

Teacher Takeaways

Teaching listening

Tuesday 12th October

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Overview

Aims	To discuss common teacher questions about teaching listening
Time	1 hour

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Key points about listening

The following section contains key points about listening in a foreign language, with links to the research that informs them.

1. Vocabulary knowledge and listening

Vocabulary knowledge is essential for listening comprehension.

The most important factors are:

- knowing and recalling the meaning of the word
- knowing and recognising the **sounds** of the word.

Reference

Zhang, S., & Zhang, X. (2020). The relationship between vocabulary knowledge and L2 reading/listening comprehension: A meta-analysis. *Language Teaching Research*.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168820913998>

Key points

- Students need to know around 95% of the words and phrases in the listening audio for fluent comprehension.
- They need to recognise the words and phrases automatically by their sounds.

This frees students' working memory for comprehension.

Notes

2. Links between listening and speaking

Practising speaking also improves students' listening ability.

Evidence from a trial with foreign language learners (using an artificial language).

- Group A focused on listening comprehension activities
- Group B focused on spoken production with feedback

Group A



Group B



The results of the trial

Group B was better than Group A at speaking.

Group B also outperformed Group A on:

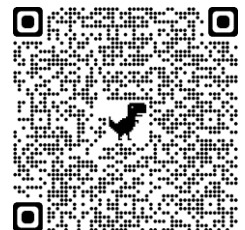
- listening comprehension
- grammar.

Reference

Hopman EWM, MacDonald MC. Production Practice During Language Learning Improves Comprehension. *Psychological Science*. 2018;29(6):961-971. doi:10.1177/0956797618754486

An article discussing the study is available online here:

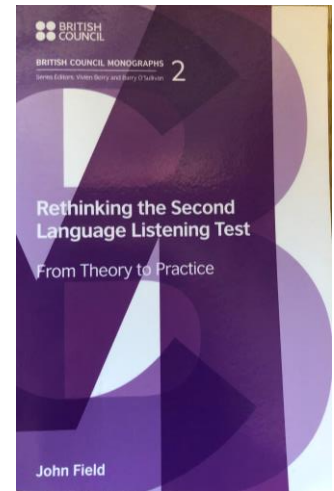
<https://www.psychologicalscience.org/publications/observer/obsonline/balancing-speaking-and-listening-for-language-learning.html>



3. Single play versus double play

A study into double-play versus single-play in tests showed:

- double-play reduces test anxiety
- single-play slightly reduces overall scores
- the difference between lower and higher proficiency test-takers doesn't change.



Reference

- Field (2015)
- Described in: *Rethinking the Second Language Listening Test*, Equinox
John Field
<https://www.britishcouncil.org/rethinking-second-language-listening-test-0>



Notes

4. Understanding spoken English

With a few exceptions, spellings don't change. Once a student has learned one spelling for a word, they should be able to recognise it every time they read it.

However, the sounds of words can change.

The sound of words changes because of:

- sentence stress
- catenation
- characteristics of the speaker.

The sounds of spoken English: Sentence stress

Depending on which words in a sentence are stressed, the sounds of other words can change.

Example of sentence stress

1. The sounds of words can change. /kæn/
2. The sounds of words can change. /kən/

The sounds of spoken English: function words

In speaking, articles and prepositions are often not stressed. Students may not easily catch these unstressed words.

Stressed and clear	Unstressed and faint
to	/tə/
from	/frəm/
the	/ðə/

The sounds of spoken English: other changes

Other sound changes in spoken English include:

1) Soft pronunciation of word endings

- **start**
- **move**

2) Words that “run together”

/təstɑ:/ /ðədeɪjæftə/

5. Different accents

When we listen to English, we often recognise words by their stressed vowel sounds.

- The biggest difference between varieties of English is the pronunciation of vowel sounds.

US	UK
b <u>a</u> th	b <u>a</u> th
w <u>a</u> ter	w <u>a</u> ter
c <u>o</u> ffee	c <u>o</u> ffee

Effects of unfamiliar accents

- “...encountering an unfamiliar accent is likely to have a disproportionate effect on word recognition” - John Field

Familiarity with accents

There is good news.

- Your ear can adapt to different accents.
- Experiments show that this can occur very rapidly.
- In lab tests, listeners adapted after hearing only two – four sentences in an unfamiliar accent.

