

Teaching of Listening as a Language Skill

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Abstract

In Nigeria, listening as a language skill is not taught expressly as reading and writing due to the fact that English language examinations majorly tests only writing and reading comprehension. This has had a very serious impact on students listening ability. This has made listening as a skill to be a challenge where ever listening is tested especially in international examinations. Listening involves mental processes which lead to the understanding of the shared information. In the classroom, it is a very important language skill which enhances the understanding of academic discussions, lectures and other classroom interactions. If it plays such a crucial role in learning, it should be expressly taught so that learners will notice and acquire relevant skills for effective interaction both within and outside the classroom. This article is therefore a guide to language teachers on some of the strategies which could be very effective in developing listening skills. The ideas put forward is expected to point language teachers to some of the best practices.

What is listening?

Listening is a receptive skill which involves responding to language rather than producing it. It involves making sense of the meaningful sounds of language. We do this by using context and our knowledge of language and the world.

What is the difference between listening and hearing?

These points are vital as far as the differences between hearing and listening is concerned

1. An individual's ability to perceive sounds, by receiving vibrations through ears, is called the hearing. Listening is something done consciously, that involve the analysis and understanding of the sounds you hear.
2. The hearing is the primary and continuous in nature, i.e. the first and foremost stage is hearing, followed by listening and it occurs continuously. On the other hand, listening is temporary, as we cannot continuously pay attention to something for long hours.
3. The hearing is physiological, which is through one of our senses in the living organisms. On the contrary, listening is a psychological (conscious) act.
4. While hearing is a passive bodily process that does not involve use of the brain. As opposed to listening, it is an active mental process, which involves the use of brain to draw meaning from words and sentences.
5. Hearing involves receipt of the message through ears. Conversely, listening encompasses interpretation of the message received by ears.
6. The hearing is an inborn ability but listening is a learned skill.
7. In the hearing, we are not aware of the sounds that we receive, however in the case of listening, we are completely aware of what the speaker is saying.

8. Hearing involves the use of only one sense i.e. ears. In contrast, listening, involves the use of more than one senses i.e. eyes, ears, touch etc. to understand the message completely and accurately.
9. In the hearing, we are neither aware nor we have any control over the sounds we hear. On the other hand, in listening, we are aware of what the other person is saying and so we listen to acquire knowledge and receive information.
10. Hearing does not require focus whereas listening does.

Therefore, it is quite clear that listening is one step ahead of the hearing. The hearing is simply the ability to hear, i.e. natural or God-given however, listening is an acquired skill, which only a few people possess. While the hearing is involuntary and performed effortlessly, listening is done intentionally, wherein we are selective and pay attention to only those messages, we think are important for us.

Listening strategies/skills

- Listening for specific information
- Listening for gist
- Listening for detail
- Listening for sentence stress
- Extensive listening
- Listening for individual sounds
- Understanding body language/ attitude

Forms of Spoken language – what do people listen to?

- Monologues
- Dialogues / Conversation
- Announcements
- Radio / Television broadcast
- Speeches, talks, lectures
- Anecdotes
- Interviews / Discussions

Listening focus-what should the learner focus on while listening?

- Opinion

- Feeling
- Purpose
- Functions
- Course of Action
- Agreement
- Gist / Detail

What are the differences between written language and spoken language?

Spoken language in English	Written Language in English
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Disappears as soon as it is spoken. ▪ Shows sentences through stress and intonation. ▪ Consists of connected speech, sentences, incomplete sentences or single words. ▪ The speaker uses body language such as facial expressions and gestures to support communication. ▪ It often contains hesitations, repetitions and frequent changes in topic. ▪ Often uses rather general vocabulary and simple grammar. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Stays on the page and does not disappear ▪ Uses punctuation and capital letters to show sentences ▪ Consists, letters words, sentences and punctuation joined together into text ▪ Has no visual support except photos or pictures sometimes ▪ Usually organised; sentences follow one another in logical sequences and are joined to previous or following sentences ▪ Uses exact vocabulary and more complex grammar

Listening is the language modality 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 instructors 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 modelling listening strategies and providing listening practice in authentic situations: those that learners are likely to encounter when they use the language outside the classroom.

