



## WHY DO WE LISTEN?

While a person's body language can give us a good idea of how they are feeling and their attitude towards themselves and others, listening is the most effective way we can obtain comprehensive information about the opinions, attitudes and ideas of the people we live, work and socialise with. We listen to understand other people, we listen to gain information, we listen for pleasure and we listen to confirm that our message has been understood properly.

## TYPES OF LISTENING

There are two main types of listening, both of which need to be addressed in the classroom.

- Non-reciprocal listening is one way, as in listening to a radio broadcast, a public announcement, or to a university lecture. While we may frame mental responses, we do not actually produce one. This form of listening does not allow the listener to ask for clarification. If the listener loses the thread, there is no backtracking. This form of speaking tends to be slower, clearer and more formal.
- Reciprocal listening characterizes normal day-to-day which we are expected to make spontaneous and relevant responses to the messages we have just received. Here we are able to indicate a lack of understanding and ask for enlightenment if we are unsure of the content of the message. This format uses natural speech delivered at a relatively rapid pace and may include colloquialisms and slang.

Although reciprocal listening is more common in daily life than non-reciprocal, students do need to be able to decipher non-reciprocal listening in order to be fully functional in English. They may need to understand a public announcement in order to know if the trains are running late, or if they should join the third queue on the left, or if there is a traffic jam on the route they are driving. Many students will also go on to study at an English university and will need to process large chunks of information without being able to ask for clarification along the way.

If it is desirable to guide our students with non-reciprocal listening, it is essential to help them practice reciprocal listening in which they must discern the speaker's meaning amid a plethora of distractions such as the speaker's accent, broken sentences, idioms, fillers, sudden backtracking, and background noise.

Not only must the student learn to process the meaning of the message, but he/she must also be given practice in creating spontaneous and appropriate responses.

## DIFFICULTIES FACED BY EFL LEARNERS

- Our students may struggle with the strange sounds especially given the range of *different native English accents*. If their ears are more tuned to a BBC accent, they may be totally baffled by the pronunciation of a New Yorker.
- A *rapid speed of delivery* can also be an impediment to a student's understanding. If this is coupled with a *high level of vocabulary*, and a *lack of familiarity with the topic*, even the most proficient student will struggle to keep pace with the speaker.
- Students may have trouble understanding *what is implied* in speech, especially when irony or sarcasm is employed and the words have a nuance that is different from their literal meaning.
- Native speakers use *colloquialisms and idiomatic speech* quite liberally. These can present an obstacle to foreign learners who often have no understanding of the meaning behind what is being said. Some colloquialisms evoke an image that can be deduced quite easily, for example "*he's so full of himself*", while others can leave a foreign speaker totally baffled. What, for example, is the poor student to make of the phrase "*fly by the seat of his pants*."?
- English is a language of *elisions*. Native speakers are familiar with repeated chunks of language, so when speaker and listener are both familiar with the topic, the speaker may leave out essential words that are understood by the listener. "Success?" we might say to a colleague returning from a sales pitch.
- Other features of spoken English which may prove difficult for foreigner listeners are *reductions* ("I'd die" sounds like "I die"), *words that sound the same* ("a new display" can sound like "a nud-ist play") and our tendency to squash *unstressed syllables* together making them quite indistinct (*ishudntve been suchn idiot* is the spoken form of *I shouldn't have been such an idiot*).

## HELPING STUDENTS WITH LISTENING IN THE CLASSROOM

As native speakers, we often tune out bits of spoken information we don't choose to hear. Lower level EFL students don't have the luxury of making such choices. Often the verbal input is so incomprehensible that they are forced to withdraw from the communicative interchange entirely. This causes great frustration and embarrassment.

As teachers, we can help our students by ensuring that the language we use is comprehensible to them. A difficulty level where the students get the gist, but not every word is probably ideal. We need to challenge their listening skills without leaving them totally in the dark. In addition, we can teach our students techniques to help them process the conventions of spoken language. To make sense of what we hear, we need to understand when and why certain conventions are being enacted. "I'm sorry" doesn't always mean that the speaker is apologising. We also need to understand what attitude or emotion is being conveying by the speaker's use of stress and intonation. We need to draw on our existing knowledge to predict what is usually said in given situations. We need a good understanding of idiomatic speech, and we need to be able to infer meaning from context.

## DEVELOPING MACRO-SKILLS

In order to help students overcome the listening hurdles they face in real-life English communication, the teacher needs to implement special exercises in the classroom. In EFL teaching, two main types are commonly used; that is *pedagogical listening passages and authentic listening activities*.

