
HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR LISTENING SKILLS



Table of Contents

- I. Introduction**
- II. Are You a Good Listener?**
- III. Barriers to Listening**
- IV. How to Become a Better Listener**
- V. Active Listening**
- VI. Listening Tips for the TOEFL® iBT Test**

I. Introduction

Studies reveal that most people spend as much as 90 percent of their working life in one of the four modes of communication: speaking, reading, writing, and listening. Of these four modes, we devote over half of our time to listening. We spend about 30 percent of our time listening to mass communication media (radio, TV, Internet) and about 25 percent listening to other people (in person or on the telephone). Clearly then, listening is a critically important skill to master.

As you probably already know, listening in a foreign language is a complex process. Learners have to be able to understand the main idea of what is said as well as specific details. They may also need to check any predictions they have made, and understand the speaker's meaning, emotions, and opinions. They may have to infer relationships between speakers, or identify the context in which the speakers are operating. Learners may well have to use several of these skills in the course of a single listening activity.

In order to become a good learner, you need to become a good listener. You may be surprised to know that hearing and listening are not the same thing. You could say that good hearing is the foundation of good listening. Listening is a specialized form of hearing, and is the primary function of the ear (not hearing).

- ▶ Hearing is a passive process. It merely involves the detection of sounds around us.
- ▶ Listening is an active process. It involves the conscious desire to determine the meaning of what is heard.

Many people have excellent hearing but are poor listeners. If you think you might be a poor listener, read on as this e-book has plenty of tips to help you improve your skills in this area.

II. Are You a Good Listener?

Students spend more time in the classroom listening than doing any other activity. Therefore, it's very important that you understand most of what you hear. In order for you to become a better listener, look first at the following list. It contains many of the variables that can make it difficult for you to understand what you hear:

- the speaker talks too quickly
- the speaker talks too softly
- two or more people are speaking at the same time
- there is background noise
- there are other distractions
- the speaker is boring (e.g. the topic is boring or his way of speaking is boring)
- you are not concentrating on what the speaker is saying
- there are no pictures or charts to look at while listening
- you have no idea about the topic
- the speaker uses many new or difficult words
- the speaker's sentences are long and complicated

Any one of the above problems alone can make it difficult for you to understand. But very often you are faced with two or three of them together. For example, you may be in a lesson where the teacher is talking quickly and in complicated English about a topic you know nothing about. As a result, your chances of understanding will be low. However, there are several things you can do to improve your comprehension of what you hear. These are listed later on in this e-book. If you do all these things, you will be on your way to becoming a better listener in class. But you can practice your listening understanding outside of the classroom, too.

For example, you can borrow cassettes with stories to listen to at home, or try to understand the words of the pop songs you like. Watching English language television programs or videos are a great way to improve your listening skills because what you see can help you understand what you hear. Working on increasing your vocabulary will also help you to become a better listener.

Finally, remember this: the more you speak to people, the more they will speak back to you. Talking with native speakers is perhaps the best way of getting lots of extra listening practice!

III. Barriers to Listening

Listening takes time or, more accurately, you have to take time to listen. A life programmed with back-to-back commitments offers little leeway for listening. Similarly, a mind constantly buzzing with plans, dreams, schemes and anxieties is difficult to clear. Good listening requires the temporary suspension of all unrelated thoughts - a blank canvas. In order to become an effective listener, you have to learn to manage what goes on in your own mind. Technology, for all its glorious gifts, has erected new barriers to listening. Face-to-face meetings and telephone conversations (priceless listening opportunities) are being replaced by email and the sterile anonymity of electronic meeting rooms. Meanwhile television continues to capture countless hours that might otherwise be available for conversation, dialogue, and listening.

Other barriers to listening include:

- worry, fear, anger, grief and depression
- individual bias and prejudice
- semantics and language differences
- noise and verbal "clutter"
- preoccupation, boredom and shrinking attention spans

IV. How to Become a Better Listener

Has someone ever said to you: "*You are not listening to me*"? Or, have you said angrily, "*You haven't heard a word I said!*" Or, have you been told: "*You don't understand because you don't pay attention to what I am saying.*" Wives complain. Husbands complain. Parents complain. Teachers complain. Preachers complain. Managers complain. Why are we such poor listeners? What can we do to become a better listener? Let's look first at why some people are not attentive listeners.

Babies are born to make noises. They react to sounds. However, a baby often frowns when he or she attempts to "listen" to the parent's words. It takes effort. It's hard work for the young mind. It does not come easily. Could we then assume that talking is a more natural thing to do than listening? Do you agree that learning to talk is a basic human drive, something we are genetically programmed to do? Can we also agree that listening is more than hearing, and that listening requires that we consciously and actively concentrate on the person speaking to us? Natural or learned, listening is something almost anyone can improve upon. Here are some ways.

First, you will listen better if you LOOK AT THE PERSON speaking. The speaker's facial expressions, eyes, hand motions, and body posture add meaning to the words you are hearing. Also, the person speaking will feel listened to, connected, and encouraged because you are making eye contact.

