

Listening

Nobody spends a whole lesson listening, and we are not suggesting that any of the skills are taught or learned in isolation. What we are talking about are activities which concentrate on the listening skill.

Listening in the classroom

It is quite clear that listening is the skill that children acquire first, especially if they have not yet learnt to read. When the pupils start to learn a foreign language, it is going in mainly through their ears and what the pupils hear is their main source of the language. Of course, we also give them as much visual back-up as possible through facial expression, through movement, through mime and through pictures. It is worth remembering too that once something has been said, then it disappears. If you're reading, you can go back and check. Or you can re-read something you don't quite understand. This isn't possible when you are listening, so when we are talking and the children are listening, it's important to say things clearly, and to repeat them. When you are telling a story, for example, you don't have to tell it from beginning to end without breaks. You can re-tell it again and again as you go along: 'This story starts on a nice, sunny Monday morning. Who's the story about? Who can we see in the picture? Yes, Fred and Sue. It's a nice, sunny Monday morning and Sue and Fred are Where are they? In the forest. Right. They're in the forest. And what are they doing? They're picking berries. So, it's a nice, sunny Monday morning, and Fred and Sue are in the forest picking berries. What happens next? Well' and so the story continues.

Because the listeners can't re-listen in the same way that they can re-read, it means that if you are the listener, you can't decide how fast you work. Therefore, you have to concentrate very hard when you're listening. Young learners have a very short attention span. This is something which increases with age for most pupils, and you'll find that the eight to ten year olds can sit still and listen for longer periods. But it's important not to overload children when you're working on listening tasks.

When we are talking to somebody who is saying something in everyday life, we usually understand what is being said and we say so - we nod, or we comment, or we show in some way that we know what the other person is saying. If we don't understand, then we usually say so at once. We very seldom wait until the end of a conversation or a story or an announcement and then start answering questions about what we have heard. The activities presented try to ask for understanding as the children listen and not check for understanding only at the end of the exercise.

Some listening activities will wake your pupils up, make them move about, create movement and/or noise. Others will calm them down, make them concentrate on what is in front of them, and create a peaceful atmosphere. Sometimes you want to have a nice quiet atmosphere and sometimes you want your children to move about, and you can use listening activities for both purposes.

'Listen and do' activities

Instructions

The most obvious 'listen and do' activity which we can and should make use of from the moment we start the English lessons is giving genuine instructions. Most classroom language is a type of 'listen and do' activity. Communication is two-way, and you can see very easily if your pupils have understood the message or not.

Moving about

There are also lots of 'listen and do' exercises which you can do with your children where they have to physically move about. The younger your pupils, the more physical activities they need. Children need exercise and movement, and you should make use of this wherever possible. As well as the moving about activities connected to doing

ordinary things in the classroom, you can ask pupils to do all sorts of crazy things - 'stand on your head by the door: 'hop on your left foot five times' - and the more language the pupils learn, the more you can ask them to do - 'count up to ten and then walk to the blackboard and back'. The advantage with this type of activity is that you know at once if the children have understood. You can check classroom vocabulary, movement words, counting, spelling, etc. Pupils learn from each other. If they haven't understood the first time, they'll still be able to do the activity by watching the others. As pupils learn more and more language, you can let them take over the role of 'instructor' -they are very good at it!

Put up your hand
You will almost certainly have to make use of the 'put up your hand' type exercise at some stage. For example, when the pupils are learning the sound system, you might ask them to put up their hands when they hear the sound /dʒ/. Or you might want them to put up their hands when they hear a certain word. Or, in order to calm them down a bit, whisper the numbers from one to twenty, and ask them to put up their hands when you miss out a number. There are all sorts of uses for the 'put up your hand when' type of exercise.

Mime stories

In a mime story, the teacher tells the story and the pupils and the teacher "do" the actions. It again provides a physical movement and gives the teacher a chance to play along with the pupils. Here's a very simple example of a mime story: 'We're sitting in a boat, a small rowing boat. Let's row. We row and row. Now what's that? A bird. A big bird flying over the water. Now it's gone. We keep rowing. Can we see the bird? No, no bird. This is hard work. Row, row. We're tired. We row slowly. There's the shore. Let's go home now. We're so tired we're dragging our feet. We're tired. We want to go to sleep. We lie down on our beds. We close our eyes, and shhhh we're asleep'.

