EFFECTIVE ENGLISH LEARNING

Unit 2: Listening

PROCESSES

In this first section we consider the processes involved in listening, the way in which listeners have to use different types of knowledge in order to make sense of what they hear, and the key role of listening in learning a second language. Most international students find it harder to listen to English than to read it, due partly to the physical differences between written and spoken language, and partly to the ways in which we listen and read.

Task 2.1

Can you suggest reasons why students say they find listening to English more difficult than reading it?

When you have thought about your answer – and, if possible, discussed it with another student – compare it with the one in the Study Notes, by clicking here

In the past, people used to refer to listening and reading as ‘passive’ language skills. However, effective listening and reading require active attention, not passive reception. So one way to increase your listening skills is to make conscious use of the context in which you are listening, and not just the words the speaker is saying. The context provides a wide range of additional information. Some is
available to the **ear** (in the form of background noise, voice quality, accent, and so on), and some to the **eye** (for example, the speaker's facial expression and gestures, and actions in the background).

**Task 2.2**

This gives you a chance to see how much you can understand of two simple sentences without knowing much about the physical context in which they were spoken.

Tony Lynch was once walking in the street near his flat in Glasgow when an elderly woman came the other way. As she passed Tony, she looked at him, smiled and said *'That's the university. It's going to rain tomorrow!'*

What do you think she meant?

When you have thought about your answer – and, if possible, discussed it with another student – compare it with our Study Notes, by clicking [here](#).