## PEDAGOGICAL LISTENING PASSAGES

Most coursebooks have pedagogical listening passages specially created for the level of the students using the book. Although these passages simulate real-life communication, in actual fact they are artificially manipulated to contain specific items of vocabulary and grammar. The rate of delivery is usually slowed down and the speech is clear and well enunciated. There are few, if any, fillers such as umm and err, and the pace, unlike that in real-life speaking, is quite slow and even. Sentences are usually short and one speaker never interrupts another.

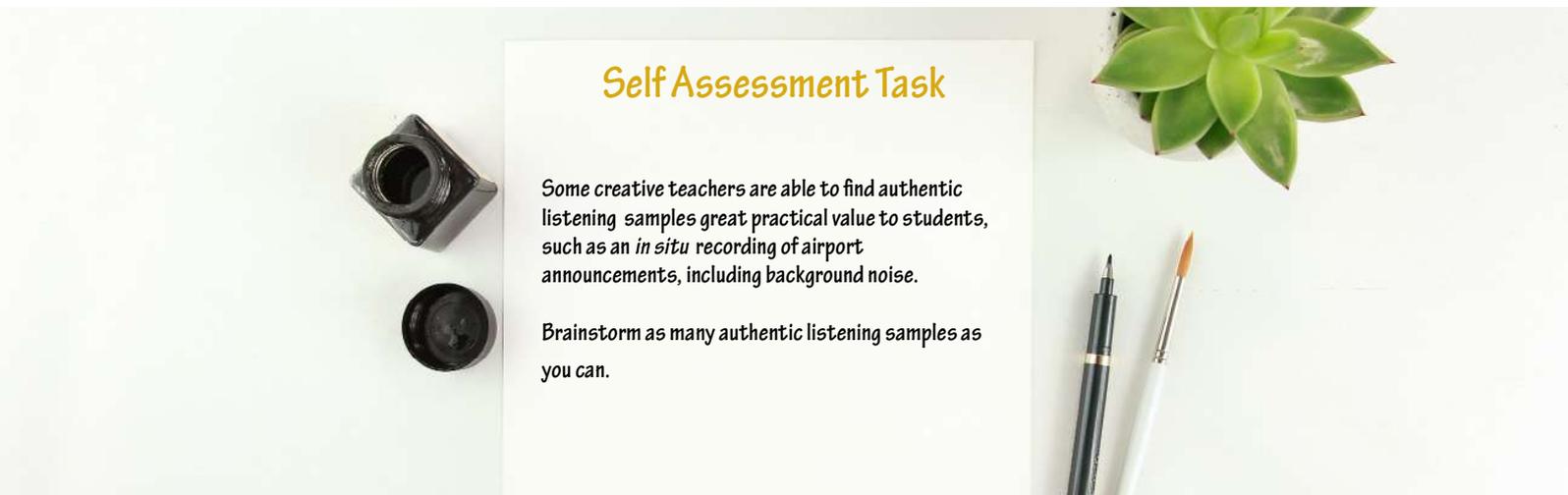
Although such adaptations can make comprehension much easier for the student, these listening passages can still create problems if the student is not familiar with the topic, the accents and the vocabulary. In addition, the student may find the sheer volume of words overwhelming.

To help the student overcome such problems, the listening passages in student coursebooks are usually accompanied by exercises designed to make the passage more accessible. They engage students firstly in the topic and make sure that it is familiar to them, and secondly in tasks that provide guidelines for understanding both the general meaning, and the supporting details. Unfortunately these exercises are frequently formulaic and unimaginative, and teachers need to substitute them with supplementary activities more appealing to their particular students.

## AUTHENTIC LISTENING PASSAGES

As even lower level students will eventually need to come to grips with natural language that has not been educationally simplified, it is helpful for the teacher to include some authentic passages in listening lessons.

- The radio is a good source of authentic material. Teachers can record the headline news or a brief weather report. Radio ads make a good base for listening lessons, as do magazine programmes, such as talks on healthy eating. The teacher can make even a difficult passage more accessible for students by grading the task. For example in a news broadcast, beginner students could be asked to write down all the famous names they hear.
- Excerpts from recorded novels, stories, or poetry anthologies can be used with appropriate tasks, provided these are not too long. If the teacher gives a context, even one paragraph from a novel can be engaging and evocative.

A top-down view of a desk with a white background. On the left is a black inkwell with its lid off. In the center is a white card with text. On the right is a small green succulent in a white pot, and two pens (one black, one white) with an orange eraser.

