



EFOP-3.4.3-16-2016-00014



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Teaching Listening

This teaching material has been made at the University of Szeged, and supported by the European Union.

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1. Introduction

In language teaching, the main four skill areas discussed are reading, listening, writing and speaking. Reading and listening are receptive skills, since they are based on the language learners' ability to comprehend written and aural texts, while writing and speaking are productive skills and are based on the active written and spoken language production of the language learner.

The focus of the present unit is listening. We are going to explore

- in what situations people need to listen to texts in real life and in classrooms,
- what the challenges are and what aids are at our disposal
- and how and where listening can be practised

in order to gain a better insight into how language teachers can prepare their learners to be able to listen to and understand target language texts.

2. Listening situations

2.1 In real life

We are surrounded by texts all our lives. If you think of an average day of yours, be it a work day or a day off, you will probably realise how many and how versatile texts you hear in how many different situations. Many of these texts may be in your mother tongue, but others may be in any of the foreign languages you are familiar with.



Thinking task 1

Make a list of at least 10 kinds of situations in which you expect your future learners to have to listen to (and understand) some kind of English speech. Think of all possible aspects of their lives: their studies, their work life, as well as their private lives.

Obviously, given the incredibly wide variability of your future learners and the life situations they might find themselves in, an exhaustive list is impossible to compile. Aim at a representative selection.



Key

Study

1. the listening component of various language exams
2. the speaking component of various language exams – where they have to understand the examiner
3. the teacher and fellow students in the various language courses they might take
4. lectures and talks connected to their studies

Work

5. job interviews
6. presentations at work
7. meetings at work
8. telephone conversations, tele- or video-conferences

Private sphere

9. listening to or watching news, sports programs or documentaries on TV or in the radio or online
10. films
11. announcements at railway stations or airports when travelling abroad
12. receiving some kind of instructions as to how to go about doing something
13. arranging some kind of official matter with some authority abroad
14. engaging in private conversations with individuals of other nationalities – using English as a common language
15. listening to songs

2.2 In coursebooks

When engaging in foreign language learning, we are exposed to aural input from the very first moment on. The majority of the course books currently available have also been written with the importance of developing listening as a skill in mind.

Now open and do Task 1 in the attached folder before reading on. Please use the key to confirm your answers.



Please note

You probably concluded that there is a surprisingly *large amount of audio material* accompanying these coursebooks – even at higher levels. This is essential for the learning process, because of the very complicated relationship between spelling and pronunciation in English, and the many challenges that learners face when listening to spoken English, which we are going to explore in the next section.

Producing quality audio support requires a high degree of professionalism and huge investment of effort, consequently not every coursebook series includes so much of it. Try to select ones that do to teach from – it helps both your work and your learners' learning process tremendously.