In this particular case, the difficulty is not so much what the woman **said**, but what she **meant**. In listening, we use more than just our linguistic knowledge, as the diagram below shows.

```
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factual knowledge</th>
<th>TOP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- general</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- local</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Cultural knowledge  |     |
|                     |     |

| Situation           |     |
| - where, when, who..|     |

| Co-text             |     |
| - what else has been (or will be) said |     |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language system</th>
<th>BOTTOM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- vocabulary</td>
<td>S I O N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- grammar</td>
<td>LINGUISTIC KNOWLEDGE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- pronunciation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Anderson and Lynch (1988: 13)
The arrows show that there are different routes by which we can reach understanding, COMPREHENSION: using our linguistic knowledge (what is called 'bottom-up' processing), the context, or the relevant background knowledge ('top-down' processing).

What effective listeners do is combine information from these different sources. If you concentrate only on the words being said (the Language level), you make it more difficult for yourself to understand what is being meant.

In the case of our Glasgow example, 'That's the university. It's going to rain tomorrow', the language causes no problems: the grammar and vocabulary are simple. But to understand what the woman meant, we have to use knowledge of background and context:

**General factual knowledge**
1. Sound is more audible downwind than upwind
2. Wind direction can affect weather conditions

**Local factual knowledge**
3. The University of Glasgow has a clock tower with a bell

**Cultural knowledge**
4. British people talk about the weather to 'oil the wheels' of social life.
5. A polite comment from a stranger requires a response.

**Context**
6. The conversation took place out of sight of the University.
7. The clock tower bell was striking the hour.

---

**The meaning of a word or phrase is clarified by its use in a specific sentence or social situation.** The only real way to understand a speaker’s message or intention is to guess the meaning - something we all do routinely in our native language.

By guessing and taking risks, you will be able to confirm your understanding of a conversation. You will then learn to note the relationships between words, phrases, and sentences in a conversation or text and among the participants in a discussion and grow to understand them better.

(Rubin and Thompson 1982: 75, emphasis added)
If you are studying in Edinburgh, you have greater opportunities to hear other people speaking English around you. If you are a distance learner, you can use the many listening sites on the internet. For any new international student, there can be the frustration of feeling that other people are speaking too quickly. In Edinburgh many students perceive a problem with the Scottish (and other) accents they hear around them.

However, judgments like these are relative: we tend to think someone is talking fast if we cannot understand them. We do not notice the speaking speed when we have no difficulty following what someone is saying.

Similarly, no accent (of any language) is in itself difficult; what makes it seem so is unfamiliarity. So a Scottish accent – and there are a wide variety of local accents in Scotland, not just one – may not be any harder to understand than, say, the accents you would hear in London, Newcastle or Liverpool.

Particularly in your first few weeks of study you need to set yourself reasonable targets in listening. Don’t expect to understand 100 per cent of what is said. Remember that British listeners, too, can find it hard to understand everything that is said around them:

If you observe the behaviour of [a native listener] coming up and joining a group of other people who are already engaged in a conversation, you will notice that the new arrival usually waits for a minute or two before beginning to take part in the conversation....

Even native listeners, then, may occasionally find it difficult to work out the precise topic, purposes and attitudes of conversations, even when they have a lot of information about the context of situation. The native listener will give himself time to work out what is going on, and will frequently have to work quite hard, making very active use of his previous experience.

(Brown and Yule 1983: 69, emphasis added)
But if you are based in Edinburgh, one thing you should expect to be able to do in your early weeks here is recognise helpful clues in what people say in conversation that will help you to identify the general topic of a conversation, and then to see if your guess at the topic is confirmed by what you hear subsequently.

Be prepared to change your mind, if you find that what you then hear does not match your first guess at what the topic is.

Flexibility of this sort is an essential skill in listening. Research has shown that we are more tolerant of uncertainty in our own language than in another language (Kasper 1984). We make an initial guess at what a conversation is about, then listen for more information to confirm or disconfirm that guess, and change our interpretation if we need to. When listening to a foreign language, we are more likely to keep to our original guess at the conversation topic than in our own language, even when we realise that some later information seems to conflict with it.

Task 2.3

Our third Listening task demonstrates the need to be flexible as you try to understand English. You are going to see five parts of a conversation that Tony Lynch overheard at work between two colleagues at Edinburgh, Gus and Sue. Each section consists of a question from Gus and the response from Sue.

As you read each pair (Gus’s question and Sue’s answer), write in under 'Topic' what you think they are talking about. Under 'Reason' put the word that makes you think so.

It is important to begin by reading only section 1, and to COVER UP sections 2-5.

Most people find that at some point in reading the conversation they change their mind about the topic, in the light of new information.

Don't forget to COVER UP sections 2-5!
To check your answers, click here.

The point of Task can be summarised as our third language learning principle:

**Learn to live with uncertainty**

**The role of listening in learning English**

We have looked at the processes involved in listening; we have seen some of the factors which influence our perception of the relative difficulty of understanding what people say to us in their language. In other words, we have looked at (short-term) **comprehension**.
