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Teaching Listening

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BEFECTETÉS A JÖVŐBE

1. Introduction

In language teaching, the main four skill areas discussed are reading, listening, writing and speaking. Reading and listening are receptive skills, since they are based on the language learners' ability to comprehend written and aural texts, while writing and speaking are productive skills and are based on the active written and spoken language production of the language learner.

The focus of the present unit is listening. We are going to explore

- in what situations people need to listen to texts in real life and in classrooms,
- what the challenges are and what aids are at our disposal
- and how and where listening can be practised

in order to gain a better insight into how language teachers can prepare their learners to be able to listen to and understand target language texts.

2. Listening situations

2.1 In real life

We are surrounded by texts all our lives. If you think of an average day of yours, be it a work day or a day off, you will probably realise how many and how versatile texts you hear in how many different situations. Many of these texts may be in your mother tongue, but others may be in any of the foreign languages you are familiar with.



Thinking task 1

Make a list of at least 10 kinds of situations in which you expect your future learners to have to listen to (and understand) some kind of English speech. Think of all possible aspects of their lives: their studies, their work life, as well as their private lives.

Obviously, given the incredibly wide variability of your future learners and the life situations they might find themselves in, an exhaustive list is impossible to compile. Aim at a representative selection.



Key

Study

1. the listening component of various language exams
2. the speaking component of various language exams – where they have to understand the examiner
3. the teacher and fellow students in the various language courses they might take
4. lectures and talks connected to their studies

Work

5. job interviews
6. presentations at work
7. meetings at work
8. telephone conversations, tele- or video-conferences

Private sphere

9. listening to or watching news, sports programs or documentaries on TV or in the radio or online
10. films
11. announcements at railway stations or airports when travelling abroad
12. receiving some kind of instructions as to how to go about doing something
13. arranging some kind of official matter with some authority abroad
14. engaging in private conversations with individuals of other nationalities – using English as a common language
15. listening to songs

2.2 In coursebooks

When engaging in foreign language learning, we are exposed to aural input from the very first moment on. The majority of the course books currently available have also been written with the importance of developing listening as a skill in mind.

Now open and do Task 1 in the attached folder before reading on. Please use the key to confirm your answers.

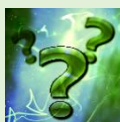


Please note

You probably concluded that there is a surprisingly *large amount of audio material* accompanying these coursebooks – even at higher levels. This is essential for the learning process, because of the very complicated relationship between spelling and pronunciation in English, and the many challenges that learners face when listening to spoken English, which we are going to explore in the next section.

Producing quality audio support requires a high degree of professionalism and huge investment of effort, consequently not every coursebook series includes so much of it. Try to select ones that do to teach from – it helps both your work and your learners' learning process tremendously.