3. Challenges and aids

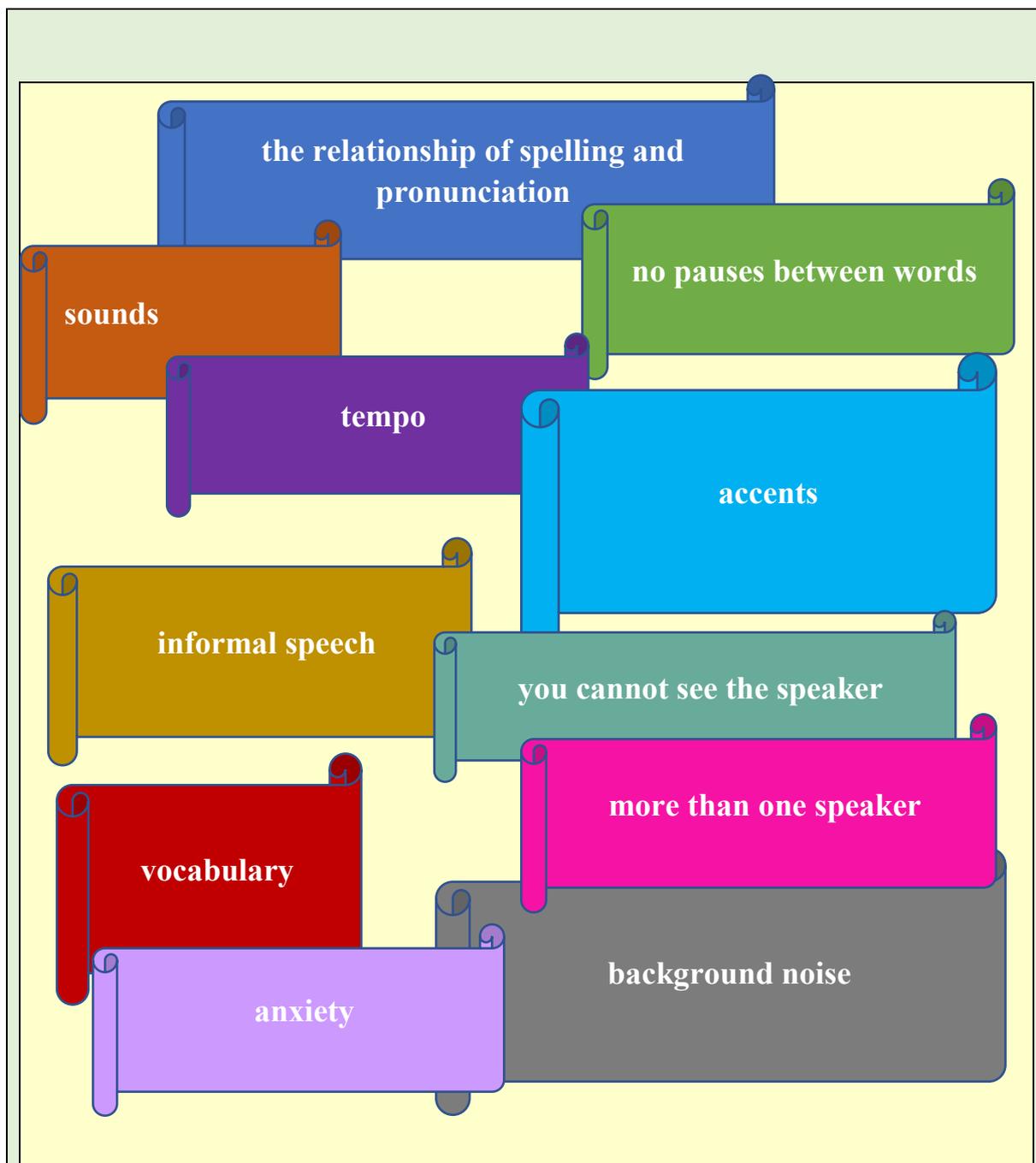


Thinking task 2

When listening to a text in English, learners are faced with a number of challenges. Can you think of some? List as many as you can think of.

Now take a look at the list of the listening challenges. The list is based on the author's experiences with her learners over the decades, and which most teachers that she has trained and talked to, and most methodology coursebook writers seem to agree on, eg. Hedge (2000:236-242), Ur (2012:103-105), Ur (1984).

Think about them and try and come up with an explanation why they may present a difficulty for the listener.



Key

1. the relationship of spelling and pronunciation

The relationship of spelling and pronunciation in English is highly complicated and complex – often seemingly arbitrary. This makes it difficult to recognise words that we are already familiar with in

their written forms. It helps a lot if the learner doesn't only pay attention to the spelling but also pronunciation of the words that he learns.

2. sounds

There are sounds in any language that may not exist in another – and these are very difficult to hear out and distinguish from phonemes that sound similar to the foreign ear (e.g. for the speakers of many languages the initial phonemes of *thin* and *sin*). Again, the importance of teaching/learning the pronunciation of words for successful listening cannot be stressed enough.

3. no pauses between words

In connected speech there are often *no pauses between words* but whole chunks of the utterance are blurred together. This makes it difficult to recognise where one word ends and the next one begins.

