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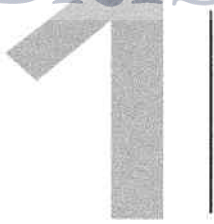
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Listening in the world and in language learning

We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak. (Epictetus)

- **The why and how of listening – motivation and mechanics**
- **The characteristics of spoken English**
- **Why listening is difficult**
- **Bottom-up versus top-down approaches to listening**
- **Why students should listen to English**
- **The place of listening in language teaching**
- **Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)**
- **Hearing English in context**
- **Listening and language learning – six myths?**

The why and how of listening – motivation and mechanics

Animals listen either to stay safe or to get food. Frogs can hear predators and other frogs but nothing else. Kangaroos can hear the scales of a rattlesnake scraping on sand. Bats find their dinner by squeaking and listening to the echoes bouncing off nearby insects. Humans, on the other hand, listen not only for the sound of lions growling in the night and babies crying for food, but also to lectures, grand speeches of all lengths (Fidel Castro's used to go on for hours, apparently), idle chit-chat, radio broadcasts, instructions and, of course, foreign languages. From the small child listening out for the melodious bell of the ice cream van to the adult tuning in to airport announcements, we listen primarily because there are things we need to know. We learn to listen and we listen to learn. But humans also listen to Beethoven and The Beatles, bedtime stories and bad jokes. Why? Because, unlike animals, humans have another reason to listen: sounds can stimulate the imagination and enrich our lives.

The primary purposes of human listening, then, are information-gathering and pleasure, though there are other reasons, such as empathy, assessment and criticism. The types of listening we engage in on a day-to-day basis can be categorised as follows:

Listening for gist	This refers to the occasions when we want to know the general idea of what is being said, as well as who is speaking to whom and why, and how successful they are in communicating their point.
Listening for specific information	This refers to the occasions when we don't need to understand everything, but only a very specific part. For example, while listening to a list of delayed trains, we are only interested in hearing news about one particular train – the one we want to catch – and so we listen selectively for this specific information. We ignore everything else.
Listening in detail	This refers to the type of listening we do when, for example, we need to find errors or determine differences between one passage and another. We cannot afford to ignore anything because, unlike listening to a list of delayed trains, we don't know exactly what information will help us to achieve our task.
Inferential listening	This refers to the type of listening we do when we wish to know how the speaker feels. It may involve inferring, which is dealt with in more detail in Chapter 5.

As for the 'how' of listening, nothing can happen without sound waves. These are caused by movement – the whirr of a bat's wings, the tremor of a violin string, the vibrations of the vocal chords, all of which move the air around them. Sound waves need conductors through which to travel, such as air or water (the tagline from the film *Alien* – 'In space no one can hear you scream' – is literally true because there is no air, water or other conductor of sound in space). The sound waves are then 'received'. Unlike spiders, which detect sound through the hair on their bodies, or grasshoppers, which 'hear' with their legs, we have ears, specially formed for receiving sound waves. The outer ear catches these vibrations, which then pass through the middle ear, consisting of the ear drum, bones and membranes, and then through the cochlea (named after the Latin for a shell, because of its snail-like shape), which is part of the inner ear. Finally, the sound waves are interpreted by the brain, and if we are really listening (that is, concentrating on the message) as opposed to merely hearing (when the same process takes place but without a sustained focus on the part of the recipient), we may then laugh, cry or slouch off to do our homework.

The characteristics of spoken English

In recent years, with the advent of text-messaging and chat rooms, writing has begun to assume some of the features of speaking: informality, lack of attention to punctuation, transience, real-time interaction. As Jeremy Harmer writes, 'on the Internet, live sessions are not called *chats* by accident'. Indeed, the word 'chat', for many teenagers and children, is associated more now with reading and writing than speaking and listening.

Listening and reading both involve the decoding of messages, but there are, of course, significant differences between the two. Firstly, reading takes place over space – pages, signs, the backs of envelopes – whereas listening takes place over time. Most oral data is not recorded and has no permanent record. It is based on spontaneous performance, an invisible ink that usually disappears from the memory within seconds.

Because listening takes place over time, not space, the gaps between words that exist in writing do not exist in speech, so the listener imagines them into being. This segmentation of words from the flow of speech (recognising word boundaries) is often problematic for listeners and occasionally amusing. Rock guitarist Jimi Hendrix didn't sing, *'scuse me while I kiss this guy*, but *'scuse me while I kiss the sky*, and, if you believe one well-known linguist, the words of the hymn, 'Gladly my cross I'd bear' are routinely thought to be about a cross-eyed bear. In fact, to listeners, speech sometimes comes across like this:

Wheretherearenonaturalpausescausedbythespeaker'sbreathingtheflowofspeechisonelongsound.

Another key difference between listening and reading is that listening involves getting to grips with features of pronunciation such as **elision**, **assimilation** and **intrusion**.

