

# Listening Techniques for a Comprehension Approach to Language Learning

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Several writers have suggested that listening has a very important role to play in the learning of a second language. This emphasis on listening is related to a corresponding drop in the importance given to speaking in the early stages of learning. This article discusses the requirements of a "listening" approach and describes a range of techniques that meet these requirements. But first we need to look at the basis of a listening approach to language learning.

## Why delay speaking?

One of the strongest arguments for delaying speaking is based on a particular view of what it means to learn a language. Some approaches to language teaching have given a lot of importance to speaking. In the very first lesson learners did speaking drills involving repetition and substitution. The lessons involved almost as much speaking as listening, because listening was seen as a way to present models that learners immediately copied. The aim of learning a language was to speak, and language was viewed as a type of behavior.

An approach that gives more importance to listening is based on different ideas. Nord (1980:17) expresses this view clearly:

Some people now believe that learning a language is not just learning to talk, but rather that learning a language is building a map of meaning in the mind. These people believe that talking may indicate that the language was learned, but they do not believe that practice in talking is the best way to build up this "cognitive" map in the mind. To do this, they feel, the best method is to practice meaningful listening.

In this view of language learning, listening is the way of learning the language. It gives the learner information from which to build up the knowledge necessary for using the language. When this knowledge is built up, the learner can begin to speak. The listening-only period is a time of observation and learning which provides the basis for the other language skills.

## Listening and language learning

What conditions are necessary for language learning to occur? Several writers (Krashen 1981, Newmark 1981, Taylor 1982, Terrell 1982) using different terminology find considerable agreement. Newmark (1981:39), for example, says:

A comprehension approach can work . . . as long as the material presented for comprehension in fact consists of (1) sufficient (2) language instances (3) whose meaning can be inferred by students (4) who are paying attention.

Terrell (1982) and Krashen (1981) would also add that the learner must not feel anxious or threatened by the situation. Let us look at each of these five conditions.

*The Message.* The learners' attention is focused on the message (language instances), not on grammatical rules. Language acquisition is considered to be an un-

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conscious process, and the conscious learning of grammatical rules is not seen as helping this process. According to Krashen (1981), conscious learning can be used only under limited conditions, namely, when the learners have time to do this, when they are able to focus on the form of the message, and when they know a useful applicable rule. Clearly, it is difficult to meet all these conditions. It is often argued that the language rules that grammarians have described are so complicated that it is impossible to apply them consciously. It is also argued that because of our incomplete knowledge of grammatical analysis, teachers are as likely to interfere with learning as to help it.

*Understanding.* The learners must be able to infer the meaning of most of the message, even though there might be some language items in the message that they are not familiar with. This means, of course, that just being exposed to a foreign language is not sufficient to learn it: it is necessary to be able to understand instances of it. Techniques of simplification are therefore very important for a teacher, because these enable the teacher to present the learners with understandable messages. This simplification can be done in two ways: one, by simplifying the grammar and vocabulary, and the other, by using organizational and contextual aids to understanding. It is important that the messages the learners meet include items that are just beyond their present level of knowledge but understandable in context. In this way the learners' command of the language can increase.

*Quantity.* There must be sufficient opportunity for learners to understand messages. Studies of young learners in immersion classes (Campbell 1975) indicate that there needs to be a great deal of listening activity before learners feel ready to speak.

*Interest.* The learners must want to pay attention to the message. For this reason, the messages must be interesting and must involve the learners, so that listening becomes a truly active process. One way of doing this is to use English as a medium for the study of other subjects. The interest then comes from the subject matter. Where English is not taught in this way, interest will become a major concern of the teacher.

*Low Anxiety.* Terrell (1982:124) says:

I am even more convinced that the lowering of affective barriers must be the overriding concern in classroom activities if acquisition is to be achieved.

Stevick (1974) would agree. In defensive learning, the learner sees the learning experience as a threat and a danger to be protected against. In receptive learning there is no reason for these fears to arise. An advantage of delaying speaking is that speaking when you are not ready can be a very embarrassing and threatening activity. Attitudes toward errors can also have an effect on anxiety. Teachers who favor a comprehension approach to language learning believe that when learners begin to

speak, their errors should not be directly corrected.

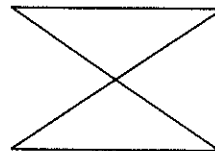
I believe that three solid reasons exist for avoiding direct correction of speech errors: (1) correction of speech errors plays no important role in the progress toward an adult's model of grammar in any natural language-acquisition situation; (2) correction of speech errors will create affective barriers; and (3) correction of speech errors tends to focus the speaker on *form*, promoting learning to the expense of acquisition (Terrell 1982:128).

#### An example

Let us now look at an example of a listening technique, and then we will look at the benefits of a listening-based approach. An obvious way to increase listening and delay speaking is to use pictures. So, learners do activities where they answer by pointing to pictures, drawing or completing pictures, or putting pictures in the right order. In order to maximize the amount of listening, it is important to get the learners to listen to a lot of language before having to make any kind of response. A drawing activity might go like this. (Notice that the learners have to listen to several sentences before they draw; it is not "one sentence—one piece of the drawing.")

