

Teaching the Language Skills

Language educators have long used the concepts of four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These skills are aspects of a unified system through which language operates. A knowledge of them is, therefore, necessary for interpreting or transmitting the language appropriately.

The four basic skills are related to each other by two parameters: the mode of communication: oral or written and the direction of communication: receiving or producing the message.

We may represent the relationships among the skills in the following chart:

	Oral	Written
Receptive	Listening	Reading
Productive	Speaking	Writing

Although these skills will be treated separately in this course, they are interdependent. Thus, one may listen and speak or write, or read and write, and so on.

Teaching the Listening Skill

Listening is the language skill that is used most frequently. It has been estimated that adults spend almost half their communication time listening, and students may receive as much as 90% of their in-school information through listening to teachers and to one another. Often, however, language learners do not recognize the level of effort that goes into developing listening ability.

Far from passively receiving and recording aural input, listeners actively involve themselves in the interpretation of what they hear, bringing their own background knowledge and linguistic knowledge to bear on the information contained in the aural text. Not all listening is the same; casual greetings, for example, require a different sort of listening capability than do academic lectures. Language learning requires intentional listening that employs strategies for identifying sounds and making meaning from them.

Listening involves a sender (a person, radio, television), a message, and a receiver (the listener). Listeners often must process messages as they come, even if they are still processing what they have just heard, without backtracking or looking ahead. In addition, listeners must cope with the sender's choice of vocabulary, structure, and rate of delivery. The complexity of the listening process is magnified in second language contexts, where the receiver also has incomplete control of the language.

Given the importance of listening in language learning and teaching, it is essential for language teachers to help their students become effective listeners. In the communicative approach to language teaching, this means integrating listening strategies and providing listening practice in authentic situations: those that learners are likely to encounter when they use the language outside the classroom.

1. Objectives and Techniques for Teaching Listening

Teachers want to produce students who, even if they do not have complete control of the grammar or an extensive lexicon, can fend for themselves in communication situations. In the case of listening, this means producing students who can use listening strategies to maximize their comprehension of aural input, identify relevant and non-relevant information, and tolerate less than word-by-word comprehension.

Focus: The Listening Process

To achieve this objective, teachers focus on the process of listening rather than on its product.

- They develop students' awareness of the listening process and listening strategies by asking students to think and talk about how they listen in their native language.
- They allow students to practice the full repertoire of listening strategies by using authentic listening tasks.
- They behave as authentic listeners by responding to student communication as a listener rather than as a teacher.
- When working with listening tasks in class, they show students the strategies that will work best for the listening purpose and the type of text. They explain how and why students should use the strategies.
- They have students practice listening strategies in class and ask them to practice outside of class in their listening assignments. They encourage students to be conscious of what they're doing while they complete listening tape assignments.
- They encourage students to evaluate their comprehension and their strategy use immediately after completing an assignment. They build comprehension checks into in-class and out-of-class listening assignments, and periodically review how and when to use particular strategies.
- They encourage the development of listening skills and the use of listening strategies by using the target language to conduct classroom activities: making announcements, assigning homework, describing the content and format of tests.
- They do not assume that students will transfer strategy use from one task to another. They explicitly mention how a particular strategy can be used in a different type of listening task or with another skill.

By raising students' awareness of listening as a skill that requires active engagement, and by explicitly teaching listening strategies, teachers help their students develop both the ability and the confidence to handle communication situations they may encounter beyond the classroom. In this way they give their students the foundation for communicative competence in the new language.

2. Listening for Meaning

To extract meaning from a listening text, students need to follow four basic steps:

- Figure out the purpose for listening.
- Activate background knowledge of the topic in order to predict or anticipate content and identify appropriate listening strategies.
- Attend to the parts of the listening input that are relevant to the identified purpose and ignore the rest. This selectivity enables students to focus on specific items in the input

and reduces the amount of information they have to hold in short-term memory in order to recognize it.

- Check comprehension while listening and when the listening task is over. Monitoring comprehension helps students detect inconsistencies and comprehension failures, directing them to use alternate strategies.

3. Developing Listening Activities

As teachers design listening tasks, they should keep in mind that complete recall of all the information in an aural text is an unrealistic expectation to which even native speakers are not usually held. Listening exercises that are meant to train should be success-oriented and build up students' confidence in their listening ability. To achieve this aim teachers should:

Construct the listening activity around a contextualized task.

Contextualized listening activities approximate real-life tasks and give the listener an idea of the type of information to expect and what to do with it in advance of the actual listening. A beginning level task would be locating places on a map or exchanging name and address information. At an intermediate level students could follow directions for assembling something or work in pairs to create a story to tell to the rest of the class.

Define the activity's instructional objective and type of response.

Each activity should have as its goal the improvement of one or more specific listening skills. A listening activity may have more than one goal or outcome, but the teacher should be careful not to overburden the attention of beginning or intermediate listeners.

Recognizing the goal(s) of listening comprehension in each listening situation will help students select appropriate listening strategies.

