

9 Listening Strategies That Develop Active Listeners

by Rebecca Palmer

Audience: Academic listening classes, intermediate and advanced levels

It's not enough for students to merely listen to audio assignments. Students must use strategies that make them active, not passive, listeners. To understand the difference between active and passive listening, students need direct instruction on strategies that work (Vandergrift, 1999; Goh, 2008; Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010). To accomplish this, teachers should use time in class to model effective strategies and evaluate students' use of them. Students who use before-, during- and after-listening strategies develop skills that enable them to monitor their own metacognitive processes.

To demonstrate good listening strategies, teachers should preselect short audio articles or lecture excerpts that are normally used in their classes and describe for students what kind of thinking they can do before, during and after listening.

Model How to Use the Strategies

Here are instructions for nine active listening strategies.

Before-Listening Strategies

1. **Connect**

Help yourself better understand a listening assignment by thinking of things you already know about a topic. This helps your mind build connections between what you know and new information you will hear. Say to yourself things like, "This lecture about animal communication makes me think about how my dog lets me know that he needs to go outside. He runs to get a sock and brings it to me."

2. **Predict**

Make guesses about what you may learn as you listen. Guessing helps your brain focus on the assignment. It doesn't matter if your guesses are right or wrong. For instance, if the topic is a space mission to Mars, you might guess, "I bet it takes six months to get to Mars and it's probably really cold. I don't think people can survive on Mars."

3. **Talk About New Words**

If there is a list of preselected vocabulary words from the assignment, go through the list and think about what you know about them. If you don't know the words, talk about them with a friend or use a free audio dictionary such as www.dictionary.com. If there isn't a preselected list of words, make sure you understand words in the title and in any introductory material. Have a brief conversation in your head to clarify key words. If you do not know what *flaunting* means in the title "Flaunting Your Success," write down a synonym like *showing off* to refer to as you read. Sometimes, a rough sketch, such as a dollar sign in front of *affluent*, can give you quick help as you listen.

During-Listening Strategies

4. Listen for Answers

As you listen, be listening for answers to questions you have. To identify questions to ask, preview activities you need to complete after you listen or turn the title of an assignment into a question. For instance, if the title of a lecture is “The Science of Love,” you might ask, “How is science related to love?” or “What have scientists learned about love?” Looking for answers to questions gives you a reason to listen and keeps your mind active and alert.

5. Take Notes

Write notes that help you remember ideas. Outlining and layering information is always a good idea, but try other imaginative ways of taking notes: Use connected circles and shapes, create a chart, or draw a map. Use abbreviations and symbols that help you keep up with the speaker’s rate of speech; for instance, if the words *memory* and *communication* are used a lot, just use an “M” and “C” in your notes and add a reminder that explains this after you finish listening. Speakers also convey ideas in nonverbal ways. Pay attention to intonation, and if applicable, facial expressions, to take notes on a speaker’s opinions and outlooks.

6. Re-listen/Find a Fix

When you get bored or when ideas are hard, you need to find a way to get back on track. The best way to fix things is to re-listen. You don’t have to wait until the end to re-listen. Sometimes a quick backtracking and re-listening to a line or two can quickly clear up confusion. This is especially important at the beginning of an audio assignment. If you can’t re-listen, shift to a different listening strategy that helps you regain your focus. For instance, if you’ve been taking notes, and you’re becoming confused, figure out what is causing the confusion. Do you need to look up the meaning of some words, can you write down your questions, or should you try to summarize what you have understood so far?

After-Listening Strategies

7. Respond

What do you agree and disagree with? What parts do you like best? What parts are confusing? Use symbols, such an exclamation mark (!) before an idea you like or an “X” next to something you disagree with, that help you quickly write your reactions so you won’t forget them.

8. Summarize

Read your lecture notes several times before and after class all week. In your head, summarize what the assignment was about and test yourself on your notes. Occasionally, you will be asked to write a formal summary. You will read your summary aloud or make a recording of it.

9. Extend

Read and listen to other sources for more information about the topic. Learning more information makes a topic more meaningful and interesting, especially if you share these ideas with others.

Evaluate Students' Listening Logs

To evaluate students' progress in using the strategies, request that they keep a listening log.

