SKILLS · LISTENING

TEACHING LISTENING

How listening works, and how to develop it rather than test it

AT A GLANCE

What it involves	decoding speech in real time and building meaning from it, using both the sounds you hear and what you already know
Teaching listening means	developing learners' listening through input on sub-skills and strategies, practice and reflection, not just checking answers
Plan it with	the **Receptive Skills Cycle – Reading and Listening** framework
Lesson ideas	the **Listening sub-skills menu** and **strategies menu** in the appendix

What happens when we listen

Listening involves several levels of processing at once. Field (2009) distinguishes **decoding** processes, which turn sounds into words and sentences, from **meaning-building** processes, which turn those words into an understanding of the message.

DECODING	1	**SOUNDS** Recognising the sounds, syllables, stress and intonation of the stream of speech.
	2	**WORDS** Dividing continuous speech into words and recognising them, even when they are reduced or linked.
	3	**SENTENCES** Working out the grammar and meaning of each utterance as it unfolds.
MEANING BUILDING	4	**MEANING** Adding context and world knowledge, making inferences and interpreting what the speaker means.
	5	**DISCOURSE** Connecting ideas, identifying main points and building an overall picture of the whole text.

Based on Field (2009)

Bottom-up and top-down

Listeners use two **sources of information**. **Bottom-up** processing works from the input: the sounds, words and grammar in the recording. **Top-down** processing works from the listener: their knowledge of the topic, the situation and the type of text, and their expectations. Skilled listeners combine both, all the time.

The knowledge listeners bring to a text is often described as **schemata**: mental frameworks built from experience. **Content schemata** are knowledge of the topic and the world (including cultural knowledge); **formal schemata** are knowledge of how types of text are organised, such as how a phone call usually

unfolds (Carrell & Eisterhold 1983). This is why lessons often start by **activating schemata** through discussion, pictures or prediction: it helps learners anticipate content.

Top-down knowledge can help fill gaps in decoding, but it has limits. Skilled listeners rely on context *less* to recognise words, because their decoding is fast and automatic. L2 listeners who rely too much on guessing from context often build the wrong interpretation (Field 2009). So, learners need **both**: strategies that use their knowledge, and practice that makes their decoding more accurate.

Why listening is challenging

Challenge	What it means for learners
It happens in real time	Learners can't go back, slow the speaker down or re-read. What they miss is gone.
There are no spaces between words	Speech is a continuous stream, so learners must work out where one word ends and the next begins.
Words change in connected speech	Linking, weak forms and dropped sounds mean that words learners "know" may not sound as expected (*gonna, wanna, d'you*).
Speakers vary	Different accents, speeds and voices, and features of spontaneous speech such as hesitations and false starts.
Memory is limited	Learners must hold what they hear in memory while processing what comes next.
Vocabulary	Learners need to know around 95% of the words they hear for good comprehension (van Zeeland & Schmitt 2013).

Many learners also feel **anxious** when listening, because they can't control the speed of the input. Anxiety reduces attention and makes listening harder still, so building confidence is part of teaching listening.

Skills, sub-skills and strategies

Skill	the overall ability to understand spoken language
Sub-skills	the component abilities that make up the skill, e.g. recognising weak forms, identifying a speaker's attitude
Strategies	deliberate actions learners take to understand or to cope with difficulty, e.g. predicting, noting key words

A **strategy** is conscious and deliberate; a **skill** is automatic. With practice, strategies learners use deliberately can become automatic, and that is how strategy work turns into skill (Afflerbach, Pearson & Paris 2008).

Strategies can be organised as a **metacognitive cycle**: learners plan before they listen, monitor their understanding as they listen, and evaluate their listening afterwards (Vandergrift & Goh 2012).

PLAN	MONITOR	EVALUATE
Understand the task, predict content, think about the speakers and situation, decide what to focus on.	Check predictions, notice when understanding breaks down, keep going, use context and tone.	Reflect on what was understood, what caused problems and which strategies helped.

Testing listening or developing it?