Reference

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/8072143_Rapid_adaptation_to_foreign-accented_English

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.3758/s13414-015-0987-1>

Teaching tip

It can be helpful to demonstrate how sounds change in different accents when you encounter them. This does **not** require complicated explanations or drills. Instead, just draw students' attention to sound changes when you come across them. Imitation by the teacher can be very helpful for this!



Example:

- Robin is from Kent, in the UK. Notice how he says, “castle”.
- Erik is from Colorado, in the US. Notice how he says, “custle”.

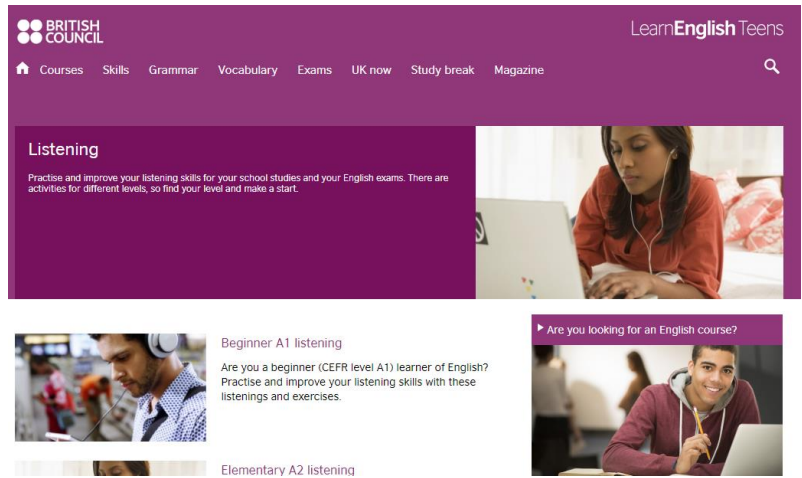
Tips for teachers: additional listening resources

Teachers and students can adopt a positive mindset for listening to speakers with different accents.

1. Older students in particular benefit from hearing different varieties of English.
2. There are plenty of listening resources available online (BBC, British Council, ABC).
3. Teachers do not need to make big changes in their teaching for different accents. Students will adapt with sufficient exposure to different accents.

Supplementary listening resources for students

The *LearnEnglishTeens* website has listening resources which include a variety of different accents. You can download audio files and worksheets for free.



Notes

6. Note-taking

Taking notes in academic lectures is a useful technique which can help boost memory of the contents of the lecture.

- However, there is little evidence that note-taking makes a difference to listening comprehension in a second language **test**.
- One reason may be that speakers don't usually pause in tests to allow time for listeners to write their notes.
- In one study, when students were **urged** to take notes for a listening test, it had a negative impact on their listening comprehension.

Reference

- Hale, G. A., & Courtney, R. (1994). The effects of note-taking on listening comprehension in the Test of English as a Foreign Language. *Language Testing*, 11(1), 29–47.

Quoted in:

- The effects of note taking on foreign language listening comprehension: An empirical study. Martyn Clark, PhD, Sarah Wayland, PhD, Peter Osthus, MA, Kassandra Gynther Brown, BA, Shaina Castle, BA, Alexandra Ralph, BA



Further resources

Important books about listening

- *Phonology for Listening: Teaching the stream of speech* (Speech in action)
Richard Cauldwell
- *A Syllabus for Listening: Decoding* (Speech in action)
Richard Cauldwell
- *Listening in the Language Classroom* (Cambridge University Press)
John Field
- *English Pronunciation in use: Intermediate* (Cambridge University Press)
Mark Hancock

Websites with listening resources

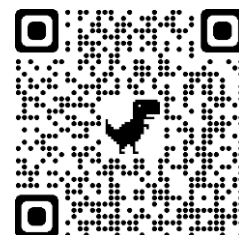
The *Speech in action* website contains a lot of interesting content and free resources.

- <https://www.speechinaction.org/>



Mark Hancock has a website which contains a lot of pronunciation and listening activities which are free to download.

- <http://hancockmcdonald.com/>



Spellings and sounds

1. The *Alphabetic Code Charts* website has a series of free posters listing the sounds and spelling patterns of English.

- <https://alphabeticcodecharts.com/free-code-charts/>



3. The *Spelfabet* site has a list of common spellings and spelling patterns for the sounds of English.

- <https://www.spelfabet.com.au/spelling-lists/sorted-by-spelling/>

