

# Independent listening

**Robin Walker** has further ideas on developing learners' listening skills.

In *Did you hear what I said?* in *MET* 29.1 (Walker, 2019), we looked at some of the key features of effective listening, such as the need to make use of contextual clues, and to actively anticipate what you are going to hear both before and while listening. We also saw the critical role of activating and making use of prior knowledge, and lastly, the value of an ongoing negotiation of meaning together with the active repair of misunderstandings.

With this in mind, look at these listening situations in the photos. Think about where the speakers are, who they are, and what opportunities they have for using contextual clues, anticipating content, negotiating meaning, etc.

All four photos show people listening, but they are doing this in two listening contexts that have little in common, as we can see from Table 1.

There are two markedly different situations in which we can find ourselves listening. Photos 1 and 3 are very much the situations I described in detail in *MET* 29.1, and are sometimes referred to as *Interactive listening* (see Trinity College London's *Integrated Skills in English* exam). Photos 2 and 4 show quite a different listening situation, which we can call *Independent listening* because of the limited or non-existent opportunities to 'take part' in the process.

Not surprisingly, independent listening is significantly more difficult than interactive listening. But today we cannot avoid situations that require us to become independent listeners: students in lectures, listening to TV, radio, podcasts or any kind of recorded material, people in business meetings, the audience in conferences, and



Photo 1



Photo 2



Photo 3



Photo 4

**Table 1. Interactive versus independent listening**

Feature of listening	Photo 1 + 3	Photo 2 + 4
<b>Eye contact &amp; facial expression</b>	Constant, natural and unlimited	Limited or non-existent
<b>Possibility of using contextual clues</b>	Frequently possible and automatic	Limited or non-existent
<b>Possibility of anticipating what the speaker will say</b>	Frequently possible (you know the speaker well and you are part of the conversation)	Limited or even non-existent
<b>Prior knowledge of topic</b>	Usually very good (you don't normally talk about topics you have no knowledge of)	Limited (not 'non-existent' as we don't usually listen to topics we know nothing about)
<b>Opportunity to seek repetition/clarification</b>	Always possible and completely normal	Limited or non-existent
<b>Opportunity to indicate that you (the listener) understand the speaker</b>	Always possible and completely normal	Limited or non-existent
<b>Control over speed of speech</b>	Always possible and completely normal	Limited or non-existent

so on. Life is characterised as much by independent listening as it is by interactive, which means that as language teachers, we need to prepare our learners specifically to deal with it.

### Skills and strategies for independent listening

There are various skills and strategies that listeners can apply to independent listening, the first of which is to prepare the topic in advance. If they are going to go to a lecture or business meeting, there will be a session title and summary, or a meeting agenda. Studying these will activate the listener's prior knowledge and bring to the forefront of their mind the vocabulary that they are likely to encounter while listening. Sometimes this will come into their mind in L1 and they'll realise that although the word is key to the topic, they don't know how to say it in English. Now is the time to get out the dictionary. Once in the lecture/meeting, that's not feasible.

Another thing that happens when learners think about what they're going to hear is that questions come into their mind. These cause them to anticipate what they are going to hear. That doesn't mean that they WILL hear it – sometimes they'll anticipate something and then the speaker does not mention it. But the act of making a list of possible contents of the lecture/talk/meeting before it happens, sets the 'anticipation machine' going, and *this* makes your learners better listeners (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012).

Another strategy that learners can apply to become efficient independent listeners is checking that they are applying the right type of listening to the task they have in hand. Should they be mainly listening for gist, or does the task require them to be listening for specific information or, worse still, listening for detail and a full understanding of the text? This last is exhausting, but if a recorded voice is giving you instructions over the phone, getting the gist of what is said is hardly going to do the trick.

Below are some of the skills and strategies that will help learners

improve their independent listening. As teachers we need to bring these into the classroom in an organised, programmed way, and that is what we turn to next.

### Strategies

- Prepare the topic in advance – especially topic areas and corresponding vocabulary.
- Activate your prior knowledge – even in class as a student you know something about the topic. Look at your notes from the last lecture, for example.

**“Interactive listening and independent listening are not the same. They share common features but differ in many ways, and so the skills and strategies that support effective listening need identifying and then teaching in class.”**

- Make predictions about possible content. Even if your predictions are wrong, you listen more effectively for having made them.
- Look out for discourse markers. New ideas are usually marked by the speaker using a high pitch. Secondary information is usually marked with a low pitch where the speaker drops their voice.

- Recognise discourse structures. Different types of text (genres) have different structures. If you know what the normal structure is, this allows you to predict what will come up next because of what the speaker is talking about now.

### Skills

- Be able to choose and use the right listening strategy. Decide if you will need to listen for gist, for specific information or for detailed understanding.
- Practise spotting the key words. These are usually nouns and verbs. Sometimes an adjective will be important. Key words will always be louder and more stressed in the speech flow.
- Learn to deal with connected speech where words run together and modify each other through vowel reduction, elision, assimilation and coalescence.
- Learn to 'let go'. It might be tempting to try to work out the meaning of a new word from the context, and when you are reading, this is a good idea. But if you start to deduce meanings when listening, by the time you've done so the speaker has moved on and you are lost. Learn to 'let go'. If a word is important, it will come back up again.
- Practise taking notes (EAP Foundation). Forget screen grabs with your smartphone. Learn to take notes. To take notes you have to understand what the speaker is saying, which pushes you to listen (and listen hard). And remember to take notes for yourself. It doesn't matter that nobody else understands them.