But if you are going to spend a year or more on an Edinburgh programme of study, listening will also be a crucial source of input for your long-term learning, giving you information you can use to improve your knowledge of English.

Of course, there is no one-to-one relationship between what we hear and what we learn. Even if we are exposed to a great deal of second language speech, we remember and learn only a small percentage of all the new words we identify and understand.

**Task 2.4**

Think back to your first day of a trip to Britain (or any other English-speaking country). What was the first new spoken word or expression that you remember hearing, understanding and learning? How were you able to work out its meaning? What makes you remember it now?

If you cannot recall the first word, think about a word you have heard (and understood and remembered and learnt) recently. Was there something special about the word, or the situation, that makes it especially memorable for you?

**To compare your recollection with one of ours, click here.**
RESOURCES

Television

Television offers a convenient way of improving your listening skills and vocabulary. The enormous range of programmes make some more suitable for listening practice and others for language learning.

Task 2.5

With such a variety of TV programmes available, some are more suitable than others for practising listening to English. Look at the list below and decide which types of programme you think are (a) most suitable and (b) least suitable for practising your listening skills.

- Scottish news
- drama
- political discussion
- children's programmes
- quiz shows
- American comedies
- Open University programmes
- international news
- film (movie)
- weather forecast

Compare your answers with those in the Feedback here.

You can find out what programmes are coming up from various sources of information (programme listings), for example:

- the free newspaper *Metro* has TV and radio listings
- Sunday newspapers, such as *The Observer*, list programmes for the coming week in a separate supplement
- *Radio Times* is a weekly printed magazine with listings and background articles on both radio and TV, and also has a website [http://www.radiotimes.com/](http://www.radiotimes.com/)
Of the range of programme available, **current affairs and news** programmes may be the most useful for improving your listening, for several reasons:

Firstly, their **subject matter** makes them easier to understand, in general, than other types of broadcast such as comedy and drama.

Secondly, they include **scripted language**, read aloud to the camera, which is easier to follow than spontaneous talk.

In the case of news bulletins, a third advantage is their **information structure**, which allows us several chances to understand what is said:

Their format makes them ideal candidates for exploitation [as listening material], since they often follow a sequence of headlines + reports + summary, similar to three steps of the Survey + Question + Read + Recall + Review procedure recommended in reading efficiency courses. ... From the learner's viewpoint the inbuilt repetition of information enables him to flesh out what he may have only half understood the first time round.

(adapted from Lynch 1982: 13)

Some students specifically choose to watch and listen to Scottish programmes, to get used to the wide variety of Scottish accents. You can find BBC Radio Scotland schedules at [http://www.bbc.co.uk/scotland/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/scotland/)

Scottish news programmes can be very helpful; the newsreader or presenter tends to have a slighter accent than the reporters, and they in turn often have a less marked accent than the people they interview for their report. Seeing or hearing each item explained in context, you will probably find that you are more easily able to understand the people being interviewed.
Subtitles

**Task 2.6**

In what way do you think subtitles might help second language listening? Do you think they help you just to understand what is being said, or would they also help you to learn English grammar and vocabulary? Can you see any possible disadvantages?

Compare your answer with the research findings reported [here](#).

Video (Internet/DVD)

Video gives you the chance to watch/listen again to English you may not have fully understood first time.

One way to use a video is to play a section of, say, 10 minutes or so. As you watch, try to follow what is being said. At the points where you have problems understanding the speaker, make a note of the time shown. At the end of the 10 minutes, rewind to the first problem point and play that part again. Do the same for all the points you found difficult on first viewing.

In some cases, the replay will enable you to decide on the words or expressions used; in cases where you can't, ask someone else to watch that section and explain it to you.
ADVICE FROM INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

In each unit, the final section offers you techniques that other international students at Edinburgh told us they found useful in improving their listening outside class.

As you read them, think about your own situation. Even if you think at first that a particular option would not be appropriate for you, (e.g. if you have no access to TV) you may be able to think of ways of adapting the student's suggestion to suit you.

Task 2.7

The techniques in the list below are shown in random order. As you read them, think about what they involve and group them into similar types of practice.

1. Listening to a tape and writing down exactly what you hear is very helpful. To listen very specifically and in detail means you have to pay attention to sounds which you have some problems with yourself. Seeing what the gaps are in your dictation tells you what your listening problems are.

2. I listen to the news on television or radio and then try to discuss the topics with friends. This is very useful for me to know whether the news that I have heard is correct and does not give different perspectives than mine.

3. I improve listening by meeting a lot of friends and talking to them on any topic. The best way is to make them give explanations when I don’t understand something and then to tell them what I have understood from those explanations.

4. I think it’s good practice to listen to other foreign speakers talking about your field. You have to get used to their accents, in the same way as you have get used to British people’s different accents. In fact, there are bigger differences between British accents than between foreigners, I think. So it’s all good practice and helps to find out more about the subject.

5. Every day I listen to different radio programmes, especially to the news, and try
to understand the whole context. By listening to different dialects and speeds, my English improved quite a lot.

6. I am a member of the Greek Dance Society, so I go to their meetings once a week and spend about 2 hours per week talking English to other students there.

