

Developing Listening Strategies

By Miriam Davis

A. What is listening?

1. Which of the following offers L2 learners the most useful description of the listening process

1. Listening is like reading. If you listen carefully to the individual sounds, then you will be able to recognize the words.
2. When you are listening, the important thing is to recognize each word the speaker says. Take care to hear the words, and the meaning of the sentence will take care of itself.
3. Listening is basically a guessing game. Think about what the speaker is likely to be saying. Try to guess what he means from what you think he would want to communicate.
4. Listening can be hard, so you need all the help you can get. Try to listen carefully to the sounds the speaker produces and at the same time try to use your knowledge of grammar and vocabulary and your best guess about his intended meaning.

(from 'Listening' by Anderson and Leach p. 23.)

2. Is it a passive or active skill?

"**Passive listening** is accurately understanding meanings as the speaker intends them. **Active listening** is creatively assorting information for a given purpose."
(Furukawa Chikashi in Nihongo Journal October 1986.)

"Listening is not merely not talking..... it means taking vigorous human interest in what is being told us. You can listen like a blank wall or like a splendid auditorium where every sound comes back fuller and richer."
(Alice Duer Miller quoted in 'Listening' by Goodith White.)

3. How important is listening compared with speaking skills?

a. 'Listening possibly, is the most important of the language skills, since people **spend approximately 60% of their time listening**. Listening is the most important first step in foreign language learning. As a child you listened for a long while before attempting to speak. Listening will give you a 'feel' for the language.' (Joan Rubin 2nd ed. *How to be a more successful language learner*

b. 'Listening skills are as important as speaking skills because **we cannot communicate face-to-face unless the 2 types of skill are developed in tandem.**' Anderson and Lynch *Listening* p3.

c. It is important because for many language learners it seems to be **the most demanding skill to acquire.**

4. How difficult is listening compared with speaking?

We can try to overcome limited proficiency in **speaking** a foreign language by

rehearsing what we intend to say. But we can't do this with listening because we can't always predict what we will have to listen to. To illustrate this think about which of the following is likely to be more taxing for you as a language task – giving a Bible message or leading a Bible study? Why?

5. Does listening involve purely linguistic skills?

Think about the following questions to answer the above.

1. What are the extra skills needed in listening to the following?
 - A recently widowed neighbour talking about her husband's funeral
 - A 5 year old describing her birthday party
 - An official explaining how to make an insurance claim
2. Why can several people listen to the same conversation and come up with different outcomes?

The **purposes** for which people listen may be different. For example, 2 people are waiting outside an office door before going in to see a 3rd person who can be heard talking on the telephone. One may only be trying to hear when the call is ended; the other, convinced that he is the topic of the telephone conversation, might be straining to catch every word and trying to reconstruct the conversation from the one side he can hear.

Listening may simply be for social purposes as in the case of chatting to a stranger to pass the time waiting for a train. Or it may be to extract information as when listening to a weather forecast causing a listener to ignore some parts of the audio message.

Listeners vary in the background information they have and this impacts the effectiveness of their listening. Just think, for example, of an outsider listening to the conversation of a long and happily married couple, or of a seeker coming to church for the first time.

6. Native speakers and listening skills.

When are native speaker listening skills developed? Do they develop automatically? Is there always 100% comprehension?

- **Babies are listeners long before they are speakers.**

Babies, as young as 3 days old, have been shown to prefer listening to speech to listening to other sounds. By about 8 weeks they have developed some sensitivity as listeners, responding differently to angry voices and friendly ones.

- **Listening skills have to be developed.**

Effective speaking depends on successful listening. This is true both for native speakers and foreign language learners. Look at the following conversation between a 5 year old and his grandmother and consider the following questions. What are the boy's problems in communication? Are they due to his ability as speaker or listener? Or both?

A: We went to the park, John, Clare and me, and we bounced and everything.

B: Is Clare in your class at school?

A: We bounced and bounced, and then the man said we had to get off.

B: You had to get off? Off what, dear?

A: Bounced and bounced on the bouncy thing, the castle.

(Anderson and Lynch p 17)

7. Relationship of listening to reading

The traditional view was that native speaker children mastered the oral skills of listening and speaking in pre-school years and that when they went to school all they needed to be taught was reading and writing. Recent research on children aged 8, 11 and 13 has shown however, that good listeners are good readers and poor listeners are poor readers. Even for native listeners, explicit practice to improve listening skills is beneficial. For example, children aged 6-10 became much better listeners when they were trained to ask questions when they didn't understand or the message was inadequate. There appear to be general language processing skills which influence both listening and reading. One is **the ability to monitor your own comprehension of a message. This is something we will come back to in the section under strategies.**

B. List some of the problems you have in listening in your foreign language and suggest strategies for coping with them

4 things to remember

- 1. Don't panic.**
- 2. Don't expect to hear every word.** 100% comprehension is not necessary. Remember native speakers may only listen to 25% of what they hear.

