

# Did you hear what I said?

**Robin Walker** describes how we can really help learners with this difficult skill.

Listening is a key skill when learning English, not just because of what it means to learners using their English outside the classroom, but also because of the benefits of understanding what is being said when inside. But listening is a difficult skill to master for many learners, and unfortunately getting better is not just a question of doing more. Sending learners home to listen to the TV, radio or other types of audio input is no guarantee of improvement, and there is the danger that weaker learners become demoralised after repeated, failed attempts to do it on their own. Acquiring competence in listening is vital, then, but most learners will benefit from teacher guidance as to how best to do this.

## What happens when we listen?

There is now enough quality research for us to have a very good idea as to what happens when people are listening, both in their first language and in a language that they are learning. As a result of years of work in the area of second language listening, academics have been able to provide ELT with a solid background as to what underlies the apparently simple act of listening to a piece of spoken English (Field, 2008).

There is also enough research data to allow us to say that learners who are aware of what is happening as they try to listen, are more successful than learners who do not fully understand the listening process (Jenkins, 2000). That is to say, that as teachers we not only need to know what processes lie at the heart of successful listening, we also

need to remember to help our learners to understand these processes. This is no easy job. No matter how everyday listening is, it remains a complex business where various actions come together to generate success. These include:

- Decoding the acoustic signal (the sound continuum reaching your ears)

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- Making use of contextual clues
- Anticipating what you are going to hear
- Activating and making use of your prior knowledge
- Negotiating meaning and repairing misunderstandings

## Decoding the acoustic signal

With all listeners, but especially with lower-level listeners (i.e. with a listening level of up to almost CEFR B2), the ability to extract individual words or very short lexical phrases from what they are hearing is paramount. Two sub-processes lie behind any success in their attempts to make sense of what is actually reaching their ears – *segmentation* and *recognition*. Segmentation is the ability to divide up the sound continuum of natural speech into separate meaningful chunks, either words or lexical phrases. Segmentation operates on the acoustic signal, or continuum of sound, at word level and above. Recognition, in contrast, operates at word level or below, and is the ability to differentiate between words or syllables that are very similar phonetically, but very different in meaning. *I'll go*, for example, is quite different in meaning to *I'd go*, but they are easily confused in the middle of a phrase or a longer piece of speech.

The more automatic segmentation and recognition are, the more effective the decoding of the acoustic signal is, and the more listeners can focus their attention on the other four areas of listening, and, more importantly, on the content. Ironically, this means regularly stepping away from coursebook exercises that focus



on listening for content, and dedicating time in class to practising segmentation and recognition. Practising these sub-skills on their own, and detached from communicative listening activities that focus primarily on content, might seem unwise at first. However, it is very similar to what tennis players do when they spend a day practising their serve or their backhand. They are not playing tennis when they do this, but the sub-skill they are practising will help them to play tennis better in the future.

A simple way of giving students practice in segmentation is to play them very short phrases from a listening text they have just done, and to ask them how many words they hear in each phrase. Alternatively, read the target phrases or sentences yourself at natural speed. This exercise sounds simple, but where there are numerous contractions and weak forms in a phrase, many lower-level learners will struggle to agree on the number of words. The sort of phrases I used with my own students include:

1. If she asks, I'll tell her everything. (8 words – contractions count as two)
2. What'll you do if they don't arrive. (9 words)

On seeing the answers, my students often ask me to say a phrase again,

complaining about how much the English mumble. But they are always happy to do a similar segmentation exercise a couple of weeks later.

Work on recognition is also easy to practise. A lot of pronunciation work focusing on discriminating between minimal pairs is also good for learning to identify similar-sounding words when they appear in a listening activity. Work on minimal pair discrimination became discredited as a result of the content focus of communicative approaches from the 1980s onwards. It was argued that confusions between *hat* and *hut* would not happen in an authentic situation since the context would make it clear which was intended. This is largely true with higher-level learners, learners listening at CEFR B2 and beyond, but as John Field (2008) points out, the energy spent on actually thinking about the context is energy taken away from dealing with other aspects of listening. In addition, the work of Jennifer Jenkins (2000) suggests that lower-level learners depend quite strongly on what they hear, that is to say on the acoustic signal, and are not very good at using the context to resolve any conflicts between what they think they heard, and what, in logic, they must have heard.

### Making use of contextual clues

Precisely because lower-level learners do not seem to make best use of contextual clues, it is important that as teachers we deliberately draw our learners' attention to those that are available from the headings and images that support listening activities in any good coursebook. Take the now classic *ship / sheep* confusion. I remember being thoroughly confused by an Italian friend in North Wales when we were out walking in the mountains. We had sat down to rest when he said *The ships. They are free?* He said this just as I was watching the ferry set out from Wales towards Ireland. An 'interesting' conversation, and it ended in a lot of laughter, but in how many other situations would it be easy to confuse *ship* and *sheep*? So, if your coursebook has a picture of a vast plain of grazing land, it's unlikely that the speaker will talk about *ships*. And if the supporting images or headings connect to a marine theme, then it is more than likely that the speaker will.

It is important, then, to train learners to make use of the contextual clues provided by their coursebook in the form of images and headings before they begin to listen. Contextual clues will help

resolve issues of recognition, which will free up processing power in the short-term memory to deal with other aspects of listening. At the same time, examining contextual clues will push learners to think about the likely contents of what they are going to listen to. That is to say, it will push learners to anticipate.

