
UNIT 7 LISTENING FOR COMPREHENSION

STRUCTURE

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7.0 OBJECTIVES

In the previous unit we had focused attention on listening perception or the process by which various sounds are interpreted by the brain. We had also looked at various suitable activities for this purpose. In this unit we shall focus on listening for comprehension.

After you have completed this unit, you should be able -

- Identify the skills as well as pre-requisites required for listening for comprehension.
- Be able to plan suitable activities which enhance listening comprehension skills in the child.

7.1 INTRODUCTION

Our society makes increasing demands upon listening as a means of communication. We are bombarded with words throughout our lives. Children learn from their parents not only by observing their skills and work habits in and around the home — but also from what is said to them. In the classroom environment, listening is often a one-way process, while in social relationships each person has the chance to listen and speak alternately.

Purposeful and accurate listening demands both **motive and consciousness of purpose**. Attentive listening is needed in situations in which accuracy of comprehension is involved. Some examples of attentive listening are: following directions, questions, announcements or introductions. Accurate listening is also necessary to be able to follow the thread of the discussion, and be able to repeat exactly or to summarize what has been said.

The good listener starts to listen on the first sentence since she knows that speakers often state their main idea in the first or at best in the first few sentences. After she identifies the main idea she listens to the supporting statements for details. She examines each to determine whether they are illustrative,, essential, or irrelevant to the topic.

7.2 PLANNING TASKS FOR DEVELOPING A CHILD'S LISTENING COMPREHENSION

While planning suitable listening tasks we need to bear in mind the age level and the interests of the children. The same activity can be varied for different ages. Two important factors need to be borne in mind while planning suitable listening comprehension activities for second language learners:

1. What sort of listening activities actually go on in real life?
2. What are the particular difficulties likely to be encountered by second language learners when coping with them?

We would like our children to go through activities which equip them to deal with real life situations effectively. In order to do this we have to create situations in the classroom which are as close to real life as possible. To do this we might need to look at:

a. Environmental Clues

The facial expressions, posture, eye-direction, proximity, gesture and tone of voice of the speaker provide important clues to the listener. In addition to this background noises, visual materials such as illustrations, diagrams or maps may be deliberately introduced to make the listening experience as close to real life as possible.

b. The length of the listening

Another characteristic of the real-life listening is the shortness of the chunks into which heard discourse is usually divided. The usual pattern is a short period of listening, followed by listener-response (not necessarily verbal), followed by another brief spell of listening with further response, and so on. In other cases, stretches of heard speech are broken up by being spoken by different people from different directions. Even when there are long periods of seemingly uninterrupted discourse—talks, instructions, anecdotes etc., these are often broken down into smaller units by the physical movement of the speaker—pauses, audience reaction, changing environmental clues. More formal stretches of speech - lectures, broadcasts, reports are usually less interrupted.

c. The degree of formality

It is necessary to draw a distinction between formal speech or "spoken prose" and the informal speech used in most spontaneous conversations. There is a range of formality, stretching from the extremely formal (speeches, lectures), to the fairly formal (news reading), to the fairly informal (television interviews), to the very informal (gossip, conversations, phone chats). Children need to identify the special characteristics of speech that go with the degree of formality. For example, informal speech uses a lot of colloquial terms, which are often spontaneous. Some of the skills the listener needs to develop, are being able to identify the characteristics of this kind of speech. The message of a piece of spontaneous talk is delivered much more slowly, with a lot of repetition and irrelevant talk, than that of a rehearsal or planned speech.

involvement of the child. The evaluation of each of the activities is based on the response given. It is for the teacher to decide whether to have an individual/pair or group response.

a. Tasks requiring productive responses include:

- Listening and following directions
- Listening and marking or labelling a diagram, map, grids, family trees, etc.
- listening for words and then making sentences.
- reconstructing stories
- listening and classifying or categorising
- listening and answering questions
- listening and using the information for a follow-up writing task
- listening and drawing
- information gap or cloze - the child uses a context to fill in the missing information or words a s/he listens

b. Tasks requiring non-productive checks include:

- listening and ticking off items
- listening and crossing out items
- listening and numbering
- listening and lettering
- raising hands according to a pre-determined listening clues
- listening and showing the relevant picture
- true and false

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 3.