Many listening lessons follow a familiar pattern: a gist task, then a task for specific information, then one for detail, with answers checked after each. This pattern mainly **tests** comprehension: it shows whether learners understood a particular recording, but it doesn't teach them how to listen better (Sheerin 1987; Field 2009).

	Testing comprehension	Developing listening
Focus	the product: right or wrong answers	the process: how learners listen
Before the task	learners read the questions	learners also get input on the sub-skill and strategies the task requires
Feedback	"What's the answer?"	"How did you know? What helped? What got in the way?"
When learners get it wrong	the teacher replays the whole recording or gives the answer	the teacher diagnoses the problem and works on it, then learners listen again
Learners learn...	whether they understood this recording	how to listen better next time

Gist and detail tasks are still useful, but in a developing approach each task practises a **target sub-skill**, comes with **input** on how to approach it, and is followed by **reflection** on how learners did it.

INPUT	PRACTICE	REFLECTION
Raise awareness of the target sub-skill and the strategies that help, ideally through guided discovery.	Learners do a listening task that requires the sub-skill, then compare answers and explain how they found them.	Learners reflect on what helped, what was difficult and what they will do next time.

This is the cycle at the heart of the **Receptive Skills Cycle** framework: Input on strategies, Listening task (repeated for each sub-skill), then Reflection on strategies.

A lesson in action

A 60-minute lesson for intermediate learners. The recording is a three-minute podcast extract in which two friends discuss whether one of them should move to a new city for a job. The sub-skills are **identifying speakers' attitudes** and **recognising connected speech**.

Stage	Time	What happens
Lead-in and pre-listening	10 min	Learners discuss: *Would you move to another city for a job?* They predict the pros and cons the speakers might mention.
Input 1	5 min	The teacher says one sentence (*That sounds great*) in three different ways. Learners discuss how the speaker feels each time and what told them: intonation, stress, choice of words.
Task 1	10 min	Learners listen and decide whether each friend is for or against the move, and how sure they are. They compare in pairs and justify their answers with what they heard.
Input 2	5 min	The teacher plays three short phrases from the recording. Learners count the words and write them down, then look at how the words link and shrink in fast speech.
Task 2	10 min	Micro-dictation: learners write down five more short chunks from the recording. They then listen again with the transcript and underline places where words link.
Reflection	5 min	Learners discuss: *What helped you understand how the speakers felt? Which sounds were hardest to catch? What will you try next time?*
Post-listening	10 min	Learners discuss the speakers' dilemma and give their own advice.

Notice that each task practises a **target sub-skill**, that the second focus is on **decoding** rather than meaning, and that feedback asks learners **how** they listened, not just what they understood.

When learners get it wrong

Replaying a whole recording rarely helps learners who got an answer wrong: they hear the same difficult stream of speech again. Instead, work out **why** the answer was wrong, deal with the cause, and then replay just the relevant section.

Diagnosing the problem

What happened	Possible cause	What to do
Learners didn't recognise a word they know.	connected speech or weak forms (bottom-up)	Replay the short section, ask learners to write the words, and compare with the transcript.
Learners missed an answer that was paraphrased.	the recording used different words from the question	Before listening, have learners think of other ways the question might be expressed.
Learners stopped following after an unknown word.	they got stuck on the word	Practise keeping going and using what comes next to work out meaning.

What happened	Possible cause	What to do
Learners heard what they expected, not what was said.	over-relying on predictions (top-down)	Ask learners to check predictions against what they actually hear.
Learners understood the words but missed the point.	missing background or cultural knowledge (top-down)	Give brief background information, then listen again.

An example

In a recording, a speaker says: *I was gonna go, but then my boss asked me to stay late, so…* Several learners answer the question *Did the speaker go to the party?* with **Yes**. The teacher suspects two causes: learners didn't recognise *gonna* as *going to*, and they don't know that *was going to* can describe a plan that didn't happen.

- **Bottom-up (sounds and words):** the teacher replays *I was gonna go* three times. Learners count the words and write them down, and the teacher shows how *going to* becomes *gonna* in fast speech.
- **Bottom-up (grammar and meaning):** the teacher draws a timeline and asks: *Was it a plan? Did it happen?*
- **Listen again:** learners listen to the sentence once more, answer the question and explain their answer.

