

# **Listening to learn: boosting vocabulary with interactive activities**

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## **Biographical statement:**

After graduating Temple University (MS TESOL) I began working at several universities around the Kansai region of Japan. Special interests include English for Academic Purposes (EAP) content-based teaching, and vocabulary acquisition.

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**Introduction**

Despite being one of our most important and most often used modalities, listening is an area of language instruction that is often overlooked by teachers and researchers alike as fertile ground for the enhancement of students' vocabulary knowledge. For low-level learners, especially those not in full control of the first 2000 most-frequent words of English, listening may be the fastest route to acquiring a larger, more effective and retained vocabulary. At higher levels, word learning can also be enhanced through exposure to aural input. Incorporating a variety of vocabulary-based activities into listening exercises will help strengthen students' understanding of words and word meanings at every level.

Much of the vocabulary acquisition research has focused on reading as the primary measure of success. Research on vocabulary acquisition through listening is limited, although promising work is being reported. Studies by Elley (1989) and Brett, Rothlein, and Hurley (1996) clearly establish that gains in vocabulary via listening are possible even with limited exposure to new words. Both studies demonstrate that learners studying in their first language are able, through listening, to acquire target vocabulary with minimal repetition even when teachers did not stop to explain the meanings of words; when teachers stopped and explained meanings, acquisition went up appreciably. Vidal (2003) found that listening to academic lectures in English can also be considered a source for vocabulary acquisition, where students listening to three lectures showed moderate gains in vocabulary. The reverse appears to be true regarding learning words through reading – Waring and Takaki (2003) showed that recall was poor when students read words just once.

Although most words are thought to be learned incidentally, providing learners with explicit training in vocabulary is an even more effective way to deliver words and phrases, especially at lower levels. There are many ways of doing this, but listening to stories, long texts and other aural input may have more promise than was otherwise thought in supporting vocabulary acquisition through listening. In his discussion on how learners pick up new vocabulary through listening to stories, Nation (2001) outlined five important conditions which can easily be adapted to fit within any interactive vocabulary program. His conditions, elucidated below, are: interest, comprehension, repeated retrieval, decontextualization, and generative processing.

**Interest** is perhaps the most important condition of acquiring new vocabulary. In order for learners to become fully absorbed in texts, their curiosity must first be piqued, hence listening texts need to be interesting to hold students' attention. One way to ensure learner curiosity is for teachers to choose intrinsically interesting passages or texts. Elley (1989) interpreted discordant amounts of vocabulary learning from two stories by lack of concentration. Students in his study processed language at deeper levels due to their intense involvement with the stories. Penno, Moore, and Wilkinson (2002) also found the choice of text is an important factor in students' learning and vocabulary gains. Teachers should not expect learners to be receptive to boring material. Students' opinions should be part of the decision-making process when selecting texts or passages. Students will more readily participate in activities when they have had a hand in the choice of materials to be used, and will have an impact on maintaining their interest in new activities as long as they can participate in the selection of materials. Teachers can also maintain students' interest levels by breaking up listening passages into sections, serializing the text and listening to it in portions over a span of time. This can help build the excitement of the next installment while also allowing more opportunities to practice difficult vocabulary.

**Comprehension** refers to learners' ability to recognize and understand what they hear. Passages with large amounts of new or difficult vocabulary carry a heavier cognitive load and are inherently more difficult to understand. In her study of first-year EFL university students' vocabulary acquisition and lecture comprehension, Vidal (2003, p. 79) found a high correlation between language acuity and understanding, leading her to speculate that “the higher the level of lecture comprehension, the greater the vocabulary gain.” The degree to which a lecture is understood influences students' vocabulary acquisition. According to Nation (2001), if the density of unknown words in a written fiction text reaches below 95% of the running words, comprehension is likely to be inadequate. It is easy to infer from Nation's findings that the same holds true for unknown words found in a listening text. The number should be minimal; perhaps about 1 in 100 for complete comprehension.

