



Teaching Listening: Practical Strategies That Work

by [Jon Phillips](#) and [Federico Pomarici](#)

It is a challenge getting students to higher levels in listening. Teachers typically assign a lot of listening practice and answering comprehension questions in the hope and expectation that these types of activities will help their students develop the skills needed. In this article, we suggest a supplement to the comprehension approach, offer 11 practical strategies that focus on the process of listening, and encourage active listening to help students develop their listening skills.

Are You Testing or Teaching Listening Skills?

How do teachers typically teach listening? From our experience, most instructional listening activities focus on testing students' listening comprehension rather than providing instruction to help them in word recognition or comprehension. The teaching of listening typically has students do some prelistening, then listen to a passage, answer content questions, fill in the blanks with missing words/phrases, transcribe a segment of the passage, or get the gist. All are valuable and useful activities, but such an approach overlooks the challenges that students face while listening and may not help them improve their listening skills.

Instructional activities consisting of a cycle of listening, answering questions, and checking answers are really just testing listening comprehension and do not help students learn how to develop their listening skills and improve their listening abilities. It benefits learners if teachers adopt a more balanced second (or additional) language instructional approach that includes both process and product-oriented listening instruction that teaches learners how to regulate their listening comprehension in addition to assessing their listening skills (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012).

Compensatory Strategies

In addition to not being able to recognize or comprehend the words they hear, multilingual learners often struggle with listening because they do not apply “compensatory” strategies (Field, 2008). Some examples of those strategies that would enable listeners to successfully comprehend a passage include

- applying background knowledge,
- recognizing text types, and
- focusing on stress and intonation.

It is important to direct learners' attention to specific areas of the listening text for specific purposes. The goal is for the students to gain a deeper understanding beyond basic comprehension, and, in the process, develop their listening skills. The 11 strategies described in this article are divided into two phases: the structured preview phase and the selective strategic listening phase. For selected examples of these activities, along with graphic organizers, see the Appendix.

Structured Preview Phase

Think of the structured preview phase as a movie trailer that consists of a series of selected scenes from the film with the purpose of attracting an audience. These excerpts are usually drawn from the most exciting, funny, or noteworthy parts of the film, but they are shown in abbreviated form and usually without producing spoilers. Similarly, the structured preview phase of a listening passage consists of a series of selected strategies that set up students' expectations, motivate them, and give them a focus for listening. The structured preview phase strategies help learners adjust to the speaker's voice, intonation, and pitch and also helps them use cues to predict contextual meaning, establish emotional connotations, raise awareness of sociocultural subtext, and attend to functional grammar.

Strategy 1: Adjusting to the Speaker's Voice and Preview of Content

Have students listen to the first few seconds of a listening passage while reading the corresponding transcript. They guess what the passage is about and share their answers with peers. Vandergrift (2004) explains that the first few seconds of any listening text are challenging for language learners. Inexperienced listeners need to adjust to the speaker's voice (articulation of sounds, stress, pitch range, loudness). This strategy also previews the type of vocabulary, grammatical structures, and linguistic elements that students will hear in the passage. The preview helps students employ content and linguistic background knowledge to facilitate comprehension.

Strategy 2: Predicting Emotional Overtone

Emotions are expressed differently by speakers from various language and cultural backgrounds. "Cultural differences in emotions appear to be due to differences in event types or schemas, in culture-specific appraisal propensities, in behavior repertoires, or in regulation processes" (Mesquita, 2003). For example, emotions of despair, happiness, depression, or anger expressed by an American individual are different from those expressed by an Arab, Korean, or

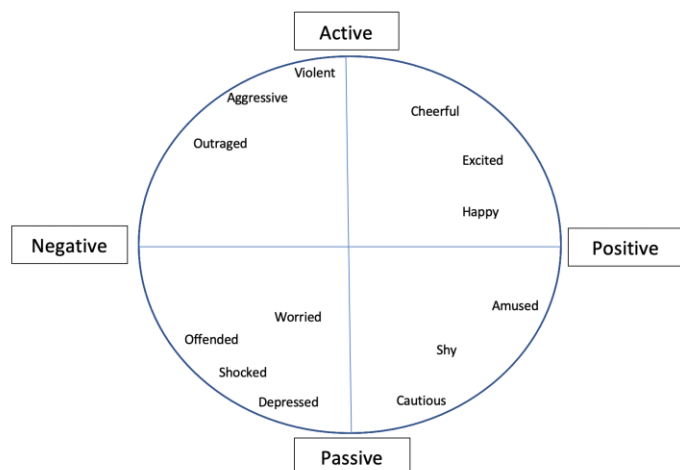


Figure. Example emotional status chart.

Chinese individual. Identifying the emotional status of a speaker helps students understand the speaker's intentions and attitude.

