Common Listening Tasks

Summary of Ur, 1984.
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Listening for perception tasks

These tasks focus on identifying different sound units: phonemes, combinations, words, intonations, word/sentence stress, prominence, etc. Secondary focus on comprehension. Main focus is on building on bottom-up processing ability, so since aural perception is the goal, these tasks tend to be focused on short, discrete units of sound. These types of lessons and tasks are particularly important at early stages of learning. Responses here include oral reproduction, identifying the written forms, and other quick, simple actions.

Word-level

- **repetitions (oral)** - teacher says or plays word or word group, asks for repetition and gives corrections where necessary. Doesn’t actually address understanding - only ability to reproduce correct oral form --and pronunciation may not necessarily mean that student has not heard correctly. Variations: each student repeats individually (takes a long time), done as pair work, or done in choral drills.
- **comparison with native language word (oral)** - task has students identify the English word (containing the target sound) with a similar sound from the students’ L1. Students can identify the English one by listening, then calling out, marking a tick in a column, or raising right or left hands.
- **categorization (oral)** - contrasting sounds within the L2 (like minimal pairs). Students can call out a number that corresponds with words that contain one sound and another number if the word contains a contrasting sound. (Like "one" for "ship" (/I/) and "two" for "sheep" (/i/)).
- **same or different? (oral)** - Again, this would work with minimal pair/phoneme identification focus. Teacher calls out two (or more) words that are the same or different. Students tick or respond with same or different to show what they heard. Activity can become more complex by saying more than two words and having the students identify the one that is different (T says, "slip, slip, sleep, slip", and the students say "three")
- **How often did you hear it? (oral)** - Teacher says short phrases or sentence and students say how many times they heard a certain sound. Of course, students must be prepared to ‘listen out’ for a specific phoneme or feature.
- **identifying the right word (requires minimal reading/writing ability)** - class gets sheets with sets of 2-3 words with minor differences (based on the sound distinction that the teacher wants to highlight). Teacher dictates or plays recording of a word being spoken and the
students choose which one it was in the group (by circling, underlining, ticking, etc.). Can also be done with ordering: the teacher reads out a whole group either in an order that is reflected on the student sheet or not. Students identify if the order was the same or different than the written version.

- **writing the right word (requires minimal reading/writing ability)** - Students write down word(s) they hear using the conventional alphabet or supply a missing letter(s) in response to a spoken version. Correct spelling should not be required (a rough phonetic representation only) because we are looking only for a response that shows perception and English orthography does not always accurately represent sound (spelling sound correspondence). Ur (1984) notes that to avoid encouraging bad spelling, it may be best to limit the sounds focused on to ones that have closer spelling sound correspondences (like /p/ and /b/).

- **meaning-referencing activities** - To show that they've perceived the sound, students say/do something that references a meaning that associates with the word that has been spoken. Requires that students already have some semantic link established around the word. Lead-up to the activity can involve establishing the link.

**Sentence-level**: focus on listening difficulties that arise when words are combined in longer utterances—*contraction, reduced forms, reductions, assimilation* and *elision*, disappearance of word-divisions

- **repetition (oral)** - repeat short phrases spoken by the teacher. Repetition indicates that they have distinguished the word group. Usually it happens that the students repeat without the combined speech effects. If the desire is to extend this into pronunciation practice, this response allows for correction and further repetition. (Ex. “I'vegotta...” becomes “I have got to...” even when they did make out the words that were intended.) This task can also focus on intonation and sentence stress pattern.

- **identify word divisions (oral)** - students listen and then tell/write how many words would be found in the written sentence.

- **identify stress/unstressed words (requires reading/writing ability)** - students mark or write on a written version of the text, recording stress/unstress with pre-specified marks

- **identify intonation (requires reading/writing ability)** - students mark rising/falling arrows corresponding with the intonation that they hear in a listening text (mark on a written version).

- **dictation (requires reading/writing ability)** - accuracy of perception is suggested by the transfer to a normal orthographic form. Correct transcribing of sentence-level utterance will not necessarily rely ONLY on perception however. Getting it right may involve correct guesswork (from context) even when some components have not actually been completely perceived. Nevertheless, success at this type of activity tells us that the signal has been interpreted accurately. Ur (1984) recommends that these selections not be based on formal prose; instead they should be short utterances (as from a dialogue or monologue).

- **meaning-referencing activities** - students can give a native language translation (if the teacher speaks the L1), students can match sentences with pictures, or students can choose
an appropriate response that is determined by having correctly made out some feature. At some point however, this type of activity may cross over to focus on comprehension, instead of simply on perception. To focus primarily on perception, the link with meaning should be quite simple.

Listening for comprehension tasks

Activities requiring no response
Although forming a firm judgment about a learner’s comprehension requires that the learner give some kind of response, Ur (1984) notes that there is sometimes a place for listening that requires no response. Students can be exposed to large amounts of aural input when there is no stopping to check whether they have understood or not. Ur recommends that such listenings, if they are used, should be designed to maximize student engagement: it should not be very difficult for their proficiency level and should have content that is interesting. Graphic material support can help increase interest. Such non-response activities can be used to establish background information that is useful for later goal-oriented listening stages.

