Learning to Listen
By Alysan Croydon

Have your students ever complained that they understand you, but can’t make out what other native speakers say? This is a common phenomenon. Students frequently say they cannot understand rapid, naturally occurring speech outside the classroom.

As teachers, we spend the majority of time working on student output to improve speaking skills, while listening skills are given less attention. But listening is at least fifty percent of communication! The problem is compounded if you meet only once or twice a week with your students and your voice is the only English-speaking voice they hear.

Below you will find some tips, strategies and activities to help develop your students’ listening skills. It is best to introduce the following strategies one-by-one and then structure practice time to build their confidence.

ASKING FOR CLARIFICATION

Discuss. Ask students about when they have had a difficult time understanding native speakers. Find out what they do about it. (Usually nothing except nodding and smiling to the speaker!)

Introduce key phrases:
Can you say it again?
I didn’t get it. Can you explain it one more time?

Give rapid fire or confusing directions. Have the students practice asking you to slow down or repeat what you said until they understand you.

Model asking for clarification:
I put the red one on the green one and then...?
What was after the...?

Put 2 blue ones on the bottom. Next, a green one on top of them and a red one next to it.

What’s after the green one?
Make a videotape or audio tape of someone asking for clarification. Ask students to pick out the clarifying phrases.

**Have students follow your directions.** Set up a situation where students have to follow your directions without being able to see what you are doing.

*For example:* Set up a screen on a desk so students can’t see what you are doing. As you build/model something out of legos or clay, give students directions so they can do the same thing with their own legos or clay. Encourage students to stop you and ask for clarification.

**Have students give directions to each other.** Have one student give directions to complete a simple task (e.g. tie a shoe lace) while the other asks for clarification. When students switch roles, give students a different task to complete. Having the students sit back-to-back helps facilitate this activity.

**Use an authentic situation.** Structure a dialogue in which students practice asking clarifying questions when getting directions in order to get to a specific place. Ask students what place they would like to visit in their community.

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**TOTAL PHYSICAL RESPONSE ACTIVITIES**

When participating in Total Physical Response (TPR) activities, students get ample opportunities to listen to the language; they don’t have to speak until they are ready. The following activities work on this principle. Students listen to you and are only required to make a physical response such as doing an action or a movement like pointing to or putting pictures in the correct sequence.

**TPR on paper.** Using known vocabulary, talk about a simple hand-drawn picture you have made. Do not show the picture to students. Tell the students to follow your directions and draw the picture.

*For example:*

*Draw a girl. The girl is happy. She has a bag in her left hand. The bag is blue. On her right side there is a big dog, etc.*
Which picture? Draw or copy some pictures that are similar but not exactly the same. A set of four pictures works well. As you describe the picture, the students look at them and try to figure out which one you are describing. When you are done, they should circle the picture they think you were talking about.

For example: It's a sunny day near Mt. Rainier. The fish are jumping out of the water. People are fishing. Everyone thinks they can catch a fish today. There are birds flying around. There is a breeze blowing in the trees. It is blowing the smoke from the fisherman's pipe. Oh look! Someone has caught a fish!

Matching statements with pictures.

For a beginning student, it might be easier to hear just one statement at a time.

For example: Give students statement #1 and have them check all the pictures that match the statement. Repeat with the remaining statements.

1. The sun is shining.
2. One man is smoking a pipe.
3. Two men are fishing.
4. Two birds are flying.
Picture sequences

Have a set of pictures - hand-drawn or cut from a magazine - that make a story.

1. Distribute a minimum of 6 pictures out of sequence to each student or pair of students.
   Allow a little time for students to look over the pictures.
2. Tell your story one time through.
3. The second time you tell the story, ask students to put the pictures in the order they think matches the story. (Beginning students may only be able to put pictures of single objects or people in the order that the objects appear in the story.)
4. If students have difficulty determining the correct sequence, tell the story again.
5. Ask students to compare their sequences.
6. If possible, find out what you said that helped them and what clues they used.

If you make your own pictures, you can use them over and over many times. You can give sets to students to make up their own stories to tell each other. This is a very versatile exercise, so it is worth taking the time to make or find good pictures.

Authentic Listening Material: Tape Recordings

Record a news broadcast, advertisement, or song from the radio.

1. Play the recording; ask students to identify it.
2. Provide a clear task that students can focus on.

   For example: Pick out all the numbers, prices, names in a recording. Either provide a list so students can check off the ones they hear, or ask them to number the items in the order they hear them.

Students build their confidence when they can understand something specific in a real recording. Higher level students can count the number of news stories in a news broadcast or sequence the headlines you provide in the order they hear them.
Recorded messages: job lines, information in the phone book, etc.

Consider using the recorded messages from stores, offices and services. The information guides in the front of the yellow pages have a whole host of recorded messages you can dial up: weather reports, sports news, horoscopes and entertainment, to name but a few.

Assign students to listen for and collect specific information from the recording. Tasks such as putting items in order, checking items on a list, or filling-in-the blanks of a prepared work sheet work well with this kind of material.

Students can listen at home and can dial up as many times as they want.

Make your own tapes

If authentic material is not suitable for your student, you can make your own recordings. If possible, ask a friend or family member to record so students can hear a variety of voices and accents. Use an external microphone to reduce tape noise. Speak clearly, but at normal speed. Do not distort your speech by slowing down too much.

Follow this procedure:

- The first time: play the tape through so students can understand the gist of the message.
- Ask leading questions such as:

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  \text{How many speakers are there?}
  
  \text{Are they male or female?}
  
  \text{Who are they? etc.}
  \]

- The second time: Ask students to pick out specific information.
- The third time: Ask students to focus on specific language or information.

If students are very nervous about their listening skills, provide a transcript. It is easier to do this for tapes you have made yourself. However, make sure they get to hear the tape at least once without the transcript.
Telephone tree

Students often want to communicate better on the telephone. Because it doesn’t involve face-to-face contact, it is usually the hardest medium for communication.

You can make a telephone tree if the students are willing to share their phone numbers. First make the tree and go over in class who needs to call whom on the tree. The teacher calls the first person on the tree and gives a message. The student who has been called phones the next person on the tree and passes the message on. The last person on the tree comes to the next class and shares the message. It is interesting to find out how the message changes as it is passed along!

Guest speakers

For higher level students, the ultimate test in listening is to be able to understand a guest speaker. Invite someone to class (police officer, librarian, public official, etc.) who can talk about a topic students may be interested in. Prepare students for the speaker by having them develop questions they want to ask and provide important background information. Ask students to read through a brochure or written material if necessary. When the guest speaker comes, it is a great forum to practice all the listening strategies mentioned above.

USEFUL RESOURCES

Before Book One: Listening Activities for Pre-Beginning Students of English, by Maryann and John Boyd. Prentice Hall Regents


Now Hear This, by Barbara Foley. Heinle & Heinle


All these books are available from ALTA Books: 1-800-ALTAESL