

EFFECTIVE WAYS OF TEACHING LISTENING SKILLS FOR B1 LEVEL STUDENTS

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Abstract

How do you really know that someone understood you correctly without asking after every sentence “Do you understand?” (And students are often programmed to respond “yes” even when they didn’t.) This problem may also apply to reading, the other “receptive” language skill, in that its focus is largely on the comprehension of another speaker’s production; however, while the teacher has some understanding of how to teach someone to read in English by teaching context clues, for example, to help students comprehend text, how do you really teach someone to listen better (especially when even many native speakers of English often have difficulties with this)? However, while teaching listening may seem ambiguous, there are actually a number of principles that apply in teaching listening skills in English. Following are a number of listening skills, most of which not only benefit the ESL student but also the native speaker.

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Basics: Pay Attention

Even native speakers need help with this. Focus on the speaker. Look at him or her because facial expressions and body language can communicate as much as language. For example, there will usually be more engagement with the listener in making eye contact and use of hand gestures if what the speaker is saying is of importance to him or her. In addition, it’s easy to mistake what someone actually said if you are not focusing on him or her and are engaged in some other tasks, such as reading or texting.

Practice Active Listening

Ask the speaker to slow down or repeat when you don’t understand or just want to be certain about what you heard. Repeat back what you think you heard him or her say, as there can often be a gap between what we thought we heard and what the speaker intended. This gap can be addressed by letting the speaker know what you heard: for example, “So what I’m hearing from you is that you would like more quiet and fewer distractions after 9 p.m. so that you can study.” This is called “active listening,” in which the listening portion of a conversation becomes as active as the speaking part in communicating a message, and not only helps the listener in understanding what the speaker is saying, but also can help the speaker in organizing his thoughts and clarify what he wants to communicate: e.g., the speaker may be spluttering something about the late hour and her test tomorrow, and may not consciously know

what she is trying to ask for—or is too reticent—until the listener clarifies.

Pay Attention to Structure

In a formal lecture or speech, the speaker will usually let you know ahead of time the organization of the discourse: “Today we will discuss the two types of diabetes, Type One and Type Two, although as we will see, there is some overlap—” and then what will follow is a description of Types One and Two, with the overlap probably addressed at the end. These devices, called “discourse markers,” actually help the listener in organizing and understanding the lecture. Even in less formal conversation, speakers will often structure their discourse, especially if they want to make certain they are understood: “Okay, there are a few issues I need to raise with you....” With this informal marker of “there are a few—” and the use of the word “issues,” the speaker signals the importance of what follows. “A few,” it may be noted, is a vague expression, and what follows may be anywhere from two to five or six issues. The listener may clarify when the “issues” are covered by asking “Is there anything else?” when the speaker pauses.

Listen for Key Words

What words does the speaker emphasize? Usually, the speaker will let you know by stressing the main point: “Let’s talk about the TIME we will meet tomorrow....” The stressed word “time” signals that the time of tomorrow’s appointment is the main point, as does the marker “Let’s talk about—”

In addition, certain words signal importance by themselves, such as “issues,” as seen above: whatever follows “issues” is of importance. Other key words signaling importance are “concerns” and “points.”

Key Phrases or Markers

In formal lectures the speaker usually also “marks” main points with key phrases: “The main point is...” or “On the other hand, some people take an opposing viewpoint....” But even in everyday conversation the speaker often uses fewer formal markers: for example, “I guess what I’m trying to say is—” is often used before a main point.

Teaching Principles of Listening

Make it Explicit

Even native speakers, who actually use markers or key vocabulary, may not have consciously thought about these devices. Introducing some key markers and vocabulary is often welcome it makes explicit how to understand and manage conversations, which may have been something a mystery (such as why a friend reacts with anger at your student ignoring a raised “issue”). In addition, key terms such as “active listening” and “discourse marker” should be introduced and exemplified.

Model

For new concepts, such as active listening, a model is needed. This can be provided by traditional print example dialogues as well as film clips, and teacher modeling with volunteer students: e.g., the teacher might say, “Gina, tell me something of importance to you, and I’ll listen actively. The rest of the class, pay attention, and then let’s discuss what goes into active listening.”

Practice

This might be especially important in active listening, which few people, native or nonnative speakers, really know how to do, as we are used to either sitting quietly while a speaker finishes his speech (or diatribe, if he or she is angry), or interrupting, when we think he or she is wrong, or sitting and planning what we will say in response, etc. Active listening takes practice, but is worth it in terms of improved listening skills and relationships.

In conclusion, teaching good listening skills is difficult as it is so difficult to define and exemplify, and few of us, even native speakers of English, really do it well. But by making explicit the qualities of

good listening and then practicing it, our ESL students can become good listeners in English, and often better than their native speaker peers.

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