Elision is when sounds are omitted, usually from the beginning or end of a word, in order to make pronunciation of the utterance easier for the speaker. For example:

She sat next to the wall.

The *t* of *next* is elided into the *t* of *to* so that it becomes /nekstə/, but we know that she did not sit *necks* to the wall (we can safely assume that she only has one neck).

Assimilation takes place when the first of a series of sounds changes to accommodate subsequent sounds. This often happens because the tongue cannot get into place quickly enough during connected speech to articulate the next sound. For example:

Tony's a heart breaker.

The *t* sound in *heart* changes to either a glottal stop or a *p* in this context: (/hɑ:pbreɪkə/), though Tony breaks girls' hearts, not harps.

Intrusion is when a sound is added in order to allow the speaker to link two words more easily. For example:

He doesn't have an original idea in his head.

Speakers of British English often add an intrusive *r* sound between *idea* and *in* (/aɪdɪərɪn/); it sounds as though he doesn't have an original 'eye-deer' in his head, whatever that may be.

Another feature of pronunciation is that formulaic phrases are often chunked; this means the phrases are said rapidly as if they are one word. For example:

/nəʊwɒdɑːmɪn/ for *know what I mean?*

/ɡɪmi:əbreɪk/ for *give me a break*

All of these are potentially problematic for listeners, though not for readers. For a more detailed analysis of pronunciation, see *How to Teach Pronunciation*.

A further difference between listening and reading is that listening is often interactive: two or more people in face-to-face contact. This means that non-verbal communication – for example, body language – plays a role, and of course listeners are often able to ask

questions, signal lack of understanding, interrupt, etc, which readers cannot do. This is why **emoticons** – those smiley faces in email correspondence such as ;) (a winking face, denoting irony) – were invented for writers (not all writers are fans; Geoffrey Nunberg wrote that the word *emoticon* ‘deserves to die horribly in a head-on collision with *infotainment*’). When reading, we have to rely far more on our **inner voice**, words that we form in the mind but do not say aloud, whereas the spoken word always contains an element of performance. Pitch, **intonation**, tone, volume and patterns of **stress** can all make words come alive. Conversely, great speeches and riveting court cases, when later read as transcriptions, often come across as mind-numbingly dull simply because the drama of live interaction is missing.

Other features of this interactivity include forms for signalling attention, such as *Hey!* and **vocatives**, which are ways of addressing someone (*Mum, honey, Jim, mate*). These features are seen infrequently in writing. Question tags (e.g. *haven't you? didn't she?*) appear in approximately a quarter of all questions uttered in conversation, while in academic prose they form less than 1 per cent. Other ways of eliciting a response in conversation include greetings, farewells and **response elicitors** such as *Okay?* and *See?*

The spontaneity involved in most speech (lectures are an exception, and these often contain many of the features of writing) means that false starts, hesitation, redundancy and ungrammatical sentences are extremely common, whereas writing usually involves well-formed sentences and careful advance planning. In most formal or semi-formal writing, deviations from standard grammar are rare – at least among proficient writers.

Finally, we should mention the status of listening in relation to reading. Storytelling is an ancient art, while writing, as done by the general public, is a relatively modern phenomenon. In the past, literacy was solely for the ruling classes and the clergy. But written documents have status because they have permanence. They are also associated with vital encoded information such as the law, national constitutions, contracts, gas bills. Back in 1923, the London Stock Exchange adopted its motto ‘My word is my bond’, but these days an oral agreement doesn’t count for much in the eyes of the law. As Mark Twain once said, ‘Oral contracts – they ain’t worth the paper they’re written on’. A boss wanting something guaranteed will say ‘Give it to me in writing’.

Because literacy is so closely bound to information and vice versa, and because literacy has to be taught (whereas listening to L1, a person’s first language, comes naturally), most modern educational systems, and therefore societies at large, emphasise reading above listening.

Why listening is difficult

Many of the differences between reading and listening illustrate just why listening is considered a difficult skill. The difficulties can be grouped into four general categories: characteristics of the message, the delivery, the listener and the environment.

Characteristics of the message

Some time during the 1980s a software company was demonstrating its latest product: speech recognition technology. A member of the audience was invited to say a sentence which would then be ‘recognised’ by a computer and displayed in written form for all to see. The participant, deciding to stay on topic, said, ‘It’s hard to recognise speech’. The computer promptly, and to much laughter, flashed up, ‘It’s hard to wreck a nice beach’.

