

Teaching Listening Comprehension in English as a Foreign Language

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Based on our teaching experience, we have observed that a significant number of learners consistently struggle with listening comprehension, even when they possess a reasonable knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and reading skills. Nevertheless, listening remains one of the most crucial elements of language learning, as it not only enables effective communication but also enhances auditory memory, which is vital for acquiring and applying English efficiently.

Listening is a core skill in English language learning and plays a central role in the development of communicative competence. Unlike other language skills that may focus primarily on written or controlled input, listening exposes learners to authentic, real-time language, providing the opportunity to experience natural speech patterns, intonation, and rhythm. By regularly engaging with spoken English, learners expand their vocabulary, encountering words and expressions in context, which helps them understand nuances, collocations, and pragmatic uses that cannot always be captured through reading alone.

Listening also reinforces grammatical structures by presenting them in functional use rather than as isolated rules. Learners hear structures embedded in meaningful discourse, which supports the internalization of syntax, tense, and sentence patterns. This natural exposure allows learners to recognize variations, exceptions, and contextual applications, which strengthens their overall grammatical competence.

Moreover, listening promotes higher-order cognitive skills, such as analysis, synthesis, and inference. Learners must interpret meaning from incomplete or ambiguous input, make predictions about upcoming information, and integrate prior

knowledge with new content. This cognitive engagement is crucial not only for understanding language but also for developing critical thinking and problem-solving abilities within the context of communication.

In addition, active listening encourages learners to monitor their own comprehension, reflect on strategies they are using, and self-correct when understanding breaks down. The process of actively engaging with spoken language, noticing gaps in understanding, and seeking clarification or feedback enhances metacognitive skills, which are essential for independent language learning. Collectively, these benefits contribute to a more holistic development of language proficiency, enabling learners to interact more confidently and effectively in diverse communicative situations [1; 2, 3].

Researchers have consistently highlighted the close relationship between listening and other language skills. Listening and reading are both receptive skills that require decoding, interpretation, and integration of linguistic input. The difference lies mainly in modality: reading allows for controlled processing, while listening demands real-time comprehension under temporal pressure [4]. Listening and speaking, on the other hand, are interdependent skills that form the foundation of oral communication. Successful conversation depends on a constant interplay between the ability to comprehend spoken input and the ability to produce meaningful responses [2].

It is important to stress that listening is not a passive reception of sounds but a dynamic, active, and highly cognitive process. Learners must rapidly recognize linguistic patterns, construct meaning from incomplete or ambiguous input, infer unstated information, anticipate the direction of discourse, and formulate potential responses. This dynamic engagement requires the use of both bottom-up processing (decoding phonemes, words, and grammatical structures) and top-down processing (drawing on prior knowledge, context, and expectations) [5; 6].

Like reading, listening is categorized as a reactive skill because it involves perception, analysis, and immediate interpretation of verbal messages [7]. However,

listening differs in that it places heavier demands on working memory: learners must process input in real time without the option of revisiting it. For this reason, training learners in metacognitive strategies—such as prediction, monitoring, clarifying, and evaluating—can significantly improve their listening performance [3; 2].

In sum, listening is not merely a support skill but a central driver of language development. Its integration with other skills, reliance on both cognitive and metacognitive processes, and demand for real-time processing make it one of the most complex yet essential competencies in English language learning [1; 5].

Learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) encounter multiple challenges when developing listening comprehension skills. These challenges are both linguistic and cognitive in nature, and they often overlap with sociocultural factors. The most common difficulties in developing listening comprehension skills include the following:

Limited linguistic resources: Learners with a restricted vocabulary and insufficient knowledge of grammatical structures often struggle to decode spoken input. This limitation slows down comprehension and increases the likelihood of misunderstandings, as students may fail to recognize familiar words or interpret complex sentence structures correctly [3; 2].

Phonological complexity of English: English speech often contains features such as connected speech, reductions, weak forms, and assimilation, which can make it challenging for learners to recognize words and phrases in natural discourse. In addition, variations in regional and international accents further complicate comprehension for non-native listeners [6; 1].

Sociocultural and pragmatic knowledge gaps: Learners may have difficulty interpreting implied meanings, idiomatic expressions, humor, or culturally specific references. Without sufficient awareness of sociocultural and pragmatic norms, even grammatically simple utterances can be misinterpreted or misunderstood [5; 4].