One suggestion for a weekly listening log is included in the attached handouts. To further develop students' progress, use one format for a listening log at the beginning of the term and a different format later. For instance, in the beginning, students' entries should describe which strategies they have used and how they have used them. When students have mastered the ability to choose and use the strategies well on their own, change the format so students' entries summarize and extend what they have learned.

With both log formats, students take part in weekly seat-hopping pair shares in which each pair shares what is in its logs for 2 minutes. When the 2 minutes are up, one student in each pair moves one or two seats to the left or right and each new pair shares information. After three or four "seat hops," the whole class may discuss what they have learned.

The goal is for students to be aware that they are in charge of keeping their attention strong and focused on complex listening tasks.

References

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Weekly Listening Log 1

The first part of the term, you will learn about listening strategies and use them.

Before-Listening Strategy	During-Listening Strategy	After-Listening Strategy
Connect	Listen for answers	Respond
Predict	Take notes	Summarize
Talk about new words	Re-listen/Find a fix	

Directions: Create the listening log below in your notebook. As you listen to the audio assignments this week, use at least one listening strategy from each column above. Describe briefly how you used each strategy. You may use more than one strategy from each column. Use the examples in the chart to help you.

Week: 1	
Topic: <i>Unit 9 lecture on animal communication</i>	
Strategy	How I used each strategy
Before-listening strategy (Use at least one strategy.)	Examples: <u>Connect.</u> I have a dog and I know a lot about what my dog is trying to communicate to our family. He always stares at us when he to eat. <u>Predict.</u> I guessed that the lecture would talk about what dogs and cats are trying to say to their owners. <u>Talk about new words.</u> Dan and I talked about the new words and completed the vocabulary activity together. We wrote down synonyms for words that were the hardest to remember— <i>discrete</i> and <i>arbitrary</i> .
During-listening strategy (Use at least one strategy.)	Examples: <u>Listen for answers.</u> I used the questions in the textbook to set a purpose. <u>Take notes.</u> I abbreviated words that are repeated often in the lecture: <i>communication, nonverbal behavior, arbitrariness, and sounds.</i> <u>Re-listen.</u> I listened to the first couple of minutes twice so I could get better notes on what <i>arbitrariness</i> is. <u>Find a fix.</u> I did not completely understand the four characteristics of language so I wrote down questions I could ask in class.
After-listening strategy (Use at least one strategy.)	Examples: <u>Respond.</u> I liked the part about how whales have accents. I couldn't believe that part! <u>Summarize.</u> The lecture talked about four ways that animal language is like human language. Animals are good at some forms of language, but they are not as good as humans.

Before class on Friday: Write a summary of what you learned this week.

During class on Friday: Seat Hopping Pair/Shares. Share what you have learned with others.

Weekly Listening Log 2

During the second part of the term, you will continue to use listening strategies from the chart below. Note the addition of another after-listening strategy—extend. In your listening log for the remainder of the term, you will keep track of how you extended what you have learned.

Before Listening	During Listening	After Listening Strategy
Connect	Listen for answers	Respond
Predict	Take notes	Summarize
Talk about the words	Re-listen/Find a fix	<i>Extend</i>

Directions. Create this new log format in your notebook. Make an entry for each listening assignment. Continue to use the before-, during- and after- listening strategies you have been practicing. This half of the term, however, you do not have to write down the strategies you use. Instead, after you listen to this week’s assignments, summarize what you have learned and go online or to the library to learn more about the weekly topic. Write down additional information and provide your reactions. Use the examples in the chart to help you.

Week: 8	
Topic: <i>Example of a class assignment:</i> <i>Tourist deported for Buddha tattoo</i>	
Short summary of the audio assignment:	A woman from Britain was arrested in Sri Lanka for having a tattoo of Buddha on her arm.
Additional information:	The woman was a nurse and she practiced the Buddhist religion. Two taxi drivers took her to a police station. The woman spent the night in a detention center and could not complete her vacation abroad. She had to return to Britain.
Citation/where I got the extra information:	http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2014/04/22/a-tattoo-of-the-buddha-gets-you-thrown-out-of-sri-lanka/
My reactions to this week’s topic:	The woman didn’t mean to be disrespectful, but she should have covered the tattoo. What was really strange was that the woman was a Buddhist. I wonder why she didn’t know it would be disrespectful.

Before class on Friday: Write down the most interesting additional piece of information you found this week.

During class on Friday: Seat Hopping Pair/Shares. Share your additional information and reactions with others.