4. informal speech

When listening to *informal* (i.e. not carefully planned and articulated) *speech*, the learner is faced with additional challenges at the discourse level:

- there are many *contractions* (I'm, He'd) and *elisions* (wətʃɪduɪn for What is she doing?)
- unplanned, spontaneous speech is full of *hesitations, false starts, restructurings* (sentence starts using one structure, then transitions into another) and incomplete utterances, all of which make it hard to follow.

5. tempo

Unlike in the case of understanding written texts, *the listener doesn't get to choose the tempo*. Spoken language is more often than not too fast for learners

- there is no time to stop and figure out what they have just heard.

6. accents

English is spoken with a *huge variety of accents* – many of which are very different from RP.

7. vocabulary

Like in the case of understanding written texts, the learner has to overcome the difficulty presented by *difficult vocabulary: idioms* (where the meaning of the whole phrase cannot be readily computed from the meaning of the individual words eg. He hit the roof when...), *slang, dialectal/regional vocabulary, specialist topic vocabulary/jargon/technical terms*. The crucial difference is that the listener cannot stop and think, figure out, look up etc – the text keeps coming at him at a speed he did not choose to start with.

8. background noise

Background noise might be present.

9. more than one speaker

More than one speaker might speak at the same time.

10. you cannot see the speaker

When listening to audio recordings, *we cannot see the speaker(s)*. This deprives us from a large variety of visual clues that in real life listening situations aid poor comprehension: the speakers gestures, facial expressions and posture/moves, as well as all kinds of environmental clues that reveal where the communication takes places and what it is about.

11. anxiety

In some listening situations we experience a considerable degree of anxiety which acts as a kind of internal fog or noise in the brain of the listener and limits his capacity to comprehend the speech coming at him.



Please note

All these challenges create gaps in understanding that the learner has to bridge. It is not much different from laying a puzzle: the more gaps we have the more difficult it is to see the whole picture.

Ur (2012:104) calls these gaps ‘noise’, the idea being that ‘in such case a gap is left, which is filled, as far as the listener is concerned, by meaningless buzz’. Tricia Hedge (2000:236) refers to the same phenomena as ‘uncertainties’.

In order for the listener to listen successfully, they have to fill the gaps – but this takes time. For foreign language listeners it takes considerably more time, which they might not have, since the speaker carries on talking and they need to listen on.

In addition to the difficulties caused by gaps in understanding, there are two common challenges that should be addressed in class:

12. the need to understand every word

Many foreign language learners shoot themselves in the foot by being reluctant to listen selectively. They feel a(n often obsessive) psychological need to understand every word, which is most of the time impossible. And while desperately trying to reconstruct what has just been said, they are missing the following incoming information – and sooner or later give up completely out of frustration and a feeling of failure. Learners need guidance and practice in *listening selectively*: gauging the importance of the incoming input and paying more attention to those bits that are essential for comprehension, while computing a rough gist of or ignoring the rest. (See also:...Ur (2012:107), Ur (1984:15))

13. fatigue

When listening to longer stretches of speech, the *learner's concentration declines and after a while fatigue sets in*. Learners vary in terms of how long they can keep up acute concentration, but in most listening situations it is impossible to keep it up as long as the situation lasts. The importance of not trying to understand every word but listening selectively cannot be stressed enough here as well. (See also Ur (1984:19))



14. sound quality

One more feature has to be mentioned:

Sound coming through the sound system of any kind of gadget, let it be your computer, your mobile phone or the cinema sound system, is physically different from sound that you perceive through the air. The sound quality (i.e fidelity and intelligibility) of an electronic device can vary a lot, but what is common in all is that in recorded sound a large range of very high and very low

frequencies are missing, which makes the audio input poorer in a way. In our technological age our brains are getting more and more used to ‘machine sound’, but the differences might matter when trying to understand recorded speech.

