

Importance of Listening Skills

Why Listening Is Vital for Language Learners

Many language learners focus a lot on speaking. They don't spend as much effort on quietly listening.

Listening seems like it should be simple, or secondary to other more active language skills. To the surprise of many new learners, listening to a foreign language is difficult. If you've ever had to sit for a second language test, you'll know that the listening section is almost always the hardest.

But, listening is a vital skill for language learning.

Research shows that when we communicate, we spend around 40-50% of our time listening, 25-30% speaking, 11-16% reading and only 9% writing (although that last one might have changed in recent years due to the rise in social media).

That means we spend about half the time listening!

The question is: **Do you spend half your language learning time on listening exercises?**

... if you're anything like me, you probably don't.

5 Reasons Why Listening Is Important for Foreign Language Learning

The solution is to spend more time listening in our second language. However, it's vital that we learn to listen effectively.

Often, we've not been specifically taught how to listen in a foreign language, or if we have we've not been taught properly.

Let's delve into the research to find why listening is important and how we can improve our foreign language listening skills.

1. Listening Is an Active Process

If you've ever sat in a group of people speaking in a foreign language, you'll be familiar with the uncomfortable feeling that you should be joining in. You feel like, if you're not saying something, you're not really engaging in the conversation.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The problem is that **you're confusing a silent process with a passive process.**

Listening is a very active process, despite the fact you're not saying anything. That's why you're so tired when you go home after a social event in another language.

Getting over the feeling that we are "doing nothing" is a key step towards listening effectively.

One solution is to employ active listening techniques, to remind yourself and others that you're involved in the conversation even if you don't speak so much.

Here are some tips to show that you are actively listening:

- Make eye contact with the person who's talking.
- Lean forward slightly to show interest. If you're actually listening, this should be natural.
- Nod your head slightly to show you understand.
- Make agreeing noises and nod your head if you agree with something they've said.
- Don't look distracted by fidgeting, playing with your phone or looking off into the distance.

2. The "Silent Period" Is Golden

Children who learn a second language often go through a "silent period" where they don't say anything. Language teachers and researchers haven't totally agreed whether it's a necessary stage of language learning, or how long it should be. But, they do agree that many children experience it. It's fair to say that most adults don't go through any silent period at all. **We often try to jump straight into speaking.**

The problem with trying to speak from the beginning is that **a period of silent listening can actually be hugely beneficial.**

One big reason is that speaking can be quite a nerve-racking experience. I find it as stressful as performing on stage. As new learners, we're thinking so much about what we should say next that we don't fully experience what the other person has said. We suffer from "task overload."

Allowing yourself to be silent lets you get the most from listening.

However, speaking successfully in a foreign language can also be very rewarding. **Speaking motivates us to continue learning.** And we wouldn't want to lose our motivation, would we?

The answer isn't to give up speaking altogether. It's to give ourselves permission to be silent, and not beat ourselves up if we don't say much. Speak when you can, but you don't have to force it.

We can benefit both from the motivation of speaking *and* the listening benefits of a silent period.

3. Your Brain Is a Foreign Language Goldfish

Would it surprise you to learn that **your short-term memory is even shorter in a foreign language?**

When you think about it, it makes sense. How often have you forgotten what someone has just said in your target language (i.e. English language)? For me, at least, it happens a lot more than in my native tongue (Mother tongue).

Listening is a vital step in overcoming this problem.

But, why does it happen?

Not to get into too much detail, although it is fascinating, this effect might be due to how our short-term memory works. When we listen to someone talking, our brain starts processing the information by “segmenting” it into small chunks to store in our short-term memory. It splits them up based on our knowledge of the “rules” for how the language is spoken. Instead of storing the actual words “a green goldfish,” our brain would maybe convert those words into an image of a green goldfish for storage. **In a foreign language, we aren’t familiar with the “segmentation rules” for how the language is spoken.** Our short-term memory has to store all the words individually.

One reason why listening is so important in a foreign language is that it helps us become familiar with those segmentation rules.

Not only will it boost your understanding, it will improve your speaking in the language too.

Learning segmentation rules is usually an unconscious process, so **the easiest way to learn them is to get lots of listening practice.**

Here are some ways to become more familiar with a language’s segmentation rules:

- Watch films in your target language (English language).
- Read a book while also listening along to the audio book version.
- Attend social events with natives (English speakers) and spend time just listening.
- Listen to the radio in your target language.
- Watch videos online in your target language.

Fluent U is one great way to find interesting, approachable video content in your target language. It provides carefully selected videos from all over the Internet in your target language, many featuring natural, casual speech. It also provides dynamic subtitles which go along with the video, which means that you can see how the spoken segmentation rules relate to the written phrases.

4. Our Listening Strategies are Upside-down

If you learned a language in school, what listening strategy were you taught?