### Anticipating what you are going to hear

One of the things that all learners should know about good listeners is the use they make of anticipating possible contents. Research has shown (Jenkins, 2000) that learners who actively try to guess what the speaker is going to say, are more successful than those who sit and wait for things to be said, and then try to make sense of them. After looking at the images and headings that contextualise a listening activity, I often ask my students to guess in advance what they think the speaker(s) will talk about. I accept any and all ideas and make no judgements on their likeliness. Instead, I simply write them on the board. The next step is then automatic; I ask my class to listen and see which of their ideas are actually in the recording, and also to make a mental note of any ideas that they didn't think of, but that the speaker mentioned. This simple exercise in listening for gist promotes the notion of anticipation as a strategy to help you become a more effective listener.



### Activating and making use of your prior knowledge

If I ask my students to guess what the speaker might talk about, I'm not only encouraging them to use anticipation. I'm also activating any knowledge they already have about the topic of the listening. Activating your prior knowledge before you start reading or listening is so automatic in mother tongue that it is easy for us to forget to do this when listening in second language. Again, it is our job as teachers to show learners the importance of activating and using their prior knowledge as a key listening strategy.

One way that I try to get learners to understand the important role of prior knowledge in understanding a text, is to show them a photo that I took

as I was driving around Murcia, a city near Spain's Mediterranean coast. I was driving north to Madrid, and was initially thrown by the traffic signs that I saw on the motorway. Above is one of them. *Madrid* does not appear anywhere, and did not appear on the next two traffic signs either. But at every moment I knew where to go because I knew that Albacete is to the north of Murcia, whilst Andalucía lies to the south-west and Alicante to the north-east. My prior knowledge of Spanish geography allowed me to make sense of a 'signal' that did not even use the word I was looking for. With listening the process is much the same, and if we don't help our learners to activate the knowledge they already have about the topic of the listening, then we are making their lives unnecessarily difficult, if not impossible, and are actually removing some of the authenticity from the activity itself.

### Negotiating meaning and repairing misunderstandings

Even with contextual clues to help us, even with anticipation to guide us, and even with our prior knowledge to help us to make sense of what we hear, listening still goes astray in real life, even between native speakers. Listening is such a complex business, and inevitably from time to time it fails. And what do we do in real life when we realise we haven't understood what someone is saying to us? Well, we ask them to clarify or to repeat.

Requests for clarification or repetition are so much part of everyday listening





in our mother tongue that just as with anticipation, we tend to forget to actively bring them into classroom listening, and consequently to make it a truly authentic activity. In real-life listening we 'negotiate meaning' in a number of ways, but principally by:

■ **Seeking clarification** by means of phrases such as *I'm not with you.*, *You've lost me there.* or *What do you mean?*

or

■ **Seeking repetition** through phrases such as *Could you say that again?* or *Sorry, what did you say?*, or simply *Sorry?*

But how can our learners practise negotiating meaning in a classroom when they are listening to recorded material, and when their interlocutor is evidently not in the same physical time or place? This was a problem that taxed the mind of listening expert Tony Lynch (1996) and to which he came up with a simple but very effective solution. Essentially, he proposed that as teachers we should train our learners to 'interrupt' the recording in much the same way that they would interrupt a live speaker.

Adopting this idea with my own students, I explain to them the notion of negotiating meaning, and then openly encourage them to raise their hand if they get lost while listening to a recording in the classroom. As soon as I see a hand raised, and following the experience of Tony Lynch, I stop the recording. At this point, my students, who are working in small groups, can take one of four different actions:

1. See if anyone else in the group has understood the problematic section (= seeking clarification)
2. Ask the teacher for further information (= seeking clarification)
3. Ask to hear the problematic section again (= request for repetition)
4. Ask to go on to see if the next section will help (= a sort of anticipation)

In my experience, learners are initially reluctant to raise their hands and stop the recording. However, once they get used to doing this, an enormous amount of useful discussion happens between students in the same group as they pool their understandings of the listening up to that point. Often the discussion happens in their mother tongue, but to have all of the class intensely discussing what they think they have understood, then choosing a course of action based on this, is a sign of success, not failure. They are interacting with the speaker in order to make sense of what they have heard, and although it is an *indirect negotiation*, to use Tony Lynch's term, it is good preparation for the sort of *interactive listening* that they will have to do in real life, with real interlocutors, and which is explicitly measured as a listening sub-skill in exams such as

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Trinity College London's *Integrated Skills in English* (see References).

Listening used to be seen as a passive skill, or at best as a receptive skill. But effective listening is anything but passive, and with the speaker in front of you listening is not just about receiving. Good listeners interact with the speaker, and effective interactive listening is a joint venture, where all involved switch between being listener and being speaker, and where all involved are using contextual clues and their prior knowledge to anticipate and then deal with what is coming next.

But what happens when the speaker is not there, or when it is not appropriate to interact with the speaker, such as in university lectures? In my second article on listening I'll be looking at precisely that, at *independent listening*.

#### References and further reading

Field J (2008) *Listening in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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Vandergrift L & Goh CM (2012) *Teaching and Learning Second Language Listening*. New York: Routledge.

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