

Unit Five

Listening

Listening

Key Issues to Remember

1. Listening is often considered to be a passive and receptive skill but **good listeners are almost always active listeners**; this means they are not simply passively receiving information but that they are actively engaged with the listening material. Good listeners form hypotheses, have expectations and are constantly seeking answers from the material.
2. As with reading, scientists have created **both top-down and bottom-up models** of how listening is processed by the brain. In the top-down approach we begin with the large pieces of information in context and work our way down to word-by word meaning. With bottom-up processing, the brain hears and understands individual words first, then builds them into larger meaningful chunks.
3. Listening is not actually one skill but **several skills**. We often refer to the distinction between **global listening** for example (the ability to understand general meaning), **and local listening** (the ability to hear key words or details). Teachers need to remember that activities should be clearly focused on improving a particular listening sub-skill or difficulty.
4. Students learning to listen in a foreign language face a **variety of difficulties**. Six of the most commonly mentioned by students are listed below:
 - Trouble with fast, **natural speech**
 - Difficulty of keeping up and **predicting** or thinking ahead
 - Lack of sufficient **vocabulary**
 - **Stress and intonation** patterns
 - **Tiring**, difficult to focus, particularly on exams
 - Inability to **distinguish between different speakers** or background noise
5. As with any other skill, the improvement of listening requires **learner self-awareness**. Students should be given the opportunity to analyze their own strengths and weaknesses as listeners and instructors need to make an effort to provide activities that can assist all learners.
6. Teachers should remember that generally *they* are the **primary source of listening material** for students, particularly in EFL courses where students hear their own language outside of class. This can cause difficulties where students learn to hear speech and intonation patterns well, but only from one source. Because of this, teachers should make an effort to get as many **other voices** into the classroom as possible.
7. **Exams**, particularly listening exams, are stressful because they are **timed, require high levels of concentration, and generally students only get one attempt**. This type of atmosphere requires practice and teachers should

occasionally attempt to replicate some elements of exam situations in their listening activities in the classroom to help prepare students for future exams.

8. Generally listening materials should be as authentic as possible and even low-level students can benefit from occasional exposure to authentic listening materials. **Authentic materials are those not created for EFL/ESL classes** but borrowed from the outside world. Songs, natural conversations, radio and TV broadcasts, etc. are examples authentic listening materials. Teachers sometimes make the mistake of believing that working with this type of material for level students can not be beneficial since they can't catch every word. In reality however, just exposing students to authentic material, even without total comprehension, can have long term benefits for their learning.
9. Writing sentences as they occur in **natural speech** can help students see and hear **native-like patterns of stress and intonation**. Compare the following two sentences as an example.
 1. Are you going to buy an apple?
 2. *Are ya gonna buy a napple?*

The second sentence represents natural intonation and having students practice and mimic this can help with both listening and speaking.

Listening: Activities and Approaches in the Classroom

1. Using songs and music in the classroom can work for all levels and it has a number of benefits in terms of language learning.

There are three main reasons why teachers should make use of song in the classroom. The first is that most everyone can recall certain lines of songs that they listened years ago. Why is this? It seems that our brains are especially attuned to recall speech in the form of song. Secondly, songs are fun. Songs can bring an entertaining and lively atmosphere to the classroom and help to relax students and lower their anxiety. This helps to create a positive learning environment in the class. Lastly, by varying the presentation format, teachers can effectively use songs with a multilevel class.

Here is a typical and effective format to follow for using music in an EFL class.

Choose: Choosing the correct material is important. Songs selected for class need to be both reasonably comprehensible and interesting for the students. Try to find material that is currently popular and appealing with your group of students.

Preview: Once you have selected the material, preview it to your class before you listen. Tell them who the artist is, what the song is called, and any particular meaning that the song may have. This will help students to listen actively and enthusiastically.

Pre-Listen: Allow the students at least one opportunity to relax and listen to the music without asking them to complete any tasks. Repeat this step if time allows.

Intensive-Listen: Here the teacher should choose one particular verse of the song and ask students to copy down the exact words to that verse. The teacher will need to

reply this verse multiple times but this task will challenge even the most advanced students in your class.

