

DEVELOPING LISTENING SKILLS IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL

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Why is listening practice important?

1. Babies learn to understand what they hear long before they learn to speak. This is also true of learners of a second language. Therefore they need plenty of practice in listening. Once they have learned to understand what they hear, their confidence will develop and gradually they will become brave enough to speak.
 2. Listening, therefore, is an important preparation for speaking, as well as an essential skill in itself. But learners usually get very little practice in useful listening. We need to give them more.
- Listening activities should be carried out in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. This helps the learners not to feel nervous or shy, as they often do when they are expected to speak. Even the shyest student can succeed in a listening activity, and his success will encourage him and increase his confidence. Continue to build up his confidence in this way and eventually he will be ready to start speaking.

What listening materials can we use?

1. What sort of materials can we use to help our pupils to develop their listening skills? We can consider various kinds:
 - (a) Stories
 - (b) Dialogues
 - (c) Factual information
 - (d) Instructions (e.g. how to make or do something)
 - (e) Other materials designed specifically to train particular listening skills.
2. All these types of material are suitable for use at any age and any level, *provided you choose the actual material sensibly*. It is no use using a complicated story with Standard 1 children, and it is no use using any story with them unless you also use pictures and actions to help them to understand. You cannot expect beginners to follow instructions for making something unless you help them with a demonstration.
3. So always use as much demonstration and action, and as many pictures and objects, as you can. The aim is to help our students to listen and understand; we want to teach them, not test them. Listening will be just part of the activity: watching will also be part of it, and (as we shall see later) doing things may also be involved.
4. Later on, when your pupils are ready for it, you can sometimes try using listening materials alone, with no pictures or actions to help. If your pupils cannot understand, you have chosen material that is too difficult. Either simplify it or go back to helping them with pictures, etc.
5. Your material must be simple in two ways:
 - (a) It must not contain many words or syllabus items that your pupils have not already learnt. (But see below, para. (e) 6). If it *does* contain unknown words, etc., they may not understand. If the word is important, you must *either* change the word *or* give the class the meaning. But you need not worry about a few new words if they are not particularly important in the story. Either ignore them or give the meaning quickly in the course of your reading. (Don't ask the children to learn such words.)

- (b) It must not contain ideas that are too difficult for the children. It would not be fair to expect them to understand, in English, something they would find difficult even in their own language.
6. Listening materials should be *short*. Children cannot concentrate for more than a few minutes, and careful listening is tiring. Often one minute is long enough. It all depends on the age of the pupils and the nature of the material: if you are using lots of pictures and actions, you can continue for longer. If you are telling a really attractive story and using lots of pictures etc., you might continue for up to ten minutes if the children can understand the story easily. But this would be unusual.

You must learn to judge suitable length by watching the children's faces: it is easy to see whether they are paying attention and understanding.

(a) Stories

These will probably be the most popular with your children, so collect a good store of suitable ones. With young children, you will have to write your own, as there are not many suitable ones in books. You can write short stories about the everyday adventures that can happen to your pupils, e.g. going to the clinic with mother; losing something; quarrelling; eating; playing. They will understand these better than fairy stories.

(b) Dialogues

These must be very short and natural. Get fellow teachers or good older students to help you, and record the dialogue on a cassette. In this way your pupils will hear different voices. You can play the tape as many times as you like, and stop it whenever you need to repeat something or help the children to understand. A good way to get a natural-sounding conversation is to tell your friends what you want them to say, but without giving them the actual words.

E.g. John : Ask Rosli what he has got for lunch.

Rosli : Tell him: 3 bananas; some biscuits.

John : Ask Rosli if he will give you 1 banana.

Rosli : Refuse.

John : Offer Rosli 10¢ and tell him you are very hungry.

Rosli : Tell John you are hungry too. You want all the bananas.

John : Tell Rosli he's greedy.

(c) Factual information

Tell the class about something you think will interest them. It might be something that has happened locally ('Pak Din went fishing three times last week. He went on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday. On Monday he caught') Or it might be talking about a local person and where he comes from or what he does. It might be about facts of natural history, geography, history, or general knowledge (for older pupils): what happens when you plant a seed, or when you mix certain colours together; what it is like to live in another country; what life was like in the past, and so on.

NOTE: Be careful, especially with beginners, that your talk doesn't become just a vocabulary lesson. Try to find something interesting to tell them, something they didn't know before. If you can't do this without teaching a great many new words, choose a different type of material.

