Authentic Speaking and Listening Strategies

by [Catherine Moore](#) and [Cheryl Bucholtz-Magallon](#)

What is the best way to learn a language? Exposure and practice! However, it is extremely difficult to gain opportunities to practice when a student does not yet have a certain level of confidence and proficiency. How can language learners get the exposure and practice that they need in order to improve and have successful conversations in English, especially when they are currently at a low proficiency level? This article offers some solutions to these challenges.

Teaching Listening

According to Brown (2001), there are seven principles for teaching speaking skills:

1. Focus on both fluency and accuracy.
2. Provide intrinsically motivating techniques.
3. Encourage the use of authentic language.
4. Provide appropriate feedback and correction.
5. Capitalize on the natural link between speaking and listening.
6. Give students opportunities to initiate oral communication.
7. Encourage the development of speaking strategies.

In addition, Krisnawati (2011) further develops upon these principles by emphasizing that in order to communicate effectively, learners of English need to develop pragmatic competence with skills such as speaking with appropriate intonation, expressing agreement and disagreement, and explaining unknown words.

Students do not need to be advanced or have a high level of vocabulary to participate in authentic conversations. This article provides activities and descriptions that will help students at all levels learn and practice conversation strategies.

Listening Strategies and Activities

1. The Listening Checklist

Every conversation starts with good listening. It is a skill that even native speakers often lack, and each culture has its own acceptable norms. It is essential to teach English language students

the listening standards of the culture they reside in so they can learn the skills needed to be considered a good listener among the natives of the places they are living. The Listening Checklist (LC; Appendix A, .pdf) was created for use in the United States with two versions for English language learners—one version that is enhanced and simplified with visuals for the lower levels, and another version only with text for students whose language is more advanced (see Figure 1).
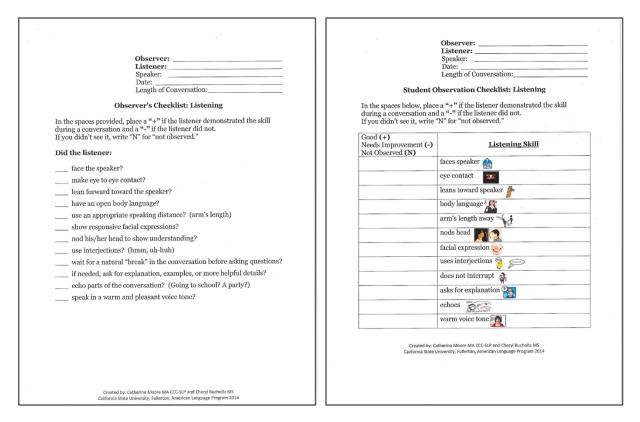

Figure 1. The Listening Checklist for more advanced (left) and lower level (right) speakers.

The LC includes a place to specify who is the observer, listener, and speaker. In some cases, the observer may also be the listener or the speaker. The learner engages in a conversational exchange and writes the date and length of the conversation. The LC is then completed looking at specific listening skills and the acceptable use of them in the United States. Following are some of the listening skills targeted:

- proxemics (making sure the listener is not too close or far away),
- leaning toward the speaker to show interest,
- the use of interjections (each language has their own that may be unique to them), and
- the use of echoing (repetition of the speaker's words to encourage the speaker and indicate understanding or a need for clarification).

Each skill should be taught prior to use with the LC. There are many ways to utilize an LC with students. Here are some ideas for use.

1. **Student Observer:** Two people engage in a conversation, and a third student acts as an observer. The third student designates one person as a speaker, and the other as a listener, and rates the listener on the LC once the conversation is finished.

2. **Student Self-Rating:** A learner can use the LC to self-monitor after they have a conversational exchange, assessing themselves purely as a listener.

3. **Instructor Evaluation:** An instructor can complete an LC as an observer in the classroom setting as a demonstration activity to model how to rate the listeners. An instructor can also use the LC to monitor and assess student listening skills while learners are in pairs with different speaking partners. The listener of each pair can also complete the LC and compare their self-ratings to the instructor ratings.