Now open and do Task 2 in the attached folder before reading on. Please use the key to confirm your answers.

Purpose and prediction

An additional powerful comprehension aid is the fact that in most listening situations we do not just accidentally overhear something, but are *listening with intention*, with a definite purpose: we need to get some information, we would like to understand some sort of ‘story’ (what happened), we need instructions to do something, etc.

The purpose that we are listening with should not be neglected as a comprehension aid as it ‘makes us’ predict the content and the kind of language that we might hear. Let’s say, for instance, that we want to learn the height of something – in this case we are expecting to hear a number and the unit word (meter, feet, millimetre, etc.) after it. Prediction is a valuable support of comprehension: verifying our active predictions is much easier for the brain as understanding something from scratch, and thus it keeps us motivated to listen and make an effort to understand.

4. Practising listening

4.1 What can the learner practise and where?

Our goal as language teachers is to prepare our learners, as best as we can, to successfully cope with the listening situations they might have to face in their lives. In order to achieve this, *we have to create opportunities in the lesson for the learners to cope with those scenarios and/or give them advice and suggestions as to how they might practice these out of the classroom.*

Now open and do Task 3 in the attached folder before reading on. Please use the key to confirm your answers.

4.2 Practising listening in class

As we have seen in 2.2, coursebooks ideally contain a wealth of audio materials of all sorts, with all sorts of purposes: presenting and practising the pronunciation of new words and structures, simply providing ample audio input for language learning (the audio version of the language tasks and reading materials), and practising comprehending longer audio texts.

In this section, we are going to focus on the last of these and look into *what procedure coursebooks typically suggest for processing listening texts in class*. The days when the teacher simply pushed the button and said ‘listen and answer the questions’ are gone now. Thanks to advances in cognitive psychology and ELT methodology, we know a great deal about how the brain copes with text comprehension – and coursebook writers, as well as teacher trainers, tap into this vast amount of knowledge when designing the activities.

Now open and do Task 4 in the attached folder before reading on. Please use the key to confirm your answers.



Summary

In the present unit you were asked to think about the possible situations in which people listen to texts in real life and in classrooms. You were guided through the major challenges and were introduced to a number of aids that are at their disposal. As a future language teacher, you were also given insight into how and where listening can be practiced.

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Teaching Listening: Task 1

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Task 1

Here are three sample units taken from three different levels of the same coursebook series – one from for beginners, one for intermediate and one for advanced learners (the 1st, 4th and 6th (and highest) level of this series).

Open each of the sample units and study them carefully. The little black squares next to the number of the activity indicate that the learner is asked to listen to some audio material to do the task.

New Headway Beginner 4th edition

https://elt.oup.com/catalogue/items/global/adult_courses/new_headway/beginner_fourth_edition/?cc=de&selLanguage=de

New Headway Intermediate 4th edition

https://elt.oup.com/catalogue/items/global/adult_courses/new_english_file/upper-intermediate/?cc=global&selLanguage=en

New Headway Advanced 4th edition

https://elt.oup.com/catalogue/items/global/adult_courses/new_headway/advanced/?cc=global&selLanguage=en&mode=hub

After having studied the units, answer the following questions:

- a) What kinds of exercises/activities are accompanied by audio material in these three units? Make a composite list.
- b) Can you see some similarities and differences between the three levels? What can they be attributed to?



Key

a)

1. Audio versions of the texts through which the new language is presented
2. Solutions to language exercises (typically the ones practising language items – grammar or vocabulary - that are just being introduced)
3. Suggested solutions for activities in which learners formulate their own answers
4. Exercises aiming to present and practise the pronunciation of new or difficult words
5. Exercises aiming to present and practise stress and intonation
6. The audio version of reading texts
7. Listening comprehension tasks – audio texts with the goal of improving listening comprehension

b)