- Identification: Recognizing or discriminating specific aspects of the message, such as sounds, categories of words, morphological distinctions
- Orientation: Determining the major facts about a message, such as topic, text type, setting
- Main idea comprehension: Identifying the major ideas
- Detail comprehension: Identifying supporting details
- Replication: Reproducing the message orally or in writing

Check the level of difficulty of the listening text.

The factors listed below can help you judge the relative ease or difficulty of a listening text for a particular purpose and a particular group of students.

How is the information organized? Does the story line, narrative, or instruction conform to familiar expectations? Texts in which the events are presented in natural chronological order, which have an informative title, and which present the information following an obvious organization (main ideas first, details and examples second) are easier to follow.

How familiar are the students with the topic? Remember that misapplication of background knowledge due to cultural differences can create major comprehension difficulties.

Does the text contain redundancy? At the lower levels of proficiency, listeners may find short, simple messages easier to process, but students with higher proficiency benefit from the natural redundancy of the language.

Does the text involve multiple individuals and objects? Are they clearly differentiated? It is easier to understand a text with a doctor and a patient than one with two doctors, and it is even easier if they are of the opposite sex. In other words, the more marked the differences, the easier the comprehension.

Does the text offer visual support to aid in the interpretation of what the listeners hear? Visual aids such as maps, diagrams, pictures, or the images in a video help contextualize the listening input and provide clues to meaning.

Use pre-listening activities to prepare students for what they are going to hear or view.

The activities chosen during pre-listening may serve as preparation for listening in several ways. During pre-listening the teacher may :

- assess students' background knowledge of the topic and linguistic content of the text;
- provide students with the background knowledge necessary for their comprehension of the listening passage or activate the existing knowledge that the students possess;
- clarify any cultural information which may be necessary to comprehend the passage;
- make students aware of the type of text they will be listening to, the role they will play, and the purpose(s) for which they will be listening;
- provide opportunities for group or collaborative work and for background reading or class discussion activities .

Sample pre-listening activities:

- looking at pictures, maps, diagrams, or graphs
- reviewing vocabulary or grammatical structures
- reading something relevant
- constructing semantic webs (a graphic arrangement of concepts or words showing how they are related)
- predicting the content of the listening text
- going over the directions or instructions for the activity

Match while-listening activities to the instructional goal, the listening purpose, and students' proficiency level.

While-listening activities relate directly to the text, and students do them during or immediately after the time they are listening. Keep these points in mind when planning while-listening activities:

If students are to complete a written task during or immediately after listening, allow them to read through it before listening. Students need to devote all their attention to the listening task. Be sure they understand the instructions for the written task before listening begins so that they are not distracted by the need to figure out what to do.

Keep writing to a minimum during listening. Remember that the primary goal is comprehension, not production. Having to write while-listening may distract students from this primary goal. If a written response is to be given after listening, the task can be more demanding.

Organize activities so that they guide listeners through the text. Combine global activities such as getting the main idea, topic, and setting with selective listening activities that focus on details of content and form.

Use questions to focus students' attention on the elements of the text crucial to comprehension of the whole. Before the listening activity begins, have students review questions they will answer orally or in writing after listening. Listening for the answers will help students recognize the crucial parts of the message.

Use predicting to encourage students to monitor their comprehension as they listen. Do a predicting activity before listening, and remind students to review what they are hearing to see if it makes sense in the context of their prior knowledge and what they already know of the topic or events of the passage.

Give immediate feedback whenever possible. Encourage students to examine how or why their responses were incorrect.

Sample while-listening activities

- filling in graphs and charts
- following a route on a map
- checking off items in a list
- listening for the gist
- searching for specific clues to meaning
- completing cloze (fill-in) exercises
- distinguishing between formal and informal registers

4. Assessing Listening Proficiency

You can use post-listening activities to check comprehension, evaluate listening skills and use of listening strategies, and extend the knowledge gained to other contexts. A post-listening activity may relate to a pre-listening activity, such as predicting; may expand on the topic or the language of the listening text; or may transfer what has been learned to reading, speaking, or writing activities.

In order to provide authentic assessment of students' listening proficiency, a post-listening activity must reflect the real-life uses to which students might put information they have gained through listening.

- It must have a purpose other than assessment
- It must require students to demonstrate their level of listening comprehension by completing some task.

To develop authentic assessment activities, consider the type of response that listening to a particular selection would elicit in a non-classroom situation. For example, after listening to a weather report one might decide what to wear the next day; after listening to a set of

instructions, one might repeat them to someone else; after watching and listening to a play or video, one might discuss the story line with friends.

Use this response type as a base for selecting appropriate post-listening tasks. You can then develop a checklist or rubric that will allow you to evaluate each student's comprehension of specific parts of the aural text.

For example, for listening practice you have students listen to a weather report. Their purpose for listening is to be able to advise a friend what to wear the next day. As a post-listening activity, you ask students to select appropriate items of clothing from a collection you have assembled, or write a note telling the friend what to wear, or provide oral advice to another student (who has not heard the weather report). To evaluate listening comprehension, you use a checklist containing specific features of the forecast, marking those that are reflected in the student's clothing recommendations.