



IMPROVING LISTENING SKILL IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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ABSTRACT

Understanding spoken language is probably one of the more difficult aspects of learning a language. It doesn't just involve understanding the individual words that make up the language. Other factors that affect your understanding include the accent the person is speaking with, the clarity with which they pronounce sounds, their individual style of speaking, but also environmental factors such as noise created by different people speaking at the same time.

Key words: *General Listening Skills, Focussed Listening Skills, increase vocabulary,*

Annotation

The article deals with some essential ways for improving listening skills.

Аннотация

В статье рассматриваются некоторые важные способы улучшения навыков слушания.

Two Types of Listening Skills It is helpful in terms of learning a language to create a distinction. It is important because the second of the two skills, whilst recognised, is seldom seen as pivotal to success. [1]

General Listening Skills There are our general listening skills, such as when we listen to someone tell us about something or other. These skills operate typically at the level of meaning. General listening skills depend upon a number of factors. How relaxed and self confident you are as a person is one of them. People who display these characteristics tend not to be trying to prove anything to themselves or someone else, So they are more likely to listen to what is actually said rather than what they want to hear. Contrasted to these people there are those who are more interested in their own ideas and ensuring people understand that, rather than understanding clearly what other people are trying to say. They are generally

poor listeners, as they don't separate what they hear from what they are thinking about or how they believe the world ought to be. Your general listening skills also depend on how open you are and ready to learn from everything you come across. If your interests are wide, then everything has its inherent interest in terms of understanding the world and your place in it. This kind of attitude will typically help in the general listening skills department. Contrasted to these people are those who have narrow or particular interests and aren't so much interested what happens outside of them or outside their range of interests. They typically tend to turn off around conversations and topics outside of their interests. General listening skills include something that is not generally talked about and that is listening to yourself. Listening to yourself is as important as listening to others. It is what enables us to monitor what we say and check it against what we mean to say. How many times have you caught yourself thinking, "That's not what I meant to say", and then adjusting what you said.

Focussed Listening Skills

As well as these general listening skills we also have focused listening skills. These are employed when you focus on a particular aspect of what you are listening to. At a job interview for example we might be very carefully attuned to looking for clues as to what to talk about. Or going on a date, finding some evidence as to what the other is thinking about you. In the area of language learning, these skills are critically important. They enable us, for example, to focus and isolate a sound or some structure in the midst of what we are listening to.

Improving your general listening skills.

You can do that any time, even in your first language. Developing good listening skills in this area primarily depends upon you getting out of your way. Everything you need is already there. What is stopping you hearing what is said can be factors like:

- not being present and having your attention wander. This can be caused by a lack of interest or just a habit that has formed whereby your ability to concentrate is limited.
- having such strong adherences to your ideas and beliefs that they prevent you hearing what others are really saying. So either your hearing gets turned off or you add your thoughts to what they say as they say it. That way you can never really hear what others are saying.

You don't need to take on what they say. It is all about understanding what they say from

their perspective. Once you do that, then you can consider that from your own perspective.

- having fears and concerns about yourself, your situation and their situation that colour what you hear. An example of this would be the fear that you might say the wrong thing when you respond to what someone is saying, so your thoughts can get so consumed by that it prevents any real listening.

Focused listening skills are a particular set of skills that need to be developed in areas that we may not be used to. In formal classes or tuition, these can be clearly visible as the teacher (or text) gets you to focus on some aspect of the language.

1. Maintain your reading activities, whether it is material for which you have the audio or not. Reading is a powerful way to increase vocabulary. Besides, when we read in a foreign language, we usually subvocalize, in other words we make the sounds in our heads. This is going to help your listening skills.

2. If possible, try to find content that has matching audio and text so that you can look up words or phrases that you are missing. This is not necessary but helpful. However, don't limit yourself to this. You can't always find such material, so in your reading and listening use different sources, a newspaper article here, a podcast or interview there. Try to stay within a narrow range of topics which cover more or less the same vocabulary, in your case current events and politics.

3. When you find audio content that you like, where you are interested in the subject and like the voice, listen more than once to the same audio material. If you like the voice, the intonation and the rhythm of the language will penetrate your mind better. I have found that this not only helps with pronunciation but also with comprehension.

4. Plan to tackle some longer content in your field of interest. This could be an audio book on history or current events for which you have the text. You can then import the book into LingQ and save the audio to your mp3 player or smart phone. Make sure you like the voice of the narrator and find the subject interesting.

5. Wherever possible, while listening or reading for meaning, try to focus on a few phrases or terms that you have just discovered or noticed. This helps the brain retain these expressions and will improve your listening skills. It also ensures that you stay focused.

6. When you are at an intermediate or higher level in a language, you need to speak a lot. If you have a tutor, get him or her to give you a Google Doc. with your mistakes and phrases that cause you trouble. Import these into LingQ to study. You will then pay more attention to these words and phrases in your reading and listening. This makes your listening more focused and gives it more resonance, as you come across words and phrases that you once tried to use.

7. Most of all remain relaxed, focus on enjoyment, and be confident that you can improve your listening skills a great deal in two months if you remain committed to these activities.

Listening For Language VS Listening Comprehension

Think back to a time when you were studying a language. Now think of all the times during your studying that you listened to the language. It may have been a CD in class, or a podcast in the car. Now, what was the purpose of that listening – language or skill? Let's look at this in more detail. Firstly, listening for language. The chances are that most of your listening has been for language. In other words, you listened to a dialogue of some kind, then went back to look at some of the vocabulary within that dialogue, then maybe a spot of grammar.