	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced
1. Audio versions of the texts through which the new language is presented	✓	✓	
2. Solutions to language exercises (typically the ones practising language items – grammar or vocabulary - that are just being introduced)	✓ nearly all	✓	✓ only of oral exercises
3. Suggested solutions for activities in which learners formulate their own answers	✓	✓	
4. Exercises aiming to present and practise the pronunciation of new or difficult words	✓	✓	
5. Extra, awareness raising and systematising pronunciation exercises	---		
5. Exercises aiming to present and practise stress and intonation	✓	✓	
6. The audio version of reading texts	✓	✓	✓
7. Listening comprehension tasks – audio texts with the goal of improving listening comprehension	✓	✓	✓

Comparing and contrasting:

- * The whole series seems to include a large amount of audio support.
- * New language is always presented with pronunciation. (In the sample unit of the advanced book there was no new language presented, hence the lack of this type of audio material.)
- * The solutions of the exercises including new language items are presented in the spoken version as well.
- * In the intermediate book, when calling the learner's attention to the pronunciation of some tricky new words, exercises that compare and contrast similar, already known words, are included. At the first level this would not make much sense as the learner does not know enough vocabulary yet. At higher levels there is similar systematic pronunciation work in all the coursebooks of this series, but not necessarily in every unit – hence the lack of it in the advanced free sample unit.



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Teaching Listening: Task 2

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Task 2

Here is a selection of some possible listening situations (cf. Task 1). For each, write in the number(s) of the most characteristic challenge(s) that the situation presents, then think of one or two features of each listening situation which help the learner to understand what he hears – thus balancing out, at least to some extent, the difficulties.

Listening situation	Difficulties	What helps
1. the listening component of various language exams		
1. lectures and talks connected to their studies		
3. telephone conversations, tele- or video-conferences		
4. listening to or watching news, sports programs or documentaries on TV or in the radio or online		
5. films		
6. announcements at railway stations or airports when travelling abroad		
7. engaging in private conversations with individuals of other nationalities – using English as a common language		
8. listening to songs		
9. Your own:		
10. Your own:		



Key

Listening situation	Difficulties	What helps
1. the listening component of various language exams	can be all, 10-14 especially acute here	- the task to go with the listening text reveals information about the content of the text, as well as some key vocabulary in the written form
2. lectures and talks connected to their studies	1, 2, 3 (4-7 should be minimised by the lecturer!) 10 in the case of audio recordings 12, 13 14 if recorded or a mic is used	- can see the speaker - there is usually visual support available (illustrations, ppt slides etc.) - a good lecturer employs a fair amount of 'redundancy' i.e. repeating or paraphrasing - a good lecturer 'signposts' his talk, i.e. uses discourse markers like 'There are three reasons for this', 'To sum up...' etc. - the listener might have the chance to ask for clarification - if recorded: can stop and investigate, and can rewind and listen again
3. telephone conversations, tele- or video-conferences	all, perhaps not 9, and not 10 if video conference	- can ask for clarification - can ask for repetition - if video: can see the speaker and thus gain some paralinguistic clues (maybe also some environmental ones)
4. listening to or watching news, sports programs or documentaries on TV or in the radio or online	1-3 7 12-14	- plenty of visual clues - can usually record and wind back for repetition or clarification
5. films	all except 10	- plenty of visual clues - can usually record (or we are watching a recording) – can wind back for repetition or clarification - most of it we don't have to understand too accurately

6. announcements at railway stations or airports when travelling abroad	1, 2, 5, 6, 8 10, 11, 12, 14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the language that we can expect to hear is restricted in range – so we have to ‘recognise’ from a predicted choice rather than really understand precisely - there is usually some visual confirmation (the info is also written on some board)
7. engaging in private conversations with individuals of other nationalities – using English as a common language	1-9 maybe 11 12,13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the utterances are relatively short - there is a lot of ‘redundancy’ (Ur 2012:104) in the communication: repetitions, rephrasing etc. - can ask for clarification - can ask for repetition - can ask the speaker to slow down - can see the speaker and thus gain a wealth of paralinguistic clues - as listener and speaker share the same environment, there is a wealth of environmental clues
8. listening to songs	1,2 3, 8 - the melody can blur the speech and thus act as a kind of background noise 6, 7 - informal words, slang and individual, free use of certain words 9 – a blend of various voices and sounds of instruments Possibly 10 14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - most students are highly motivated by listening to songs – it can disinhibit students and at same time stimulate them. This condition is optimal for learning - there are usually lots of repetitions in the words of a song
9. Your own:		
10. Your own:		



