

## Balanced Listening Instruction

by [Beth Sheppard](#)

Listening is one of the most important skills for second language learners, and also one of the most challenging skills. It is also challenging for instructors, because listening is a “hidden” skill, and most of us received little training in listening instruction.

In order to provide balanced listening instruction to our students, we need to focus on the process of listening rather than just the product, and we need to offer our students opportunities for both independent practice and explicit instruction, both extensive and focused listening, and both challenges and motivating experiences of success. In this brief article, I hope to provide some basic guidance for each of these areas, and references for further information on balanced listening instruction.

### Process vs Product

Too often, we confuse the *assessment* of listening comprehension with *instruction* in listening. Thus, we provide background and vocabulary, have students listen and answer comprehension questions, then correct and explain the answers, and repeat the same procedure in our next lesson. Does this sound familiar to you?

In fact, while the ability to understand spoken texts is a valid end-goal for listening instruction and perhaps the *product* of our instruction, we need to focus more on the *process*. We should make sure we teach students *how* to listen rather than focusing so much on their comprehension of the specific texts we use in class.

Vandergrift (2004) describes a process approach to listening instruction:

- **Predict and listen:** Students work in small groups to make predictions about the contents, key words, and appropriate strategies for the listening text, then they listen to check their predictions and note additional information.
- **Discuss and listen:** The small groups meet again to discuss what they heard, what they still don’t understand, and how they will listen for this information when the listening text is played again. After this second listening, the whole class works together to outline the key contents of the listening text, with help from the teacher.
- **Listen and reflect:** With a good idea of the meaning, now the students listen again, to note information that they missed the first two times. Finally, students reflect on their listening, considering the strategies they used and setting goals for future listening.

In this approach, most of the responsibility for developing listening skills rests with the students, guided by the teacher. It is truly student centered, and these activities can be very helpful for students, but I believe they need to be balanced out by more explicit instruction as well.

### Independence vs Explicit Instruction

You are probably familiar with the division of listening into top-down and bottom-up skills, where top-down skills refer to the use of context and background knowledge to build expectations that assist comprehension and bottom-up skills refer to the use of listening subskills such as phoneme recognition and grammatical parsing to decode the message of a text directly from the sound stream. We always use both processes simultaneously.

One point that's not often mentioned, though, is how these processes are used differently by student listeners than by expert listeners. Bottom-up processes are automatized for expert listeners—they require no attention and very little mental energy, and we get very complete information from them, unless there is noise or some other problem. This means that expert listeners use top-down processes mostly to amplify and extend the message, making inferences about what the speaker has left unstated. For student listeners, on the other hand, bottom-up processes are not automatized, so they require a good deal of the student's attention and result in incomplete decoding of the message (see Field, 2011). Thus, student listeners need to use the top-down processes to compensate for this missed information (see Field, 2008).

A balanced approach to listening instruction will include explicit instruction and focused practice in both bottom-up subskills and metacognitive strategies.

### **Metacognitive Strategies**

Metacognitive strategy instruction can include

- strategy checklists such as MALQ, from Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal, and Tafaghodtari (2006);
- guided reflections in listening diaries; and
- the use of “curiosity questions” (turning comprehension questions on their head by having students ask curiosity questions before and during listening).

The process approach I described above (from Vandergrift, 2004) is also closely connected to metacognitive strategy instruction. I recommend that you read more from Vandergrift and Goh (2012).

### **Bottom-Up Skills**

Instruction in bottom-up skills should be guided by knowledge of students' specific weaknesses. Field (2008) describes a diagnostic approach to listening instruction in which the teacher uses students' comprehension errors as well as students' answers when asked “why?” to understand exactly what is giving them trouble. The teacher then creates very brief, focused activities to practice these areas.

For example, if students are having trouble distinguishing two English phonemes, say /p/ and /f/, the teacher can create dictations, using many words with those sounds, or have students listen to a short text and raise their hand every time they hear /f/, or say sentences with p/f but stop right before the key sound and have students predict which sound is coming. Or if students are having trouble recognizing unstressed function words, dictations using these function words are a good

choice (dictations as a listening exercise should be short sentences spoken at a natural pace, and spelling and other writing features should not be assessed), or the teacher could insert function word errors into a transcript of a brief text and have students listen to correct it.

## Extensive vs Focused Listening

Think about the listening texts that you offer your students. Are they all about the same length? Students need a balanced variety of different text types so they can practice different types of listening. In the paragraph above, I described several **focused listening** tasks best completed using texts well under 1 minute in length.

**Selective listening practice:** Students also need midlength texts, generally for selective listening practice (to catch the main ideas or to find specific information). It's also useful to focus on interactive listening by introducing an explicit listening task to what otherwise might be considered speaking tasks in an integrated skills classroom. For example, if students are giving a presentation, you might assign the rest of the class to take notes on the content in preparation for your oral comprehension questions, or if students are interviewing each other, you might insist that the questioner listen closely to their partner in order to formulate one or two follow-up questions per interview question.

**Extensive listening practice:** Finally, students need a chance to practice extensive listening, so they can increase the fluency and automaticity of their bottom-up skills. This means listening to relatively long, interesting, and easy passages, for enjoyment and general understanding. The extensive listening strand can often be completed at home, allowing every student to choose their preferred topic.

For more information about different types of listening texts and practice types, see Rost (2011) or Nation and Newton (2009). Renandya and Farrell (2010) provide an excellent short article on extensive listening. See the Appendix for listening resources.

## Challenges vs Motivation

My last topic is by no means the least important. Students need sustained motivation to succeed in the long and challenging task of becoming expert listeners. Strong motivation likely will also make students more willing to try out new listening strategies and approaches.

Student motivation is a complex subject, but we can be sure to support our students' motivation by choosing appropriate listening texts and tasks, and by being sure to consider our learners' levels, interests, and learning goals. We also need to provide a supportive learning environment that recognizes students' efforts, applauds their successes, and builds classroom community and collaboration. Rost and Wilson (2013) provide a summary of research related to student motivation for listening.

Finally, I believe that a balanced and process-oriented approach to listening instruction will contribute to students' motivation, as they see their listening proficiency grow. Happy teaching!

## References

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## Appendix: Listening Resources

The teacher’s voice can be a great resource for listening practice, and so can recorded materials available for purchase, such as textbook audio and recordings of graded readers. There are also a variety of excellent listening materials freely available online. Here are a few:

ESL materials for extensive listening

- [VOA: Learning English](#)
- [BBC: Learning English](#)
- [Randall’s ESL Cyber Listening Lab](#)
- [TESL Journals ESL Listening Podcasts](#)

Authentic materials for extensive listening

- [PBS](#)
- [NPR](#)

- [BBC: World Service Radio](#)
- [TED Ed: Lessons Worth Sharing](#)
- [YouTube](#)

Materials for focused listening

- [Big Think: Videos](#)
- [ManyThings.org: American English Pronunciation Practice](#)

Materials for selective listening and note-taking

- [PBS: Nova: Science Now!](#)
- [Academic Earth \(university lectures\)](#)

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