

## Practical guidance on training students to cope with authentic spoken English

<http://englishagenda.britishcouncil.org/seminars/practical-guidance-training-students-cope-authentic-spoken-english>



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1. Why course books need to be supplemented / critique of traditional comprehension approach
2. The challenges of spontaneous speech
3. Some solutions to the problem

As an English language teacher, are you testing your students' listening ability or training them to listen more successfully? Even native speakers face challenges in understanding authentic English speech, so imagine the size of the challenge for non-native speakers! Sheila Thorn explains why the types of listening comprehension activities typically done in class are not really helping our students to listen and shares some alternative advice for improvement.

### Session summary and objectives

It is generally accepted that listening is the skill we use most in our daily lives, and yet listening practice continues to receive the least attention in the English Language Teaching (ELT) classroom. In this seminar Sheila Thorn encourages teachers to use authentic listening texts to train their students to listen more effectively.

The presentation begins by discussing why it is essential to supplement the mainly scripted listening texts in coursebooks with authentic spoken texts. This is followed by a critique of the traditional listening comprehension approach to listening practice and a discussion on whether this approach is still valid in the modern communicative classroom with its emphasis on testing rather than listening training.

Sheila Thorn offers several practical ideas for listening materials design, including a wider than normal range of collaborative gap-fill exercises.

### Who is this session for?

- New teachers who need to learn more about teaching listening.
- Teacher trainers looking for video-based materials for a listening training session.
- Experienced teachers who are interested in comparing what they do in class with what Sheila Thorn recommends.

### Before you watch

Sheila Thorn argues that traditional listening comprehension exercises are unsuitable for helping students develop the skill of listening. Why do you think this is? What are the limitations of traditional listening comprehension exercises found in many course books?

### Real life practice

Task: Free listening - listening without a pre-set task

- Select a short piece of video that is suitable for free listening. (Alternatively, you could do this activity with a listening text from a course book.)
- Tell students that you are going to play them a short passage, and that they are going to listen to the whole thing without writing down anything.
- They are not going to watch the video. Only listen to the audio.
- Play the audio.

- Ask the students to chat a bit about what they heard. Gather their ideas. How much did they understand?
- In feedback, write down their ideas on the board.
- Play the audio again – this time asking students to write down any words they hear.
- Write the words on the board.
- Once you have gathered the vocabulary from the students, ask them if they can tell you about the passage. What is happening? What is it about? Allow them some time to discuss this in pairs or small groups before returning to whole class teaching.
- Monitor the students, and guide them with any content that they may be struggling with.
- After they have spent some time listening and making notes and discussing the audio, you can show them the video. Can they pick up any new information from context now? What additional information do the visual clues provide?
- Allow students to see the audio script if you have it so they can compare the actual audio with what they thought they had heard.
- Optional: If the students wish, they can continue working on the same listening exercise in their own time. The more times they listen to the text, the more likely they are to pick up additional content.

### Top tips

1. Use as much authentic listening material as you can in class, but ensure the task is manageable for the students' ability and language level.
2. To develop students' listening skills, focus on intensive exercises on very short audio passages (a few seconds long) rather than extensive listening on longer passages. Extensive listening practice is suitable for higher-level students.
3. It is very important to develop students' listening skills to build both confidence and communicative competence. To do this, focus on developing students' skills through training rather than language testing.
4. Vary the ways in which learners practice listening. They can work in pairs or by themselves as an alternative to the more usual teacher to whole class approach.
5. Gap-fill exercises are a good way to develop listening skills. Vary the gap-fill activities. Rather than always focusing on the main content words in speech, you can get students to focus on other aspects of speech such as function (grammar) words, or contractions.
6. Developing second language listening skills takes a long time and a tremendous amount of practice. Be really positive and patient with students when working on listening skills. For many learners, it is the most difficult skill to develop and if handled badly may seriously damage learner confidence.

### Join the discussion!

Discuss these questions with your colleagues, if you can:

1. What issues have arisen when using authentic listening texts in your classroom? What have you done to overcome these?
2. What have you learned about teaching listening skills that you can share with other teachers on this forum?