7. I work in a café and there I concentrate a lot.

8. I try to spend time as much as I can with someone I don't understand their accent, and get used to it. During this time I ask them something that I can expect long answer.

9. I learn French at OLL. During French class, I hear mostly French with appropriate supplemental comments in English. Such an environment makes me naturally feel that to be able to listen to English is a matter of course. As a result, increased awareness seems to promote improving my listening skills.

10. I make it a rule not to speak my mother tongue, even with Japanese friends.

11. I sometimes visit an old lady and talk with her. We talk for about two hours.

12. I am a volunteer in a charity shop. It is a great chance for me to do something meaningful and talk to other people

Click here for one possible solution.

**Task 2.8**

Student 1 says he has found dictation useful. Can you think of reasons for and against using dictation to practise your listening skills.

**Compare your reasons with those in the Feedback here.**
Listening websites

For practice in listening to lectures and taking notes:

- [http://www.education.ex.ac.uk/dll/studyskills/note_taking_skills.htm](http://www.education.ex.ac.uk/dll/studyskills/note_taking_skills.htm)
- Reith Lectures (selected from the historic BBC series)
- Academic Study Skills BBC (includes contributions from Tony Lynch)

For more general listening:

- [Voices from the Archives](http://www.bbc.co.uk/voices) (BBC Audio Archives)
- [BBC Radio 4](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4) (Old and new radio programmes from BBC Radio 4)
- [CNN.com Video](http://www.cnn.com/video) (Top news and stories from CNN)
- [Euronews](http://www.euronews.com) (News in six European languages, including English)
- [freevideolectures.com](http://www.freevideolectures.com) (Links to lectures on a range of subjects).
- Great Speeches (Famous speeches from the History Channel)
- [Listening Lab](http://www.listeninglab.org) (Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab)
- Real English (Interactive Video Online)
- Videojug (Everything you want to learn explained on video)
- [World Service](http://www.bbcworldservice.net) (Watch and listen from BBC World Service)
- Academic Study Skills BBC (includes contributions from Tony Lynch)

Finally, one of our students has recommended [http://www.elllo.org/](http://www.elllo.org/)

That's the end of this unit, which I hope has given you some new ideas for improving your English listening as a University of Edinburgh student (and later in life!).

If you have found any errors in the text, or web links no longer working, or if you would like to suggest other informal learning techniques for this unit, you are welcome to email me at A.J.Lynch@ed.ac.uk

Prof. Tony Lynch
English Language Teaching Centre
University of Edinburgh

Tony Lynch and Kenneth Anderson, English Language Teaching Centre, University of Edinburgh 2012
Listening
Feedback: study notes and answers

Task 2.1
Formal differences:
- speech is normally temporary (unless you can record it), whereas print/writing is permanent;
- in print, words are clearly separated by white spaces, but in natural speech the words merge together, and some sounds 'disappear';
- the listener has to understand spoken language in real time (as the speaker is speaking; the reader is able to control the speed at which they read the text in print or on screen).

In some countries, much less attention is paid in English courses to helping students to understand the spoken language. This can be for a variety of reasons, e.g. lack of technology, teachers’ poor oral proficiency, an official policy that English is essentially a ‘library language’, likely to be used for reading texts rather than oral communication.

To return to the page, click [here].

Task 2.2
When the woman said, 'That's the university. It's going to rain tomorrow', Tony Lynch didn't understand what she meant and said 'Pardon?' She repeated the words, but also added a gesture with her hand indicating 'Listen!'

Tony then realised that, in the far distance (about 2 kilometres away) he could hear the sound of the University of Glasgow clock striking the hour. Do you now see why the woman connected the sound of the bell with rain? If not, click [here] to read the explanation on page 2 of different types of information.

Task 2.3
For this task, it is essential that you DO NOT LOOK at the next section of conversation before you have answered Topic and Reason for the section you are currently thinking about.

Below are the findings of an experiment Tony Lynch carried out with the same text, which you can compare with your own answers to Task 2.3.
Here are three listeners' answers:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Listener A</th>
<th>Listener B</th>
<th>Listener F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Topic</td>
<td>COMPUTERS</td>
<td>RESTAURANT</td>
<td>FAST-FOOD RESTAURANT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason</td>
<td>'menu'</td>
<td>'menu'</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Topic</td>
<td>COMPUTERS</td>
<td>RESTAURANT?</td>
<td>I don't understand this!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason</td>
<td>'mouse'</td>
<td>but why 'mouse'?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Topic</td>
<td>COMPUTERS</td>
<td>CHARITY COFFEE BAR</td>
<td>Still can't make sense of it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason</td>
<td>'widows and orphans'</td>
<td>'widows and orphans'</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Topic</td>
<td>COMPUTERS</td>
<td>SOMETHING BOUGHT</td>
<td>SOMETHING BOUGHT - HOUSE?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason</td>
<td>'happy with it'</td>
<td></td>
<td>BOAT?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Topic</td>
<td>DEFINITELY COMPUTERS</td>
<td>COMPUTERS</td>
<td>COMPUTER?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>numbers and 'menu'</td>
<td>By elimination - the numbers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interesting thing about those answers is that it is not possible to tell, from the table, whether the three listeners were native or non-native listeners. In fact, Listener A was an adult intermediate learner of English; and Listeners B and F were British.

As you can see, Listener A had no doubt at any stage that the conversation was about computers. **She was right.** In fact, it turned out that she had a degree in Artificial Intelligence; she was therefore able to use both language knowledge and background knowledge to interpret context.

Although Listeners B and F were native speakers of English, they seem to have been misled or confused by words used in the first three pairs of speaking turns. In the end (at Section 5) they reached the same correct solution, that the conversation was about computers. But they did so for different reasons: Listener F relied on the fact that the numbers seemed to suggest a model of computer; and Listener B recalled, eventually, that 'menu' was a term she had heard in connection with computers.