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Teaching Listening: Task 3

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Task 3

Look at the listening scenarios (including the ones that you came up with) in *Thinking task 1* and tick the ones that you think we can rehearse in the classroom. Then brainstorm yourself and think of possibilities for the learners to expose themselves to the kinds of listening situations that do not lend themselves to classroom practice.



Key

Here are some comments that might help you:

1. the listening component of various language exams
 - very easy to rehearse in class, and the learner can find plenty of additional material on the internet to practice
2. the speaking component of various language exams, where they have to understand the examiner
 - if you are working towards an exam with your students, get familiar with the task types and the roles of the examiner, including what language he or she is likely to use – and rehearse it with your learners
3. the teacher and fellow students in the various language courses they might take
 - this happens as a matter of course in the lesson
4. lectures and talks connected to their studies
 - when teaching a general course, we probably don't know where our learners are going to end up and what kind of lectures they might need to listen to. With advanced learners, listening to a selection of recorded talks like for example the one on the ted.com website might offer some preparation. If we have a homogenous ESL group, we can browse on the internet for talks about the relevant field to practice on, of course.
5. job interviews
 - in Business English courses they are a must. If you teach BE, you should get prepared to offer rehearsal in job interviews.
6. presentations at work
 - it is much more difficult to give presentations than to follow, but if your learners express that they need practice in it, try to find 'talking' presentations on the internet in their field of work.

7. meetings at work

- this is, to some extent, rehearsed in the lesson in the form of interaction among the students. Life will supply additional practice for your learners at their workplaces.

8. telephone conversations, tele- or video-conferences

- they require a bit of effort to rehearse in the lesson, especially in group lessons. As we saw above, the main difficulties here are the distortions resulting from machine voice, with an additional loss of visual clues in telephone conversations.

As regards the difficulty of not seeing each other: getting your learners into pairs, making them sit with their backs to each other and carry out a conversation task that simulates some kind of telephone conversation provides some preparation for such a scenario.

As to machine speech: if you encourage your learners to watch films, series, news broadcasts, documentaries and vlogs, they will get accustomed to the somewhat poorer machine audio input. In today's online world, you can expect most of your students to get plenty of practice in their work and private lives.

9&10. news, sports programs, films or documentaries

- you can include some in your courses, and encourage them to do more of it in their own time

11. announcements at railway stations or airports when travelling abroad

- these do not lend themselves easily to practising in class, of course. But on the internet you will find samples that you can bring into class provided the technical requirements are met where you teach. Simply search for 'railway announcements', 'airport announcements' or listening to announcements'.

12. receiving some kind of instructions as to how to go about doing something

- you can select topics in which your learners can expect to have to follow instructions in the future, write your own script and tell them a series of instructions in class. Or find how-to videos on the internet

13. arranging some kind of official matter with some authority abroad

- this is again not very easy to rehearse in the lesson. The key here is to teach the relevant words and phrases for the scenarios that they might find themselves in (immigration at the airport, registering somewhere etc.)

14. engaging in private conversations with individuals of other nationalities

- this is again difficult to practise in class (other than with their own group mates). Watching series, vlogs and films provides some practice, and you can encourage your learners not to shy away from opportunities to practise in their private lives.

15. listening to songs

- although your students probably listen to a lot of music, they might not pay attention to the words. If you listen to some songs together in the lessons, you might encourage them to listen out for the words by showing them the benefits of it: songs can be an entertaining opportunity to practise understanding English, even if this special version of English, which the lyrics of songs sung with accompanying music are...



