
Listening

Listening to a text, or more often these days, watching a video, is often a central feature of a language learning lesson. But what's the best way to work with these materials? Is it better to let learners settle for a general understanding, or should you try and focus on the text in detail? What kind of activities can you set learners for both of these approaches?

This workshop will outline some different approaches to working with texts, and do so with reference to one particular video series on the Premier Skills English site, finishing by giving you a chance to prepare a lesson yourselves.

Over to you: Look at the list of statements and decide whether you agree or disagree with them. Discuss with a partner, then feedback to the group.

This workshop is mainly focused on working with listening texts. This includes audio-only, and also video (which is increasingly common in the classroom). Although not focused on reading, a lot of the principles we discuss can relate to reading texts too.

What can you do to make it easier for learners?

There are many different ways you can make a listening/watching exercise more accessible for learners. These are just two examples.

The first is to prepare them with context – this may be the context of the conversation they are going to listen to in terms of where it is ('two people in a shop'), or more generally the time and place ('it is the 1970s, and they are in Great Britain'); it could also be the nature of the conversation (so you focus on, say, the transaction that learners will listen to).

You can also, of course, set tasks related to a listening/watching exercise which are at a level which checks only general understanding. This is often called listening for gist. Listening for gist does not require the learner to have a detailed understanding of a text. For example, you might use an authentic recording and tell your students you want them to listen or watch it just to understand the 'gist' of it – are the people speaking feeling happy or angry? They don't need to listen to it for detail.

More than just gist...

As part of a communicative approach to teaching English, gist activities are widely used with listening texts. This is often to illustrate to learners that in many situations they don't need to understand everything a speaker says in order to get the information they require/complete a transaction. This is a fair point.

However, surely this ability to listen for gist is a skill which most people have in everyday life in their own language? It is good to raise learners' awareness of it, but don't forget the rich detail in the listening text that is there to be explored and analysed in your language classroom. And also, it's worth considering how the learners feel about only understanding the gist? Often frustrated!

Gist and detail: top-down and bottom-up processing

Of course, ideally we give our learners a mix of high-level understanding activities (e.g. for gist) and activities which focus on the content in more detail.

'Top-down' and 'bottom-up' are two strategies for processing language which learners are exposed to in listening or watching exercises. Top-down activities might well be 'gist listening' activities: for example, 'listen and say whether the first speaker was happy or unhappy'. They often concern learners using their knowledge on a topic to help them predict/follow a listening, even if there are gaps in their detailed understanding. Bottom-up activities, meanwhile, will zoom-in on those details and exploit them: perhaps a feature of pronunciation, or the use of a specific form.

In this workshop, we are going to look at combining top-down and bottom-up activities into a coherent plan: we will follow a simple 'before, during and after' approach to planning a listening (or 'watching') lesson. First, let's consider those three stages one at a time.

Before

Listening to somebody speak English can be a difficult experience for a lot of learners – often it is associated with testing, which doesn't help, but there are many reasons why it can be so complex. Think about the factors involved: the sounds of the words, speakers' accents, intonation and stress, lexis, grammatical structures, the immediate situation as well as the wider social and cultural context, trying to predict what will happen next. All of this is being processed at once! Imagine how much easier reading might seem, when you can focus just on one or two aspects at a time e.g. the lexis and context.

This is why it's important to, generally speaking, to support and prepare learners for listening tasks in your classroom. You might do this by setting the context for the listening, discussing the topic so as to highlight/re-activate related vocabulary in learners. You can also, of course, motivate them – get them interested or intrigued in the topic the speakers are going to talk about if possible!

During

During the listening itself, it's important not to overwhelm learners with too many tasks – again remember how much they are processing. If you ask them to write something, make sure it's not too demanding: writing itself can be a difficult skill to focus on!

It might be a good idea to start with a general 'focusing' question e.g. 'were the speakers generally for or against this issue?' for the first time they listen. Then the second time give learners more detailed tasks – but again being careful not to make them write too much. Gap fills can be good, or ticking pictures or words related to details that they hear.

Remember you can do the listening as many times as you and the learners think is right – you don't have to play it once or twice only: it's not an exam! It's a rich and often under-exploited resource which can give plenty of related areas to work on after the listening. And also, of course, you are not obliged to give learners tasks to do while they listen. Why not just let them respond naturally?

After

So, a listening can be a rich language resource, but language is only the first of at least three aspects you can follow up on.

- **Language:** this doesn't have to be grammar! It may be a lexical area, or a feature of pronunciation. It can be useful to use part of the listening as a dictation here, and audioscripts are often helpful to support these kind of activities.
- **Content:** continue the discussion on the topic, if it's interesting for your learners. With other listenings, you could get learners to do something similar to what the speakers do in the listening e.g. if the speakers describe the first time they did something, then you can get your learners to do the same.
- **Learner training:** research suggests it's worth spending a little time on this, just to increase awareness among learners of how they can help themselves to be 'better listeners'. What did they find useful from the listening activities? Did the tasks they did before listening help? What did they 'notice' in this last listening?

Over to you: Teachers now look at the Activity list and decide which of them are most appropriate before a listening, during, and after.

Remember, these activities are just examples, and there are many other different ways of planning for listening.

Using video

Although you can use most of the activities we've discussed just now, there are of course some differences between traditional classroom listening (e.g. from an MP3 or a CD) and watching a video.

Firstly, remember the number of different factors we talked about which learners need to consider and process when listening. Some of these are made easier by using video – for example the immediate context may be more apparent, or the speaker's body language may indicate how they are feeling.

In terms of activities, as a teacher you also have opportunities to try something a little bit different with video. Here are some examples:

1. You could play the video with zero volume, and ask the learners to guess what the speakers are saying. You could also listen to the speakers without showing the video – so the learners guess what the speakers are actually doing, where they are, etc. Obviously this all depends on the kind of video it is.
2. If you have good quality video, or learners can access the video on their own device, it might be possible to pause one scene and explore the lexis in it – e.g. the kind of clothes the speakers are wearing.
3. Split viewing – this can be difficult to do as you need good facilities, but is a good information gap activity (similar to jigsaw reading). Split the learners into two groups and give them two different parts of a film to watch. Alternatively, give them the same film, but the first group watches with zero volume, and the second group listens without seeing.

Over to you: You will now explore a part of the Premier Skills English website called *Fans in the UK*, and have a chance to apply some of the principles we have discussed to planning activities and lessons for your learners with this part of the website.