Myself, I remember that a listening exam went like this: listen to a tape (Yes. It was all tapes in those days) and then translate what we’d heard. The specifics were important, the difference between a pass and

a fail. You would lose marks if you messed up the gender of a word, for example. As far as I can see, that's how listening is still taught in my home country.

Language researchers call this a bottom-up listening strategy.

Bottom-up listening is an okay strategy to use in the classroom. It means carefully listening to each word, pronoun and sentence structure to work out what has been said. Unfortunately, it's not a complete listening strategy for use in the real world.

In the real world, you can't spend all your listening energy focusing on specific grammar while people speak. They'll keep talking and you'll be lost.

Top-down listening, on the other hand, is a great strategy to add more understanding of what's being said.

Top-down listening strategies focus on concepts. Bottom-up listening strategies focus on words. Both are necessary to be an effective listener.

It basically means that you learn a little about the spoken topic beforehand. Here are a few suggestions for implementing a top-down listening strategy for some common activities:

- If you're going to see a movie or theater play in a foreign language, read the story first.
- Read up on the topic before going to see a presentation.
- Try reading about or predicting the content of an audio passage before you listen to it. This will get your brain focusing on concepts and not just specific words.
- Hang about with a friend who repeats the same anecdote when with different people. You already know the story, so your comprehension will go up dramatically. It's also a great way to make a potentially annoying situation into a useful learning exercise.

5. The Gist Is Only Half the Story (or Less)

Finally, one thing that we often neglect when listening in another language is to check exactly how much we have understood.

Beyond a certain level of language ability, we often "get the gist" of what was said. However, sometimes we haven't understood as much as we think.

Next time you listen to something in your target language, try these six short, easy exercises to prove to yourself that you've understood what was said:

- Try drawing a picture of what was said.
- Ask yourself some questions about it and try to answer them.
- Provide a summary of what was said.
- Suggest what might come next in the "story."
- Translate what was said into another language.
- "Talk back" to the speaker to engage in imaginary conversation (I do this when listening to the radio).

Listening challenges for English language learners

There are many difficulties an individual may face in understanding a talk, lecture or conversation in a second language (and sometimes even in their first language). The speaker, the situation and the listener can all be the cause of these difficulties.

Contributing factors include the speaker talking quickly, background noise, a lack of visual clues (such as on the telephone), the listener's limited vocabulary, a lack of knowledge of the topic, and an inability to distinguish individual sounds.

While the challenges posed by the speaker or the situation may be out of the listener's hands, there are a few skills or 'strategies' that English learners can use to help them along.

1. Predicting content

Imagine you've just turned on your TV. You see a man in a suit standing in front of a large map with the symbols of a sun, clouds and thunder. What do you imagine he is about to tell you? Most likely, this is going to be a weather forecast. You can expect to hear words like 'sunny', 'windy' and 'overcast'. You'll probably hear the use of the future tense: 'It'll be a cold start to the day'; 'there'll be showers in the afternoon', etc.

Depending on the context – a news report, a university lecture, an exchange in a supermarket – you can often predict the kind of words and style of language the speaker will use. Our knowledge of the world helps us anticipate the kind of information we are likely to hear. Moreover, when we predict the topic of a talk or a conversation, all the related vocabulary stored in our brains is 'activated' to help us better understand what we're listening to.

Practice predicting content:

Watch or listen to a recorded TV programme or clip from YouTube. Pause after every few sentences. Try to predict what is going to happen or what the speaker might say next.

Tip:

If you are taking a listening test, skim through the questions first and try to predict what kind of information you need to listen out for. A question beginning 'How many..?', for example, will probably require you to listen for a specific number or quantity of something.

2. Listening for gist

Imagine you are a superhero flying in the sky. From that height, it is possible to see what the entire area is like, how densely populated it is, the kind of houses in each area.

When listening, it is also possible to get the 'whole picture' but with one crucial difference: information comes in a sequence. And in that sequence of information, there are **content words** (the nouns, adjectives and verbs) that can help you form that picture. We often call this listening for gist.

For example, the words 'food', 'friends', 'fun', 'park' and 'sunny day' have their own meanings, but when you hear the words in sequence, they help form the context of a picnic.

Practice listening for gist:

Find a short video with subtitles on a topic that interests you. Use the title to help you predict the content and then listen out for the **content words**. Go back, and listen again with the subtitles. How much did you understand the first time? Return to the video a week later and try again.

Tip:

When you learn new words, try to group them with other words used in a similar context. **Mind maps** are good for this.

3. Detecting signposts

Just like the traffic lights on roads, there are signposts in language that help us follow what we're listening to. These words, which link ideas, help us to understand what the speaker is talking about and where they are taking us. They're particularly important in presentations and lectures.