In this activity, have students listen to several short segments while reading a script. As they listen, have them identify and underline the content words spoken with the highest stress. They should guess the reason for the speaker stressing those words and mark the speaker's emotions on an emotional status chart (see the example in the Figure). The chart helps students to determine when the speaker is active, passive, positive, or negative in delivering the message. (An internet search of "emotional status chart" will show you a variety of formats.)

Strategy 3: Raising Awareness of Cultural Elements

In this strategy, you select social, cultural, or historical references included in a passage and ask your students to guess the implication of each or search them on the internet. Students share their information. Cultural elements can be places, events, social activities, celebrations, and so on. This strategy helps students enhance their background knowledge and situate a text in a sociocultural context, thereby improving the meaning-making process when listening to the entire listening passage.

Strategy 4: Attending to Functional Grammar

This strategy directs students' attention to the role of grammar in building the meaning of a listening text. Listen to the text and identify the common grammatical features used by the speaker. (The grammar features form an essential component in constructing the intended meaning of the text.) Have students listen to short segments that include the common grammatical feature(s), and then have them transcribe the sentences, identify the common grammatical features used, and indicate the intention of the speaker for using them.

Selective Strategic Listening Phase

So far, we have focused on strategies that could be used in the structured preview phase. In the selective strategic listening phase, students delve more deeply into the content of the listening passage. Knowing your students and your listening text, you decide on the most appropriate strategies to be used.

Strategy 5: Building a Storyline

This strategy is useful for listening passages that include a sequence of events, such as authentic news reports and stories. Students listen to the passage and use a graphic organizer to indicate the chronological order of all events stated or inferred: what happened first, next, last.

Strategy 6: Paraphrasing to Understand Inferencing

For this strategy, select a few key sentences from the listening passage and paraphrase them with the same words but different word order—and hence different meanings. Students listen to the corresponding original sentences, read the paraphrased sentences, and indicate which ones mean

the same and explain why. This strategy helps students understand nuances and shades of meaning with a focus on syntactic formations.

Strategy 7: Recognizing Odd Transcription

Prepare a partial transcript of a passage and alter selected words or phrases. The new version has to make sense so that the changes are not too obvious. The key is that the altered transcript must be comprehensible. Students listen and underline the odd transcription while listening. Next, they listen for a second or third time to correct the transcription.

Strategy 8: Paragraphing

Audio or video presents ideas in chunks—or hypothetical paragraphs. Each “paragraph” provides a specific meaning that contributes to the overall contextual meaning. In this strategy, students listen to a passage and, whenever they think the speaker is starting what seems to be a new paragraph, write three or four words that they can hear. Allow students to listen to the passage again, check their paragraphs with one another, examine how each paragraph is linked to the previous one, and make brief notes about what the speaker is saying in each paragraph. Students may need to listen to the passage several times to complete the task. This strategy helps students follow the speaker’s development of thoughts.

Strategy 9: Distinguishing Between Facts and Opinions

For this strategy, use a graphic organizer with two columns: facts vs. opinions. Have students listen to an excerpt from the passage and compose a list of facts and opinions. Then let them explain their answers.

Strategy 10: Identifying Referents

Almost all pronouns challenge inexperienced listeners. They are difficult to detect in speech and it is difficult to track their referents, especially if they appear attached to verbs, nouns, particles, or prepositions. To help students identify the referents of pronouns, have them listen to a passage, read transcripts of short extracts where pronouns are used, and write the referent of each as indicated in the listening passage.

Strategy 11: Building a Comprehensive Summary

Teachers often ask students to listen to and summarize a passage, overlooking the difficulty of the summary task. Summarizing requires grasping the meaning; identifying key points; and restating them simply, briefly, and accurately. This is a difficult listening task for inexperienced multilingual learners. In this strategy, using a graphic organizer (see the Appendix), students listen to a text in segments, each represented with a box, and take notes in the box to specify the main idea of each segment. They may need to listen repeatedly to add more information and build a comprehensive summary.

Conclusion

Listening comprehension is a huge challenge:

The effective listener must comprehend the text as they listen to it, retain information in memory, integrate it with what follows, and continually adjust their understanding of what they hear in the light of prior knowledge and incoming information. The processing imposes a heavy cognitive load on listeners. (Thompson, 1995)

How can we help our students to be better listeners? By helping them to be better prepared: They don't have to understand everything in the beginning. Draw their attention to specific areas of the text for specific purposes. If we train our students to be active listeners by using strategies in which they have to do something that gives their full attention to the audio text, we can encourage active listening and help them develop the practical listening skills they need to communicate in the real world.

