

# **LISTEN UPI – WAYS TO HELP YOUR STUDENTS**

## **BE ALL EARS**

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### **RESUMO**

A habilidade de compreensão de insumo oral é muitas vezes interpretada como sendo passiva e receptiva. Este artigo, entretanto, visa discutir diferentes formas de melhorar a capacidade de entender língua oral de alunos de língua estrangeira. Para tanto, algumas abordagens, estratégias e técnicas de aplicação e desenvolvimento desta habilidade serão revisadas com o intuito de demonstrar que a habilidade de compreensão de insumo oral pode ser tratada e trabalhada de forma ativa e produtiva.

**Palavras-chave:** Compreensão oral. Estratégias. Conscientização. Atividades.

### **ABSTRACT**

Listening has been regarded as a passive, receptive skill. This paper, however, will discuss different ways to improve students' listening performance by sharing some approaches, strategies and techniques to deal with this skill in an active, productive fashion.

**Keywords:** Listening. Strategies. Awareness. Activities.

Listening used to be regarded as a passive, receptive skill. It was believed to be acquired simply by mere exposure, and it was also thought that students just needed to practice over and over till they got used to idly absorbing information from an audio source. Currently, however, this idea has fortunately changed and listening has been considered as active as speaking, writing and reading skills. It is now known that listening requires developing techniques and strategies and a very active use of the mind. Following this trend, this paper will first review why listening has begun to be seen as an active skill. Next, some approaches, strategies and techniques to deal with this skill in an active, productive fashion will be presented. In addition, different ways to improve students' listening performance and a discussion whether certain activities truly practice listening skills will be shared.

As far as language learning is concerned, there is no passive skill. Not long ago, the four basic language skills used to be divided in two groups: active skills (speaking and writing) and passive skills (reading and listening). The idea was that written and spoken forms required thinking, organizing ideas and physically producing language actively whereas reading written language and listening to spoken discourse were just a matter of passively absorbing information. These terms obviously did not reflect the true nature of reading and listening (Cf. Anderson & Lynch, 1988; Carter & Nunan, 2001; Ur,

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1984). Reading and listening do take a lot of thinking, organizing ideas and managing previous knowledge. Both can be improved by learning specific techniques and consciously developing particular strategies. It is true that practicing certainly helps promote better listening, but just as much as it helps improve all other skills. Likewise, the enhancement and use of any skill does involve an active set of procedures. After this new concept was established, the division was then renamed productive and receptive skills – the latter being, admittedly, a term that much more accurately reflects what actually happens when one listens.

A good number of strategies are involved in the process of listening. In true native-language listening, the first step is to understand the auditory input. Listeners have to strategically concentrate on the sound source. They have to adjust to its loudness, tone, speech style, intonation and articulation features. The second step is, to say the least, to understand the lexical input—register, slang, idioms, phrasal verbs, etc—, and, moreover, the semantic input—literal meaning, metaphor, sarcasm, implication, etc (Cf. Clearly, Hoden & Cooney, 2003; McCarthy, 2001; Rost, 1990 and 1991). Other features add up, and they all have to be dealt with simultaneously. For that matter, listeners activate their schemata and take advantage of bottom-up and top-down strategies (Cf. Richards, 1997; Ur, 1996). By activating their schemata, i.e. their idiosyncratic strategies to understand information and negotiate meaning, they mentally reorganize the information they already have about the topic, then compare and contrast it to the new information input. Top-down strategies, processing meaning from amassed data to new data, will use this previous knowledge to evaluate the contents of the message more critically whereas bottom-up strategies, processing information according to the context and text structure in which it is presented, will help understand the message and eliminate possible communication noises. It is important to bear in mind that the level of proficiency of all these cognitive devices will greatly vary from individual to individual, depending on their level of education and on how much they consciously or unconsciously devote to sharpening each of these mental tools.