Goals and Techniques for Teaching Listening

Instructors 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 accomplish this goal, instructors 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 are doing while they complete listening tape assignments.
- They encourage students to evaluate their comprehension and the strategy used 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 business: 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, instructors 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.

Integrating Metacognitive Strategies

Before listening: Plan for the listening task

- Set a purpose or decide in advance what to listen for
- Decide if more linguistic or background knowledge is needed
- Determine whether to enter the text from the top down (attend to the overall meaning) or from the bottom up (focus on the words and phrases)

During and after listening: Monitor comprehension

- Verify predictions and check for inaccurate guesses
- Decide what is and is not important to understand
- Listen/view again to check comprehension
- Ask for help

After listening: Evaluate comprehension and strategy use

- Evaluate comprehension in a particular task or area
- Evaluate overall progress in listening and in particular types of listening tasks
- Decide if the strategies used were appropriate for the purpose and for the task
- Modify strategies if necessary

Using Authentic Materials and Situations

Authentic materials and situations prepare students for the types of listening they will need to do when using the language outside the classroom.

One-Way Communication

Materials:

- Radio and television programs
- Public address announcements (airports, train/bus stations, stores)
- Speeches and lectures
- Telephone customer service recordings

Procedure:

- Help students identify the listening goal: to obtain specific information; to decide whether to continue listening; to understand most or all of the message
- Help students outline predictable sequences in which information may be presented: who-what-when-where (news stories); who-flight number-arriving/departing-gate number (airport announcements); "for [function], press [number]" (telephone recordings)
- Help students identify key words/phrases to listen for

Two-Way Communication

In authentic two-way communication, the listener focuses on the speaker's meaning rather than the speaker's language. The focus shifts to language only when meaning is not clear. Note the difference between the teacher as teacher and the teacher as authentic listener in the dialogues in the popup screens.

Strategies for Developing Listening Skills

Language learning depends on listening. Listening provides the aural input that serves as the basis for language acquisition and enables learners to interact in spoken communication.

Effective language instructors show students how they can adjust their listening behaviour to deal with a variety of situations, types of input, and

listening purposes. They help students develop a set of listening strategies and match appropriate strategies to each listening situation.

Listening Strategies

Listening strategies are techniques or activities that contribute directly to the comprehension and recall of listening input. Listening strategies can be classified by how the listener processes the input.

Top-down strategies are listener based; the listener taps into background knowledge of the topic, the situation or context, the type of text, and the language. This background knowledge activates a set of expectations that help the listener to interpret what is heard and anticipate what will come next. Top-down strategies include

- listening for the main idea
- predicting
- drawing inferences
- summarizing

Bottom-up strategies are text based; the listener relies on the language in the message, that is, the combination of sounds, words, and grammar that creates meaning. Bottom-up strategies include

- listening for specific details
- recognizing cognates
- recognizing word-order patterns

Strategic listeners also use *metacognitive strategies* to plan, monitor, and evaluate their listening.

- They plan by deciding which listening strategies will serve best in a particular situation.
- They monitor their comprehension and the effectiveness of the selected strategies.
- They evaluate by determining whether they have achieved their listening comprehension goals and whether the combination of listening strategies selected was an effective one.
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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.
- Select top-down and bottom-up strategies that are appropriate to the listening task and use them flexibly and interactively. Students' comprehension improves and their confidence increases when they use top-down and bottom-up strategies simultaneously to construct meaning.
- 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.

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Developing Listening Activities

As you design listening tasks, 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.

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 (one way) or exchanging name and address information (two way). At an intermediate level students could follow directions for assembling something (one way) or work in pairs to create a story to tell to the rest of the class (two way).

Define the activity's instructional goal 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 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 higher-order 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
- doing guided practice

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

- listening with visuals
- 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

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.

A framework for planning a listening skills lesson

Listening is one of the most challenging skills for our students to develop and yet also one of the most important. By developing their ability to listen well we develop our students' ability to become more independent learners, as by hearing accurately they are much more likely to be able to reproduce accurately, refine their understanding of grammar and develop their own vocabulary.

A framework that can be used to design a listening lesson that will develop your students' listening skills and look at some of the issues involved is outlined.