Now I want you to draw something that looks a bit like an hourglass. Do you know what an hourglass is? It's made of glass and has sand in it, and the sand runs from one end to the other. You use it to time things. Well, this hourglass is really made of two triangles. The point of one is touching the point of the other. It's just as if one is balancing upside down on the other. We can look at it another way, too. The picture that I want you to draw is made of four lines—two long ones and two short ones. . . .

The description continues in this way with the speaker repeating and explaining until the learners have drawn a simple diagram like this:



It is possible to describe the diagram more efficiently by simply saying:

Draw a horizontal line three centimeters long. About ten centimeters directly above it and parallel to it draw another line the same length. . . .

But this type of description would defeat the purpose of the activity, because it doesn't give as much opportunity for listening.

Gary and Gary (1981) describe the many benefits of delaying speaking and concentrating on listening. These benefits include the following:

1. The learner is not overloaded by having to focus on two or more skills at the same time.

2. It is possible to experience and learn much more of the language by just concentrating on listening. If learners had to be able to say all the material in the lessons, progress would be very slow.

3. It is easy to move very quickly to realistic communicative listening activities. This will have a strong effect on motivation.

4. Learners will not feel shy or worried about their language classes. Having to speak a foreign language, particularly when you know very little, can be a frightening experience. Listening activities reduce the stress involved in language learning.

5. Listening activities are well suited to language laboratories or tape recorders. This can give learners a lot of independence in their learning.

6. Taylor (1982) and others have described the conditions necessary for language acquisition, as contrasted with conscious learning, to take place. Listening-based approaches easily fill the requirements for acquisition to occur and avoid the bad effects of having to produce language before the learner is ready.

Techniques for listening

Let us now look at a range of techniques that can be used in listening-based approaches. As we do this, we will set up a list of features that good techniques for this type of teaching should have.

The *listening to pictures* technique (McComish 1982) is an excellent example of a technique that involves a large quantity of material to listen to and yet requires only a minimal language response. The learners have a big picture in front of them in which several things are happening. The teacher starts describing the picture, and the learners follow the description while looking at the picture. Occasionally the teacher includes a true/false statement. If the description is recorded on a tape, this can be preceded by a buzz to warn learners that the next statement is a test. The learners write *T* or *F* on a sheet of paper, the correct answer is given, and the description continues. Some important features of this technique are that it is very easy to prepare and to mark, and the same picture can be used several times if different descriptions are used with it.

In *picture ordering* (Flenley 1982) the learners see a set of pictures that are in the wrong order. They listen to a description of each of the pictures or to a story, and they put the pictures in the right order. Suitable pictures can be found in picture-composition books or among the comic strips from Sunday newspapers. Instead of using pictures that tell a story, a collection of pictures of faces or cars, for example, can be used. The pictures must be put in the same order as that in which they are described. The same set of pictures can be used again and again with slightly different descriptions and a different order. It is easy to get fluent speakers of English to record descriptions with very little preparation.

The *What is it?* technique (Nation 1978) can be used to produce large quantities of recorded material for listening, and it is also useful as an impromptu technique. The teacher describes something, and the learners have to decide what is being described. The description begins with only a little bit of information, and gradually more and more information is revealed. Here is an example.

I forgot it when I left home this morning. This made me angry because it is useful. I don't like it very much but I need it. Not every person has one, but I think most people do. Some people like to look at it and now many people play with it. Mine is quite heavy. . . .

The rambling description continues with more clues given until the learners guess that a watch is being described. Teachers who are not confident about their own English can follow set patterns when describing.

The *same or different* exercises can be adapted for listening. Usually in these exercises learners work in pairs, and one member of the pair has a picture that he describes to his partner. They try to decide whether the two pictures are the same or different. They must not show their pictures to each other (Nation 1979). When these exercises are used for listening, all the learners

THE SAME OR DIFFERENT ?		FORM A	
1		26	
2		27	
3		28	
4		29	
5		30	
6		31	
7		32	
8		33	
9		34	
10		35	
11		36	
12		37	
13		38	
14		39	
15		40	
16		41	
17		42	
18		43	
19		44	
20		45	
21		46	
22		47	
23		48	
24		49	
25		50	

THE SAME OR DIFFERENT ?		FORM B	
①		26	
2		②7	
③		28	
4		②9	
⑤		30	
6		③1	
⑦		32	
8		③3	
⑨		34	
10		③5	
①1		36	
12		③7	
①3		38	
14		③9	
①5		40	
16		④1	
①7		42	
18		④3	
①9		44	
20		④5	
②1		46	
22		④7	
②3		48	
24		④9	
②5		50	

have the same picture and the teacher has the other picture. This is just like working in pairs except that the teacher is one member of the pair and the class is the other member of the pair. There are several types of exercises that can be used in this way. The exercises can consist of several small pictures or just a large picture with several differences (Nation 1983).