Sound familiar? Thought so. This is the pattern virtually every language course on the planet follows. So what's the problem? In so far as you learn new words and phrases, none. But let's be clear here, this kind of listening is intended to **teach you new words**, not to **make you a better listener**. You know this because the audio you listen to is highly simplified, and it's simplified in order to help you understand the new words. The trouble is that when native speakers talk it's not simplified.

Quite the opposite. **Natural speech** is very complex and not at all like the oversimplified dialogues you find in self-study courses. If the only listening you've ever done has been the kind mentioned above – for language – you will be seriously unprepared when it comes to understanding the real thing. In order to do this, you need to develop the second kind of listening mentioned earlier: listening skill.

What Is Listening Comprehension In A Foreign Language?

So as suggested above, a working definition of *listening* is the ability to understand language, as it is actually spoken by native speakers in everyday contexts. This ability comes ultimately from one thing: exposure.

And a lot of it. This is self-evident, as people who go to live abroad rapidly improve their listening comprehension and ability to understand native speakers. Quite apart from any special studying that they might be doing, living abroad and getting a lot of exposure to language helps to form connections on a number of levels: context gives you information on how to use language naturally, “learnt” vocabulary becomes consolidated as you hear and see it used, and you learn the true usage of words rather than the dictionary definition.

The important message at this stage is this: the fact that people improve quickly when they live abroad does *not* mean that you have to live abroad in order to improve quickly.

Although by living abroad you get a lot ‘for free’ (such as picking up common expressions through hearing them everyday), those of us learning in our home countries can replicate that success, and even improve on it, by deconstructing the skill of listening and using strategies that your average expat won’t even know existed.

Why You Struggle With Listening Comprehension

In my experience, there are usually three reasons you won’t understand what a native speaker says. You:

- don’t know the words
- can’t distinguish the individual words (whether you know them or not)
- understand the individual words, but you still don’t understand what they’re trying to say.

Let’s examine these one by one.

1) You Don’t Know The Words *The most common problem and one that, in fact, has nothing to do with listening! In order to have a conversation with someone you have to know the words they’re using.*

2) You Can’t Distinguish The Individual Words (Whether You Know Them Or Not)

This is a problem with understanding *connected speech* – what happens to words when they’re spoken quickly (as in the English: *want to/wanna*). When we speak quickly a whole

range of factors come into play which affect how we articulate individual words. The result can be sounds being linked together (*a glass_of water*), changing (*Green[m] Park*), disappearing completely (*I'd go if I could*), or even appearing out of nowhere (*He_[y]_ate a pizza*). The same happens in all languages, and you need to be able to handle it.

3) You Understand The Individual Words, But The Meaning Is Lost On You

This can happen for a number of reasons. It could be due to colloquial or idiomatic language (e.g. *take my word for it*), long sentences that make it hard to keep track of what's being said, or unfamiliar grammar.

Now, if improving your listening is important to you, you need to make sure you're studying in a way that addresses these three areas. This might need a change in mindset. You've heard this quote before, but never was it more relevant than now!

If you keep on doing what you've always done, you'll keep on getting what you've always got. W.L. Bateman.

DOs To Improve Your Listening Skills

- Listen **extensively**. Massively increase the quantity of the language you listen to everyday. It doesn't always have to be for study – have it on in the background and even create an immersion environment.
- The holy grail is **authentic** listening material that **comes with accompanying text**. Not always easy to find but you can start with audio books, YouTube channels with captions in the language and some specialist websites. (Some **tips for finding stuff here**).
- When listening, don't use the text at first – listen over and over to the recording, actively engaging with the listening and trying hard to understand as much as possible. When you really can't get any further, get the text out and follow through. Do this many times. Pay special attention to those words you knew, but somehow didn't recognise on the recording. Why didn't you recognise them?
- Listen to the same things over and over, and revisit them later. Even if you've used the text to help you understand something, go back to it in a few days or weeks and try listening to it without the text. Repeat listenings help consolidate what you've learnt.

- Practise with a conversation partner. When there's something you don't understand, don't gloss over it – ask your partner to repeat what they just said and write it down if necessary.
- **Record any conversations with native speakers clandestinely** using your phone and listen back later, deciphering difficult bits.
- When watching movies or having real conversation with native speakers, try to accept and be happy with not understanding every word. If you find yourself getting frustrated a lot, this may be highly relevant to you. It's not necessary to understand everything in order to get the point, and in fact learning to do so is a key skill.
- ...but also listen actively. Don't just sit back and enjoy the movie. Periodically, think: What are they saying right now? What words are they using? Go back and listen again if you feel like it.
- Learn to use all contextual clues possible to help you with what's being said. For example, if **watching a movie**, think: Where are they? Who's there? What mood are they in? What does their body language tell you? What's around them? This stuff is important – language doesn't exist in a vacuum and your surroundings heavily influence what you say. Likewise a lot goes unsaid in real life if it is evident from the context.
- Get native speakers to make audio recordings of things that interest you. Website **RhinoSpike** is a great free resource for this. If there's something you particularly like, such as a book or magazine article, it would be well worth paying someone to record it for you. Make sure to tell them you want it recorded in natural speech – not slowed down.

CONCLUSION

To conclude Improving your listening skills will undoubtedly have an enormous impact on your ability to learn to speak a new language. Of course you can study the grammar, practice the pronunciation, work tirelessly at remembering new vocabulary but unless your listening skills are good (at the very least) your speaking skills will inevitably be constrained. This is because listening informs you about so many things that can be learned in no other way. Improving listening skills must be a top priority for anyone who wants to become really good at speaking a second language. There are some who seem to have retained really good skills. Why I say "retained" is because we all developed exceptional listening skills when we learned our first language. That is one key reason why we all master our first language.

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