4. **Conversational Peer Partners:** The LC can be used while students practice with conversation partners or during informal conversational exchanges. Conversational partners can also rate the listener on the LC, and once again, the student can rate themselves and compare the results with their conversation partner.

5. **Homework With Digital Media:** LCs can be assigned as homework to use while watching television, or with other similar digital or communication media, such as YouTube. The student will choose a video, TV show, movie, YouTube clip, or something similar and observe a conversation. They will assess the conversation immediately after viewing. The student who is observing the digital media will designate one of the conversational partners that they are observing as the listener and rate their listening.

All of these possible methods of use with the LC should lead to enhanced awareness of skills that good and bad listeners utilize during conversational exchanges. Additionally, use of the LC should promote increased use of successful listening skills for those making the observations.

2. Using "That's..."

By using formulaic expressions combined with intonation, English learners can express both their understanding and feelings without needing to think about grammar and sentence structure. One way to do this is by using "that's" in conjunction with an adjective (see Appendix B, .pdf). If the listener understands that a situation is negative, they can use expressions such as "that's awful," "that's sad," and "that's terrible." with a downward intonation. If the listener understands that a situation is positive, they can use expressions such as "that's wonderful," "that's great," and "that's exciting" with an upward intonation.

Activity Steps

1. Ensure that students understand upward and downward intonation and how they can express a positive or negative reaction. At the top of the handout, there is a chart which not only separates various adjectives into "positive," "negative," and "neutral," but also tells the student how to change their tones. (Note: For the "neutral" category, an advanced class might be able to practice with sarcasm.)

2. You and the students can brainstorm a list of adjectives that express positive and negative reactions. If the students do not have a high enough language ability for this, they can simply use the list provided on the handout, and the definitions of the words can be discussed as a class.

3. Both intonation and the newly acquired adjectives can be combined to create a simple way to react to virtually any situation. In order to help students practice, the bottom half of the handout includes a list of sentences that are either negative or positive. Students would typically do this part of the activity by working in pairs: One student will read the sentence, and the other student will respond using "that's…" with an adjective and the appropriate intonation. Then the students will switch roles.

4. Have students think about how they feel about what their partner said. Was it a good thing or a bad thing?

3. Describing A Word

For this activity, it is our goal to teach students how to describe a word that they may not know or may not remember—such a conversational "bump in the road" often causes a conversation breakdown, which many students have difficulty recovering from. Therefore, it is essential to teach them how to describe a word, even if they cannot find the word itself in their mental vocabulary. The steps for this activity (Appendix C, .pdf) are twofold:

1. **Put the Word in a Box:** All words can fit into a category; on this handout, each category is placed in a box. This is a way for students to narrow down the idea that they are thinking of. Many times, students say something similar to, "I am looking for a…?," and they pause there. It is challenging to help a student unless they give you more information. By putting a word "into a box," this helps the listener know what type of word the student is looking for. Is this word a place, a sport, an animal, a food, a person? Each of these categories will lead to a completely different group of words. We teach our students to categorize a word by saying, "It is a kind of _____."

2. **Explain Similarities:** The student can explain similarities to other known items and then use any additional knowledge that they have to further describe the word that they are looking for. This information does not need to be grammatically correct; it can merely be a list of facts. However, they should begin by saying, "It is kind of like _____" in order to tell the listener what they are doing with this language.

Example 1: "It is a kind of sport. It is kind of like soccer, but it is in the water. They play with their hands. There are two goals. People wear bathing suits. People have funny hats. People yell a lot." (Answer: Water Polo)

Example 2: "It is a kind of animal. It is kind of like a mouse but no tail. It is very fat. It has small ears. It can be brown, black, or white. It has a small nose. It makes a very small noise." (Answer: guinea pig)

Conclusion

This article provided three activities that were created to help students at all language levels learn and practice various conversational strategies. Additionally, these activities help students build tactics and confidence they need to take advantage of authentic language use and opportunities. By giving students tools and teaching them approaches that help them compensate for and maneuver around the words, language, and grammar that they are not comfortable with, students can still benefit from the English conversations around them, while acquiring the language faster and more enjoyably. These methods will help you promote communicative transformation and increase student success by helping learners say more with less.

References

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