### Activities to help learners improve their independent listening

It is commonplace to talk about listening for gist, for specific information and for detailed understanding. All three are relevant to independent listening and will need practising. However, in my experience, listening for specific information is the easiest for most learners as it is always done with a clear idea of exactly what to listen for.

Listening for gist is another matter altogether. It is so often the ‘first listening’ in coursebooks, but many learners find sorting out the gist from the detail genuinely difficult. Listening for gist, then, needs scaffolded practice, with success built in to the initial exercises aimed at practising this vital 21st-century skill. Coursebook listening practice is usually focused mainly on communication, and as a result is testing understanding rather than *teaching* listening. Students choose one of the possible answers from the options or True/False questions that usually accompany coursebook listening. But often they have not really understood much, and ultimately become discouraged as they progress elsewhere with their English, but fail to understand the spoken language better.

Look at the four exercises in Table 2 for practising listening for gist. All four are best done with students working in pairs or small groups, and being openly encouraged to discuss what they heard before finally choosing an answer. This is the indirect negotiation of meaning that we talked about in *MET* 29.1 (Walker, 2019).

Done in the same order as in Table 3, these four activities take learners from heavily scaffolded activities (1 & 2) where success is almost guaranteed in order to generate success and confidence, to activity 4, which reflects the sort of pressure independent listeners are under in real life, where they will only hear the speaker once.

This idea of heavily scaffolding listening activities initially, then gradually removing the scaffolding, can be applied to listening for detail or listening and note-taking. Table 3 gives an idea as to how this might be done for listening and note-taking. As with the exercises for listening for gist, these four activities take the learner from a relatively easy first exercise to a real-life and very demanding final exercise by slowly reducing the scaffolding.

If it were necessary to practise listening for specific information, it

**Table 2. Scaffolded activities for practising listening for gist**

Listening activity	Difficulty
1) Listen to the recording and put the ideas in a prepared list into the right order based on what you hear. If you need to, ask to listen again as often as you need to.	Easy, especially if the list of key ideas is well written.
2) Listen to the recording and then choose the best title from the titles in the list. If you need to, ask to listen again.	Straightforward if the titles are well chosen.
3) Listen to the recording and then write a ‘tweet’ or a short sentence summarising the main idea of what you heard. If you need to, ask to listen again to selected sections of the recording.	Quite hard, but the writing gives the students time to think.
4) Listen to the recording and then turn and tell your partner(s) the general idea of what the recording was about in a short sentence. CAREFUL – you won’t be allowed to listen again.	Hard. Almost immediately after listening, the learner has to summarise key ideas.

INCREASED INDEPENDENCE

**Table 3. Scaffolded activities for practising listening for detailed understanding**

Listening activity	Difficulty
1) Listen to the recording and then choose the correct key data from the options provided. If you need to, ask to listen again as often as you need.	Easy, especially if the data is good.
2) Listen to the recording and then decide if the statements in the exercise are True or False. If you need to, ask to listen again.	Straightforward if the titles are well chosen.
3) Listen to the recording and then fill in the gaps in the skeleton notes for the recording. If you need to, ask to listen again.	Quite hard, but the writing gives the students time to think.
4) Listen to the recording and then turn and tell your partner(s) in as much detail as you can, exactly what the speaker said. CAREFUL – you won’t be allowed to listen again.	Hard. Almost immediately after listening, the learner has to summarise key ideas.

INCREASED INDEPENDENCE



wouldn't be difficult to work out a sequence of four different activities that ran from a heavily scaffolded first activity to a totally unsupported final activity. Something similar could be done to train learners to listen and take notes, which is such an important sub-skill of independent listening, especially in CLIL and EMI environments.

### Resources for teaching independent listening skills

With digital recording and the internet, there is now so much in the way of resources for listening that the teacher's problem is one of choice – what do I need, or better still, what do my learners need? If you are looking at exercises in coursebooks or resource books, it helps to ask one or two questions as you analyse each exercise:

- Is there a good lead-in to the topic, one that will activate the learners' prior knowledge and check that they have the key vocabulary?
- Do the exercises explicitly differentiate between listening strategies (gist, detail, specific information)?
- Are learners openly encouraged to listen for key words as they listen?
- Is note-taking encouraged and supported?
- Are learners helped with the issues that surround connected speech changes in authentic speech?

Not all coursebook exercises would come out well from an analysis based on these questions since, as we saw earlier, all too often they focus on testing understanding rather than improving the learner's listening micro-skills. One resource book that does teach listening, however, is Mark Hancock and Annie McDonald's (2017) excellent *Authentic Listening Resource Pack*, which I reviewed some time ago in the *ELT Journal*.

An excellent free web resource for independent listening practice is EAP



Foundation (see References) which we met earlier in this article. This very useful site is aimed at students preparing to study in the UK at university level, but it offers a lot of interesting materials for all aspects of studying in English, and will also be of use to anybody who is helping learners who are involved in CLIL programmes in their own country. And two almost infinite sources of free listening material are the *English Language Listening Library Online* (see References), and my own favourite, *Three-minute Thesis* (see References), where university research students present their doctoral research in, yes, you guessed, three minutes. It is perfect for students working on their independent listening at levels C1 and C2.

Interactive listening and independent listening are not the same. They share common features but differ in many ways, and so the skills and strategies that support effective listening need identifying and then teaching in class. This last is becoming increasingly important, but can be done, this article shows. And it is worth doing because it will provide our learners with a vital 21st-century skill – independent listening.

### References

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