

Teaching listening: intensive listening

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Introduction

Intensive listening is a type of listening practice which directs the attention of language learners to their language knowledge, and requires them to note contrasts of language form, viz. sound, structure, and lexical choice, in the process of comprehension and interpretation of the aural input. During listening practice, the listeners process sounds and detect word boundaries, perceive and /or analyze vocabulary, sentence and clause boundaries, word stress, intonation and changes in pitch, tone and speed of delivery, basic syntactic patterns, cohesive devices etc. in the input. The listeners keep hold of relevant information bearing in mind the goal of listening and complete a task or make responses to the input. Intensive listening activities aim at developing learners' listening skills and also at raising learners' awareness of the impact of phonological, syntactic and vocabulary differences in meanings. Apart from linguistic knowledge, language listeners also make use of other types of knowledge (e.g. prior knowledge, discourse knowledge and pragmatic knowledge) to process and analyze the aural input.

The process of intensive listening

When doing intensive listening, the listeners process information in the aural input in three ways: discriminating, comprehending, and interpreting.

Discriminating	To discriminate sounds of the target language, recognize the form and meaning of the words, phrases, grammatical units, and pragmatic units in the aural input. The listeners may have to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ identify consonant blend sounds, e.g. trouble, lift, and discriminate between different initial and final consonant blend sounds in words, e.g. sheep/sleep, bat/bad.✓ recognize the sound effects (e.g. onomatopoeia, rhymes and alliteration) in poems, including looking for a word
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	that rhymes with another word in a poem.
Comprehending	<p>To decipher messages and meanings by listening for, identifying, selecting only those things that are relevant to the goals and objectives of the language user, and that serve to satisfy listening task needs. The listeners may have to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ extract specific information by identifying relevant meaningful phrases or sentences in announcements ✓ follow simple directions by using knowledge of simple cohesive devices and prepositional phrases in a telephone conversation
Interpreting	<p>To filter the thoughts and ideas of the speakers using the listener's own language knowledge, prior knowledge, pragmatic knowledge, discourse knowledge, and make evaluation or judgement. The listeners may have to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ identify facts/ opinions by recognizing common expressions (e.g. 'It is generally understood', 'In my opinion') in a speech ✓ recognize differences in the use of intonation in expressing approval, disapproval, queries and doubts and decipher speakers' intentions/ attitudes in a conversation

The three ways of processing aural input do not follow a fixed order or sequence and it is not a must to go through all three ways of information processing arbitrarily. However, many teachers tend to devise intensive listening tasks in a bottom-up approach requiring their students to discriminate the language sounds and forms, then moving on to meanings and eventually evaluation and judgement of the input. The goals, objectives, needs of a given listening activity/task determines if the listener should discriminate the sounds, words, grammatical units only, or to proceed to identify main points and details and/or to judge and infer the speaker's thoughts and feelings, then make appropriate responses. Below is an example of an intensive listening task:

Genre	Radio news (a traffic accident)
The listener	Aural input
1. Receiving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Phonological(the voice of a newscaster) ● Lexical, syntactic, and stylistic aspects of the genre, and language focus.
2. Discriminating listening skills: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● to identify and recognize the sounds in the speech of the newscaster ● to identify and recognize the vocabulary and grammar of the aural input (i.e. radio news reporting) 	<p>Using prior knowledge and discourse knowledge:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The structure of details anticipated: e.g. what>when> where> who/which> how> why <p>Using linguistic knowledge:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Vocabulary: e.g. when and where: last night, 10 o'clock; where: Justin Road; what/who: a taxi, a lorry, drivers, passengers, seat belts ; verbs: crashed, killed, hurt, the police, confirmed. ● Syntax and style: e.g. 'Welcome to our ABC news. This is Mary Smith reporting'. ● Past tense, active voice, and passive voice of verbs.
3. Comprehending listening skills: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● to listen for the gist of the topic ● to listen for the main and supporting details 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The listener should know the organization and structure of radio news and get ready to listen for information to answer the following : <p>What happened? When did it happen? Who were involved? How did it happen (the process of the accident)? How did it end up (Casualty)? Why did it happen?</p>
4. Interpreting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● to infer the causes of the accident based on the clues collected 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● This is optional. For radio news, the listener is usually satisfied after comprehending listening stage. The listener may not be eager to guess the cause of the accident unless the clues show that this is not a car accident caused by normal

	factors, e.g. slippery roads in rainy days, careless driver.
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Myths about intensive listening