• listening aided by visuals - students look at a visual while following along with a spoken description of it; they look at different parts as they are mentioned. If some response is wished, the teacher can ask the students to point to the part related to the one being described (see Ur, 1984, p. 53-57 for sample pictures). Alternately, real objects (realia) found around the classroom or brought in can be used to provide the visual reference. Different types of diagrams (like maps, plans, grids and family trees) are useful visuals, but may be better matched to the skills of intermediate or advanced students. Following along on map as a route is described is a good example of this type of activity (Ur, 1984, p. 60-61).

• informal teacher talk - Teachers themselves are an excellent source of authentic input and informal teacher-chat can be a wonderful tool, provided that the students also get a chance to practice producing speech themselves. It can be fit in at different stages of a lesson (even during a break). Ur (1984) recommends a few topics for informal teacher talk, but it can be molded to the particular interests of the learner group. Example topics: a member of your family or a friend, something you enjoy doing, a place that is important to you, an emotional experience (surprising, frightening, etc.), a movie or performance that you saw.

• entertainment sources - Stories, popular songs, and films and TV programs can all provide a good basis for listening activities. Stories can be told spontaneously or read aloud from pre-written texts. Songs or selections from films and TV programs can be used to introduce vocabulary or grammatical structures or to introduce some feature of English language culture. With stories, music, and films, tasks can be design with required responses or without them, depending on the objectives of the lesson).

Activities requiring short responses
Most activities here consist of listening to longer sections of speech (either monologues or dialogues) which are broken into smaller sections. At the end of the sections, learners give an immediate short response. Learners here are responding not to the gist of the text, so much as
discreet ideas as they come along. Thus comprehension of specific detail tends to be the main focus. The teacher can gather quick feedback at each stage as the activity progresses.

- **obeying instructions** - In these activities, students demonstrate comprehension by complying with commands.
  - **physical movement** - teacher issues strings of commands and students move to comply with them. These activities can take the form of a game (in the style of "Simon says..."). For example, the students can keep count of how many mistakes they made for a comparison at the end. Alternately, the teacher can make one movement and at the same time issue a command that may or may not be the same. The students who comply with the verbal command will have shown their comprehension. Physical activities are especially useful with young learners (Ur, 1984, pp. 68-69).

  - **constructions** - students build a model to comply with the specifications delivered in the listening texts. Building blocks or LEGOs are effective. Can be used with learners of all ages and tends to be very engaging. (Ur, 1984, pp. 70-73)

  - **picture dictations** - students draw a picture in response to verbal instructions. Results can be compared with an original in feedback. The complexity of the picture and the items described can be varied according to the level of the learners. Additional oral fluency practice can be gotten by having learners do the activity on their own (with a different picture) as a follow-up to the listening comprehension stage. Especially useful with younger learners. (Ur, 1984, pp. 73-74)

- **ticking off items** - In these activities, listeners 'tick off' items in different categories as they hear them spoken in a text. This is especially effective for working with recently learned vocabulary items. For example, if the categories were "food" and "drink," the teacher could read a short dialogue (or monologue) in which a customer orders a meal from a waiter, and the students would make a mark in one category or the other whenever they heard a corresponding item. The correct number for each item at the end would indicate some level of accuracy. "Bingo" is a version of this activity, but many alternate versions of it can be imagined. (Ur, 1984, pp. 74-78)

- **true and false** - In these exercises, the students write down T or F (or make some kind of representative mark or even an oral response) to show whether a statement in the listening is true or false. Diagrams, charts, pictures, or recently-learned material can be the basis for the judgements and the teacher’s statements or the recorded texts are made in reference to these. This task is easily adapted to many types of content. (Ur, 1984, pp. 77-80)

- **detecting mistakes** - similar to the true and false exercises, the students listen to a spoken text (a longer passage instead of separate statements as above) and respond by identifying discrepancies or mistakes. This can be done with a picture (details of the text and the picture are different), a popular story (with incorrect details), or with two performances of a text (the second with mistakes to identify). Students can respond immediately with any number of different actions or words; or they can tick off the mistakes and compare tallies at the end. Making the mistakes humorous or ridiculous can increase the students' level of interest. (Ur, 1984, pp. 80-83)
• **aural cloze** - Cloze exercises have been used extensively in reading comprehension instruction to work on guessing missing words from context. Ur (1984) and Newton (2009) suggest using aural variations of the same types of activities--words are deleted from a text at regular and irregular intervals. Students listen for meaning and supply the missing words in the text. The teacher can choose to give the students a written version and allow for pre-reading of the text (in which case they simply listen to confirm their guesses from the reading) or can choose NOT to allow for pre-reading. Not allowing for pre-reading places more emphasis on listening comprehension since students will have to keep pace with the performance and focus on constructing meaning in action. Ur (1984) warns against using too many deleted words and suggests reading or playing the text several times. Alternately, the teacher may choose to supply no written text and simply omit words occasionally. Ur (1984) recommends spacing out the missing words at longer intervals and stopping regularly to allow students to call out the missing word. Likewise, Newton (2009) describes a similar activity in which the teacher reads a text and then pauses every 50 words (approximately) and learners guess the next word.

• **same or different** - These exercises are often used in speaking activities (like Information Gap), but can easily be adapted for a listening task. Newton (2009) describes a comprehension activity in which the teacher has one picture (or several small ones) and the rest of the class has another. The students listen to the teacher’s spoken description of her picture and decide where there are differences (can be done orally or marked and checked at the end).

**References**