**Repeated retrieval** refers to exposure. Learners need to meet target vocabulary as many times as possible. Both Elley (1989) and Brett et al., (1996) observed that the number of times a word

occurred in a story (i.e. frequency) was positively related to the likelihood that a student would learn that word. Interestingly, Vidal (2003) showed that word frequency was indeed a factor in recognition and retrieval, but not nearly as influential as the word's predictability from its parts, its type, or a subsequent gloss provided by a teacher. An easy way to make sure students meet new words in the same context is to repeat the number of times a listening is heard. In so doing, the teacher guarantees the target words will be heard, and heard again. Like its reading counterpart, 'narrow' listening can also be an effective way to ensure listeners hear the same types of words in a variety of contexts falling within one genre. If the passage is a long one, breaking it up and listening to it serially is another way to keep the quality and persistence with which students listen high. Teachers can have students listen over the duration of week, a month or even over the course of semester. Another way to help listeners encounter the same words is for the teacher or students to retell the passage in groups, either prior to or directly after the listening is completed. Alternatively, the teacher can retell the story up until the point where the class will start listening from, embedding key vocabulary as he or she goes.

**Decontextualization** is one of the most popular ways for teachers to introduce new vocabulary to students. Essentially, it consists of drawing learners' attention away from the listening passage as a whole and focusing directly onto the words contained within the text. This can be accomplished in many ways such as writing the words on the blackboard as they occur in the text, pausing to define and explain the word, or even in a pre-listening exercise where new vocabulary is introduced and inserted through some kind of task. Elley (1989) Brett et al., (1996) and Penno et al., (2002) all found that vocabulary learning is considerably increased if teachers stop to explain or elaborate on words as they come up in a story. In contrast, Vidal (2003) found that contextualization of vocabulary embedded within a passage was enough for students to learn vocabulary. In her study, target words that were defined in the surrounding context of the listening passage were more likely to be learned.

**Generative processing** refers to encountering vocabulary in broad and varied ways, thus stretching the conceptualization of meaning a word has. Generative word use occurs when teachers make sentences using words in ways that differ from the way they appear in the text (Nation, 2001). Long texts and serial listenings provide excellent opportunities for the same vocabulary to recur. Recurrences provide learners with the benefit of hearing the word used generatively. Using pictures, listening to sound bytes, looking at magazine clipping or other authentic realia may also help provide learners with the opportunity for greater negotiation of words previously encountered, especially when accompanied by a task. Another way to supply learners with generative uses of words is to give them simple, contextual definitions of words using sample sentences.

### **Including interactive vocabulary activities**

Looking beyond Nation's five conditions of vocabulary learning, Paribakht and Wesche (1997) propose a skills checklist of interactive vocabulary activities. They suggest that interactive classroom vocabulary practice can be designed to accomplish the following hierarchy of mental processes including: selective attention, recognition, manipulation, interpretation and production. These two processes (Nation's conditions and Paribakht and Wesche's skills) can be merged in the classroom setting, giving the teacher a broad palette to work with when designing vocabulary exposure and retention exercises.

**Selective attention** uses basic 'listen and do' techniques to focus a learner's attention on target words. It has the goal of making students certain to notice target words, which may be the first step in word acquisition. Students can be asked to underline, circle, high-light, or boldface words and phrases heard in listening texts. Exercises like these are thought to be the least challenging for learners.

**Recognition** practice provides learners with the essential parts of an exercise and asks them to recognize target words and their meanings; thus partial knowledge of target vocabulary is enough to complete these types of tasks. Examples include matching pictures after hearing target words, choosing the correct word to label a picture, or matching a target word with a definition.

**Manipulation** requires participants to rearrange and organize given elements to make words or phrases. They can also be used to draw on students' knowledge of grammar and word morphology. Examples of these type of exercises include changing the inflection of word endings, changing nouns to adjectives and using stems or affixes to make words.

**Interpretation** involves the analysis of word meanings with respect to other words in a given context (i.e., collocations, multi-word units). Teachers can ask students why certain phrases or expressions were used in a listening text or to find the odd word in series of collocationally related words. Students might also work to arrange target words into lists or define words heard in context.