*Listen and choose* exercises are similar to *picture ordering* and *same or different*. The learners listen to a description and choose the picture that is described from a set of similar but slightly different pictures. It is easy to tape-record such descriptions without much preparation. The same sets can be used again and again, by describing different items in the set or getting different people to record descriptions. The descriptions should not be brief; they should add several bits of irrelevant information, should be repetitive, and should be interesting and lively. Brown (1978) suggests that spoken language is used mainly for social reasons and not for conveying detailed information. Where information is conveyed, it is usually given in short bursts. Long, detailed informative pieces of spoken English are uncommon. Accordingly, our listening exercises should not be too dense—that is, they should not pack too much information into a single utterance.

### Features of the techniques

Before we look at a few more exercises, let's look at the important features of the listening techniques that we have just described.

1. The language material, particularly the vocabulary, should be controlled so that learners can understand what they hear. For this reason, if the exercises are recorded, the descriptions should be done by people who are familiar with the learners that will use them, or who are used to controlling what they say.

2. The spoken descriptions should contain some material, but not too much, that is new to the learners. This new material can be a few new words, the occasional new structure, or an unfamiliar function. As long as there are not too many new items, the context will be sufficient to clarify them. Meeting these new items helps learners expand their knowledge of the language.

3. The listening material should be interesting to the learners. Interest leads to increased attention and deeper processing of material. Although the exercises described here do not require the learners to produce much language, they are not passive exercises. The learners have to give close attention in order to be able to do them.

4. The exercises do not require the learners to produce language, so there is little stress or worry associated with doing them.

5. Each exercise should be constructed so that it presents the learners with a large quantity of material. As we have seen, this does not mean that the material consists of closely packed information. It should contain short pieces of relevant information, but it should also contain the same information said in other ways, digressions, comments, and irrelevant details.

6. The exercises require very little preparation and can be tape-recorded. Fluent speakers of English without special training could make recordings if the appropriate pictures or topics were provided. An English-teaching center in Thailand made an excellent set of tapes by getting each visitor to the center to spend a few minutes making a recording. In this way they soon had a large amount of listening material in a wide variety of accents. There is no need to tape-record the material, however, if teachers can do the description themselves.

### Some more techniques

We have already described a *listen and draw* exercise. There are lots of variations on such an exercise. For these exercises each learner needs to have a copy of a picture.

1. The learners listen and color the picture with colors suited to the description.

2. The learners listen and fill in details on the picture. This can include activities like having an outline of several heads and having to fill in the details of eyes, nose, mustache, scars, mouth, and hair while listening

a description of several people. Other activities could involve incomplete maps, rooms, outdoor scenes, and lists. A variation of this technique that requires more preparation involves providing small drawings of objects that have to be placed in the right position in a larger picture.

3. The learners listen and label parts of a picture or diagram. The amount of writing required can be reduced by providing a list of the words needed for labeling. I saw this done very well by a teacher telling about her country. The learners had an outline map of the country with some numbered points on it. These points were places. The teacher gave a very interesting description and occasionally indicated when the learners could label the map. This type of activity provides good opportunities for vocabulary learning. For example, the labels can be new words, and the learners discover what objects to label by listening to the description.

Another group of techniques involving a small amount of written language is given the name *information transfer* techniques. In this type of technique information in one form (in our case a spoken form) is changed into another form—for example, a written form or a picture or diagram. Listen-and-draw techniques can thus be classified as information-transfer techniques. Palmer's (1982) excellent article gives a large number of useful and practical suggestions. He classifies them according to what the learners produce after listening. His categories are maps and plans, guides and tables, diagrams and charts, diaries and calendars, and miscellaneous lists, forms, and coupons.

*Padded questions* give a lot of listening practice with a minimal language response. For example, the teacher talks about where she lives and what it is like living there and then asks the learner "Where do you live?" so each item consists of a simple question which is preceded by quite a long talk on the same topic. Here is another example.

I don't come from a small family, but I don't come from a big family either. I have one sister. She's the oldest. She plays the piano very well and can drive anything. My two brothers are older than me. All my brothers and sisters are married and have children. How many people are there in your family?

Padded questions are very easy to make because you can talk about your own experience. They can include questions like *Where were you born? What is your job? What's your favorite food? What have you read recently? and Do you play tennis?*

*Oral cloze exercises* and *listen and enjoy* stories are very similar to each other. In oral cloze exercises the learners listen to a story and occasionally (about once every 50 words) the teacher pauses so that the learners can guess the next word in the story. The word should be easy to guess and the guessing should not interrupt the story too much. If the learners can produce very lit-

tle English, a list of possible words can be put on the board for them to choose from, or they can answer in their mother tongue. Immediately after the learners have guessed, the teacher gives the answer. Listen-and-enjoy exercises are simply interesting stories without any gaps to fill and without any kind of testing at all. The interest of the story should be enough to get the learners to listen. There are many graded reading books containing interesting simplified stories that are good for listening to.

A comprehension approach to language learning depends heavily on the ability of teachers to provide a large quantity of controlled material. This control needs to be sufficient for learners to understand what they are listening to; it need not be like the strict control used in graded readers and course books. The techniques described in this article provide a framework for producing such material.

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