Although the same strategies should be used when listening to a foreign language, EFL students (students of English as a foreign language) will not fully apply them unless they are properly taught how to. It is essential to remember that, as native listeners, when these individuals employ the appropriate strategies to each listening situation, they do it automatically and unconsciously. Nevertheless, when they are exposed to EFL listening tasks, their anxiety level, their lack of intimacy with the language, and their wish to understand the message thoroughly—contents and surface structure—usually mislead them into thinking that good listening means simply being able to recognize each and every word. Unfortunately, however, as they try to catch every word uttered, they end up not paying attention to the context or to the contents of the passage. Furthermore, as it is nearly impossible to pick all the words of a listening passage—whatever the language—, their frustration and anxiety levels rise and make them miss more and more chunks and understand less and less. This situation creates a vicious circle which can only be broken once teachers raise their students' awareness to the right procedures to follow.

Strategy training is therefore the best approach to help EFL learners become better listeners. Students need to learn to consciously apply the techniques they master when negotiating meaning in their native language. So, teachers should make them aware that it is not necessary to understand

every word to be a good listener. On the contrary, they should focus their attention on specific words and use their schemata, top-down and bottom-up techniques to absorb the information in a more accurate fashion. In addition to that, they need to keep at honing their strategy mastery and to continue acquiring new strategies if they want to be more and more proficient in the target language. Only by working on these strategies and techniques systematically can learners truly improve their skills.

The role of the teacher is then to expose students to activities which will make them build awareness of the process of listening to a foreign language. Talking about the process does help students understand why they fail to achieve the level of listening skills they target, but exposing them to activities which will foster improvement is as important. Teachers can work on pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening activities (Cf. Bowen & Marks, 1994; Hadfield, 1996; Underwood, 1993). Each works on different parts of the process of understanding oral input and should be carefully planned. In order to discuss the phases of listening, some more considerations are presented below.

Pre-listening activities will cause students to activate their schemata and get them prepared to actually listen to the message itself rather than to the words spoken. The first step in this phase is to consider the approach to the vocabulary found in the listening sources. Some argue that vocabulary from the listening passage should be taught in this section to prepare students to the lexical range in it whereas others claim that this practice does not reflect real-life listening and so would not prepare learners to listen outside the classroom environment. Both views have to be pondered. The greatest trouble to pre-teaching vocabulary is that it would only reinforce students' habit to focus on words rather than content. On the other hand, in natural environments, when individuals activate their schemata, they naturally talk about the topic prior to listening, as in a lecture or seminar, for instance, and quite often get in touch with new words which will obviously be used by the source. In other words, teachers can always insert new vocabulary in topic discussion questions and let students deal with them intuitively and grasp meaning by the context, if they feel the need to. That would surely be more natural than just showing a list of words and revealing their meanings before playing the passage. The next step, then, is to think of possible activities to be applied in this phase. The most common and natural procedure would be familiarizing the topic and predicting either what the text will be about, or what the passage's main point will be, or arguments the passage might present, or even possible answers to the listening questions, etc. These kinds of activity will definitely activate their schemata and get their top-down strategies ready to comply.

While-listening activities can also either help or hinder the process. If the exercise resembles a mere "listen and write the words/sentences you hear in the lines below," students will only be encouraged to keep their bad habit of trying to get word for word again. Skimming exercises should be true to their original objective of checking general information and scanning exercises should also have students focus on details of the story itself rather than searching for particular words. Working on skimming and scanning exercises that only get students to identify words or even to rely their answers on specific words uttered in the passage simply will not help them develop listening skills. Any exercise which leads to this practice should be classified as what it really is: a mere vocabulary search activity. As mentioned above, skimming practices understanding the gist. As in natural life listening, in

this kind of exercise, teachers should play the source only once. Students have to train themselves to summarize the general idea of every passage the first time they listen to it, exactly as they do at home, when they watch TV and listen to radio interviews, news, etc. Playing the passage more than once in a skimming exercise will only slow down their strategies. Scanning exercises, nevertheless, do allow for repetition as, in real life, interlocutors naturally ask people to repeat what they have said if they miss something in the speech they feel is important, and they also replay films, songs and other recordings as they want to deepen their knowledge about them or even pick out some specific information they missed the first time they watched or listened to it. The here called vocabulary search exercises should be left for last, when the work on listening has already been accomplished. Teachers have a due role when preparing their classes as they are supposed to evaluate their book listening activities and adjust them accordingly to fit their meant purposes, whenever they need to. Other activities still in this phase are critical listening, that is, students have to state whether they agree or disagree with the speaker rather than only stating what the speaker has said, and inferring, or listening “between the lines” as they would have to grasp the true intention of the speaker or what a speaker really wants to convince them of by analyzing his or her arguments and the order they are disposed in the passage. Working on each activity in the most appropriate way would make the whole task more communicative and closer to real-life listening situations, which would positively help students become more prepared to what they will come across as users of English.

