

Listening and Reading

“I like to listen. I have learned a great deal from listening carefully. Most people never listen.”

Ernest Hemingway

“I suggest that the only books that influence us are those for which we are ready, and which have gone a little further down our particular path than we have gone ourselves.”

E.M. Forster

Teaching Listening

Listening is definitely the first skill children acquire. As soon as they enter this world they start listening. First they distinguish their mother’s voice from other sounds. It has been proved that they recognize the difference between corresponding voiced and voiceless consonants very early. They still don’t produce any words; they just cry, coo and babble, preparing their vocal cords for later tasks. Children start talking at roughly the same age. It’s impossible to say of any child exactly when he/she has started to talk because it is not clear what should count as a criterion – single words or two-word utterances or real sentences? We can be sure that a child needs a period of 18 or a bit more than 20 months for preparation. This “silent” period is filled with listening. It enables all normal children to acquire the language they hear spoken around them gradually without special instruction.

Classroom atmosphere should be as close as possible to real-life situations. Therefore the teacher shouldn’t insist on making students speak English from the very beginning. At least some of them will need the “silent” period. What the teacher really should do from the very beginning is talking English to them most of the time to create the English atmosphere in the classroom and make the surroundings natural. Of course hardly any student will spend a whole lesson listening. The teacher also gives the students as much visual back-up as possible. He/she uses gestures, miming, facial expressions, movement and pictures. The teacher just should remember that once something has been said, then it disappears. That is why the teacher can interrupt his speech from time to time, repeat the item, illustrate it with the pictures, explain more details, and ask questions to make things clear. This also helps to prolong a concentration span. On the other hand students shouldn’t be overloaded with listening.

Methodologists offer a variety of activities which “will wake your students up, make them move about, create movement and/or noise. Others will calm them down, make them concentrate on what is in front of them, and create a peaceful atmosphere.” This is what listening enables, either to wake students up or calm them down.

Pre-listening activities

Before students start listening, they can be given tasks that will help them to understand the passage better while listening:

- 1 Look at the picture belonging to the topic and guess what the passage will be about.
- 2 Guess which words will be used.
- 3 Read the list of word and omit those you think will not be in the passage.

- 4 Look at the set of simple pictures, omit those which you suppose don't belong to the passage. Give names to the rest of the pictures.
- 5 Put pictures in logical sequence, and then check while listening.

Activities during listening

TPR (total physical response) activities are desirable especially with young learners. Students also can fill in the missing information either with a picture or a word, they can listen and repeat:

- 1 Put up your hand whenever you hear ...
- 2 Follow the instructions.
- 3 Point at the thing mentioned.
- 4 Discover the mistake.
- 5 Put items in order.
- 6 Listen and colour.

After-listening activities

Communication works both ways therefore this part should be more productive:

- 1 Mime the dialog or the story.
- 2 Draw a picture illustrating what you have heard.
- 3 Fill in the grid.
- 4 Listen and repeat. How much do you remember?
- 5 Out of the set of pictures choose those which have been mentioned in the listening passage.

A creative teacher could prolong the list of activities and invent a lot more of them. Just put listening to the centre of your struggling.

Listening cannot be taught or learned in isolation. It is integrated with other language skills. Babies listen to their first language for a long time before attempting to produce it. The parents patiently repeat first words and greet with excitement the child's first efforts at speaking. Mistakes are not only overlooked but also enjoyed and imitated. Love, self-esteem, and confidence drive the desire to learn. Teachers at school take the place of wise parents at home. Do they still remember the atmosphere mentioned above?

Teaching Reading

Reading is not the first skill to be acquired. Children usually start reading foreign texts after they have learned reading in their native language first. Printed word becomes a valuable source of expanding children's knowledge of a foreign language. The teacher must be happy if reading becomes an enjoyable activity because books open up a new world to young learners. Their natural curiosity makes them read. This is a chance for the teacher, which must be exploited. The teacher should bring interesting texts of all kinds. We are surrounded with books, comics and magazines, texts on a computer screen, on a mobile display, inscriptions and labels. These texts work in our native language and make our native world. Foreign language texts open the door into another world and enlarge our horizons. Students should be exposed to many kinds of texts. However, meeting with literature is essential. "Literature has a social and emotional value that is a vital part of its role in the development of children's language and literacy." (D.Vale with A.Feunteun: Teaching Children English, CUP 1995).

Students are active, creative elements in the process of reading. When they read or listen to a story, they imagine and create a mental picture of what they comprehend. They try to predict what will happen next, and they recall what has happened previously. They identify with the situations or with the characters in the text thanks to their own life experience. They also try to make judgements and find useful values in the text.

At the very earliest stages of learning to read learners need practice in recognizing words. Wordcards seem to be a very useful teaching aid at this stage. The teacher shows and pronounces the word in the card, and the class repeats. Wordcards can be shown in combinations and in different sequences. This technique belongs to **look and say** approach. As soon as we combine the wordcard into a simple sentence, we may apply so called **look and do** approach. Students read and do what the sentence says. This enables the teacher to control if learners understand. They discover this way that words don't exist in isolation, but as whole phrases or sentences. Later the sentences form a story that the children read for the first time themselves after the whole text is familiar to them.

Pre-reading activities

We bring tasks for learners before they start reading to make them involved in the process of reading, to make them focused and interested. Key words should be prepared in advance for students to understand the text afterwards, to make reading comprehension easier:

- 1 Say the word you read,
- 2 perform actions you read,
- 3 match words (sentences) with a picture,
- 4 match halves of sentences together,
- 5 draw a picture.

Activities during reading

When reading a story, we may interrupt from time to time asking students to predict what will come next. This technique might not be devoid of mother tongue. While reading students can:

- 1 Fill in the chart,
- 2 put the words or sentences in order,
- 3 fill in the missing words in sentences,
- 4 write words instead of pictures in the text,
- 5 complete the last word in a sentence or the last sentence in a story.

Activities after reading

Like people like to talk about the TV programme they have seen, students naturally want to talk about the story. Let's give them a chance. Of course at the beginning mother tongue can be allowed here a bit. Anyhow, they also can:

- 1 Draw a picture based on the text,
- 2 fill in the crossword where new words from the text appear
- 3 mime the story,
- 4 choose the right picture which suits the story from the set of pictures,
- 5 discover the mistake in the summary written by the teacher.

It is the teacher's responsibility to value his learners as readers. Success and progress should be accepted with joy and mistakes sometimes overlooked with a decent diplomacy. It is vital to offer a balance of reading activities, some of which enable a creative partnership with the text, and involve interest and the experience of a student.