This takes a few minutes and only needs doing for the answers most learners got wrong. Prepare by doing the task yourself, noting where each answer comes in the recording and what learners need to understand to get it right.

Choosing recordings

Type	Features	Use it for
Scripted	clear, often slow and carefully pronounced, with little overlap or hesitation	introducing language and building confidence at lower levels
Semi-scripted	speakers work from notes, so speech sounds natural but is controlled	a bridge between classroom and real-life listening
Authentic	real speech, with natural speed, accents, hesitations and overlaps	preparing learners for real-life listening

A common principle is to **grade the task, not the text**: even lower-level learners can do a simple task on an authentic recording (e.g. *How many people are speaking? Are they happy or annoyed?*). But this has limits. If learners know too few of the words, decoding breaks down, so choose recordings where most of the language is within reach.

Keep recordings **short** for decoding work, and use **video** where possible: seeing the speakers and the situation supports understanding. Consider the number of speakers and how familiar their accents are.

Intensive and extensive listening

Intensive listening is close work on a short recording in class, as in the lesson above. **Extensive** listening means listening to large amounts of enjoyable, understandable material, such as podcasts, series or graded audiobooks, usually outside class. Both matter: intensive work develops sub-skills, while extensive listening builds fluency, vocabulary and confidence. Encourage learners to keep a simple listening log.

Making it work

Give a reason to listen

Set the task before learners listen, so they know what to listen for and don't try to understand everything. Remind them that efficient listening doesn't mean understanding every word.

Ask how, not just what

Let learners compare answers in pairs before whole-class feedback, and always ask them to justify their answers: *How did you know? What did you hear?*

Let learners listen more than once, with a purpose

Give each listening a new purpose or a short focus on what caused problems. Simply replaying the recording without guidance is much less useful.

Use transcripts after listening

Transcripts are a powerful tool once learners have listened: they let learners see what they missed and why. Avoid giving them during the first listening, when they turn listening into reading.

Stay out of the way while learners listen

Walking around during listening is distracting. Monitor from a distance, then monitor closely while learners compare answers.

Common pitfalls

Pitfall	What to do instead
Every lesson follows the same gist–detail sequence with no input or reflection.	Focus each task on a target sub-skill, give input and reflect afterwards.
Feedback is only right or wrong answers.	Ask learners how they found their answers.
The whole recording is replayed when learners struggle.	Diagnose the problem, deal with it and replay only the relevant section.
Lessons only practise top-down strategies such as prediction.	Include decoding work on sounds, words and connected speech.
Too many words are pre-taught.	Pre-teach only the few words that would block the task.
Learners only listen in class.	Encourage extensive listening outside class.

ONLINE CLASSES

Check audio quality before the lesson, and consider letting learners listen individually on their own devices, so they can control playback. Playback-speed tools and captions can support lower levels, but use captions with care: like transcripts, they turn listening into reading. Share transcripts in a document after listening for decoding work.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Listening combines decoding (sounds, words, sentences) with meaning building (meaning, discourse).
- Bottom-up and top-down processing work together, but relying too much on top-down guessing leads to misunderstanding.
- Many listening lessons test comprehension; developing listening means input, practice and reflection on target sub-skills.
- When learners get it wrong, diagnose the cause and replay only what is needed.
- Combine intensive work in class with extensive listening outside it.

WHERE NEXT

Receptive Skills Cycle – Reading and Listening (framework) planning a listening lesson

Teaching Reading the same approach, adapted for reading

Teaching Speaking interactive listening in conversation

Conveying Meaning and Checking Understanding timelines and concept questions when clarifying

Guided Discovery designing input on strategies

References and further reading

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Appendix · Listening sub-skills menu

Use this menu to choose a sub-skill focus and to find an activity idea. Most activities work with any short recording. The groups follow the levels of processing, from decoding to meaning building, plus interactive listening.