Cognitive processing demands: Listening requires learners to decode speech rapidly, segment the continuous stream of sounds into meaningful units, and

construct coherent interpretations in real time. These cognitive demands can overwhelm working memory, particularly for learners who are not yet proficient [7; 1].

Attention and memory constraints: Maintaining sustained attention throughout a listening task is challenging, especially for lower-level learners. Limited working memory capacity can hinder the retention and integration of auditory input, reducing overall comprehension and performance [2]. Effective pedagogy should therefore integrate both bottom-up processes (decoding sounds, words, and structures) and top-down processes (using context, prior knowledge, and prediction) to support learners in overcoming these barriers [5; 3].

To develop listening comprehension skills effectively, instructors should adopt a structured, progressive, and scaffolded approach that gradually increases the complexity of the input and supports learners at each stage of development. Effective listening instruction combines cognitive, metacognitive, and linguistic strategies, ensuring that learners are not only exposed to authentic language but also actively engaged in processing it.

Initial exposure without post-task activity: At the earliest stage, learners are introduced to audio materials without the pressure of immediate tasks or responses. This stage focuses on familiarizing students with the prosodic features of English, including stress, rhythm, intonation, and patterns of connected speech. By repeatedly hearing these features, learners develop an intuitive sense of how English is pronounced in natural contexts, which helps them decode speech more efficiently later. For example, listening to a short story or dialogue without answering questions allows learners to notice stress patterns, pauses, and intonation changes, building foundational auditory skills [2; 6].

Guided listening with short responses: Once learners are familiar with prosodic features, they can engage in guided listening tasks that require brief, immediate responses. This stage encourages active listening, where learners practice detecting key words, understanding simple instructions, or identifying main ideas. Short

responses—such as answering multiple-choice questions, completing a gap-fill, or signaling comprehension with gestures—promote rapid processing and reinforce attention to important elements of the audio. This stage also allows teachers to provide corrective feedback and clarify misunderstandings, which strengthens learners' confidence and comprehension accuracy [6].

Extended listening with elaborated responses: At a more advanced stage, learners use audio materials as a basis for extended, elaborated responses, which integrate both listening and productive skills. This may include summarizing spoken texts, discussing interpretations, or expressing opinions based on the content. By linking comprehension to oral output, learners strengthen listening comprehension, critical thinking, and speaking skills simultaneously. Extended listening tasks encourage learners to process the entire speech stream, identify nuanced meanings, and make inferences, which mirrors real-life communication scenarios. For instance, after listening to a news podcast, learners could summarize key points, analyze the speaker's perspective, and discuss cultural or social implications [2; 6].

Use of authentic materials: Incorporating authentic listening materials is crucial for exposing learners to natural speech. Resources such as podcasts (BBC Learning English, ESLPod), YouTube channels (English Addict with Mr Steve, BBC Learning English), and platforms like VOA Learning English provide diverse accents, speech rates, and topics. Authentic materials motivate learners, increase engagement, and prepare them for real-world communication by presenting language as it is naturally used, rather than in simplified textbook dialogues [2; 6].

Visual aids and pre-listening activities: Visual supports, such as transcripts, subtitles, and illustrations, can enhance comprehension by connecting auditory input with written or visual representations. Pre-listening tasks that introduce key vocabulary, expressions, or grammatical structures reduce cognitive load, allowing learners to focus on meaning rather than decoding every word. Combining pre-listening preparation with repeated exposure to the audio, followed by discussion and

analysis, helps learners develop strategic listening skills, such as prediction, inference, and summarization [6].

By following this structured approach, instructors create a step-by-step progression that supports learners' auditory processing, enhances comprehension, and gradually prepares them to understand and engage with English in authentic, real-life contexts. The combination of exposure, guided practice, elaboration, and authentic materials ensures that listening development is systematic, targeted, and pedagogically sound.

Listening comprehension is a fundamental skill in learning English and must be integrated systematically into every stage of instruction. Teachers should carefully select materials and activities that match learners' linguistic levels and interests, while progressively increasing difficulty. Developing listening skills goes beyond listening itself: it requires structured practice, integration with speaking activities, and consistent exposure to authentic English input.

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