Post-listening exercises can involve other skills and make students interact more actively. Even though this part of the listening task in the classroom is the least approached by EFL books and teachers, it is the closest to real life. When native listeners listen, most frequently they listen because they want to, not because they are told to, and their next step is to use that information in social-interactive situations. That means teachers should engage their students in that kind of environment as well. Quitting a listening activity right after all answers are checked is telling students’ minds that all that effort was useless and that it all might as well be deleted. Students must engage in a conversational activity involving the listening topic so that they have enough time to digest the ideas and realize the effectiveness of the strategies they have taken advantage of. There are several activities that can be used in this stage such as story telling and sharing, discussions, debates, summarizing, responding to the speaker, register manipulation, defining cultural traits (Cf. Tomalin & Stempleski, 1994), etc. This phase even promotes oral intertextuality, as now students would have to listen to other points of view about the same topic. All these will certainly prepare students to real life as they might have to share and give their opinion about something they have heard, retell it in a different way, level the vocabulary and adjust register to best suit their new interlocutors.

Choosing listening passages is also part of the strategy-training process. Variety is the key to developing listening skills. Narratives, news, songs, ads, interviews, radio announcements, among others will encourage students to learn how to focus on different styles in order to accomplish their tasks. Other aspects to consider besides genre are authenticity, cultural information and passage contents. Learners need to be in contact with different kinds of genre and different cultural aspects so that the passage can also be meaningful to them as world citizens and not only as a mere linguistic exercise. The authenticity is also an essential issue to consider. Varying authentic sources such as

movie clips, news clips, telephone and radio passages will truly help students realize how to deal with these sources in real life if they are authentic or at least replicated in a natural way. Teachers need to understand that a source is never too easy or too challenging; what makes it easy or challenging is the task that comes along. ELT professionals should also agree that unauthentic passages made too easy or even made too hard to listen just to challenge students simply do not help create the necessary self-confidence to engage in real interactions outside class. The same is true about the activities accompanying them. Teachers have to prepare exercises which are suitable to their students' level or even slightly higher than their current level (Cf. Krashen, apud Richards & Rogers, 1986) so that skill development is guaranteed.

Deciding on repeating or not repeating a passage, giving or not giving the right answer, controlling the length of the passage, etc are serious elements in the teachers' hands. Educators need to think about what they actually teach when they apply a book listening activity and that there are several other features being worked on besides those connected to the surface-leveled exercise objectives. By repeating a passage in the wrong moment, not only are teachers hindering skimming improvement, but also undermining their students' confidence level. The same can be said about giving off the answer to an exercise or disclosing the sentence the students could not grasp. A better option in this case would be to train students to use the appropriate strategies, give them some positive reinforcement and brainstorming possibilities so that it is certain students will succeed. The length of the audio input is also treacherous. It is clear that stories longer than three minutes should be broken into smaller pieces and that the activities connected to the passage should then be adapted. Listening for a long time will only make students feel awkward and frustrated as they might get tired and, consequently, lost after the third minute. The more a person is interested in the audio topic, the longer this person can listen to it so it is important to integrate listening and the other skills (Cf. Willis, 1993) in an attempt to get students so involved in the task that they would be willing to listen and also be able to accomplish their tasks.

Attitude and commitment are key words to improve listening skills. Learners must be willing to try and improve little by little and that means teachers have to be alert in order to avoid undermining their students' will and confidence. Listening is a crucial skill for it is used every moment. It has to be trained and it has to be improved if learners are to become fluent interlocutors of the language. Teachers, then, must do their best to make their students feel secure and aware of the listening process and of their listening development targets; only then will both be able to help each other find the best path to listening efficiency.

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