**Production** practice requires the learner to produce target words in appropriate contexts. Examples of these types of activities include labeling pictures, answering questions using the target word, or hearing the L1 target word and providing an L2 definition.

Adapting Paribakht and Wesche's hierarchy for processing vocabulary with Nation's discussion on vocabulary acquisition through storytelling, I offer the following interactive activities for use in listening classes. The processes described above should probably be included at all stages of language proficiency, however the amount of class time devoted to such tasks should vary according to the level of the student.

### **True beginner to false beginner: listening exercises and activities**

At the beginning levels of language and vocabulary acquisition, lower proficiency students – say those with a vocabulary of 100 to 200 words – need exposure to lots of words. Providing students with opportunities to notice words is probably a good first step, followed by interactive activities to help gel the learning process. Approaches like Total Physical Response and Teaching Physical Response Storytelling may have added value in injecting into learners' vocabulary, a core of essential vocabulary words. Later, as students develop their vocabulary into the 500-plus word levels, a variety of other interactive activities can take place. What follows is a proposal of exercises designed to enhance vocabulary growth through listening.

#### *1. Decontextualized recognition of differences (selective attention)*

A simple way to train students to detect the differences between words that sound similar but have different meanings is to have them listen to word groupings and 'spot' the difference.

##### Exercise 1.1

*Directions:* raise your hand when you hear a word that is different:

- |           |        |        |        |
|-----------|--------|--------|--------|
| 1. dairy  | dairy  | daily  | dairy  |
| 2. butter | better | better | better |
| 3. fast   | fast   | fist   | fast   |

This exercise can also be done in pairs if students are capable of reading the target words. Pairs read word lists to each other and signal when they hear a different sound. This would strengthen the connections participants make with the words. Boldfacing, italicizing, circling, underlining or coloring words heard in a text may also impact on the word learning that occurs during a listening.

## 2. Generative schema building (recognition, selective attention)

At lower levels of vocabulary learning, providing a framework for the association of new words can also help learners progress and contribute toward building their schemata. Exercises in this category provide learners with prerequisite pieces and ask them to recognize target words and their meanings. Examples include: matching target words with definitions or synonyms; recognizing the meaning of a word from a bank of choices; choosing the correct picture after hearing the target word; numbering a series of pictures based on a sequence of the items; choosing the right word to label a picture; hearing a target word in the L2 and giving an L1 equivalent.

### Exercise 2.1

Read aloud or place three or four vocabulary words in succession:

cottage      tent              cliff              cabin

*Directions:* Ask students questions which will encourage them to discriminate between the items. For example, *Which of these is not a place to live? Which of them can you carry with you? Which doesn't start with a /k/ sound?*

### Exercise 2.2

Start with a simple sentence that can allow for additional vocabulary words to be slotted into the exercise. The words used should come from within the schema, however students' attention can also be directed toward grammatical features as well. A common example is, *I went to the supermarket yesterday and bought tomatoes, potatoes and a quart of milk.* The students work in groups, with each student repeating the previous sentence and adding additional words to increase the length of the list.

## 3. Decontextualized semantic framing (recognition, interpretation, manipulation)

As previously mentioned, providing a systematic framework for vocabulary that is part of larger schemata can be helpful for lower-proficiency learners. Categorization of vocabulary requires deeper processing by learners and may lead to greater comprehension. Examples include foods (meats, cheeses, fruits) occupations (doctor, driver, fireman) or genres of movies (action, love story, documentary). Since lower-level students are unlikely to have these sets, the first step is for the teacher to supply them. Presentation can take many forms, including written lists or dictations. In exercises like these, it is important to keep in mind that the main thrust of the activity is on the way in which vocabulary words can be categorized, rather than the vocabulary words themselves.

### Exercise 3.1

<i>Animal</i>	<i>Meat</i>	<i>Meat</i>
pig	pork	bacon, ham
cow	beef	burger, steak
chicken	chicken	

*(adapted from Courtright and Wesolek, 2001)*

Almost at once students can begin to see the system as well as come to understand more basic vocabulary. The following exercise can help beginning students practice what they've just learned. Here students explain why they chose to cross out the word they did. For example, in number one below, a hospital is not an occupation but a place where doctors and nurses work.