There are some myths about intensive listening. First, some researchers and teachers argue that too much attention given to intensive listening will hinder general comprehension as the focus of listening should mainly be on understanding the gist instead of requiring students to understand most, if not all of the words involved in the audio input. They think that daily classroom does not provide opportunities for the students to practise authentic listening and they can practice listening among peers in English. But intensive listening can take place in the classroom, sometimes with the teacher as a source of input. Instruction-giving is probably the most natural way to listen intensively. For example, teachers brief students before carrying out language tasks, particularly those more complicated procedures, steps or rules. Some common classroom directives such as ‘Put away all other books’; ‘Put only your English book on the table’ ; ‘Turn your book to page 3’, and steps such as completing a road map, playing treasure hunt, finishing a paper folding game. Students need to listen intensively and react to the speech of the teacher.

Second, some teachers think that listening skills can be improved naturally when the students have reached a level of proficiency, at which their vocabulary and grammar knowledge form a good condition to do work on listening tasks. So they assume that if students got improvement in grammar, vocabulary, they can do well with listening.

To comprehend the meaning in aural input requires having a lexicon of words and also all rules of grammar, with which one can understand what others are saying. Some students would benefit from more opportunities to practise intensive listening. These are those students who are struggling with vocabulary and grammar and sentence structures of the target language. Moreover, as most language learners naturally start with a small vocabulary and developing grammar, thus they need to improve through completing intensive listening practice on discriminating, comprehending, and interpreting language forms at an early stage of learning.

Students should be exposed to a wide range of social contexts in order to learn a wide range of vocabulary, grammar and usage. Thus it is necessary to set contextualized, task-based listening activities with an inclusion of language form and grammar focuses on themes, e.g. shopping, travelling.

Third, in some countries or cities, where a second language, e.g. English, has enjoyed a high education role and the students have to take public examination or high risk assessment in the language, intensive listening of the language is drilled with an aim to prepare students for examination /assessment. Many teachers arrange students to do listening exercises which resemble the question types in those examinations. Intensive listening is 'overdone' in such curriculum. Students do mechanical listening exercises extracted from past examination papers. Students may get bored with such drills and lose interest in listening and feel that listening is a passive language skill.

Whereas intensive listening consolidates the language foundation of the learners, the problem of washback effect of assessment in listening may be resolved if teachers infuse intensive listening in fun packed activities and make intensive listening less threatening to students.

Intensive listening practice and activities

It is important to develop various listening skills in second language learning. Teachers may arrange task-based intensive listening activities in the classroom and listening activities beyond the classroom to enable students' to plan self-directed intensive listening.

To plan intensive listening practice and activities for students, teacher should take note of the above three myths and make sure intensive listening will provide students opportunities to listen to topics of a wide range of social contexts and thus students will learn new vocabulary, grammar items and usage through listening in contextualized listening tasks.

Besides, intensive listening practice and activities should be set with variation to ensure the tasks are challenging and yet manageable for the students of different ability and proficiency levels. Variation may be made in language form of the input, and task demands. Scaffolds should be provided to the students.

Intensive listening can be skills-based and fun-packed in order that students will be interested in listening activities which are not extracted from past assessment papers or resemble assessment format and responses only. There should be a balance between interactive listening (adopting communicative approach) and one-way listening practice. The mode of responses should not be confined to ‘close’ questions, e.g. multiple choices, true-false, and blank filling formats.

