exercise, they listen to a recording to check their answers. This is 'easy' listening because the students are already familiar with the language, but it is valuable because the students are highly motivated to listen carefully.

46 Listening to environmental sounds: We understand our 'aural environment' by identifying the noises of all the machines, weather, animals, birds, insects, music, chatter and activities which surround us. We use this non-linguistic aural information to add meaning to the language we hear. The aural environment is an important part of cross cultural learning.

47 Listening in noisy environments: In the real world, we frequently have to 'filter out' a lot of environmental noise in order to concentrate on language and meaning. Teachers can try using music, traffic noise, aircraft noise, etc. as 'distracters' during listening activities. These noises will make listening more difficult, but they are a natural part of listening in many everyday situations.

48 Listening to portraits: Men usually have deeper voices than women, children's voices change as they grow into adolescence, people's voices change when they gain weight, grow old or become ill. An interesting task is to listen to a dialogue and then choose 'photographs' of the voices they hear. This is not an exact skill, but, it is something which we all do in everyday life.



49 Listen to the emotions: We use our voices to express emotions in ways which are specific to our culture. Students need to be able to distinguish between anger, enthusiasm, fear, ironic humour, sarcasm, excitement, fear, weariness, surprise, shock, satisfaction, relief, lack of interest etc. These emotions may be communicated simply by the tone of voice and not through the actual language used.

50 Listening to accents: Native speakers can usually recognise many regional accents from their own country and can recognise many foreign accents. For example, most native speakers of southern British English can recognise Scottish, Welsh, Irish, South West British, Midland British, Northern British, Australian, Indian, South African and two different American accents (from Northern States and Southern States). Those who have travelled or had contact with other cultures can identify Spanish, French, Italian, German, Swedish, Arabic, Russian and Chinese speakers of English.

Recognising accents is much more difficult in a foreign language. How many accents can your students recognise when listening to English? If you 'know' an accent, it is much easier to interpret the different sounds you hear.