For example, if a university lecturer says: 'I am going to talk about three factors affecting global warming...' then later on you might hear the phrases 'first of all', 'moving on to' and 'in summary' to indicate the next part of the talk. Other words and phrases can function in a similar way. For instance, to clarify ('in other words', 'to put it another way'); to give examples ('to illustrate this', 'for example'), and so on. Take a look at this **list of phrases** for more examples.

Practice detecting signpost language:

Most course books for learners of English come with a CD and audio script. Find an example of a business presentation or lecture and see how many signpost phrases you can identify (listen more than once, if necessary). Then check your notes with the audio script.

Tip:

In your notebook, group signpost phrases according to their functions, and continue to add new expressions as you come across them.

4. Listening for details

Imagine you are a detective taking a closer look at those buildings you saw earlier on as a superhero. This time, rather than taking in the big picture, you're looking for something specific and rejecting anything that does not match what's on your list.

Similarly, when listening for details, you are interested in a specific kind of information – perhaps a number, name or object. You can ignore anything that does not sound relevant. In this way, you are able to narrow down your search and get the detail you need.

In a listening test, if you are asked to write down the age of a person, listen for the words related to age ('old', 'young', 'years', 'date of birth', etc.) or a number that could represent that person's age. If it is a conversation, you might wait to hear someone beginning a question with 'How old...?'

Practice listening for details:

Decide on a type of detailed information you want to practice listening for and watch programs where you would expect to get that information. For example, you could listen to a weather report to get details about the weather, or you could follow the sports news to find out the latest results.

Tip:

If you are taking a test, as soon as you get the question paper, skim through the questions, underline the important words and decide what kind of detail you need to identify in the listening text.

5. Inferring meaning

Imagine you are a tourist in a country whose language you do not speak. In a restaurant, you hand over a credit card to pay for the bill, but the server seems to say something apologetic in response. Even though you don't understand his words, you can probably conclude that the restaurant doesn't take credit cards, and you need to pay with cash instead.

This is the technique of inferring meaning: using clues and prior knowledge about a situation to work out the meaning of what we hear.

Similarly, we can infer the relationship between people from the words they use, without having to find out directly. Take the following conversation:

A: Tom, did you do your homework?

B: I did, sir, but the dog ate it.

A: That's a terrible excuse. You'll never pass your exams if you don't work harder.

We can infer from the use of the words 'homework' and 'exams' that this is a conversation between a student and his teacher. By using contextual clues and our knowledge of the world, we can work out what's being said, who is speaking and what's taking place.

Practice inferring meaning:

Find a YouTube clip from a popular television show, for example *Mind Your Language*. Now, rather than watch it, just listen to the dialogue. How much can you infer about what is taking place, who is talking and what their relationship is? Now listen to the clip a second time but watch it too. Were your conclusions correct?

Tip:

The next time you hear a word you don't understand, try to guess its meaning using the context or situation to help you. But don't worry if you don't get it the first time. As with everything in life, the more you practice, the better you will get.

Summing up

These strategies are not stand-alone. While prediction is mostly a pre-listening skill, others need to be used simultaneously to get the best result when listening.

ACTIVITIES

1. Listen to the mp3 link “*A girl talks about her new Spanish class*” given below, and put the correct word into each space. Then listen again to check.

<https://www.esl-lounge.com/student/listening/1L3-the-new-class.mp3>

A girl talks about her new Spanish class.

1. Susan's teacher is a 35-year old from the city of _____.
2. There are about _____ students in the class.
3. The lessons are in the local _____.
4. The best student in the class is a _____ girl called Miko.
5. The student James wants to go to _____ next year.
6. Most of the students come from _____.
7. One of Susan's classmates is a friend of _____.
8. In today's lesson, they learned how to ask someone's name and some _____.

2. Click the link given below and listen to the mp3. You will listen to a woman asks a customer some questions to complete a questionnaire.

<https://www.esl-lounge.com/student/listening/1L5-bookworms.mp3>

You have listened to this woman doing a survey on reading habits; now answer whether the following statements are true or false.

1. Sarah's first question is about what type of books Charlie likes reading.
2. Sarah asks Charlie to name three types of books that he likes.
3. Charlie likes science fiction, romance and Westerns.
4. Charlie spends about \$50 a month on books.
5. Charlie also buys books from his friends.
6. Charlie buys books from the internet.
7. Charlie went to The Regal Bookstore last week.

3. Click the link given below and listen to Jessica's spoken letter to her friend.

<https://www.esl-lounge.com/student/listening/1L15-a-friend-visits.mp3>

Write "yes" for the places Jessica mentions and "no" for the places she doesn't talk about.

1. Disco
2. Lighthouse
3. Hospital
4. Museum
5. Train Station
6. The sea
7. Country House
8. Cinema

9. School
10. Park
12. Bank
13. Swimming pool
14. Lake
15. Castle
16. Fountain

4. Click the links given below, and try to infer the meaning of what you listen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hLtxKNgBzUg>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AA0AtHHS9d8>