Drawing

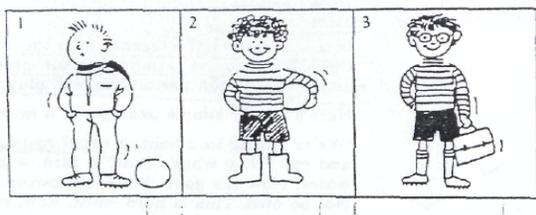
'Listen and draw' is a favourite type of listening activity in almost all classes, but remember that drawing takes time so keep the pictures simple. In 'listen and draw' activities the teacher, or one of the pupils, tells the other pupils what to draw. You can make up a picture or describe a picture you have in front of you. This activity is particularly useful for checking object vocabulary, prepositions, colours and numbers. It is not so useful for actions, since drawing people doing things is quite difficult for most of us.

Listening for information

'Listening for information' is really an umbrella heading which covers a very wide range of listening activities, and which could have been the title of this chapter. However, we are taking it to mean listening for detail, for specific information. These activities are often used to check what the pupils know, but they can also be used to give new information.

Identifying exercises

You can make up very simple identifying exercises like this one: "Has anyone seen this boy? He has dark hair and big ears. He is wearing rubber boots and carrying a football. He has a striped jersey and short trousers. Put a cross by the right picture."



Listen for the mistake

You can use the picture in your book but make mistakes in the text you read, so that pupils have to listen for the mistakes. The same can be done using the correct text and the wrong picture, but this takes a bit more time to prepare.

Putting things in order

Pupils have a number of pictures which illustrate a text in front of them. The pictures are not in the right order. Pupils listen to the text and put the pictures in the order they think is right.

Questionnaires

You can have a questionnaire type exercise which involves a little bit of writing or the filling in of numbers like this one, which/is about how much television pupils watch:

Name	How many evenings?	How many hours each evening?	Total number of hours a week.
 RICHARD	5	2	10
 JANE			
 THOMAS			
 SUSAN			
 PAMELA			
 GEORGE			

Questionnaires are a very useful type of language exercise

Listen and colour

Children love colouring pictures and we can easily make this activity into a listening activity. We can use any picture which the pupils have in their workbook. Instead of just letting them colour it by themselves, make it into a language activity.

Filling in missing information

Pupils can fill in the missing words of a song or a text or a timetable.

There are many, many different types of exercises which could be mentioned here. It is worth remembering that pupils are very good at making up this kind of exercise themselves. Getting pupils in one group to make up a listening task for the rest of the class or the members of another group is an excellent language activity. Make full use of the tape recorder and any other visual aids which you have available.

'Listen and repeat' activities

'Listen and repeat' exercises are great fun and give the pupils the chance to get a feel for the language: the sounds, the stress and rhythm and the intonation. When done in combination with movements or with objects or pictures, this type of activity also helps to establish the link between words and meaning.

Rhymes

All children love rhymes and like to repeat them again and again. Here you can use either traditional rhymes or modern rhymes, and you really don't have to worry too much about the grading. Rhymes are repetitive, they have natural rhythm and they have an element of fun, of

playing with the language. Children play with language in their mother tongue, so this is a familiar part of their world, and it has an important part to play in their learning process.

Songs

Songs are also a form of 'listen and repeat', and there are lots of books on the market with songs for children.

Exercises

The most obvious 'listen and repeat' exercises are the ones where the teacher or one of the pupils says something and the others repeat what has been said - it may be a drill, it may be words with special sounds, it may be a short dialogue using puppets or toy figures, or it may be a message to give to someone else.

Listening to stories

Listening to stories should be part of growing up for every child. Time and time again educationalists and psychologists have shown that stories have a vital role to play in the child's development, and, not least, in the development of language.