Cloze-Listen: Hand out the lyrics to the song with certain words, groups of words or lines missing and ask the students to fill in what they hear. This will allow lower level students the opportunity to contribute and will maintain the focused listening of the entire class.

Post-Listen: After you have completed all the listening exercises associated with the song, the student should be given some questions or an opportunity to discuss their interpretation of the meaning of the song. This completes the activity nicely and allows for analysis and critical thinking.

2. Variety is good; here is a list of potential listening activities to engage your students.

Back to back: Ask students to carry on a conversation or pass information to one another while sitting back to back so they can not see body language and facial expressions. This helps with the difficulties presented with talking on the telephone.

Numbers and Dates: Students often have trouble hearing and reproducing numbers, particularly large numbers. Dictate a quick series of numbers (large numbers, decimals, and fractions for advanced students) and ask students to write what they hear.

Rhyming: The teacher reads a series of rhymed words (three or four each for example *tree, three, see, me*) and students write them in the correct order.

Guessing Definitions: Read definitions of words to your students and ask them to listen and guess the word that that you are defining/

Intonation and Stress: Read a conversation or short passage in an exaggerated and theatrical way. Give your students the text to what you are reading and ask them to mark changes in stress or intonation in your speech. Ask students to reproduce what they have heard afterwards.

Paraphrasing/Translating: Ask your students to rewrite the listening text either in other words or in another language.

Summarizing: Students listen to a brief passage and then summarize the contents.

Songs: Teachers may either bring recorded material into the class or encourage students to learn and sing a song together as a group.

Cloze: Provide the text of a listening activity with certain key words or lines missing. Listeners must fill-in the missing information.

Film/Theater/Video: If resources are available, provide video or film for your students to watch, analyze and discuss.

Dictation: Either with recorded material or the teachers voice, ask students to write down the exact words of a listening task.

Telephone: Form your students into two lines or rows and whisper a sentence to the end of each of the lines. Students should continue whispering the repeated sentence to one another down the lines. Ask students at the other end to say or write what they heard. It will likely no be the same!

Detecting mistakes: Tell a story that students know well and are familiar with but deliberately change some of the facts in the story. Listeners should try to identify the mistakes.

Obeying instructions: The teacher should give clear instructions (stand up, sit down, draw ...) for the students to follow in class.

Note taking: Give or present a lecture on a fixed topic in a structured and orderly way and ask student to take notes on the lecture.

3. Multitasking is a good way to engage the more advanced students in a mixed level class.

Teachers of large multilevel classes often struggle with how to engage and challenge the advanced students while at the same time teaching to rest of the class. Multitasking is one possible solution to this problem.

Multi-tasking with language is something that most native speakers do well but it often is a challenge for even advanced non-native speakers.

Multitasking refers to the ability to do two or more tasks at one time. For example, most people can have a conversation with a friend in a café and also hear some of what is being said at a table behind them simultaneously in their native language. They might even be reading the menu too!

There are a variety of ways to practice this in the classroom but keep in mind that the activities need to be presented in a way that does not distract the lower level students who will only be focused on a single task.

One idea is to handout a brief reading passage that is to be completed at the same time as a listening activity. For example, if an instructor is working with a song in class, they might handout a story or anecdote about the band to some advanced students and ask them to read it during the class.

Another idea is to group your advanced student together for the listening activity and then approach them for a quiet conversation during the listening. They will be confused at first, but with repetition students will begin to see the value of multi-tasking activities of this nature.

4. Focused and intensive listening activities are valuable but they are also tiring and stressful; plan your lessons accordingly.

There is a good chance that students will need to take listening exams at some point and practicing the stressful and intensive atmosphere of a listening exam in your class is an excellent way to help students prepare and to learn about their own strengths and weaknesses.

Teachers will find however, that after activities like this their students will be drained and the classroom atmosphere may be generally tired and depressed. This is the time when good lesson planning is important. Particularly long, intensive, or difficult listening activities need to be followed by something physically active and entertaining for students. This may be a favorite game of the class or a competitive speaking activity of some kind but the teacher will need to do something to change the mood in the classroom from dull and depressed back to excited and engaged.