(d) Instructions

Even beginners can learn to follow spoken instructions. They can be very simple:

1. Stand up. Put up your right hand. Touch your right ear with your left hand. Stand on one leg. Say 'Hello' to your friend.
2. Draw a big tree. Put a little bird on the tree. Draw a man sitting under the tree. Draw a dog sitting near the man.
3. (Each child has (1) a piece of paper or card marked with 8 numbered squares (2) various specified objects.)

Put one of the flowers on number 1. Put a stone on number 2. Put a leaf on number 3. Put the other flower on number 4. (etc.)

Later, you can give instructions for making something, e.g. a paper boat, a model made from satay sticks. (Ask every pupil to bring the necessary materials.)

But be careful: sometimes, the simplest actions are difficult to express in easy language. Always try the instructions out, step by step, before deciding to use them in class.

(e) **Other material**

You can prepare material specially to train various listening skills. Here are some useful ones:

1. *Understanding the topic*, i.e. being able to answer the questions:
What are they talking about?
2. *Noting details*, i.e. being able to answer questions like: How many fish did he catch on Tuesday?
What colour was her dress?
3. *Following sequence*, i.e. being able to answer questions like:
Did she wash the clothes before she went to the market or after?
4. *Getting the main point*, i.e. being able to answer questions like:
What does John want? Is Rosli hungry? (See dialogue, para. (b))
5. *Recognizing relationships between speakers*, i.e. Are Rosli and John father and son? School friends? Teacher and pupil? etc.
6. *Inferring the meaning of unknown words*: This is a very useful skill. You can give practice in this whenever the context provides enough clues to help the pupils to make intelligent guesses. For instance, in the dialogue outlined in para (b), you could ask for the likely meaning of greedy, instead of telling the class what it means. Help them to see what clues they have, if they don't guess sensibly. Don't ask for guesses if the context does *not* provide clues.

What shall we do with the materials?

1. It is sometimes enough for the children just to listen; for example, if you are telling a story, you can often see if they are understanding, and you may not want to spoil their enjoyment by asking questions.
2. However, it is usually better to get the children to do something to show their understanding. There are two reasons for this:
 - (a) if the activity is well-planned, it may actually help the children to understand.
 - (b) it enables you to see how well they have understood, so that you can stop, explain, or simplify where necessary.

3. The best known activity is of course answering questions. But this forces the child to use language, and as we saw, he may not be ready to do that yet. There are other ways of showing understanding, some of which do not involve using language, and some of which are more fun than answering questions. We will list them:

(a) **Doing or making something** (see (d) 1.)

(b) **Drawing something** (see (d) 2.)

(c) **Arranging objects, pictures, etc.** (see (d) 3.)

You can provide, for example, 4 pictures of events. Then you narrate a story in which the events occur. The pupils must write down the correct sequence in which the pictures should be arranged to match the story.

(d) **Completing a picture, diagram or table** which has some parts missing. You supply the incomplete picture, etc. on the blackboard and the children copy it before the listening activity begins; or you supply a stencilled copy. Then you read a description, a factual statement, etc. and the children listen for the information needed to complete the picture, supply figures for a table, etc.

(e) **Matching**

(i) Supply several pictures, e.g. pictures of houses. You describe one house and the children have to identify which is the picture of it.

(ii) You display pictures of pairs of people. Pupils listen to several short dialogues and tell you which picture goes with which dialogue.

(iii) You display pictures of objects. Pupils listen to conversations and say which conversation refers to which object.

(iv) Supply a short text with some words missing. Pupils copy it out. You read aloud the text in full. Pupils listen for the missing words and write them in.

(f) **Identifying**

(i) Supply a simple map and label point A. Describe how to get from point A to another point B (not labelled). Pupils have to identify which is point B.

(ii) Supply a simple map and mark a number of places (e.g. places A–E). Describe the area, or describe a journey through it, mentioning the places by name (e.g. the Post Office, the school) and making clear where they are located. Pupils have to label them (or write answers e.g. A = school).

(iii) Supply a picture, diagram, etc. Read out a description of a similar picture, with some differences. Pupils have to list the differences *or* draw the corrected picture.

(iv) Supply, for example, a list of instructions, a timetable, a family tree. Read an account which relates to the same thing but differs in a few details. Pupils have to spot the differences. They can then write out a corrected version.