### Exercise 3.2

*Directions:* cross out the word that doesn't belong in the group

1. doctor      nurse              hospital
2. pig              chicken              beef
3. action              painting              love story

(adapted from Courtright and Wesolek, 2001)

This can exercise can be expanded on by asking students to produce items missing in a chart. Students can read the lists to their partners or work alone to produce the answers.

### Exercise 3.3

*Directions:* Fill in the missing spaces

Movie types

action            love story        \_\_\_\_\_

Foods

bacon            steak                \_\_\_\_\_

## 4. Contextualized grammatical framing (recognition, manipulation, interpretation, production)

Even at the lowest levels, students can benefit from basic focus-on-form instructional techniques. Making distinctions among vocabulary words is a listening, reading, writing and speaking skill that should be introduced early on in language classes. For example, many students are familiar with the word *easy* but may be unaware of the connection it has to the word *ease*. A part-of-speech chart is one tried-and-true way to help students make these connections. After listening to a passage, students are asked to complete a chart based on words contained within the text.

### Exercise 4.1

Noun	Verb	Adjective	Adverb
easy	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	terrific	_____

Since beginning-level listening passages are often highly contrived, they can be designed to contain some of the above word forms, but very seldom contain more than one. They also tend to be quite short. Without hearing the words in meaningful contexts, students may have no choice but to go to the dictionary and look up the word, however a dictionary definition at this stage of development may not provide enough context to be successful. Vocabulary word cards complete with parts of speech, etc., vocabulary notebooks and explicit training in dictionary work are all common remedies for this issue. As students begin to get a feel for how word families go together it may be useful for them to produce sentences, either in writing or orally. Production exercises like the one below may be more appropriate for students past the initial stages of vocabulary development or for those nearing the 1500-2000 word level of competency.

### Exercise 4.2

*Directions:* Write (say) short sentences using the following words. Choose only one of the words:

<i>n.</i> gladness	<i>n.</i> probable	<i>n.</i> ease	<i>n.</i> drink	<i>n.</i> friend
<i>adj.</i> glad	<i>adj.</i> probable	<i>v.</i> eases	<i>v.</i> drink	<i>adj.</i> friendly
<i>adv.</i> gladly	<i>adv.</i> probably			

(adapted from Courtright and Wesolek, 2001)

Exercises like this one and the one preceding it may offer other types of benefits to learners. For example, they help demonstrate to students that some word families have differing numbers of members. And they can also help students to understand the rules of inflections, such as in the adverbial ending -ly.

**low-intermediate – intermediate: listening exercises and activities**

Beginning level vocabulary and listening practices typically tend to focus on developing selective attention and recognition skills. At the intermediate level of instruction teachers can inject more focused vocabulary training, expanding on students' lexical background with more intensive practice in manipulation, interpretation, and production of words. Whereas lower-proficiency students tend to use words to communicate basic needs, intermediate-level students often struggle with the inability to say exactly what they mean. In these cases, expanding their vocabulary to include synonyms, longer word phrases and collocations may be effective. Teachers can design exercises which incorporate the skills of higher-level processing together with other ways of addressing the same concept.

*1. Distinguishing similar vocabulary items within a group (manipulation, recognition, interpretation)*

Exercise

*Directions:* Give an example of a food that is packaged in each of the following containers.

carton	dozen	liter
bag	can	quart
box	bottle	refrigerator dish

This kind of vocabulary practice can easily be fit in before, during or after a listening on food. Activities like this give students a more thorough understanding of the nature of a set. Furthermore, it provides them with information and opportunities to notice which words are missing from their available schema.

*2. Concentration questions (repeated retrieval generative processing, interpretation)*

Generating lists can also be an effective way to expand and internalize vocabulary. For example, having listened to a story in which words like *mark*, *scratch*, and *scar* occur, students can be asked to show their understanding of these words.

