

“I like to listen. I have learned a great deal from listening carefully. Most people never listen.”

Ernest Hemingway

Teaching Listening

Listening is definitely the first skill children acquire. As soon as they enter this world they start listening. First they distinguish their mother’s voice from other sounds. It has been proved that they recognize the difference between corresponding voiced and voiceless consonants very early. They still don’t produce any words; they just cry, coo and babble, preparing their vocal cords for later tasks. Children start talking at roughly the same age. It’s impossible to say of any child exactly when he/she has started to talk because it is not clear what should count as a criterion – single words or two-word utterances or real sentences? We can be sure that a child needs a period of 18 or a bit more than 20 months for preparation. This “silent” period is filled with listening. It enables all normal children to acquire the language they hear spoken around them gradually without special instruction.

Classroom atmosphere should be as close as possible to real-life situations. Therefore the teacher shouldn’t insist on making students speak English from the very beginning. At least some of them will need the “silent” period. What the teacher really should do from the very beginning is talking English to them most of the time to create the English atmosphere in the classroom and make the surroundings natural. Of course hardly any student will spend a whole lesson listening. The teacher also gives the students as much visual back-up as possible. He/she uses gestures, miming, facial expressions, movement and pictures. The teacher just should remember that once something has been said, then it disappears. That is why the teacher can interrupt his speech from time to time, repeat the item, illustrate it with the pictures, explain more details, and ask questions to make things clear. This also helps to prolong a concentration span. On the other hand students shouldn’t be overloaded with listening.

Methodologists offer a variety of activities which “will wake your students up, make them move about, create movement and/or noise. Others will calm them down, make them concentrate on what is in front of them, and create a peaceful atmosphere.” This is what listening enables, either to wake students up or calm them down.

Pre-listening activities

Before students start listening, they can be given tasks that will help them to understand the passage better while listening:

- 1 Look at the picture belonging to the topic and guess what the passage will be about.
- 2 Guess which words will be used.
- 3 Read the list of word and omit those you think will not be in the passage.
- 4 Look at the set of simple pictures, omit those which you suppose don’t belong to the passage. Give names to the rest of the pictures.
- 5 Put pictures in logical sequence, and then check while listening.

Activities during listening

TPR (total physical response) activities are desirable especially with young learners. students also can fill in the missing information either with a picture or a word, they can listen and repeat:

- 1 Put up your hand whenever you hear ...
- 2 Follow the instructions.
- 3 Point at the thing mentioned.
- 4 Discover the mistake.
- 5 Put items in order.
- 6 Listen and colour.

After-listening activities

Communication works both ways therefore this part should be more productive:

- 1 Mime the dialog or the story.
- 2 Draw a picture illustrating what you have heard.
- 3 Fill in the grid.
- 4 Listen and repeat. How much do you remember?
- 5 Out of the set of pictures choose those which have been mentioned in the listening passage.

A creative teacher could prolong the list of activities and invent a lot more of them. Just put listening to the centre of your struggling.

Listening cannot be taught or learned in isolation. It is integrated with other language skills. Babies listen to their first language for a long time before attempting to produce it. The parents patiently repeat first words and great with excitement the child's first efforts at speaking. Mistakes are not only overlooked but also enjoyed and imitated. Love, self-esteem, and confidence drive the desire to learn. Teachers at school take the place of wise parents at home. Do they still remember the atmosphere mentioned above?