

Selecting listening tasks for the EFL classroom: the do's and the don'ts

What makes a good listening activity? How can we make sure our listening tasks will foster language comprehension and acquisition?

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In many EFL contexts learners do not get enough exposure to the L2 outside the language classroom. Using authentic TL input for our listening activities should therefore form an important part of our lessons. The world wide web can be a great ally in our quest for authentic audiovisual resources. YouTube videos and certain podcasts can offer great real life listening material as long as they are selected with caution.

Variety in language input is also equally important to authenticity. Listening tasks in the EFL classroom should not just focus on conversations among native speakers. The options are endless: news broadcasts, radio programs, listening to an interview with a famous politician/actor/singer, announcements at a train station/airport etc. can all be used as the basis for effective and innovative EFL activities.

For Penny Ur (2012:115), authenticity in listening tasks mainly has to do with real-life listening, with material that has not been produced for language speaking purposes. As she points out, the degree of authenticity and whether or not we will be giving out a specific listening task to our students will depend on our learners' level and needs. Younger

students with limited exposure to L2 input could benefit from semi authentic materials that are not very demanding and are 'adapted' to a lower level with clear, low rate of speech. More advanced learners will need more exposure to real, authentic examples of speech. As teachers we therefore need to evaluate the effect the listening materials will have on our students and whether they will help our learners develop effective listening skills in the target language.

Variety and authenticity however are not enough for a listening activity to be successful. Below you will find some key points to consider when designing or choosing listening tasks for the EFL classroom:

Before designing any listening task we should first of all keep in mind what a passive skills activity should not look like. A bad listening activity will generally have the following characteristics:



Focus on the listening sub skills

What is the purpose behind the listening tasks we give out to the class? What do we want to achieve? These are key questions we need to ask ourselves when we select or design activities for this receptive skill.

The tasks should always be adapted to our learners' level, age and specific needs. We need to carefully examine their level of difficulty and what the purpose behind each listening task is. In exam oriented classrooms for example these activities should provide

adequate practice for the upcoming language tests, whereas with adult learners (who learn the TL for communicative purposes) the focus should be shifted to real-life listening tasks.

During the planning stage of our lesson we should also keep in mind the basic functions in our brain during any sort of listening activity as this will help us gain a deeper understanding of the main goals that our listening tasks should aim for.



Activating learner schemata through engaging pre-listening activities

Pre-teaching key vocabulary:

We need to carefully examine the abstract our learners will be listening to and decide whether or not we need to pre teach certain vocabulary items or whether our students can deduce meaning from context. The key is somewhere in the middle. The activity should not be too hard for them and at the same time it should allow our learners to learn how to

discover information on their own by using contextual clues and 'selective listening' in order to extract the information they need.

We should consider pre-teaching certain words and phrases that can facilitate the comprehension of the listening task. Again, we should focus only on the words that may confuse our learners during the activity. Teachers can try to do some brainstorming with the entire class and elicit this vocabulary from the ss during the lead-in stage.

The importance of strategy teaching

For Vandergrift (1999) listening strategies are conscious means by which learners can guide and evaluate their own comprehension. He divides these strategies into *metacognitive* (selective listening, monitoring), *cognitive* (making deductions, using one's own knowledge on the subject) and *socio-affective* (asking for clarifications, cooperating with others). Keeping these in mind, it is important to make sure that the listening tasks we give to our students are designed to help them use such listening strategies and will consequently boost their overall communication skills.

Identifying the aims of the listening task

In order for our students' interlanguage and listening skills to develop we need to provide them with a lot of L2 input and give them opportunities for practice. Previous to the listening activity, we must make sure our instructions are clear. We must always remember to give them some thinking and reading time before the task begins. Our students need to be trained to quickly read the task instructions and grasp the meaning of what they need to focus on during the listening stage. Activating our learners' schemata and previous knowledge on the listening topic is also important. Through the use of realia, brainstorming or whole-class discussion on the listening subject, we prepare our learners for what comes next and provide the adequate guidance they need in order to successfully carry out the listening task.

