

Unit 7 Listening

■ What is listening?

Listening is one of the four language **skills**: reading, writing, listening and speaking. Like reading, listening is a **receptive skill**, as it involves responding to language rather than producing it. Listening involves making sense of the **meaningful** (having meaning) sounds of language. We do this by using **context** and our knowledge of language and the world.

■ Key concepts

Listening involves understanding spoken language, which is different from written language.

What differences can you think of between the spoken and written language of English? List some before reading this table.

<i>Written language in English</i>	<i>Spoken language in English</i>
Stays on the page and doesn't disappear.	Disappears as soon as it is spoken. Sometimes it is spoken fast and sometimes slowly, with or without pauses.
Uses punctuation and capital letters to show sentences.	Shows sentences and meaningful groups of words through stress and intonation .
Consists of letters, words, sentences and punctuation joined together into text.	Consists of connected speech , sentences, incomplete sentences or single words.
Has no visual support – except photos or pictures sometimes.	The speaker uses body language to support his/her communication; for example, gestures (movements of hands or arms to help people understand us), and facial expressions (the looks on our face). This helps the listener to understand what the speaker is saying.
Is usually quite well organised: sentences follow one another in logical sequences and are joined to previous or following sentences.	Is not so well organised; e.g. it contains interruptions, hesitations, repetitions and frequent changes of topic.
Usually uses quite exact vocabulary and more complex grammar.	Often uses rather general vocabulary and simple grammar.

To understand spoken language we need to be able to deal with all the characteristics of spoken language listed in the table on page 30. Here is an example of spoken language. You can see that it can be less well organised and less exact than written language:

- FATHER: How's your homework? You know, your history?
 SON: Easy.
 FATHER: You sure?
 SON: It's just ... I mean all we need to do is, well, just read some stuff.
 FATHER: But d'you understand it?
 SON: Yeah. Can I go and play with Tom?

To help us understand spoken language we need to use the context the language is spoken in and our knowledge of the world. In this example, our knowledge of relationships between fathers and sons, and of children's attitudes to homework helps us understand, but if we knew the context of the conversation (e.g. the place where it took place, the father's and son's body language, their attitudes to homework), we would understand more.

When we listen, we also need to be able to understand different kinds of spoken text types such as conversations, stories, announcements, songs, instructions, lectures and advertisements. They contain different ways of organising language and different language features, and some consist of just one voice while others consist of more.

We also need to understand different speeds of speech. Some people speak more slowly and with more pauses. Others speak fast and/or with few pauses. This makes them more difficult to understand. We need to understand different accents too (e.g. Scottish or Australian English).

But we do not listen to everything in the same way. How we listen depends on our reason for listening. We might **listen for gist, specific information, detail, attitude** (listening to see what attitude a speaker is expressing), or do **extensive listening**. See page 22 about reading for an explanation of these terms.

We can see that listening involves doing many things: dealing with the characteristics of spoken language; using the context and our knowledge of the world; understanding different text types; understanding different speeds of speech and accents; using different listening **subskills**. Look at this extract from a listening syllabus for lower secondary students of English. It shows many of these different aspects of listening:

- Hearing the differences between common sounds
- Identifying important words in what someone has just said
- Understanding and responding to simple instructions and commands
- Recognising basic differences in information (e.g. commands vs questions)
- Following a simple narrative spoken by the teacher with the help of pictures
- Recognising the sound patterns of simple rhyming words
- Understanding the development of simple stories
- Understanding and responding to simple requests and classroom instructions
- Identifying main ideas

(adapted from *Syllabuses for Secondary Schools, English Language, Secondary 1–5*; the Education Department, Hong Kong 1999)

■ Key concepts and the language teaching classroom

- In the classroom, learners can listen to many sources of spoken language, e.g. the teacher, other learners, visitors, cassettes, video, DVDs.
- When we listen to audio cassettes or CDs we can't see the speaker's body language or the context he/she is speaking in. And we can't ask the speaker to repeat or explain. These factors make listening to recordings more difficult than listening to live speakers.
- Some listening texts in coursebooks are **authentic**, i.e. they contain all the features of real spoken language. Other texts are written especially for language learners. Many experts think that learners need to listen to both kinds of text to develop their listening skills.
- Understanding and showing you have understood are not the same thing. For example, maybe you can understand all of a story, but you can't tell the story. So, comprehension activities should be in easier language than the language in the listening text.
- Children learn well from listening to stories that interest them.
- We can develop learners' listening skills by focusing regularly on particular aspects of listening, e.g. problem sounds, features of connected speech, subskills, and, if necessary, on any new language.
- The activities in a listening lesson often follow this pattern:
 - 1 Introductory activities: an introduction to the topic of the text and activities focusing on the language of the text
 - 2 Main activities: a series of comprehension activities developing different listening subskills
 - 3 Post-activities: activities which ask learners to talk about how a topic in the text relates to their own lives or give their opinions on parts of the text. These activities also require learners to use some of the language they have met in the text.

See Unit 16 for listening activities and Unit 20 for planning lessons.

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES (See page 172 for answers)

- 1 Here is a conversation between two learners of English. Find in it examples of contractions, repetitions, hesitations and interruptions.

Yuko: What would you like your life to be like in 20 years' time?
Hiroko: I'd like it to be ... I want to have a family ... you know, a husband, three children, my ...
Yuko: Would you be happy?
Hiroko: I'd be ... I mean, yes. Yeah, sure, sure, of course. What about you?
Yuko: Erm, me, well, erm, er ... Maybe I'd like to have a good ... you know, to do a really interesting job ... with lots of pay, of course!

(based on a conversation in *English for the Teacher*, Mary Spratt, Cambridge University Press 1994)

- 2 What do you think is the context of this conversation?
- 3 Which subskills – gist, detail, specific information or attitude – do the following questions about this conversation focus on?
- A What is the conversation about?
 - B What does Yuko want her life to be like in 20 years' time?
 - C How many children does Hiroko want?
 - D Does Hiroko sound happy?