Make sure the children get the maximum benefit out of listening to stories in English by the creation of a friendly and secure atmosphere. Establish a story-telling routine which creates an atmosphere. Rearrange the seating so that you have eye contact - if you can, all sit together. Many teachers have their younger pupils sitting on the floor. It's important that children are comfortable. They don't have to sit up straight when they're listening to a story. If they're relaxed and comfortable, then they are more open to what they are about to hear, and they will benefit far more from the story-telling. You yourself might have a story-telling position. You might even have a beanbag chair to sit on. If you have the lights on in the classroom, turn at least some of them off.

Listening to stories allows children to form their own inner pictures. They have no problems with animals and objects which talk – they can identify with them and the stories can help them to come to terms with their own feelings. The teacher should not moralize or explain the story, although, of course, discussion is very important.

The structure of stories helps children when they come to telling and writing their own stories. Many stories are full of repetition in themselves like the Turnip Story. Almost all stories are worth telling again and again. Stories also exclude all kinds of teacher talk.

Telling stories

We have made a difference between telling stories and reading stories. We'll look at telling stories first. If you tell a story, then you don't have a book in front of you. Telling stories to children of all levels means that you can adapt the language to their level, you can go back and repeat, you can put in all sorts of gestures and facial expressions, and you can keep eye contact most of the time.

Traditional fairy tales

Traditional fairy tales, like *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Goldilocks* make wonderful stories for telling. They have a clear structure, with a special type of beginning, middle and end. Any five year old will be able to tell you what is a proper fairy story and what isn't, even if they can't tell you why. They start off with a setting - when and where. The story is told in episodes - events which have consequences. One set of consequences leads to another event. There are goodies and baddies, and the goodies win. Most fairy tales have good story lines and you can either tell traditional stories from your own country or tales from other countries. If you are going to tell traditional stories, then it is best that you go through the story first and write it down in sequence, For example. *Little Red Riding Hood*:

Setting: In a wood. Her grandmother's cottage.
Episodes: Little Red Riding Hood makes a lunch basket.
She says goodbye to her mother.
She skips and sings on the way.
She meets a wolf, etc.

This will make it easier for you to remember the story as you tell it. Traditional fairy tales can, of course, be read aloud as well if you have a version which is simple enough.

Creating stories

Another exciting form of story telling which you can do from a very early stage is to create stories with the children, so that you tell their story. First, the setting: When did the story happen?' 'Once upon the time' - you must accept the first answer that comes, no censoring allowed. 'Okay. Once upon a time in . . .?' 'Egg.' 'Fine. Once upon a time in a country, town called Egg. . . ,?' 'Town' 'Right. Once upon a time in a town called Egg, there was . . .?' And so on. This gives a real feeling of a shared story and you cannot tell how the story will end - but it does, usually rather unconventionally. Making up stories with the children at all stages helps them to put their thoughts into words, and gives them a starting point for their own writing.

Reading stories

Instead of telling a story, you can read aloud from a book. This is not the same as telling a story and, in this case, you should not change the story at all. Children like to have their favourite stories repeated, and they will very often be able to tell you the story word for word - they do not like changes being made. If children like learning stories off by heart, let them. There is sometimes a very narrow dividing line between learning a story off by heart and being able to read it. Children of all ages love to be read to, and you should try to spend as much time as possible reading to the eight to ten year olds as well as to the younger group. For the older group it is often good to have a continuing story so that you read a bit of the book every time you see them.

Independent listening

We talked in about having an English corner where you have a comfortable place to sit, books to read, a notice board, etc. If at all possible, you should also have cassettes here too. so that the children can sit and listen in peace and quiet. There is a lot of English cassette material available both-for young learners of English as a mother tongue, and for foreign language learners. These are usually cassettes which come along with books and there is no reason why pupils shouldn't listen and follow the pictures before they can read the words. Young children need to have some sort of introduction to this type of material, and five to seven year olds in general should have listened to it first in class or with their group and the teacher.

Don't forget that sometimes we just want pupils to listen for the sake of listening - music and poetry or a short anecdote or story all have a role to play in the classroom. Try to introduce as many different voices into the classroom as you can, and remember that pupils need to hear many varieties of language. The more they hear, the better they will be able to speak and write.

(Taken from 'Teaching English to Children',
by W.A.Scott and L.H.Ytreberg)