To return to the page you were on, click here.
Task 2.4
Here is something that happened to Tony Lynch:

'When I went to work in Portugal, I spoke no Portuguese. I took a taxi from Lisbon airport to the city centre to catch a train to Porto, where I was to start a teaching job. The school director had told me to ask for 'Porto. Primeira classe' (Porto. First class).

When I said those words, the ticket clerk replied with what I took to be 'Forget' in English. I assumed he had recognised that I was British and was telling me to 'forget it' - i.e. that I should give up any idea of taking the train because it was not running, or something like that. But I was then surprised to see that, just after saying 'Forget', he gave me a ticket to Porto and took my money.

I later realised that what he had said was 'Foguete' ('Rocket'), the name of the express train to Porto. He wanted to check that I wished to take that train, since it would cost me more than the other trains. For this reason - a mixture of misunderstanding and embarrassment - I remember my first encounter with this Portuguese word'.

To go back to the materials, click here.

Task 2.5
The answers to this task are debatable. The programmes that we think would be the most difficult are films and drama, because of their colloquial speech, poor sound quality, and background music.

Factual programmes may be easier to understand, but familiarity with content will play a part here, so that one might expect international news to be less difficult for international students to understand than Scottish news.

How difficult quiz shows are will, again, depend on their content, which is often linked with cultural assumptions and background knowledge.

Overall, we think that Open University programmes may be simplest to follow, as they are designed for instructional purposes (provided that they are on a topic you know about).

The term 'children's programmes' covers a wide range in Britain, but it would be wrong to assume that what is intellectually simplified for a young British audience will be linguistically simple for foreign listeners.

To return to the page, click here

Task 2.6
Vanderplank (1988) investigated the benefits of sub-titled TV programmes for two groups of English learners at Heriot-Watt University. One was a group of post-intermediate advanced level students from Europe; the other a group of Arabic-speaking students at low-intermediate to advanced levels. Here is an extract from Vanderplank’s abstract:

‘[Students] reported that they found the sub-titles useful and beneficial to their language development and that they were able to develop strategies for using sub-titles flexibly and according to need. The findings suggested that sub-titled programmes may be of limited value for low-level learners, but may provide large amounts of comprehensible input for post-intermediate level learners.’

(Vanderplank 1988: 272)

We should bear in mind that Vanderplank's conclusions were based on self-reports by the learners and on teacher observations, but not on a test of progress. In other words, his study provides a picture of subjective perceptions of the value of sub-titles.

Vanderplank also found that the European students in his experiment were much more positive towards sub-titles than the Arabic-speaking group, even after the first viewing. The Arabic speakers complained that the text changed too rapidly for them to read it with understanding.

‘The quality of the text was at times in some programmes rather poor and subjects reported inconsistencies, omissions and errors.... Differences between text and speech were seen as a hindrance at first, but were used as a useful and productive self-monitoring device later and, of course, could be a very useful teaching technique...

... there are serious questions regarding the use of sub-titled programmes with learners below intermediate level. At beginner and low-intermediate levels, the language may not be comprehensible enough, even with textual support, since not only may the text be beyond them in terms of grammar and vocabulary, but the learners’ reading speeds in English may also be too slow...

(Vanderplank 1988: 276 & 280)

To return to the page, click here
Task 2.7
You could categorize the students’ techniques by type of resource, like this:

Use of media:  
- TV (2)  
- radio (2, 5)  
- MP4 player (2)

Use of people:  
- social (2, 3, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11)  
- academic (4)  
- work (7, 9, 12)

If you want to read more about improving your listening through informal practice, email Tony Lynch at A.J.Lynch@ed.ac.uk and ask for a copy of his paper “Not just talking: Conversation and progress in listening” (2012).

To return to the page, click here

Task 2.8
Some of the arguments in favour of dictation are:

- Many students feel it helps, like the writer of comment 1, and if you feel positive about something it will probably work for you.
- If you have a native speaker to consult after you have completed a dictation, you can ask them for correction and feedback on your text.
- Getting things right, in the sense of reproducing the original words, may build your confidence.

And here are some arguments against:

- Dictation is rarely used or useful in real life.
- It trains or requires listening to every word, which is not necessary - and not even helpful in situations like lectures.
- How can you check whether your dictation is right? (One way would be to do dictation from an Internet audio site that provides transcripts, and then check your dictation text against the transcript).
Making your own questions
If you listen to an audio that has no questions, you can make your own listening tasks. Try to match the difficulty of the task you set yourself with your comprehension level. Below are some suggestions on different levels of task:

Relatively easy
1. Listen once without stopping.
2. How many news items are there?
3. Is there an item about the weather?
4. Is there just one person reading the news? If not, how many reporters are there?

Moderately difficult
1. Listen to one news item only.
2. Try to write down the main points.
3. Listen again to the item; this time write down as many of the words as you can, without stopping the tape.

Difficult
1. Listen to the whole programme once and write down as much as you can remember.
2. Listen again and stop after each item. Write a summary of the main points. (adapted from Windeatt 1981)

Finally, visit some of the Recommended Listening websites here

References in this Unit
Lynch T. 2012. 'Not just talking: Conversation and progress in listening’. English Language Teaching Centre / Institute for Academic Development, University of Edinburgh.
Windeatt S. 1981. 'A project in self-access learning for English language and study skills'. Practical Papers in English Language Education. University of Lancaster.