3. **Take control where possible.** (c.f. strategies section for concrete ways of doing this.)
4. **Focus your listening** e.g. by listening for key words, content words as opposed to function words, specific words or facts. You may listen for familiar words or for the rhythm or stress patterns and intonation. Or you may simply listen for repeated words.

C. Listening – when or where and with what purpose?

List 4-5 situations which require you to listen in your foreign language and which are also potentially language learning opportunities. These may be situations you create yourself. What kind of listening tasks or goals could you set yourself in these situations? Be as specific as possible. What you decide on needs to reflect your level of language ability. You may have several different goals for the same situation.

Listening varies according to **purpose**. You may listen for:

- general information
- specific facts
- for practice or reinforcement
- for relaxation and pleasure

Try to be aware of your listening purpose – why you are listening?

Intensive and extensive listening

In what situations might you use the following listening strategies?

- Listening for every detail (intensive listening)
- Listening for gist to get the general idea (extensive listening)
- Listening selectively – having a specific point in mind and listening just for that (extensive listening)

D. Strategies for better listening

Michael Rost, an expert in second language acquisition and author of 'Basics in Listening' and 'Strategies in Listening' wrote the following:

"Listening is probably the most fundamental part of language learning, yet it is also the least understood. Listening has 2 components- one part is automated and not consciously controlled, while the other part of it is conscious and very much influenced by our intentions. When we try to improve our listening ability it is important to understand this difference.

The conscious part of listening is called '**listening strategies**'. These are the things we consciously do in order to control our attention and response. Research has shown that **successful listeners tend to develop 5 categories of listening strategies**. Successful listeners try to use these strategies all the time, especially when they are in 'difficult' listening situations."

The 5 main strategies are

PREDICT, INFER, MONITOR, CLARIFY AND RESPOND

1. Predict

Try to predict what the speaker will say or do. A major part of successful listening is checking our predictions. Prediction means actively thinking about the content, the words and ideas and feelings that the speaker might bring up. Good predictors are good listeners. In order to predict, it is necessary to learn as much as possible about the topic or speaker in advance.

2. Infer

Guess what the speaker means based on what you hear. All effective listening involves guesswork because speakers can never be completely explicit or clear about their meaning. Find ways to 'construct' meaning rather than give up. It is always better to try to build meaning based on what you DO understand than to worry about what you DON'T understand.

3. Monitor

Pay attention to HOW well you are listening. **Successful listeners have realistic expectations**. They realize that they will have difficulties and uncertainties when they listen. They pay attention to their internal states: Am I understanding this easily? Do I enjoy listening to this speaker? What kind of problems am I having? Listeners who monitor their internal states are better able to make adjustments and not get overwhelmed by confusion.

Ellis and Sinclair ('Learning to Learn English' Student's book p.59) suggest the following as points to consider when monitoring your listening.

- a. *Who were you listening to* – was the person speaking too fast for me? Was the accent a familiar one?

- b. The topic* – Did I know much about the topic? Was I interested in it? Did I know most of the words?
- c. The situation* – Could I see the speaker? Could I talk to the speaker? Were there several people talking at the same time? Were there several speakers with similar voices? Was there any background noise or interference?
- d. You* – was I clear about my reason for listening? Did I use the best listening strategy? Did I feel tired/impatient, etc?

When you assess your listening comprehension you are really assessing how you cope with these above factors.

4. Clarify

Wanda Nash in a book called ‘At Ease with Stress’ says “Taking charge of my choice is the keynote of how to ‘harmonize’ the stress in my life.” I.e. Are there things that I can do to exercise a measure of control over the situations that cause me stress?

The same principle applies in language learning. By asking for clarification, for e.g., we are exercising a degree of control and are taking steps to control the stress that a listening situation may cause us. Rost says “Listening involves uncertainty. Successful listeners are always formulating clarification questions in their mind: What does that word mean? What do you mean by that? Do you mean...? Can you tell me more about that? Even if the listener is not able to actually ask the questions, formulating the questions helps keep the mind active while listening. In conversations, asking questions and providing feedback to the speaker helps the listener stay involved. More involved listeners naturally understand more.”

In any conversation you listen to you may find examples of the following clarification strategies:

1. Making appeals
2. Asking for repetition/clarification
3. Repeating information
4. Checking/confirming
5. Reformulating
6. Summarising

5. Respond

Listening involves a response. This response may be **internal**, a sort of evaluation or appreciation, or it may be **external**, in the form of a verbal response to the speaker. In either case, the response to the speaker is an important part of listening. Successful listeners are able to formulate their response to what they are listening to. This keeps them involved and motivated to listen. Rost says “**Being interested is the foundation for better listening.**”

E. In conclusion

- a. Think of situations in which you can recall having learnt new words or expressions in your foreign language by hearing them used. Can you remember what it was about the

item that enabled you to learn and remember? Can you learn anything else about listening strategies from these learning experiences?

b. Some researchers have concluded that **'Learners need to experience comprehension problems.'** Why should they have concluded thus?