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Teaching Listening: Task 4

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Task 4

Click on the following links and look at the Listening sections of the following sample units taken from three current popular coursebooks. Page numbers are given for easier reference.

Study the activities designed around the actual listening experience and answer the question: What seems to be the standard procedure when dealing with a listening text in class?

New English File Pre-Intermediate

https://elt.oup.com/catalogue/items/global/adult_courses/new_english_file/pre-intermediate/?cc=global&selLanguage=en

The listening comprehension section is on page 77, Exercise 3 a and b in the strict sense – but study the whole of Unit 7A to see how the lessons build up towards it.

You can observe the same structure in 7B, with exercise 5 (page 79) as the listening task and all the other tasks build towards it.

English File Third Edition Intermediate Plus

https://elt.oup.com/catalogue/items/global/adult_courses/english_file_third_edition/intermediate-plus/?cc=de&selLanguage=de

Study pages 54-55 and 60-61.

New Headway 4th Edition Pre-Intermediate

https://elt.oup.com/catalogue/items/global/adult_courses/new_headway/pre-intermediate_fourth_edition/?cc=global&selLanguage=en&mode=hub

Study all the activities on page 25.



Key

The previous parts of the lesson, as well as one or two activities in the listening section, prepare the learners for the listening experience. Some of these (mostly teacher-led) activities aim at making them familiar with the topic of the listening text by activating or supplying background knowledge. A fair amount of topic



knowledge makes it much easier for the listeners to quickly decode information and fill those gaps in understanding that we talked about in Section 3 above.

Other pre-listening activities make sure that the learners will understand key vocabulary in the text.



The activities to complete while or right after listening to the text seem, on the surface, to fulfil the aim of checking comprehension. However, their roles reach far beyond this. On one hand they provide a purpose for the listening activity (the importance of which we emphasized at the end of Section 3). On the other hand, they also serve as a useful aid to comprehension by segmenting the

listening text (one question for each important segment), providing paraphrases for key sentences of the text (the question doesn't repeat the relevant part word by word but reformulates it – and thereby can help comprehension: if the learner didn't understand it the way it was in the text, he might understand it this way).

The students usually complete the while-listening activities individually, on their own. An important part of the listening lesson is a detailed feedback session to see how they coped with the text and the tasks. If there is enough time, they can be asked to compare their answers in pairs or groups, which makes them think through some of their answer again and try to convince their groupmates if it comes to that. Although all this does not entail much listening (other than listening to each other speaking), it is a useful comprehension activity, which can at the same time serve as a brilliant speaking activity if the students speak to each other in English.



The main part of the feedback session is teacher-led again, just like most of the pre-listening activities. Teachers often begrudge the time for a detailed, discussion-style feedback session, and simply give the right answers or refer the student to a solution key. The crucial role of feedback in the learning process, however, cannot be emphasized enough.

Not only does it serve as valuable information to the teacher (and the learners) about where they are in the learning process, but it also consolidates the material. In the case of listening, the benefits of discussing their answers include:

- it confirms comprehension
- it clarifies uncertain or foggy parts
- the teacher can suggest useful strategies to deal with this or that difficulty next time.



Follow-up activities

They can be of many kinds. In the sample units you can find the following, most common types:

- pronunciation work (New English File pre-intermediate page 77, exercise 4)
- a speaking activity based on the text (New English File pre-intermediate page 77 exercise 5 and page 79, exercise 5d, New English File Intermediate Plus page 55, exercise 3f and page 61, exercise 7e)
- a writing activity based on the text (New English File Intermediate Plus page 61, exercise 8)
- dictation of part of the text – which raises the learners’ awareness to details and their gaps in grammar (e.g. is it boy’s or boys?) and spelling (e.g. is it sea or see?) (New Headway Pre-Intermediate page 25, exercise 6)
- project work on the topic (New Headway Pre-Intermediate page 25, exercise 7)