### Self Assessment Task

Some creative teachers are able to find authentic listening samples great practical value to students, such as an *in situ* recording of airport announcements, including background noise.

Brainstorm as many authentic listening samples as you can.

## DESIGNING AND TEACHING AN ORIGINAL LISTENING EXERCISE

Teachers working without coursebooks or with coursebooks with inappropriate listening activities will have to design and record their own listening passages. These passages may be pre-scripted so as to be appropriate for the level of the particular students, or they may be a genuine conversation between native English speakers. Either way, teachers will have to design a number of accompanying tasks before they present the passage to their students. The following general guidelines may be helpful in considering the nature of the tasks.

1. **ENGAGE** interest in the topic. If students begin the activity disinterested, they will give up as soon as they hit the first hurdle. Visual aids, brainstorming and group discussions of opinions can help get the students involved. Establish what they already know about the topic and elicit vocabulary they would expect to hear in a passage on this topic.
2. **PRE-TEACH LEXIS**. If there are any words or phrases that will hinder understanding of the gist of the message, pre-teach them to the students.
3. **FOREWARN** the students as to the accents they are likely to hear. If there are crucial words that have a heavy regional pronunciation, it helps to model these for the students before they listen. If these words are not crucial for understanding the main idea, advise students. The students should also be aware of the purpose of the discourse, where the discourse takes place, and who the speakers are.
4. **MOTIVATE** students to listen by giving them something specific to listen for. This is the aural equivalent of scanning. Instead of being bogged down by the volume of words coming their way, they focus instead on finding out specific pieces of information that relate to the main idea.
5. **STRUCTURE THE ACTIVITY**. There should always be at least two listenings:
  - a. The first listening should always be accompanied by a fairly simple task for the students to perform. This task should be based on gist questions rather than on specific facts. Students will need a bit of time to get attuned to the personal idiosyncrasies of the speaker, so it is best not to overload them with interpretative tasks immediately.
  - b. The second listening should be accompanied by comprehension questions or tasks that test students' understanding of the passage. These tasks can be in the form of questions, checking the right answer in a box, true or false choices, or identifying a matching picture. If the task requires answers to questions, these should be short. It is not fair to overburden students with trying to write and listen at the same time. It is also helpful if the students are allowed to read the questions before they start listening as they may find it hard to focus on reading the question and listening for the answer at the same time.
  - c. Very often, even a double listening is not enough to make the passage comprehensible to the students. We may have to *play the tape a few times* before they are able to perform the accompanying tasks.
  - d. If they are really struggling to find even the passage, it often helps to break up the passage by pausing frequently and let the students discuss what they heard with a partner. Although in real life, we can't ask the speaker to pause frequently so we can catch up, this does provide an interim solution to the problem students have with being overwhelmed by strange information.
  - e. Students should always be allowed to check their answers to the tasks with each other before the teacher elicits feedback.

f. When the tasks have been completed and the feedback dealt with, it is sometimes quite instructive to let the students see a *text of the listening*. This can clear up any lingering feelings of frustration at confusing parts of the passage.

6. **POST-LISTENING ACTIVITY.** Give students a chance to personalise what they have heard by initiating a pair or group activity based on issues raised in the listening. This could take the form of an opinion sharing discussion or a role-play. Often the listening activity can be a prelude to a reading or writing activity as well.

## DEVELOPING MICRO-SKILLS

In addition to developing macro-skills, teachers can improve their students' listening skills by working with small, problematic segments of listening. Some examples of these are:

1. **MINIMAL PAIRS.** All cultures have certain "deaf spots." These are sounds that they cannot differentiate from very similar sounds. Watch and wish, for example, or sue and zoo. Before students can even begin to try and pronounce these, they need to be able to hear the differences. By playing or saying one or the other and having the students identify which sound it is, the teacher can provide a valuable exercise in overcoming the limitations of the deaf spot.

2. **CONTRACTIONS.** Similar listening activities can help students identify contractions such as *I wouldn't've* from a general jumble of sound. By training the ear to pick these out, the teacher can help the student deal with such contractions in real-life listening.

3. **QUICK QUESTIONS.** One of the problems students have with real-life communication in English is formulating a rapid response to input from native speakers. The teacher can help develop this skill by unexpectedly asking simple questions that require reply. Questions such as "What's the date? What time is it? What's the capital of China?" don't require a lot of thought on the part of the student, but do require a quick processing of what they are being asked, and an equally quick response. This practice is invaluable if it is done regularly as part of revision, perhaps at the beginning or the end of a class.