What is the teacher's role in planning and conducting listening comprehension exercises?

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7.4 SOME CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES WHICH ENHANCE LISTENING COMPREHENSION

Given below are a few sample classroom activities. Procedures for pre-listening, and while-listening, are the same as in the previous section:

A. Tasks Requiring Productive Responses

1. Listening and Following Directions

There can be very simple activities, where the children listen to simple instructions and do an action, or they listen to a story or song which give directions, and they perform the action accordingly. For example:

"If you're happy and you know it

Clap your hands

Clap, clap.

(Repeat)

Keep changing the action

or

Put your right hand in

Put your right hand out

Put your right hand in

And turn yourself about.

(keep changing to include other parts of the body)

Following directions, can become more complex, as the teacher may read out a set of instructions for making an object, and the children would be required to follow them as they listen and actually make the object. There can be several variations to this activity depending on the age level and particular interests of the children. The important thing is to make the directions very simple and clear, and to read out one set of directions at a time. To ensure comprehension, each direction could be repeated twice.

For older children the directions can involve labelling a diagram or filling in a map or a grid. One example of such an activity is given below:

Potato Puzzle

What country did potatoes originally come from? Follow the directions and fill in the sheet you have. You will find the answer. Remember to listen carefully.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O
1															
2															
3															
4															
5															
6															

Instructions to be Called Out

1. shade in all the boxes in columns A and I
2. now shade in the top three boxes of columns C and K
3. shade in all the boxes in columns M and O
4. shade in boxes 1,3 and 4 of column J.
5. shade in boxes 1,3 and 6 of column F
6. also shade in boxes 1,3 and 6 of column G
7. shade in the sixth box of column N
8. shade in all the boxes of column E.
9. shade in boxes 1 and 3 of column B
10. shade in boxes 5 and 6 of column K

Answer: PERU.

Teachers can create their own route maps and call out directions for the children to follow and find out where they reach. Other variations can be based on some of the lessons that the children are studying — labelling of diagrams from a science lesson can be done by listen and following oral directions. The children could also be asked to alter a drawing by following the instructions called out.

2. Listening and Reconstructing a Story

Let the children sit around and listen to a short story of about 3 to 5 minutes. Choose a story where there is a clear flow of events. Make sure that the story is suitable for the age level and interest of the particular class. Choose a longer story for older children. After the story is over. Let the children individually fill in a story map (given below).

Story-Map

Title :
Character :
Events : First -
 Next -
 Then -
 Finally -

For younger children simplify the story - map to include just the flow of events. The children could work in pairs or individually. As a variation children could be asked to arrange pictures in the order in which they appear. Older children could be asked to fill in a flow chart as they listen to a story. It's up to the discretion of the teacher to decide whether the children should fill in the story map/flow chart while listening or after listening.

3. Listening and Classifying

Read out a jumbled up list of objects. Give the children 3 or 4 categories. As the children listen they are required to write the name of the object under the suitable category. The list could include the names of vegetables, fruits and flowers or nouns verbs and adjectives. The degree of difficulty would depend on the age and class of the children. The material from the lessons being studied can be included.

4. Listening and Drawing or Picture Dictation

Call out simple and clear step by step instructions for drawing a picture. Give the children a little practice in listening to, and following "direction words" such as **above, below, on the left, on the right, top right hand corner** and so on. Let the children listen to the directions and draw. Let the children compare their individual drawings with the original. To increase the difficulty level for older children. You could give a drawing created with geometrical figures. A sample is given below:-

Younger children could be given a picture and asked to listen to the directions and colour it accordingly.

5) Listening for the Main Idea

Read aloud short paragraphs of 5 to 6 sentences based on a particular topic. Give the children two or three main ideas as options. Let them listen and then mark the main idea that the paragraph/story is about. To increase the level of difficulty with older children, do not give the options to the children, but let them identify and write down the main idea after listening. Some samples are given below:-

"I can't find my little dog" said Salim. "I saw him at the back of the house. He was playing there. He was running and jumping. I just went out to look for him. He's not there now"

What is the main idea?