Different people (students and teachers) react differently to the task of reading aloud in class. It can be useful and effective however, so for teachers who are considering it, here are a few things they should remember.

- One student reading and 49 listening is not a good use of class time because the one reading is nervous and the 49 listening are not really listening.
- Divide large classes into groups for reading aloud activities.
- Encourage the “one book open” method of reading aloud; this means that students who are not reading aloud will be more likely to listen attentively and less likely to interrupt the reader with corrections.
- Don’t ask students to read something they are unfamiliar with. Always allow time for them to prepare and familiarize themselves with the material first.
- If you want to correct students on their pronunciation, do it after they have finished the reading.
- Passive learners need a listening option so try to design activities that do not require everyone to read aloud.

4. Students often come to teachers with the question of how to improve their listening ability. Here are some solid answers that you can give them.

- Listening closely to your classmates will help you improve your listening. Many classmates have pronunciation problems so if you can understand them then you will certainly be able to understand native speakers easily.
- Listen carefully to your favorite songs in English and try to write down the words. If you have any problems then check the lyrics online or bring them to me and I will help.
- Before you do a listening activity in class, you should make guesses and predictions about what you will hear. This will help you increase your listening speed.
- Watch DVD’s in English with the sub-titles *on*! Sub-titles do not hurt your listening ability; you will still be listening while reading the sub-titles will help you fill in the parts that you miss.

- The radio is one of the greatest listening challenges available because you do not have the benefit of body language and facial expressions on the radio. Use the radio to practice your global listening skills; this works particularly well when trying to understand the content of a news broadcast on the radio.
- You need to be responsible for your own listening. Try to identify your own strengths and weaknesses as a listener and work on ways to improve.

Handouts for Class

How do you feel about reading?

Instructions: Complete the following survey by putting a check (✓) in the appropriate box to give your opinion about each question.

	Topics	Very True	True	Not Sure	False	Very False
1	Reading is the most interesting part of studying a foreign language.					
2	Reading in class is better than reading at home on my own.					
3	Good readers are usually bad at other subjects like math.					
4	Being able to read a foreign language well is more important than being able to speak well.					
5	Having good grammar knowledge is very important to being a good reader.					
6	Having a large vocabulary is the most important part of being a good reader.					
7	Teachers can't help much with reading; it is mostly the job of the students.					
8	When I read I often get upset and stop because I can't understand.					
9	When I read out loud in class I don't really learn anything.					
10	When we practice reading in class the teacher should give a time limit so we learn to read faster.					

Further Resources

For Students

1. Song Lyrics

<http://www.lyrics.com/>

Students who are interested in finding the lyrics to their favorite songs have thousands and thousands to choose from here. This is not an audio site; it only provides the words to the songs.

2. Randall's ESL

<http://www.esl-lab.com/>

This is an audio site that requires Real Player Audio but provides a long series of excellent listening activities including pre and post listening questions and short listening quizzes for ESL students.

3. Free MP3 Books

<http://www.free-books.org>

Students who would like to download the entire text of famous books as MP3 files can do it here for free. This is a great and easy to use site that has a wide selection of both popular and literary books.

4. Ohio ESL

<http://www.ohiou.edu/esl/english/listening.html#Activities>

Again Ohio ESL is a comprehensive resource for ESL listening material including links to a large number of other sites.

5. The History Channel – Great Speeches

<http://www.historychannel.com/speeches/archive1.html>

This is a comprehensive website but under the link to “speeches” you can find Real Audio files and texts to some of the most famous speeches in recent history.

6. NPR

<http://www.npr.org/>

NPR is one of the best comprehensive news sites from America. It provides Streaming Broadcasts (you can listen to the radio on your computer) as well as short audio files summarizing each day's news events.

7. ESL Movie Guide

<http://www.eslnotes.com/index.html>

A site that gives long and detailed summaries of all of the slang and idioms used in popular movies; it is a wonderful resource for ESL students.