

What are the different listening sub-skills and how do we practise them in the classroom? This lesson will help you understand what different listening sub-skills students need to practise. It will also give you an understanding of how to order activities in a typical classroom lesson that aims to practise listening.

#### Task 1 – Is there another way?

*Emily is explaining a problematic lesson to a colleague.*

**Emily:** “Well, I was doing this listening lesson and I didn’t want the lesson to be too hard for students. So I told them just to listen and try and understand what they could. But my students just complained and said they couldn’t understand the words in the conversation, so they’d never have a hope of understanding the whole conversation. In the end I just gave up.”



**It is not surprising that Emily’s lesson was problematic. What could she have done? Jot down your ideas / suggestions on a note pad, then check the answer key below. 🗝️**

#### Task 1 Feedback 🗝️

Emily didn’t think about which listening sub-skills to practise and how to order different listening activities in the lesson. This probably meant the students immediately focused on a lot of detail and tried to understand individual words rather than the main ideas in the conversation. There are more efficient and supportive ways of conducting listening lessons. Read on.

#### Key skill

When people listen in their first language, they use a variety of strategies to get both the main idea and the detail of what they listen to. By staging well planned listening lessons in the classroom, we can help students to understand spoken text more effectively.

### Task 2 – Listening and processing models



When learners listen to a stream of sound, they use both ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ processing. Match the processing models to the correct definition. Two of the definitions are not correct:

Processing models	Definition
1. ‘top-down’ processing	
2. ‘bottom-up’ processing	

#### Definitions

- Listeners only listen to parts of a conversation and take small ‘rests’ from the stream of sound.
- Listeners try to make sense of the stream of sound by trying to understand words or grammatical structures they are familiar with.
- Listeners process what they hear in relation to their background knowledge of the topic or the situation.
- Listeners try to make sense of the stream of sound by following the logical order of what they hear.

Check your ideas in the answer key. 

#### Key skill

The way we process incoming language can affect the way we understand information. In our first language we use *both* processing models and sometimes in tandem. We do this automatically in response to the kind of text we are listening to.

### Task 3 – Listening strategies and processing models



Letters a to g describe different listening strategies which are associated with either top-down or bottom-up processing. Match the strategies to the correct processing model.

Top-down processing	Bottom-up processing

#### Listening strategies

- a. Listening carefully to football results.
- b. Listening to flight departure announcements in order to hear the departure gate.
- c. Predicting the content of a lecture or short talk on a subject that the listener knows something about.
- d. Listening attentively to try and understand (or infer) a speaker's attitude to something because the speaker has not stated their opinion clearly.
- e. Listening to get the general idea of the topic of a conversation.
- f. Listening to a series of short conversations in order to understand where the conversation is taking place.
- g. Listening in order to do a dictation activity.

Check your ideas in the answer key. 

#### Key skill

- When we use **top-down processing**, we tend to use “bigger picture” information such as the context, the gist of the message, the tone of speakers’ voices to make sense of what we are hearing.
- When we use **bottom-up processing**, we listen for the individual “blocks”

### Task 4 – A typical listening lesson



Numbers 1 to 5 show a typical order for different steps in a listening lesson. Imagine your students are listening to a conversation between a tourist and someone who lives in your town – the local. The tourist is asking the local for directions. Letters a to e are the different activities for this lesson. Match the activities to the steps.

Steps in a listening lesson	Activities
1. Pre-listening activity to activate students' knowledge on the topic of the text.	
2. Listening for a general understanding (listening for gist).	
3. Listening for a more detailed understanding of information in the text.	
4. Very detailed listening for language (vocabulary, grammar, phonology) in the text.	
5. Follow-on speaking activity.	

### Activities

- a. Students listen and mark the route the local suggests on the map.
- b. Students listen to find out where the tourist wants to go and why they want to go there.
- c. Students evaluate whether the route suggested by the local is the best one.
- d. Students look at a map of the city and find different landmarks.
- e. The teacher dictates two sentences from the local's directions.

### Additional question:

- In steps 2 and 3, should the teacher give students the task *before* or *after* they listen? Why do you think this?



**Jot down your ideas on a note pad, then check your ideas in the answer key.**



#### Thinking about your teaching ...

When we listen to things in our daily life, we listen in different ways and we usually have different reasons for listening. Think of a typical day (yesterday? last weekend?) and make a note of all the things you listened to. Try to analyse *why* you listened to these things and *how* you listened. What relevance does this have to getting your students to listen in the classroom?

Note your conclusions in your *Teaching Log*.

#### Taking it to the classroom ...

In general, students understand more of a listening text each time they listen to it. It might pay to point this out to them, or you could elicit this idea from them and ask them if they understood more or less the third time they listened to the text. It also helps if you play the tape more than once, particularly during activities that require students to listen in detail.

#### Want to find out more ... ?

On pages 178 to 183 of *Learning Teaching (2<sup>nd</sup> edition)* by Jim Scrivener (Macmillan 2005), there is further reading on developing listening skills, and ideas for staging listening lessons.

On pages 270 to 274 of *The Practice of English Language Teaching (4<sup>th</sup> edition)* by Jeremy Harmer (Pearson 2007), there is further reading on top-down and bottom-up processing, and how these relate to the structure of receptive skills lessons (both listening and reading).

See also section 7 of *Language Teaching Classroom Practice DVD & Workbook* by Heather Richards and Karen Wise (AUT University 2007).

#### Related TaskBook lessons...

You may be interested in the following lessons in the ESOL TaskBook series, which also relate to this topic:

- **Unit 3 b) Listening 2:** Learner-friendly listening lessons (*a follow up to this lesson*)
- **Unit 3 c) Reading 1:** Knowing about strategies and sub-skills (*a useful focus on another receptive skill, highlighting the stages of a reading lesson*)

### Answer Key



#### Task 2 – Feedback

- 1) c
- 2) b

#### Task 3 - Feedback

Top-down = c, e, f  
Bottom-up = a, b, d, g

#### Task 4 - Feedback

- 1) d
- 2) b
- 3) a
- 4) e
- 5) c

#### Additional question:

The teacher should give the task before students listen, as this gives them a reason for listening. If the task is not given first, students may be unsure about what they need to listen for and begin to focus on irrelevant words or ideas.