This story may be apocryphal – although Bill Gates admits that Microsoft’s speech recognition group calls itself the Wreck a Nice Beach group – but it is a small illustration of the problems (for computers and people!) involved in listening to connected speech. As Rick Altman wrote, ‘For us [teachers], listening is like reading speech. For students it is more like finding the objects hidden in the drawings of trees’. Knowing the written form of a word is no guarantee that students will recognise the spoken form. As already mentioned, recognising word boundaries is problematical, but also the irregular spelling system of English does not help matters. A sentence (however unlikely) such as:

Mr Clough from Slough bought enough dough.

would probably cause problems for students to pronounce even if they ‘knew’ the words, because of the variety of ways in which one combination of letters (*ough*) can be pronounced.

There are also, of course, ‘slips of the ear’ – simple mishearing – as when the anti-hero of Bret Easton Ellis’s novel *American Psycho* hears ‘murders and executions’ instead of ‘mergers and acquisitions’ (although some would call this a Freudian slip, bearing in mind the character’s murderous habits).

Other linguistic difficulties include unknown words, lexical density (short spaces of time between content words, forcing the listener to concentrate harder), and complex grammatical structures. Non-linguistic characteristics of the message include familiarity of the topic, text type and cultural accessibility. We will deal with all of these in more detail in Chapter 2.

Characteristics of the delivery

Mode of delivery is a vital factor. It may be helpful here to distinguish between **reciprocal** and **nonreciprocal** listening. Reciprocal listening involves interaction between two or more people; in other words, there is a conversation. Reciprocal listening allows the use of **repair strategies**: speakers can react to looks of confusion by backtracking and starting again; listeners can ask for clarification, ask the speaker to slow down, etc.

Nonreciprocal listening describes a situation in which the listener has no opportunity to contribute to a dialogue, for example while watching television or listening to the radio. In these situations, the listener’s lack of control over the input is a crucial issue. The listener has no influence over factors such as the speed at which the speaker talks, the vocabulary and grammar used, and no recourse to asking for repetition of a word if the speaker’s pronunciation renders it incomprehensible. It seems surprising to us now, but when American ‘talkies’ were first shown in the cinema in Britain, audiences had great difficulty in understanding the American accent.

For all of the above reasons, nonreciprocal listening is usually regarded as more difficult than reciprocal listening.

Other characteristics of delivery include organisation (do the speakers ramble on, jumping from topic to topic, or are they concise?), duration, number of speakers (the more speakers, the more difficult it is to follow the conversation) and accent. We will look at these more closely in Chapter 2.

Characteristics of the listener

As any teacher can testify, some students get sidetracked easily and simply lack the ability to sustain concentration. Other students have problems motivating themselves to listen. These are often long-term issues.

Yet other students learn better using modes that are different from listening. According to **Multiple Intelligences theory**, people possess different ‘intelligences’, such as linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinaesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalist. These can be related to preferred modes of learning. Most people, at some unconscious level, realise they are more predisposed to one way of learning than to another. Someone with musical intelligence may choose to learn a language through listening to songs; someone with bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence might prefer to learn by acting, moving to sounds or physically piecing together words on wooden blocks.

Besides the students’ individual dispositions, there is the age factor. Young learners can be loosely categorised as anything from the age of seven or eight (younger than this may be considered very young learners) up to those in their mid to late teens. Students at this age differ from adults considerably in their needs as listeners. Some of these differences may include shorter attention spans, fewer cognitive abilities, difficulties concentrating on disembodied voices and the importance of visual stimuli and music. Another consideration is children’s familiarity and confidence with multimedia material, particularly when they reach their teenage years, which often surpasses that of older generations. We will look at the challenges of planning lessons for young learners in Chapter 7.

At the other end of the scale, older learners – those above the age of seventy, for example – sometimes have difficulties with listening due primarily to physiological factors. These might include declining abilities in hearing in general or problems with short-term memory. Teachers of older learners may need to proceed more slowly with instructions and they may also find that their students’ ability to cope with fast connected speech lags behind the students’ cognitive abilities. The ideas contained in Chapter 7 for adapting materials are applicable for such students.

Some temporary characteristics that affect listening might include anxiety (for example, in test conditions), tiredness, boredom or the listener having a cold (blocked sinuses affect the aural system).

Characteristics of the environment

Environmental conditions which may affect listening performance include the temperature of the room (hot rooms induce sleep), background noise (heavy traffic, for example) or defective equipment which affects the clarity of a recording.

Another problem which does not fit neatly into any of our other categories is the role of memory in listening. As we process one word, another word is ‘incoming’. The mind gets flooded with words. Unless we are well attuned to the rhythm and flow of the language, and the way in which a piece of discourse is likely to continue, this can lead to **overload**, which is one of the main reasons why students ‘switch off’. The idea may be heresy to poets, but the mind isn’t really concerned with individual words. We tend not to remember these with any exactitude, but rather the general meanings that they convey. Jack Richards states that ‘memory works with propositions, not with sentences’. Many of our students are faced with badly-conceived tasks that test their memory instead of guiding them towards comprehension, an issue that will be dealt with in Chapter 3.