

Most teachers I have talked to about this agree that listening is the skill least liked and most feared by learners. It seems universally true that learners perceive listening tasks as assessment and there is usually more than one student that calls out 'Is this a test?' when the teacher sets up a routine listening activity from the text book.

In most of our schools, where the language of 'learning to learn' has become very familiar, we are aware that learner 'tenacity' or 'perseverance' is least in evidence in language lessons when it comes to listening. This is often the point in the lesson when anxiety, particular among those who find language learning difficult, is most obvious and when we need to work hardest to reassure learners.

The renewed Key Stage 3 framework for languages recognises this in its speaking and listening strand, where one of the objectives for Year 7 learners reads 'to sustain perseverance and concentration when listening to speech containing some unfamiliar but accessible language in familiar contexts.'

I believe that anxiety is perhaps the greater barrier to perseverance and concentration and in my own teaching and the many lessons with other teachers that I've been privileged to observe, I've come across the following strategies that I think help to reduce anxiety and increase learner confidence with listening tasks:

Listening (with confidence and perseverance)

1. Learners work in pairs and listen for alternate number answers and then share their answers before listening a second time. On feedback their approach is "we think that no. 1 is....." NB: it works to do all of the feedback in the foreign language too. This has the effect of making the responses more of a 'joint effort' and the impact is noticeable with learners visibly happier to volunteer responses.
2. Give the answers first and ask learners to anticipate (written or orally) what language they will hear (even scripting a suggested dialogue / monologue). When they listen, they compare what they've anticipated with the audio material. For example, this works well with a textbook listening on brothers and sisters and numbers and ages thereof. Learners predict answers in advance, a lower set perhaps drawing stick boys and girls to represent the predicted number of brothers and sisters and writing numbers underneath for their ages, a higher set writing out in script form what they expect to hear in the dialogue. Listening then is more about corroborating or confounding their predictions and turning the task on its head in this way somehow increases the interest of the task and lessens the stress.
3. No questions first time around. Learners listen for intonation, tone of voice clues to speaker mood and opinion. Second time learners listen for key words. Third time they respond to details for comprehension.
4. Learners respond to material heard by ordering cards. The focus can be on the structures, where learners sort the activity cards into columns to denote present, past or future or opinions, where the categorising is into positive and negatives, or simply on the order in which the items on the cards are mentioned in the passage. The source material can be individual words and be repeated several times with the vocabulary items called out by the teacher (or a student) in a different order each time and with increasing speed. Or the comprehension can be at text level, where the learners need to pick out the details from the overall narrative.
5. Learners are the source of listening themselves. A text is posted on the wall – learners read and memorise as much as they can and run back to their group and repeat it. Learners have to respond to the text by answering questions or filling in a grid or completing a multiple choice activity. (If learners write down what is said, this is called 'running dictation').
6. Use songs, with gap fill exercises and / or responses using a simple proforma to identify key features, key language and elicit opinions.
7. Use listening as a stimulus for speaking as often as you can, rather than an end in its own right. Ofsted's 2008 report, 'The Changing Landscape of Languages' notes that 'it was much rarer for reading or listening to be used to stimulate discussion and communicative activities'.
8. Think of all speaking activities as listening activities too and let this influence planning. For example, verbal tennis, speaking lines, role plays are as much about listening as they are about speaking.
9. Pre-teach some key language. Teacher selects some key language crucial to the listening passage and flags this up, defining it in the foreign language for learners before listening. This activity is a listening task in itself and can greatly enhance learners' comprehension of the text when they come to listen to it.
10. Repeat listening exam papers (or end of unit assessments too) a couple of lessons later or the following week, after you have gone through and marked the material with the class. This really improves confidence which in turn impacts on performance.

Plus – why not use video?

- Move away from the 'disembodied voices' of a CD by using video extracts for listening tasks (YouTube, foreign television channels, short TV adverts, BBC online clips).

- Learners can make their own listening material in groups (as a revision activity at the end of a module) and the whole class completes the different activities. If you like, you can use video for this (webcam & effects).

There are examples of some of these strategies on my blog in a post of the same name as this article.

See www.rachelhawkes.typepad.com/linguacom