Exercise

List three types of accidents which can cause scars.  
List three objects and describe how they can get scratched.  
List three situations in which people get or give marks.

Activities like this lead students to view vocabulary in different contexts and help them differentiate between words with similar meanings. Marks, scars and scratches are synonymous on one level but quite different on another.

*3. Schema sorting (selective attention, production, recognition, repeated retrieval)*

A good production activity that helps students to manage and practice their schema for thematic concepts is an adapted version of a commercially available game, Taboo. In the commercial version, players try to get their partners to guess the word on their card without using the word itself or the five additional (taboo) words listed on the card. In this version, adapted for language learning, students practice giving definitions of words that revolve around categories. The best way to begin is with teacher-generated groupings and have students working together to compile the lists of items. After students have made lists, pairs of students can then take turns giving clues and making definitions for an allotted amount of time.

Exercise

After doing a listening unit on houses and apartments, have students work together or in teams to create lists for “rooms in a house” or “living room furniture,” or “kitchen utensils.” Once the lists are made, pairs take turns trying to guess the words.



## **high intermediate – advanced: listening exercises and activities**

Once students have reached this stage of language acquisition, they will probably be accustomed to using word learning strategies such as using word cards, dictionaries, word parts (affixes, base words, root words) clues from context and other references. Since most of the new words encountered at this stage will be lower-frequency, often obscure words, teachers should encourage students to employ the strategies above to help ensure words get internalized. Practice and exposure are the only ways learners will be able to expand their vocabularies from this stage onward.

### *1. Computer connections (interpretation, selective attention)*

If students have access to computers they probably have access to a “Find” feature which will allow them to search digital versions of speeches, sermons, or lectures. After doing a listening exercise students can import the text to their computers and examine it more closely using the find key to pinpoint each instance of the word in context. If the classroom has internet access this task could easily be adapted to include searching for authentic examples of words using webpages or digital corpora.

### *2.1 Deadlines, deadlines (recognition, manipulation, interpretation, production)*

Paraphrasing is a skill that should be practiced at every level, but really comes into fruition as students move into advanced stages of acquisition. To help students improve their skills in this area teachers can read aloud authentic newswire copy to students who first dictate then paraphrase or rewrite the stories. For additional practice, teachers can add a timed element to the exercise and either change the factual information or the deadlines or both.

#### **Example:**

The man who brought breakfast to McDonald's when he invented the Egg McMuffin has died at the age of 89, it was reported today. Herb Peterson, who began his career with the fast food chain while working for its Chicago-based advertising firm, died peacefully at his home in Santa Barbara, California, yesterday. While working on the McDonald's account, Peterson came up with the chain's first national advertising slogan. (from: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/mar/28/foodanddrink.usa?gusrc=rss&feed=worldnews>)

Once students are underway, the teacher announces key changes in the story. For example, in the above story, the man died yesterday peacefully at his home. Teachers could add a twist by changing the facts slightly thus necessitating the need for students to change their copy and possibly their lead, body or conclusion. As with other tasks, students can work together or alone to complete their stories with the teacher circulating and giving feedback.

### *2.2 Deadlines, deadlines – Fictional version (recognition, manipulation, interpretation, production)*

Rather than giving students real stories to paraphrase and rewrite, students can simply be given vocabulary lists with which they construct a new story. Like the preceding exercise, additional challenges can be added to include a timed element or additional vocabulary to be included. As a follow-up activity, students can read their stories to other groups as a dicto-comp.

## **Conclusion**

It is estimated that students get as much as 90% of their in-school information by listening to their teachers and to one another (Schwartz, 1998). While learning to read is a valuable skill for students to acquire, without a good foundation of frequently-used words, reading texts at best can be an

inefficient use of students' time and at worse, could lead to frustration, disinterest and resignation from the task. To acquire a more advanced vocabulary, listening may be an excellent alternative to reading. Blending interactive vocabulary-building exercises together with aural input is a logical first step toward getting students' language up and running. Although activities such as the ones presented in this paper take longer to prepare and set up than conventional exercises, providing opportunities to interact with vocabulary should be a priority in every language classroom.

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