- A. Salim can't find his dog.
- B. Salim has a new house.
- C. Salim likes to read books.

More advanced level -

Water is many things to many people. To the captain and the sailors of a ship, water is their road. To a fireman, water is a weapon to drown the flames. To the farmer, water means crops to sell. To the Engineer, water is a power that creates electricity. To people dying of thirst, water is life itself.

The story mainly tells:

- A. Why firemen need water.
- B. Why everyone needs lots of water.
- C. What water means to different people.

Problem solving or finding clues from the heard passage to solve a problem is a variation that can be tried with older children.

6) Information Gap or Cloze

Play a taped song or story or conversation, depending on the age level of the children. The children could be given a set of pictures based on the listening experience. They are required to identify the missing elements. There can be several variations to this activity. For example, you can play a taped conversation about a school trip to Agra. Give the children a sheet of paper with a diary entry about the trip, with some gaps the children are required to listen and fill the gaps. Telephone conversations can be used, and the children asked to fill in the missing information in a message based on the conversation. There are several variations to this activity. You could play a taped announcement and let the children fill in the gaps on a school notice based on the same.

Jigsaw Listening

Different groups of students listen to different but connected passages, each of which supplies some part of what they need to know. Then they come together to exchange and pool their information and then reconstruct a complete picture of a situation, or perform a task. In other words, the listening comprehension functions as a basis for a further activity. For example, the children could each listen to one passage of a story and then on the basis of their combined listening fill in a grid like the one given below:-

	Father	Mother	Brother	Sister
Name				
Age				
Two things they liked				
One thing they don't like				

7. Looking for Errors/Mistakes

Play a conversation, or story or song. Repeat it, but this time make some deliberate mistakes. Let the children identify the mistakes and correct them. For a variation of this activity, change the order of the events the second time and ask the children to look out for the change in order.

8) Listening for Words and Sentences

Give the children a set of words that are going to appear in the song or story or conversation they are about to hear. For older children it is a good idea to use real life situations also. Let the children spot the words and identify as closely as possible the sentences in which they are used.

Any classroom situation, such as, making an announcement can be converted into a listening activity. It is not necessary to use a taped stimulus, you can read aloud or ask some children to come and read out or narrate as the situation demands.

B) Tasks Requiring Non-Productive Checks

These are fairly straight-forward activities. The children listen and check, arrange in order, or number according to the order of appearance or tick as they hear. The purpose of these activities is to sharpen the accuracy of listening comprehension within a spoken context. Such activities can be easily devised. Some examples are given below:-

1) **Following Descriptions:** The children are given a set of objects or pictures. The teacher describes each object without naming it. The children listen carefully and number the objects or arrange them in the order in which they are described.

This activity can be made more complex by playing a taped conversation between two people who have been to the market to buy things. The children are given a list of

items bought. They are required to number the items in the order in which they appear. Another variation may have a list of items that were bought and some additional items. The children are required to tick off the items that were bought, and then list out the additional items on the list.

2) **True and False** : Play a taped story or rhyme or conversation or radio item based on the age and level of the children. Let the children listen to it carefully. Then give the children some facts based on the above. Let them decide whether these are true or false. The decision would be based on the listening experience.

3) **Word Hunt** : Give the children a list of words. Let them listen to the taped story/song and number the words in the order in which they appear. This activity can have several variations. You could put in additional words which do not appear and let the children circle and number the words as they appear. You could change this to numbering of sentences in the order in which they appear. To increase the difficulty level, for older children you give the children a set of word meanings and let them listen and find the appropriate words.

4) **Bingo or Lotto** : Each child is given a card with some pictures or words on it. He covers or ticks them off as he hears them called out. The first to cover all the words wins. The words on each card are different. You can give a list of words or pictures on the blackboard. Ask the children to make their own cards by selecting any six or eight words. The teacher calls the words out in random order - or the words may be included in a context such as a story.

