Listening matters: Active listening

*By Adrian Tennant*

Adrian Tennant looks at ways of bringing realistic listening – active listening where students are fully engaged – into the classroom.

**Introduction**

In the [previous articles on listening](http://www.onestopenglish.com/skills/listening/teaching-tips/listening-matters/) I’ve looked at aspects such as process listening, top-down and bottom-up listening, and tasks for listening. I’ve mentioned the superficial and artificial nature of classroom listening where students are relegated to the role of ‘eavesdropper’ with no real engagement in the process. In this article, I’ll try to build on some of the issues touched on before, thinking about what listening in real life actually means.

* How do listeners affect what is going on?
* Why do people listen?
* What are some of the key features of active listening?

And, finally, I’ll suggest some activities to help our students become active listeners.

**What is real-life listening?**

Real-life listening usually requires interaction between the listener and the speaker. Of course, there are plenty of examples where this isn’t the case, for example watching TV, listening to a lecture and listening to an announcement at an airport or train station. However, in many situations, listening is an active task. We practise active listening when we:

* buy something in a shop;
* talk on the phone;
* have a conversation with friends;
* ask for directions.

**How do listeners affect what is going on?**

In the active-listening situations mentioned above, listening is a two-way process with the roles alternating between the two (or more) people involved in the interaction. Quite clearly, then, the listener has an impact on the conversation, shaping it often as much as the original speaker. Listening, then, becomes both active and dynamic rather than a one-way passive act.

**Why do people listen?**

The simple answer to that is interest or need. Either people are *interested* in hearing what is being said or in being part of the conversation, or they feel there is a *need* to listen and that, in some way, they will benefit from it.

**So, what are some of the key features of active listening?**

One definition of active listening is that it requires feedback from the listener to the speaker. This idea of active listening often focuses on getting the listener to paraphrase or restate what they have heard to the speaker. However, to my mind, this is quite a narrow definition and fails to take into account how we are active listeners in real-life situations. This is not to say that it isn’t one form of active listening, but I think it is just that – one form.

For me, active listening has a number of key features. The first of these is that **listening needs to be meaningful**. Students need to *want* to listen, not simply to be able to answer some comprehension questions, but also because there is a desire or realistic need. One element of this is building up an interest prior to doing the listening activity itself. I’ve mentioned in the [Writing matters](http://www.onestopenglish.com/skills/writing/writing-matters/) series the way that ‘going in cold’ to a writing activity can cause problems, and this also applies to listening (or any other type of activity, in fact). Developing interest, giving students some understanding of the topic or actively getting them thinking about what they want out of the activity is far more likely to engage students than simply playing a recording and asking them to complete a pre-designed task.

Secondly, we need to **make the most of listening opportunities in the classroom**. For example, in the article [Tasks for listening](http://www.onestopenglish.com/skills/listening/teaching-tips/listening-matters/listening-matters-tasks-for-listening/154747.article) I said that one of the best sources of listening material was the students themselves but that often students don’t really have to listen to each other because many pairwork activities are, in reality, two separate monologues! The key thing here is to create a need to listen, and this can often be done by simply tweaking an activity – see ‘Different or same?’ and ‘Jumbled dialogues’ in the practical ideas section at the end of this article.

Finally, **active listening doesn’t take place in isolation**. In many ways, dividing the skills up into four separate entities is both unrealistic and unhelpful. In real life, listening and speaking are frequently inseparable. Turn-taking in conversations requires both skills to be used, and we can’t really classify it as one or the other, so why do we try to do this in the classroom? Making listening in the classroom closer to listening outside the classroom will help our students far more than simply pressing play and standing back. It will also increase their motivation.

**Does it help to tell students not to understand every word?**

The answer to that is ‘yes’ and ‘no’. Yes, because it might help some students relax and also realize that they aren’t expected to understand every word. But equally the answer might be 'no', because just telling students it isn’t necessary doesn’t really help them. It seems as though many students are reluctant to abandon attempts to understand every single word. What is probably more effective is using activities where it is impossible to get every word and yet the activity is doable. It is a careful balancing act because you don’t want the student to simply switch off and not attempt the activity in the first place. This ‘consciousness-raising’ approach can be extremely effective and is often reinforced by discussing what actually happened after the task is complete.

It’s also important to remember that when we tell students that they only need to understand the key words, this is probably fairly useless advice. How do the students know which of the words are ‘key’ ones? If they hear particular words, but not others, can they be sure the ones they heard were the key ones? So, when we give advice, however well intentioned it may be, we really need to be thinking about whether it is feasible to follow.

**Some practical ideas**

The activities below aim to make the listener take on an active role.