Hearing the sounds

Sub-skill	Activity idea
Telling individual sounds apart	Minimal pairs: learners hear one word from each pair (*ship / sheep, light / right*) and tick it.
Hearing stressed and unstressed syllables	Learners mark the stressed syllables in short phrases as they listen.
Recognising linking, elision and assimilation	Transcript gap-fill at points where words link or sounds disappear (*lookin' at, nex' week*).
Hearing weak and strong forms	Counting words: learners count the words in a fast phrase (*What do you want to do?*).
Understanding sentence stress and intonation	Learners identify the stressed word in a sentence and what it signals (*I said TUESday*).
Adjusting to different accents	The same short text read by two speakers; learners note what sounds different.

Recognising words and phrases

Sub-skill	Activity idea
Picking out words from continuous speech	Micro-dictation: learners write down short chunks (four to six words) from the recording.
Recognising known words in their spoken form	Learners predict how familiar words will sound in fast speech, then listen and check.
Recognising common chunks and word combinations	Tick the chunks you hear from a list (*you know, kind of, at the end of the day*).
Understanding idioms and set phrases	Match set phrases from the recording to their meanings.
Noticing formality and topic-specific language	Classify expressions from the recording as formal or informal.

Following sentences in real time

Sub-skill	Activity idea
Holding chunks of language in memory	Learners repeat back increasingly long chunks from the recording.
Following grammar as it happens	Pause and ask: *Past or present? Positive or negative? Question or statement?*
Following reference	Pause after a pronoun and ask who or what it refers to.

Understanding main ideas and specific information

Sub-skill	Activity idea
Getting the main idea	Choose the best title or summary for the recording.
Picking out specific details and facts	Complete a table with names, numbers or times.
Following steps or sequences	Put pictures or instructions in the order you hear them.
Telling main points from supporting details	Sort statements from the recording into main points and examples.

Inferring and interpreting

Sub-skill	Activity idea
Drawing conclusions not directly stated	"How do you know?": learners answer inference questions and quote the evidence they heard.
Using context to work out unknown words	Pause before a key word and ask learners to predict it, then continue.
Identifying the speaker's purpose and attitude	Decide how each speaker feels and which clues (words, tone) told you.
Understanding implied meaning, irony and humour	"What did she really mean?": interpret short indirect or ironic remarks.
Telling fact from opinion and comparing viewpoints	Classify statements as fact or opinion; compare two speakers' views.
Understanding cultural references	Before listening, learners match cultural references to explanations.

Following spoken discourse

Sub-skill	Activity idea
Following signposting	Tick the signposts you hear (*first of all, another thing, so*), then predict what comes next.
Noticing topic changes and story structure	Mark on a timeline where the speaker changes topic or moves the story on.
Picking out key points for note-taking	Take notes from a short talk using a simple note frame.
Recognising emphasis and definitions in talks	Listen for and write down the definitions a speaker gives.

Interactive listening

Sub-skill	Activity idea
Recognising turn-taking cues	Learners signal when they think a speaker is about to finish a turn.

Sub-skill	Activity idea
Understanding listener responses	Identify listener responses (*mm-hm*, *really?*, *right*) and what each one shows.
Following several speakers	"Who said what?": match opinions to speakers in a group conversation.
Asking for clarification or repetition	Live listening: the teacher tells a story with a few planned unclear moments, and learners ask.

Appendix · Listening strategies menu

Strategies learners can use before, during and after listening. Introduce a few at a time and help learners practise them until they become automatic.

When	Strategy
Before	understand the task and underline the key words in the questions
	think of other ways the information might be expressed (synonyms, paraphrases)
	predict the content and the type of information you need (a number, a feeling, an opinion)
	think about the speakers, the situation and their relationship
	remind yourself that you don't need to understand every word
During	focus on the information the task asks for and let the rest go
	note down key words, using abbreviations
	keep listening after something you don't understand: what comes next may explain it
	check your predictions against what you hear, and change them if needed
	use tone of voice, context and signposts to work out meaning
	note down roughly how an unclear chunk sounds, and work it out later
After	compare answers with a partner and explain how you found them
	identify where and why your understanding broke down
	decide which strategies helped, and plan what to try next time
	recognise what you did well: confidence helps you listen better

Ideas from: Field (2009); Brown (2007); Vandergrift & Goh (2012)