3. Challenges and aids

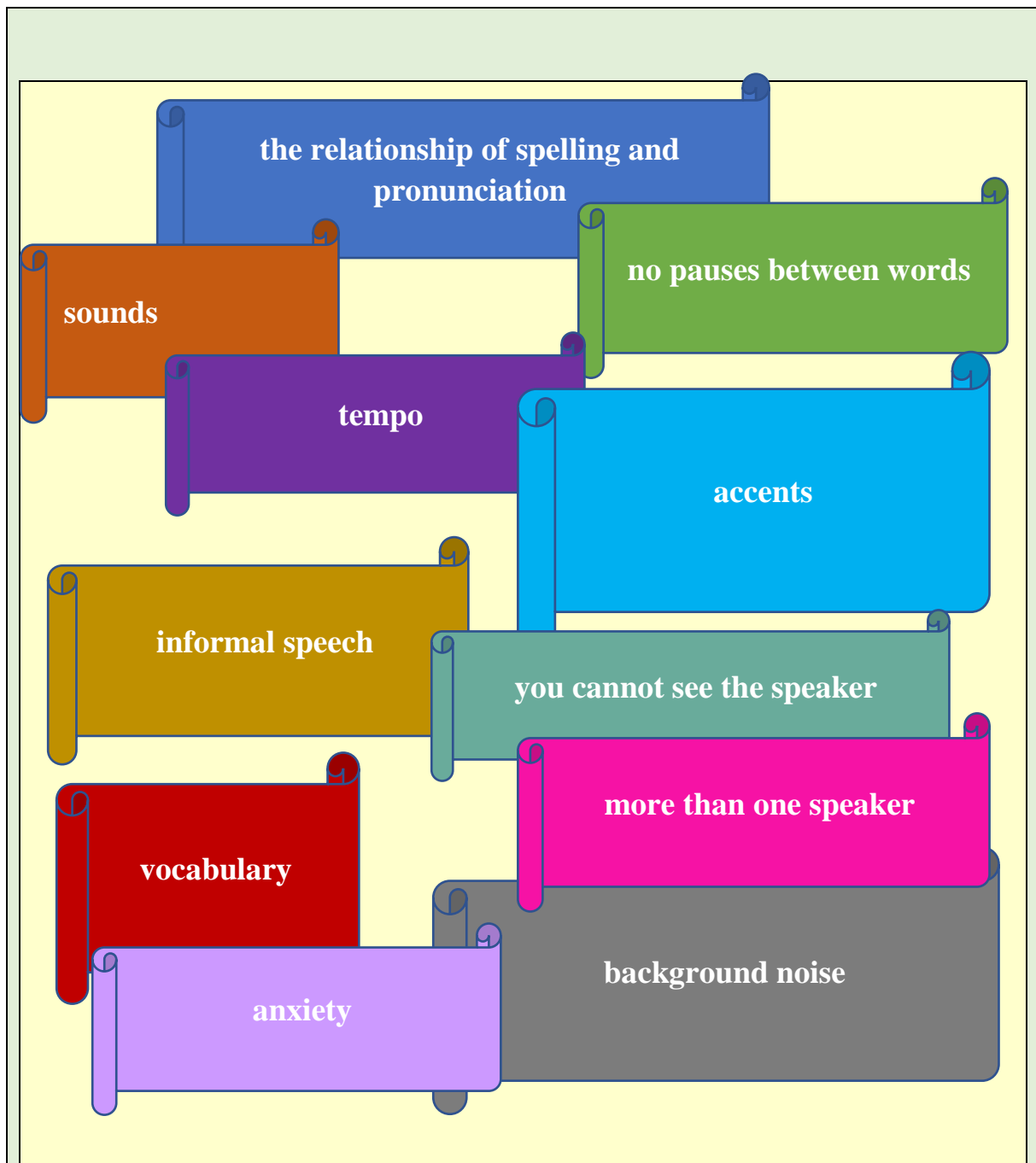


Thinking task 2

When listening to a text in English, learners are faced with a number of challenges. Can you think of some? List as many as you can think of.

Now take a look at the list of the listening challenges. The list is based on the author's experiences with her learners over the decades, and which most teachers that she has trained and talked to, and most methodology coursebook writers seem to agree on, eg. Hedge (2000:236-242), Ur (2012:103-105), Ur (1984).

Think about them and try and come up with an explanation why they may present a difficulty for the listener.



Key

1. the relationship of spelling and pronunciation

The relationship of spelling and pronunciation in English is highly complicated and complex – often seemingly arbitrary. This makes it difficult to recognise words that we are already familiar with in

their written forms. It helps a lot if the learner doesn't only pay attention to the spelling but also pronunciation of the words that he learns.

2. sounds

There are sounds in any language that may not exist in another – and these are very difficult to hear out and distinguish from phonemes that sound similar to the foreign ear (e.g. for the speakers of many languages the initial phonemes of *thin* and *sin*). Again, the importance of teaching/learning the pronunciation of words for successful listening cannot be stressed enough.

3. no pauses between words

In connected speech there are often *no pauses between words* but whole chunks of the utterance are blurred together. This makes it difficult to recognise where one word ends and the next one begins.

4. informal speech

When listening to *informal* (i.e. not carefully planned and articulated) *speech*, the learner is faced with additional challenges at the discourse level:

- there are many *contractions* (I'm, He'd) and *elisions* (wətʃɪduɪn for What is she doing?)
- unplanned, spontaneous speech is full of *hesitations, false starts, restructurings* (sentence starts using one structure, then transitions into another) and incomplete utterances, all of which make it hard to follow.

5. tempo

Unlike in the case of understanding written texts, *the listener doesn't get to choose the tempo*. Spoken language is more often than not too fast for learners

- there is no time to stop and figure out what they have just heard.

6. accents

English is spoken with a *huge variety of accents* – many of which are very different from RP.

7. vocabulary

Like in the case of understanding written texts, the learner has to overcome the difficulty presented by *difficult vocabulary: idioms* (where the meaning of the whole phrase cannot be readily computed from the meaning of the individual words eg. He hit the roof when...), *slang, dialectal/regional vocabulary, specialist topic vocabulary/jargon/technical terms*. The crucial difference is that the listener cannot stop and think, figure out, look up etc – the text keeps coming at him at a speed he did not choose to start with.

8. background noise

Background noise might be present.

9. more than one speaker

More than one speaker might speak at the same time.