The basic framework

The basic framework on which you can construct a listening lesson can be divided into three main stages.

- Pre-listening, during which we help our students prepare to listen.
- While listening, during which we help to focus their attention on the listening text and guide the development of their understanding of it.

- Post-listening, during which we help our students integrate what they have learnt from the text into their existing knowledge.

Pre-listening

There are certain goals that should be achieved before students attempt to listen to any text. These are motivation, contextualisation, and preparation.

- **Motivation**
It is enormously important that before listening students are motivated to listen, so you should try to select a text that they will find interesting and then design tasks that will arouse your students' interest and curiosity.
- **Contextualisation**
When we listen in our everyday lives we hear language within its natural environment, and that environment gives us a huge amount of information about the linguistic content we are likely to hear. Listening to a tape recording in a classroom is a very unnatural process. The text has been taken from its original environment and we need to design tasks that will help students to contextualise the listening and access their existing knowledge and expectations to help them understand the text.
- **Preparation**
To do the task we set students while they listen there could be specific vocabulary or expressions that students will need. It's vital that we cover this before they start to listen as we want the challenge within the lesson to be an act of listening not of understanding what they have to do.

While listening

When we listen to something in our everyday lives we do so for a reason. Students too need a reason to listen that will focus their attention. For our students to really develop their listening skills they will need to listen a number of times - three or four usually works quite well - as I've found

that the first time many students listen to a text they are nervous and have to tune in to accents and the speed at which the people are speaking.

Ideally the listening tasks we design for them should guide them through the text and should be graded so that the first listening task they do is quite easy and helps them to get a general understanding of the text. Sometimes a single question at this stage will be enough, not putting the students under too much pressure.

The second task for the second time students listen should demand a greater and more detailed understanding of the text. Make sure though that the task doesn't demand too much of a response. Writing long responses as they listen can be very demanding and is a separate skill in itself, so keep the tasks to single words, ticking or some sort of graphical response.

The third listening task could just be a matter of checking their own answers from the second task or could lead students towards some more subtle interpretations of the text.

Listening to a foreign language is a very intensive and demanding activity and for this reason I think it's very important that students should have 'breathing' or 'thinking' space between listenings. I usually get my students to compare their answers between listenings as this gives them the chance not only to have a break from the listening, but also to check their understanding with a peer and so reconsider before listening again.

Post-listening

There are two common forms that post-listening tasks can take. These are reactions to the content of the text, and analysis of the linguistic features used to express the content.

- Reaction to the text

Of these two I find that tasks that focus students reaction to the content are most important. Again this is something that we naturally do in our everyday lives. Because we listen for a reason, there is generally a following reaction. This could be discussion as a response to what we've heard - do they agree or disagree or even

believe what they have heard? - or it could be some kind of reuse of the information they have heard.

- Analysis of language

The second of these two post-listening task types involves focusing students on linguistic features of the text. This is important in terms of developing their knowledge of language, but less so in terms of developing students' listening skills. It could take the form of an analysis of verb forms from a script of the listening text or vocabulary or collocation work. This is a good time to do form focused work as the students have already developed an understanding of the text and so will find dealing with the forms that express those meanings much easier.

Applying the framework to a song.

Here is an example of how you could use this framework to exploit a song:

- Pre-listening
 - Students brainstorm kinds of songs
 - Students describe one of their favourite songs and what they like about it
 - Students predict some word or expressions that might be in a love song
- While listening
 - Students listen and decide if the song is happy or sad
 - Students listen again and order the lines or verses of the song
 - Students listen again to check their answers or read a summary of the song with errors in and correct them.
- Post-listening
 - Focus on content
 - Discuss what they liked / didn't like about the song
 - Decide whether they would buy it / who they would buy it for

- Write a review of the song for a newspaper or website
- Write another verse for the song
- Focus on form
 - Students look at the lyrics from the song and identify the verb forms
 - Students find new words in the song and find out what they mean
 - Students make notes of common collocations within the song

Conclusion

In this article, efforts have been made to describe a framework for listening development that could be applied to any listening text. This may not be the only way to develop students listening or to plan a listening lesson, but it has been found to be effective and motivating for students.

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