**Live listening**

1. Explain that you are going to tell the students a story, but don’t do it yet. For now, just write the title of the story on the board, for example: ‘A nightmare journey’.
2. Put the students in groups and ask them to write eight questions they would like to ask you about the story. **Note:**They do this *before*they hear the story.
3. Elicit a few of the questions and write them up on the board.
4. Next, tell the students that while they are listening to you telling the story, they should see how many of the questions you answer.
5. Tell the students to put their pens and pencils down.
6. Tell the story.
7. After telling the story, ask how many of the questions they heard the answers to – you might want to elicit some of the answers.
8. Next, put the students in pairs and get them to sit facing each other.
9. Explain that you want one of the pair to start retelling the story but in the first person. However, when you clap your hands, they should stop and their partner should continue telling the story.
10. Start the pairwork and monitor to see if or when the participants finish retelling the story.

(Acknowledgement: I was shown this idea by two teachers, Birthe Beigel and Lesley Cook, on one of my training courses at Pilgrims in the summer of 2012.)

**Different or same?**

Often, teachers will put their students in pairs, give them a topic and ask them to talk together for a few minutes. The idea is that the students will share ideas, listen to each other and interact. Unfortunately, most of the time this isn’t what happens! However, with a small tweak, what would have resulted in two monologues can be turned into a meaningful pairwork activity.

1. Write up the topic on the board, for example: ‘What I did last week.’
2. Give the students a minute to make some notes about what they might mention.
3. Put the students in pairs.
4. Tell them you want them to talk to each other about the topic but they need to find two things that are the same and two that are different.
5. Give a fairly short time-limit, perhaps three minutes, and get them to start talking.
6. Monitor, and then at the end see how many students could find two things that were the same and two that were different.

This simple tweak to what is a fairly typical pairwork activity means that students listen carefully to each other and truly interact.

**Jumbled dialogues**

1. Before the lesson, select a dialogue from a coursebook and photocopy the script so that you have enough copies for one per pair. Write a big number 1 next to person A’s first line. Then, cut up the dialogue, separating the lines that person A speaks from the lines that person B speaks. Alternatively, you can write out the lines from the dialogue on two separate pieces of paper and then cut them up. You can also use a conversation involving more than two people, but then your students will need to work in groups with the same number of people.
2. In the lesson, put the students in pairs. Give one student in each pair one speaker’s lines, jumbled up, and the other student the other speaker’s lines, also jumbled up.
3. Explain that they have a dialogue between two people but that the lines are not in the correct order. Tell student A to start with the line marked ‘1’.
4. Student B should then try to find the next line and read that aloud.
5. The students should try to complete the dialogue, with the students taking turns.
6. Finally, ask a volunteer pair to read out their dialogue.

**Note:** Once you’ve finished, you could get the students to complete any exercises in the book that went with the original listening activity.

**Changing the direction**

In the section on how listeners can affect what’s going on, I mentioned the way in which the listener can actively shape the conversation. This activity develops that idea.

1. Put the students in pairs or small groups.
2. Tell them that they are going to start a conversation – you’ll give them a topic, and one student will start speaking.
3. However, the other student(s) should listen, and when they hear a word that relates to something they can talk about they should interrupt and change the topic of the conversation using that word as the starting point.
4. This should continue with the listeners interrupting and trying to change the direction of the conversation.

**Note:** The idea is quite simple but can be difficult to explain. Often, the easiest way is by demonstrating – you could demonstrate with a student. For example:

Student: Yesterday, I went shopping with my friends—

You: Friends! They’re important, aren’t they? You can share—

Student: Sharing! My favourite thing to share is chocolate—

You: Chocolate – yummy! I just love chocolate, especially milk—

Student: Milk is delicious, but only if it’s cold—

You: Cold – I don’t like the cold, and I really hate snow—

… and so on.

**So, what you said was …**

Earlier on, I mentioned one narrow definition of active listening, where the listener paraphrases what the speaker says. This can actually make for a very fun activity, especially for intermediate students and above.

1. Start by writing up a few key phrases on the board, for example:

* So, what you're saying is ...
* If I understand you correctly ...
* So, you mean ...

2. Next, tell the students they are going to work in small groups of four or five. One of the students will talk about something for three minutes (or one or two, if you prefer) and the others will listen. Then, at the end, each of the listeners will take turns to summarize what they heard in just two sentences using a key phrase to start.

3. For topics, you can either use one from a recent lesson or prepare the activity by setting up project work in an earlier class. If you decide on the project-work option, then choose a number of students to research a topic they would like to talk about to the rest of the class.

**Conclusion**

* In real life, listening is often active, whereas in many classes it is taught as something that is inherently passive.
* Getting students involved and engaged is of paramount importance.
* Taking listening and speaking activities you already use and tweaking them (in other words, making a small change) will often turn the activities into more meaningful active-listening tasks.
* Active-listening activities are far more fun than traditional listening activities and will help students learn to listen.

Good luck and enjoy!