10. you cannot see the speaker

When listening to audio recordings, *we cannot see the speaker(s)*. This deprives us from a large variety of visual clues that in real life listening situations aid poor comprehension: the speakers gestures, facial expressions and posture/moves, as well as all kinds of environmental clues that reveal where the communication takes places and what it is about.

11. anxiety

In some listening situations we experience a considerable degree of anxiety which acts as a kind of internal fog or noise in the brain of the listener and limits his capacity to comprehend the speech coming at him.



Please note

All these challenges create gaps in understanding that the learner has to bridge. It is not much different from laying a puzzle: the more gaps we have the more difficult it is to see the whole picture.

Ur (2012:104) calls these gaps ‘noise’, the idea being that ‘in such case a gap is left, which is filled, as far as the listener is concerned, by meaningless buzz’. Tricia Hedge (2000:236) refers to the same phenomena as ‘uncertainties’.

In order for the listener to listen successfully, they have to fill the gaps – but this takes time. For foreign language listeners it takes considerably more time, which they might not have, since the speaker carries on talking and they need to listen on.

In addition to the difficulties caused by gaps in understanding, there are two common challenges that should be addressed in class:

12. the need to understand every word

Many foreign language learners shoot themselves in the foot by being reluctant to listen selectively. They feel a(n often obsessive) psychological need to understand every word, which is most of the time impossible. And while desperately trying to reconstruct what has just been said, they are missing the following incoming information – and sooner or later give up completely out of frustration and a feeling of failure. Learners need guidance and practice in *listening selectively*: gauging the importance of the incoming input and paying more attention to those bits that are essential for comprehension, while computing a rough gist of or ignoring the rest. (See also:...Ur (2012:107), Ur (1984:15))

13. fatigue

When listening to longer stretches of speech, the *learner's concentration declines and after a while fatigue sets in*. Learners vary in terms of how long they can keep up acute concentration, but in most listening situations it is impossible to keep it up as long as the situation lasts. The importance of not trying to understand every word but listening selectively cannot be stressed enough here as well. (See also Ur (1984:19))



14. sound quality

One more feature has to be mentioned:

Sound coming through the sound system of any kind of gadget, let it be your computer, your mobile phone or the cinema sound system, is physically different from sound that you perceive through the air. The sound quality (i.e. fidelity and intelligibility) of an electronic device can vary a lot, but what is common in all is that in recorded sound a large range of very high and very low

frequencies are missing, which makes the audio input poorer in a way. In our technological age our brains are getting more and more used to ‘machine sound’, but the differences might matter when trying to understand recorded speech.

Now open and do Task 2 in the attached folder before reading on. Please use the key to confirm your answers.

Purpose and prediction

An additional powerful comprehension aid is the fact that in most listening situations we do not just accidentally overhear something, but are *listening with intention*, with a definite purpose: we need to get some information, we would like to understand some sort of ‘story’ (what happened), we need instructions to do something, etc.

The purpose that we are listening with should not be neglected as a comprehension aid as it ‘makes us’ predict the content and the kind of language that we might hear. Let’s say, for instance, that we want to learn the height of something – in this case we are expecting to hear a number and the unit word (meter, feet, millimetre, etc.) after it. Prediction is a valuable support of comprehension: verifying our active predictions is much easier for the brain as understanding something from scratch, and thus it keeps us motivated to listen and make an effort to understand.

4. Practising listening

4.1 What can the learner practise and where?

Our goal as language teachers is to prepare our learners, as best as we can, to successfully cope with the listening situations they might have to face in their lives. In order to achieve this, *we have to create opportunities in the lesson for the learners to cope with those scenarios and/or give them advice and suggestions as to how they might practice these out of the classroom.*

Now open and do Task 3 in the attached folder before reading on. Please use the key to confirm your answers.

4.2 Practising listening in class

As we have seen in 2.2, coursebooks ideally contain a wealth of audio materials of all sorts, with all sorts of purposes: presenting and practising the pronunciation of new words and structures, simply providing ample audio input for language learning (the audio version of the language tasks and reading materials), and practising comprehending longer audio texts.

In this section, we are going to focus on the last of these and look into *what procedure coursebooks typically suggest for processing listening texts in class*. The days when the teacher simply pushed the button and said ‘listen and answer the questions’ are gone now. Thanks to advances in cognitive psychology and ELT methodology, we know a great deal about how the brain copes with text comprehension – and coursebook writers, as well as teacher trainers, tap into this vast amount of knowledge when designing the activities.

Now open and do Task 4 in the attached folder before reading on. Please use the key to confirm your answers.



Summary

In the present unit you were asked to think about the possible situations in which people listen to texts in real life and in classrooms. You were guided through the major challenges and were introduced to a number of aids that are at their disposal. As a future language teacher, you were also given insight into how and where listening can be practiced.

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