

1

Listening and Lectures

In this unit students will:

- discuss the different situations in which they have to listen;
- identify what factors influence their ability to understand;
- learn about features of lectures in different academic cultures.

Task 1: Listening in different languages

The aim of this activity is to get students thinking of different purposes for listening, and about the notion that we vary our listening strategies according to purpose.


You can either do this task as a discussion among the whole class, or in pairs/small groups before summarizing with the whole class.

Students should come up with some of the following points.

- When you are involved in a conversation, you can check your understanding, while you can't for the other contexts. This means that you probably don't need to concentrate as hard.
- When people listen to the radio, they tend to tune in and out depending on how interested they are in the topic. There may well be a difference in attention level between listening to music on the radio while you do the ironing, and listening to a penalty shoot-out involving your favorite football team.
- When you listen to announcements at a bus station, you are generally listening for specific information; you are probably listening for your destination, the bus number, and whether or not your bus is on time.
- When listening to an academic lecture, there is likely to be more "close listening" than for the other contexts, but in fact students will be applying different skills at different points in the lecture. They might be listening for specific information at the beginning if, for example, they expect to hear a deadline for an assignment; they might "tune out" and listen for the gist during a digression.

Task 2: Issues in understanding spoken English

2.1 Students are likely to cite factors like unfamiliar vocabulary, accent, and lack of listening practice in their previous education as factors causing problems when listening to English.

2.2  **CD1 - 1** This listening activity raises some of the fairly predictable issues affecting comprehension, and then goes on to look at two specific problems of decoding spoken English. In later units there will be more detailed analysis and practice recognizing unfamiliar word forms and word boundaries.

After students have read the questions, play Track 1.

Answers:

- a) The professor discussed the factor of the speed at which someone is speaking. She did not discuss background noise.
- b) She also talked about **topic** and **specialized vocabulary** as factors affecting comprehension.
- c) The two additional problems she discussed were:
 - the problem of word boundaries (understanding where one word ends and another begins);
 - recognizing words pronounced in an unexpected way.

Students who have studied English primarily through the written channel are likely to have listening problems and fail to recognize words or phrases that they would otherwise recognize in the written form.

- 2.3** 🎧 **CD1 – 2** In the second part of the talk, the professor illustrates the two problems she has introduced. Before you play Track 2, check that students understand they have to write down a phrase that is dictated during the talk.

After you have played Track 2, elicit the phrase *words they hear in natural speech* and write it on the board.

Try to get students to explain why this phrase is difficult to decode. The linking (*hear-in-natural*) may cause difficulties, in addition to the elided vowel in (*natural*) /nætʃrəl/.

- 2.4** 🎧 **CD1 – 3** You may need to play Track 3 two or three times before students complete the transcript. You can either get them to check their answers themselves by referring to the transcript in the Course Book, or you can elicit the answers on to the whiteboard or an overhead projector transparency (OHT) of the blanked text. (See photocopiable handout, Appendix 1a, page 17.)

Answers:

So what is the solution to these two problems? Well, first you need to get as much practice listening to natural speech as possible. Listen to extracts from lectures and try to develop your understanding of how words and phrases are really pronounced, not how you expect them to be pronounced. Secondly, you need to accept that when you listen you may misunderstand what is being said. So you need to be ready to change your mind about your understanding of the meaning, if what you hear doesn't make sense compared to what you understood before. And this means taking a flexible, open-minded approach to listening.

- 2.5** Focus the students' attention on the words they misheard or did not hear at all. Try to get them to explain why they had problems. Did they have problems identifying word boundaries? Were there words they knew in the written form but did not recognize in the spoken form?

Make it clear that, during the course, the micro-skills work will focus on some of the problems of decoding.

Task 3: Listening to lectures

This talk is based on a tracking study carried out by the speaker. It is important to demonstrate to students that they will have to adjust to a system where the lecture delivers less of the course content; they will have to do a lot more background reading around the lectures; and students have to recognize for themselves what the important points are.

- 3.1** Check what students understand by the term *lecture* and that students have attended lectures elsewhere. If you have a class that includes a large proportion of students who will be studying at a university for the first time, then they probably will not be able to discuss the topics in Ex 3.1. If this is the case, it might be better to describe what kind of lectures they might be attending in the US:
- generally between 45 and 90 minutes long;
 - traditional lecture (questions at the end) vs "interactive" lecture (questions at any point);
 - professor generally speaks from notes, but occasionally fully scripted or delivered from memory;
 - visual support (PowerPoint, OHP, handouts, none).

3.2 🎧 CD1 – 4

Sample notes: (See Appendix 1b, page 18.)

- *what his main interest is:*
Differences between Chinese and American academic cultures—particularly lectures—how they are organized or presented—role of lectures in acad. program.
- *where he got his information about lectures in China:*
From tracking study with Chinese students; individual interviews every term.
- *the survey he did and the students he talked to:*
Very small sample—12 students.

3.3 When students have discussed these questions in groups, elicit from the whole class ways of writing down the information concisely, e.g., omitting function words, using key words and symbols. We will return to the use of abbreviations and symbols in later units.

3.4 🎧 CD1 – 5 **Sample notes:** (See Appendix 1c, page 19.)

| China | US |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a lot of course content delivered through lectures • lecture information sufficient to pass exams/course • not interactive—no questions/comments from students • professor points out key points • based on one course book | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • most course content not delivered through lectures • give overview or background info • students have to read around lectures • very interactive |

3.6 You may wish to give students time individually to review their notes and think about their answers to the questions before discussing in groups.

If you do not have students from China, omit question a). The discussion can be organized in mixed nationality groups.

After students have finished their group discussion, ask them to report back to the whole class. You may wish to focus on their answers to questions e) and f) to help them prepare for the lecture cycle and ultimately their own academic majors. You may also want to check that they have mentioned the following:

- reading any handouts given before the lectures;
- reviewing own notes;
- checking notes with peers;
- discussing the content with peers, etc.

Unit summary

You may wish the students to complete the unit summaries in class or in their own time. If they complete them out of class, make sure you get some feedback during class time. Whatever you choose, it might be beneficial to set up some of the activities in class, either to clarify what to do, or to help students start thinking about the topics.

Some of the items can be done individually and others are best done in pairs or groups. When working outside the classroom, encourage students to find the time to meet with others and complete any pair or group activities.

The activities in Unit 1 are based mainly around student reflection. Encourage them to think carefully about the way they answer and to share their conclusions with other students.

Web resources

The web resources provide further areas of practice or study on topics or skills related to the unit. They can be accessed at:

www.englishforacademicstudy.com/us/student/listening/links