In view of learner differences, teachers may decide on a progression map of listening skills for staged development of listening skills through intensive listening practice. This is a frame for teachers to refer to when they are planning listening tasks, materials and strategies for students of particular ability levels. The following five holistic levels of listening skills show that students may develop listening skills with ascending degrees of challenge in aspects such as aural input, text length and complexity, and strategies to complete the tasks:

Level 5 (the highest)	Understanding and inferring information, ideas, feelings and opinions in a range of texts using and <i>integrating a range of</i> listening strategies as appropriate
Level 4	Understanding and inferring information, ideas, feelings and opinions in <i>a range of texts</i> using some listening strategies as appropriate
Level 3	Understanding and <i>inferring</i> information, ideas, feelings and <i>opinions</i> in some simple texts using some listening strategies as appropriate
Level 2	Understanding <i>information, ideas, feelings</i> in some short simple texts using some listening strategies as appropriate
Level 1 (the basic)	Understanding <i>key words</i> in some short simple texts using some listening strategies as appropriate

For activities of intensive listening skills, teachers may try to build in the features of contextualization, variation and scaffolds in their intensive listening lessons. An intensive listening lesson may contain pre-, while- and post-listening stages.

At the pre-listening stage, teachers provide scaffolds for their students. Activities at this stage serve as warm up, and focus on ‘listening for specific information’ and applying phonics skills. For instance, teachers may relate the topic to prior knowledge of students. This can be done by raising the topic and retrieving students’ experience or knowledge of the topic in the aural input. For the theme of e-shopping in a listening input, teacher may ask: ‘Have you ever done e-shopping? What goods can be bought via the Internet? What may not be bought online? Why not? What are the advantages of e-shopping? What kind of risks should the buyer be aware of?’ If students know the context of the input, they can activate prior knowledge and make appropriate inferences of the content later in the core listening task.

Teachers may also teach or revise some vocabulary items to be received in the aural input. Some teachers point out that their students tend to give up in the first few minutes of a listening task when they do not get the message and content of the input because the language is too difficult for them. Therefore, teachers should prepare a list of words and phrases the students find difficult and check the pronunciation and meanings with the students. They may illustrate the pronunciation of some words when necessary and test mastery of word pronunciation through a ‘Listen and Circle’ game.

The following pre-listening activity is for a new Cinderella story:

1. The teacher is going to read aloud some English words in the story.
2. Please try to tick the words in the table when you hear them.
3. The teacher will read the words twice.

<input type="checkbox"/>	party
<input type="checkbox"/>	Cinderella
<input type="checkbox"/>	Peach
<input type="checkbox"/>	whisper
<input type="checkbox"/>	wealthy
<input type="checkbox"/>	goodbye
<input type="checkbox"/>	dance
<input type="checkbox"/>	pumpkin
<input type="checkbox"/>	godmother
<input type="checkbox"/>	The Peak

There are other choices: mark items in pictures, match pictures with text, carry out actions, etc.

While- listening stage is where the core listening task is arranged. At this stage, students will listen and complete comprehension questions which are supposed to cover a wide variety of listening skills. If possible, teacher may teach relevant listening strategies according to students' proficiency level. It is advisable to set easy tasks in the first round of listening. To cater for diverse learner differences, the listening comprehension task and questions may be varied to suit the students. Variation may be made along the criteria of language complexity of information, ideas of the aural text and cognitive complexity of the listening. For example, less proficient students may be asked to demonstrate their understanding of the gist and more proficient students need to identify the details of the topic. For multiple choice format responses, the slower students may be supported by allowing three choices to consider while the fast students will consider four choices. If necessary, in the first time of listening, teacher can have students tackle some easy tasks. For example, teacher may give each group of students a set of word cards and ask them to listen to the recording and put the words in the order that they hear them. Then go through the comprehension questions. Play the recording again and let students try to answer the questions.