We need to make sure our learners gain something useful out of the task, useful language, vocabulary, grammar, lexical chunks to use. We also need to make sure that our learners receive a lot of input from a variety of sources and that they get enough exposure to the different dialects and accents found in the TL. i.e. language they will come across in the future.

Listening for a specific purpose

Nobody wants to listen to something they do not find interesting or relevant to their age and needs. It is important to always remember that we need to keep our learners' motivation levels up at all times. Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are equally important here. Our learners need to find the activity stimulating, focus on it and carry it out with success.

We must also keep in mind that, in real life, listening mainly serves functional purposes. When we listen 'naturally', we listen for a reason, for a purpose. We then either retain (or

skip) the information, we use it to interact with others or we take some other sort of action. Our listening tasks must serve these same functions. We must design these activities with a 'purpose' in mind, that will trigger our students' interest and make them 'tune in' and focus on the listening task in order to achieve something. This sense of purpose will greatly enhance their motivation levels and will make them eager to participate in the lesson.

Learners as discoverers

Cultivating the anticipation of discovery should be one of our main tasks in the language classroom. We must activate our learners' schemata and previous knowledge by having them **guess** what the topic and aim of the lesson are through **brainstorming**, through **authentic** and engaging activities that **trigger** our learners' minds and imagination. We must train them to expect the unexpected. The teacher is there not feed them with input and instructions but to provide the stimulus and let the learners give the response and be actively involved in the learning process.

Ur (1996:169) stresses the positive impact to language acquisition of the 'journey of self-discovery' through imaginative writing/speaking. When students find the task and the topic interesting, challenging and relevant to their age, they will 'strive' harder than usual to 'produce a greater variety of correct and appropriate language' in order to express their ideas.

Selective listening

Similar to skimming and scanning in reading, our learners need to be trained to listen for the gist or for specific information. Our students must learn to identify general topics and at the same time detect specific details when needed. This will come in handy not only as exam practice but also when they will have to listen to native speakers of the language in real life situations.

Learner collaboration

Listening may be a passive skill but this doesn't mean that we cannot promote learner collaboration through a listening task.

In many cases our learners will rarely find the opportunity to practise the TL outside the language classroom. It is therefore essential to encourage them to speak and write in the foreign language as much as possible. We must give them the freedom to interact in the TL, to try to communicate successfully and appropriately (not necessarily accurately), to get their message across without the fear of errors. Our learners' **interlanguage** will constantly evolve through **creative mistakes**. It's not just the drilling and the exercises that will boost their linguistic development but the interaction, the constant effort to turn their passive vocabulary into active.

By working in pairs or groups our students will combine their imagination and their knowledge of L2 lexis and grammar and will learn from one another. Role play, real-life

simulations, games and quizzes combined with the listening task will not only increase student talking time (STT), but will also enhance our learners' communication skills.

Time limits

Giving students adequate time to process all the information and clear instructions so that they know what to do at all times:

It is important to discuss the listening topic beforehand with the entire class, to prepare the learners for what they are going to listen to and activate their schemata. We should try to elicit from our ss as much information as possible, let them 'discover' what the upcoming task is all about and thus keep them actively involved in the learning process.

Training students to read all the relevant information before the listening task begins is also a strategy that could be useful for their language exams. This way they will be prepared for what they have to focus on when the activity begins and easily 'extract' the specific information they need in order to complete the task.

It is better not to give out a transcript to the students and let them focus only on what they are listening to. The only information they will have will be the lead in activity and whatever is written in the task. The rest will be up to them to discover. After all we are preparing them to face real life situations in the future. They will have to communicate with other speakers of the language without any transcript.

Giving students a time limit: Again, this is a very useful technique that will help learners in their language exams as they will learn to work under time pressure and to focus on what they are listening to. They will need to focus more on the listening task

Follow up tasks

Listening can be followed by a hands on activity, by note taking, by a game, a quick role play activity, a group task, a matching task or even a writing task that will boost our learners' creativity (ex. listen and write down what happens next). The selection of these activities will greatly depend on our specific language classrooms, our students' L1 background and the difficulties they may face when listening to an authentic L2 conversation. It will also depend on whether or not our classroom is exam oriented (which will mean that we will have to focus on specific task types and topics that will help our students in their language exam preparation).

References

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