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Appendix. Selected Examples of Strategies for Teaching Listening

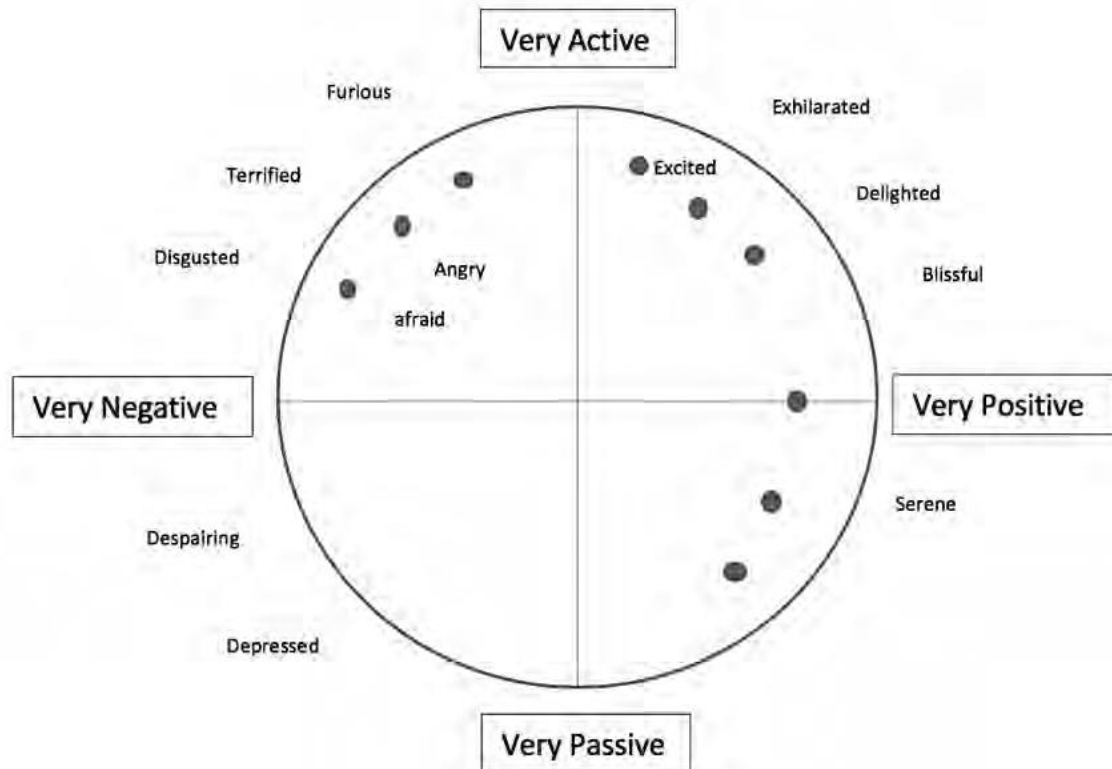
Part 1. Structured Preview Phase

- a. ***Adjusting to speaker's voice and preview of content.*** Listen to the first few seconds of the listening passage while reading the corresponding transcript. Guess what the passage is about and write your answers below.

What do you think this report will be about?

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- b. ***Predicting emotional overtone.*** Listen to Jason Hargrove in these two short segments. As you listen,
- Underline the content words spoken with the highest stress.
 - Guess the reason for the speaker stressing these words and mark the speaker's emotion on the emotional status chart.
 - What do you think is the speaker's intention and attitude?



Listen to each segment. Underline the words spoken with the highest stress:

1. There about a good eight or nine people on the bus and she stood there and coughed, never covered up her mouth.
2. For you to get on the bus and stand on the bus and cough several times without covering up your mouth and you know that we in the middle of a pandemic, that lets me know that some folks don't care.

Part 2: Selective Strategic Listening Phase

- a. **Building a storyline.** Listen to the passage and use the graphic organizer to indicate the chronological order of events:
- What happened first?
 - What happened next?
 - What happened last?

First:

Next:

Last:

b. Odd transcription. Following is a partial transcript of the listening excerpt. Some words and expressions in this transcript are inaccurate. As you listen the first time, locate the incorrect words and phrases in the script and underline them. Listen a second time and correct them.

“I am pleading with all of you. If you do not just have to be about, please follow your orders. This is not the same out there! This is not a hoax out here! I miss kissing my husband. My children don’t have their dad anywhere! This is serious! So please people, I am imploring you! I am begging you. Do not let my husband’s death be in the drain.”

c. Distinguishing between facts and opinions

Listen to the excerpts and use the table to differentiate between facts and opinions.

Facts	Opinions
1.	

2.	

d. ***Building a comprehensive summary.*** Use the graphic organizer, listen to the text in segments and take notes in the box to specify the main idea of each segment.

1.
2.
3.
4.

5.