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Pre-listening skills and activities

People never listen without a purpose, except perhaps in a language class.
(Gary Buck)

- **Listening in the lesson – the sequence**
- **The role of the teacher**
- **What a listener needs to know before listening**
- **Activating schemata/ predicting**
- **Establishing reasons for listening**
- **Generating questions**
- **Pre-teaching vocabulary**
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Listening in the lesson – the sequence

Current thinking suggests that listening sequences should usually be divided into three parts: pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening. These three stages will be exemplified at length in this and the following chapters. First, however, we will deal briefly with what the three parts consist of and why this sequence is often favoured.

Pre-listening

The pre-listening stages described below help our students to prepare for what they are going to hear, and this gives them a greater chance of success in any given task. The first stage of pre-listening usually involves activating schemata (see Chapter 1) in order to help students to predict the content of the listening passage. The second stage is setting up a reason to listen. Maybe there is an **information gap** that needs to be filled or an **opinion gap** or pre-set questions, or perhaps the students have asked questions based on things they would hope to hear.

While-listening

The students hear the input once, probably listening for gist, although of course there may be occasions when they need to listen for specific information or listen in detail (see Chapter 1). They check their answers in pairs or groups. This is to give them confidence and to open up any areas of doubt. They then listen a second time, either in order to check or to answer more detailed questions. It is important that the students should be required to do different tasks every time they listen (listening to check answers is slightly different from listening to answer questions).

How many times should students listen to a passage? Some commentators say ‘once’. They point out that in real life we may not get second and third chances. For teaching

purposes, however, multiple opportunities to hear the input give students a safety net which helps to reduce their anxiety. There are a number of other factors concerning the passage that come into play: difficulty, length, the pedagogical focus and the potential for boredom. It may be the case that students only need to listen again to the part that they found difficult. If the focus is on close language analysis, it might be necessary to repeat several times, whereas if the focus is on listening for gist, it won't be. Hearing the same passage three times is probably the maximum before feelings of boredom begin to set in. Furthermore, if a listener has been unable to decode a word or phrase after hearing it three times, the problem is probably not one that can be solved by repeated exposure to the same recording.

With longer passages, teachers might consider 'chunking' the text by pausing it at various intervals. This can help to make extended listening more accessible and to avoid overloading the students.

Post-listening

The whole class checks answers, discusses difficulties such as unknown vocabulary, and responds to the content of the passage, usually orally, sometimes in writing. This may be done in plenary (with the whole class) or in pairs or groups.

A final stage may involve the 'mining' of the recording for useful language, a particular grammatical structure, vocabulary or discourse markers, for example.

Here is a summary of the sequence:

Pre-listening	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Activate schemata: What do I know? 2 Reason: Why listen? 3 Prediction: What can I expect to hear?
While-listening	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Monitor (1): Are my expectations met? 2 Monitor (2): Am I succeeding in the task?
Post-listening	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Feedback: Did I fulfil the task? 2 Response: How can I respond?

The above is the most common sequence for a listening lesson, although the duration of each stage will vary. Why has this sequence developed? Both research and instinct tell us that students have more chance of succeeding when they know something about the topic and are mentally attuned to what they may hear. These are, after all, the conditions under which most listening takes place outside the classroom. Also, as stated in the quotation that begins this chapter, we listen with a purpose and with certain expectations, hence the development of classroom exercises that ask students to listen purposefully. During the post-listening phase there is now an emphasis on helping students with difficulties, and reflecting on performance. The post-listening stage also developed with the realisation that listening provides excellent input and that this input needs to be analysed. We should note, of course, that the sequence described here – pre-, while- and post-listening – is not the only one, and alternatives will be discussed in the next chapter. It should also be mentioned that although the three stages of the sequence have been placed in different chapters, they need to form an organic whole – a seamless flow of activities that fit the text and the teaching situation. Further guidance on lesson planning will come in Chapter 7.

to exploit them, but for a number of reasons transcripts still remain underexploited. One problem is that book configurations do not allow sufficient space for large print transcripts. Another is the lack of teacher education on how to use them. A third problem is the element of controversy surrounding their use; many teachers believe that transcripts facilitate cued reading rather than listening.

There are, however, compelling reasons for using transcripts, as we saw in Chapter 3. Their main appeal, apart from the fact that they represent an invaluable source of connected speech, is that they show the students the language in the recording. They appear in physical space rather than time. Sound is ephemeral, and conversations in recordings are gone with the wind, whereas transcripts allow students to look again, re-read and check. As such, transcripts provide opportunities for students to see the difference between the way words are written and the way they sound. Features such as elision and assimilation are far easier to teach if there is a visible context on paper. Transcripts can be marked up, annotated, kept as reminders of vocabulary or other features, while recordings cannot. Below is a summary of the reasons for exploiting transcripts.

Seven reasons to exploit transcripts

Features	Elaboration
pronunciation	elision, contraction, assimilation and other aspects of connected speech, sentence stress, intonation for mood and attitude
speed	where and why speakers speed up and slow down
vocabulary	students relate the written form to the sound of the word in connected speech
features of good listeners	backchannelling (<i>mhm, I see</i> , etc), paraphrasing, asking follow-up questions
features exclusive to speaking	fillers, false starts, hesitations, repair strategies
discourse markers	signals for speech functions such as changing the subject, softening an opinion, returning to the main point, etc
graphophonic relationships between words	words that are related in spelling and meaning but differ greatly in sound (syllable shifts, silent letters, etc), e.g. <i>sign</i> and <i>signal</i> , <i>suspect</i> and <i>suspicious</i> , <i>nation</i> and <i>nationality</i> , <i>know</i> and <i>knowledge</i>

Here is how one coursebook attempts to exploit the transcript.

A final word of warning: deconstructing a text needs to be done judiciously. If we try to point out every interesting feature, our students will become either bored or overwhelmed. Many aspects of

7.5 conversation feature showing you are listening

- a** When Tom is telling the story, John uses some words and phrases to show that he is listening and interested. Underline these phrases in the transcript.