Below are some sample responses to intensive listening tasks:

<p>Listen and answer the questions. Where do the Wongs live?</p> <p>A. On a field in China B. On a farm in China C. On a field in Chile D. On a farm in Chile</p> <p style="text-align: right;">1</p>	<p>Listen and complete the details of the 'Things to do' list:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take ___ to the ___ • Give ___ to Mr. ___ • Throw away the ___ • Do the washing and ___ • Buy ___ for ___ • Lock the ___ <p style="text-align: right;">2</p>
<p>Listen and guess why Mary shouted at John when John was playing near the pond.</p> <p>A. To scold John B. To leave the park together C. To go to buy snacks together D. To ask for help</p> <p style="text-align: right;">3</p>	<p>Listen and complete the last words in the following sentences.</p> <p>I laughed at John – that was rude I kn__.</p> <p>Then I shouted at him, 'Come on! It's time to g__.'</p> <p>But John was careless and fell in the p__.</p> <p>I was very afraid. John shouted, 'Please help m__!'</p> <p style="text-align: right;">4</p>

Q1 & Q2 responses: the aural input is a narrative about a family preparing for an overseas trip. Q1 requires the listener to make contrasts among words using knowledge of word pronunciation. Q2 requires the listener to listen and follow a

coherent part of the aural input and jot down the key words for a checklist. They need to use knowledge of word pronunciation. The context can give them some clues for the answer etc.

Q3 & Q4 responses: the aural input is a poem which is about a girl and her younger brother having a stroll in a park. Q3 requires the listener to interpret what they have listened and infer (guess) a reason which was not given in the input. Students need to listen for details and use prior/ world knowledge to tackle the question. Q4 is similar to Q2 in objective and strategy required. But the initial consonant (cluster) of the key words is revealed to cater for the need of the less able students.

There can be other types of pre-listening activities, e .g. dictation to each other (information gap game), reproduce/rearrange diagrams, text strips, complete diagrams/ tables, label pictures, identify true-false, fact-opinions, spot differences, identify specific information, etc.

The last stage is post-listening. At this stage, teachers try to sustain the interest of students in listening and if possible, arrange extended tasks for an integrated language practice involving other language skills or types of performance, and engage students in individual, pair or group work.

The procedure of post-listening stage may be planned to include debriefing, and consolidation activities. First, review the listening strategies used by students and suggest alternative strategies to them. List other details of the focus object in the topic. Group the words based on some given criteria. Read the script and practise pronunciation. Explain some concepts in the topic using the information received. Apply the new knowledge about a topic after this listening practice (e.g. try e-shopping) and suggest students listen to a wide range of social contexts.

Below is a post-listening activity involving physical responses after completion of a listening task.

1. Some students are invited to be an actor/actress. They may volunteer to do so.
2. In each round, one student will go to the front of the classroom and draw an action card from a box.
3. The teacher is going to read aloud some sentences.
4. The student listens to the sentence and then acts out what the teacher says.
5. To be successful, they must act with reference to the adverb in the sentence.

I am eating greedily	I am writing on the blackboard fast .
I am singing loudly .	I am whispering to a classmate secretly
I am walking to the door slowly .	I am asking a classmate for a pen politely .

Variation:

The teacher may read 2-3 action cards for the student to act out the two directives successively. This is more challenging for the older students or those who are more proficient in English.

There are also other types of post-listening activities, e.g. create another text with information collected in listening work, compare and contrast information, elaborate the original message, rank information, offer solution to problems raised in the aural input.

In this article, I have discussed the meaning of intensive listening and given some ideas of devising activities of intensive listening. Apart from intensive listening, there are other types of practice teachers may consider when planning listening skills instruction. These include extensive listening (listen widely: topics, venues, channels), one-way listening (radio programs), interactive listening (telephone conversation), attentive listening (contrasting minimal pair of words) and so on. Teachers can design appropriate skills instruction programs and activities to suit the needs and interest of their students.

Further reading:

Nunan, D., & Miller, L. (Eds.) 1995. New Ways in Teaching Listening. Washington DC: TESOL.

Rost, M. (1994). Introducing Listening. London: Penguin.

Rost, M. (2001). Listening. In R. Carter & D. Nunan (Eds.) The Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, pp.51-84. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.