

Five essential listening skills for English learners

By Raphael Ahmed

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'Listening occupies about 45 per cent of the time adults spend communicating.' Original illustration © [Jamie Johnson](#) for British Council

How can learners improve their listening comprehension? Teacher Raphael Ahmed shares some useful strategies in one of our top five articles of all time, illustrated by artist Jamie Johnson.

Why listening is important

It should not be difficult to realise the importance of listening when we consider that it occupies about **45 per cent** of the time adults spend in communication. This is significantly more than speaking, which accounts for 30 per cent, and reading and writing, which make up 16 per cent and nine per cent respectively.

Yet, for all its importance, students (and even teachers) often fail to give listening the attention it needs. This is all the more remarkable as learners often say that listening is the most challenging of all the skills in English.

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.

Practise 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.

Practise 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.

Practise 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...?'

Practise listening for details:

Decide on a type of detailed information you want to practise listening for and watch programmes 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.

Practise inferring meaning:

Find a YouTube clip from a popular television show, for example *Friends*. 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 practise, 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.

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This article is one of our top five most-read of all time.

Raphael Ahmed is still a teacher of English, and currently interested in AI and its implications on assessment. He got into teaching English in 2011, to make himself more internationally mobile; he heard that he could 'go places' if he did the Cambridge CELTA. Apart from learning, teaching and travelling, he's interested in woodworking, painting, cooking, writing and coding.

***Jamie Johnson** is an artist and illustrator based in Glasgow, Scotland. He works in painting, collage, drawing and various digital media techniques. Jamie has exhibited his work in galleries around the UK, Europe and North America, most recently as a solo show at Chopping Block Gallery in London. He continues to work with a wide variety of clients as an illustrator and designer, alongside a personal interest in community-based projects.*

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