5) **Listening for Specific Information** : The children are given something very specific to listen for, and answer as yes/no. For example they may hear a story, or a bit of radio news. After listening they would need to answer a question like "Did India win the hockey match?" This is a useful exercise for older children as it helps them to sift out irrelevant information and pick out the specific, related information. It may be fairly difficult initially, so do not make the listening stimulus very long. Picking out a 2 second bit of information from a 15 to 20 second stimulus works well. Although it is a good idea to make the item as close to real-life as possible, in the initial stages make sure that each sentence is very clearly articulated and is not too complex.

Additional Skills

When we listen to someone speaking, the meaning of what they are saying is only one of the things we absorb, even though that is the most important aspect of listening. We may also perceive and take into account other things. For example, what kind of a person is speaking, his/her mood, his/her attitudes, what is going on around. The ability to make these additional interpretations assists in the over all comprehension of the listening situation.

This is an ability all of us acquire to a greater or lesser degree as we acquire our first language and we carry these over to the second language. There may however be certain socio-cultural norms that may be unfamiliar to a second language learner. A child unfamiliar with English may need to understand the interpretation of some signals. Although it is almost impossible to teach these. It is useful for a teacher to bear in mind, the importance of these, and bring them up for discussion whenever they arise. Listening for variations in intonation to express different moods and feelings is one example.

Check Your Progress 4

What are the different kinds of listening comprehension activities?

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7.5 LET US SUM UP

Listening comprehension refers to listening with understanding. This unit looked at the pre-requisites, as well as, the skills required for enabling and enhancing listening comprehension in young children. This requires full attention as well as the interest and motivation on the part of the listener. To develop accurate and purposeful listening, it is possible to plan activities in the classroom. In this unit we discussed what to bear in mind while planning such activities. It was stressed that these activities should cater to the age level and interests of the children. They need to be of a suitable length. As far as possible they should represent real life situations. Children need to develop the skill of listening for the main idea, and skimming through the irrelevant sounds. They also need to learn to look for environmental clues which enhance listening. We looked at samples of different types of listening tasks. On the basis of the expected response, listening tasks are categorised into two types, i. e. those requiring non-productive checks like tick marks or circling, and those requiring productive checks such as following descriptions or listening for specific information.

7.6 SUGGESTED READING

Maley Alan and Moulding, Sandra, 1981. *Learning to Listen*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

Penny Ur, 1984 *Teaching Listening Comprehension*, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

7.7 ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

Understanding speech in a second language is a complex activity. The child is exposed to a variety of spoken language, often within unfamiliar contexts. The child's expectations of what s/he is going to hear are also fairly limited. This makes comprehension quite difficult. It therefore, becomes useful to give a second language learner frequent practice in a variety of listening exercises. Some of these need to be based on real life situations. Such structured exercises sharpen the child's overall skills of listening attentively. They also specifically focus on enhancing comprehension in the second language.

Check Your Progress 2.

The first thing while deciding upon the suitability of a listening comprehension exercise is to keep in mind the age level and interests of the children. The spoken language should be at the child's level in clearly articulated sentences. The length of the listening experience should not be more than 2 minutes. If the response is expected at the end of the listening, then short intervals of listening followed by a response are more suitable, as with longer spans of listening we are basing the child's response on memory, which is not the purpose. It is very important to ask for responses that test listening comprehension and not other skills such as memory or inference, although very clear cut demarcations are often not possible.

Check Your Progress 3.

It is important for the teacher to be able to identify the language proficiency level of the class, so that the listening exercises are planned keeping in mind an appropriate difficulty level. The teacher needs to give very clear instructions. All materials, such as a tape recorder, response sheets etc. must be kept ready, so that the children are not distracted and focus in on the activity quickly. The teacher needs to ensure minimum distraction while the listening experience is being given. It's important for teachers' to be alert and innovative and use classroom opportunities in any subject area as a listening experience. The teacher needs to also be flexible enough to modify tasks according to the current interests in the class. The listening tasks should be enjoyable, so that the children are motivated to use the second language.

Check Your Progress 4.

Listening comprehension exercises range broadly from very "passive" ones, where the child simply listens, making a minimal response such as a tick mark or a check; to very "active" ones, where the listening is only the preliminary to or a basis for more sophisticated activities involving other language skills and imaginative or logical thought. The activities can be improvised or varied by the teacher depending upon the particular needs of the class.