### Self Assessment Task

Minimal pairs, where the sound of a word is the same but for a single phoneme, can present significant problems for those learning English as a foreign language.

Think of as many as you can, for example:

night – might

# DICTATIONS

A traditional dictation activity is when the teacher reads aloud and the students write down verbatim what they hear. This exercise has never been very popular with students and is not very highly regarded in communicative language teaching. It can, however, be made more useful and enjoyable if we vary the type of dictation. Here are some examples:

## KEYWORD DICTATION

Teachers find a story and underline the key words. They read these words aloud and the students must write them down. Pairs or groups must then collaborate to create their own story using these keywords.

## BAD COLD DICTATION

The teacher pretends to have a bad cold and every so often sneezes instead of saying a word. The students have to write down the story and when they have finished they must try and fill in the "sneezed over" words.

## RUNNING DICTATION

Students are divided into pairs. One is a runner and one is a writer. The teacher should stick a text or a puzzle on the classroom wall. The runner must run to the text, memorise as much as he/she can, then run back and dictate it to the writer. To make it more challenging, the sentences can be jumbled and the pair has to try and restore it to a meaningful whole once the puzzle or story has been transcribed correctly.

## DICTOGLOSS

This can be done with a rhyme, a story or the lyrics of a song. The teacher should tell the students that she is only going to read or sing it at ordinary speaking/singing speed. For a shorter text, the teacher should read/sing only once but for a longer one she may need to repeat it. The students should write down key words. Afterwards, the teacher should give the students a few minutes to write down as much as they can remember of the story/song. Then they should compare what they have with a partner or group and see if they can work together to reconstruct the whole. The aim is to try and recreate the original as closely as possible.

If this is done with a song, the students will be able to sing along if it is played again after they have completed the dictation activity. Provided it is a catchy tune, most young students love this.

## DRAWING DICTATION

The teacher describes a scene or a picture and the students draw it. In a more advanced class, one member of each group of students can describe the scene and the other students in the group do the drawing. In this case each group can be given a similar but slightly different picture to draw, and at the end the originals are put on display and the students must choose which one was described to them.

## PHYSICAL RESPONSE DICTATION

The teacher prepares a script and then reads it out slowly line-by-line. Students must perform the actions indicated or suggested by the information. For example, the teacher reads out:

*Walk down the street  
It's raining  
Go inside a shoe shop  
Pick up some shoes  
Sit down  
Try them on  
They are too small  
Try on another pair  
Walk up and down in them  
Look in the mirror*

Look sideways  
Now the other side  
You like them  
Walk to the till  
Take out your money  
You don't have enough .....

As she says each line, the students should perform the action in the most creative and dramatic way possible. The better the teacher models this activity, the better the results will be.

## Suggestions for Further Listening Activities

1. In three groups, students listen to one of three different accounts of a single event (witness reports, phone conversations arranging a meeting etc.) By comparing notes, they have to work out the truth. This is called "jigsaw listening." (intermediate/advanced)
2. Students listen to a phone message being given. They have to record a message on a message pad. (elementary).
3. Students hear sound effects. They use them to construct a story of what actually happened. (elementary)
4. Students listen to a narrative and have to plot the characters' movements on a map. (elementary/upper intermediate)
5. Students listen to a news broadcast and compare it with a newspaper report. What are the differences? (upper intermediate/advanced)
6. Students listen to three poems being read by three different people. They have to choose a mood/colour for each and say which they like best. (intermediate/advanced)
7. Students listen to people describing their occupations. They have to decide what the people look like and what the occupations are. (intermediate/upper intermediate)
8. Students listen to a story. They have to put some pictures in the correct order to match the story. (elementary/intermediate)
9. Students listen to a recorded message of films, times and decide which film they are going to see and when they will see it.(elementary/intermediate)
10. Print out the lyrics from a song in which the words are clearly audible. Blank out some of the words. Play the song and ask the students to fill in the missing words. At lower levels provide the words in random order at the bottom of the song sheet. (all levels)
11. Print out the lyrics from a popular song and make group of three. Cut up the sheet and scramble the order. Students listen to the words and assemble the lyric sheet in the correct order. (all levels)



# CERTIFICATE ASSESSMENT TASK - 4

## LISTENING

Describe in detail how you would design and teach a listening activity to an intermediate class, based on one of the authentic listening samples you came up with in the self-assessment task. Note any difficulties you anticipate.

Do not exceed 1500 words.