Second, you can become a better listener if you CONCENTRATE ON UNDERSTANDING what the person is saying. The speaker is attempting to make a point, or to describe an event, or put into words something that doesn't come easily, or to explain the reasons for his or her actions, or to express a sensitive feeling, or whatever is the reason for talking. Your listening is an attempt to get the meaning, find the bottom line, and understand the main part of the communication. Your listening focuses on understanding even if you do not agree or see it the way the speaker does. People concentrate to understand.

Third, you can TUNE IN TO THE WAY WORDS ARE SPOKEN. The speaker may whine some words, speak louder other words, put in a pause or sigh, sing a phrase, or drop or raise the voice to suggest emotion. These sounds are like colors painted on the spoken words. They are often combined with a raised eyebrow, or narrowed eyes, or frown, or a turned-down mouth, or a smile, or tears to enhance the meaning of particular words spoken.

Fourth, you will improve your listening when you are able to SUMMARIZE in a sentence or two what the other person has been saying. This does not mean you summarize what you think about what the person said. This does not mean you tell your personal experience that is similar or dissimilar. Instead, it means you have accurately received the message and summarized it when the speaker says "*Yes, that's what I mean.*"

The bottom line is this: you will become a better listener if you look at the speaker, concentrate to understand, tune in to the sounds surrounding the words, and are able to accurately summarize the primary message. Start practicing today!

V. Active Listening

Listening is hard work! Active listening is one proven method to help people become better listeners. Active listening is more than just skill; it's also a matter of attitude. To be an active listener, you must accept people for who and what they are, not what you want them to be.

» The A, B, C's

A: Eye contact
B: Posture
C: Gesture

All are important in order to listen well.

» S.O.L.E.R.

Five steps to attentive listening:

Squarely face the person
Open your posture
Lean towards the sender
Eye contact maintained
Relax while attending

Specific Tips for Active Listening

1. Listen patiently to what the other person has to say, even though you may believe it is wrong or irrelevant. Indicate simple acceptance, not necessarily agreement, by nodding or perhaps injecting an occasional "mm-hmm" or "I see".
2. Try to understand the feeling the person is expressing, as well as the intellectual content. Most of us have difficulty talking clearly about our feelings, so it is important to pay careful attention.
3. Restate the person's feeling briefly, but accurately. At this stage you simply serve as a mirror. Encourage the other person to continue talking. Occasionally make summary responses such as, "You think you are in a dead-end job", or "You feel the manager is playing favorites." In doing so, keep your tone neutral and try not to lead the person to your pet conclusions.

4. Allow time for the discussion to continue without interruption and try to separate the conversation from more official communication of company plans. Do not make the conversation any more "authoritative" than it already is by virtue of your position in the organization.
5. Avoid direct questions and arguments about facts; refrain from saying, "That is just not so", "Hold on a minute, let's look at the facts", or "Prove it." You may want to review evidence later, but a review is irrelevant to how a person feels now.
6. When the other person touches on a point you want to know more about, simply repeat his statement as a question. For instance, if he remarks, "Nobody can break even on his expense account", you can probe by replying, "You say no one breaks even on expenses?" With this encouragement he will probably expand on his previous statement.
7. Listen for what is not said, evasions of pertinent points or perhaps too-ready agreement with common clichés. Such an omission may be a clue to a bothersome fact that the person wishes were not true.
8. If the other person appears to genuinely want your viewpoint, be honest in your reply. In the listening stage, try to limit the expression of your views since these may influence or inhibit what the other person says.
9. **BE QUIET.** Let the other person talk. Actively listen to what **THEY** have to say.
10. Do not get emotionally involved yourself and try to control your emotional "hot buttons". Words, issues, situations, personalities can be emotional triggers for us. When these issues trigger our "hot buttons", we tend to distort, positively or negatively, the message we are hearing. We may tune out or pre-judge the message and/or the speaker.

VI. Listening Tips for the TOEFL® iBT Test

The best way to improve listening skills for the TOEFL® iBT Test is to listen as much as possible to a variety of sources in various subject areas (sciences, social sciences, arts, business, etc.). Watching movies and TV and listening to radio are also excellent ways to practice listening. Cassette tapes and CDs of talks are available in libraries and bookstores; those with transcripts of the listening material are particularly helpful. The Internet is, of course, also a great resource for listening material, including these valuable sites:

Here are some suggestions for ways to strengthen skills for the three listening purposes included in the TOEFL® iBT test.

1. Listening for basic comprehension

- Expand your range of academic vocabulary knowledge, perhaps by using flashcards.
- Focus on the content and flow of material. Do not be distracted by the speaker's style and delivery.
- Anticipate what a person is going to say as a method of staying focused.
- Stay active by asking yourself questions. (e.g.: *What main idea is the professor communicating?*)
- Be sure to take notes on the main idea, major points, and important details.
- Listen to a part of a lecture or talk and either orally summarize or write a brief summary of the main points. Gradually increase the amount listened to and summarized. Keep in mind that this skill is not measured in the Listening section, but is also needed for the integrated tasks in the Writing and Speaking sections.

2. Listening for pragmatic understanding

- Think about what each speaker is trying to accomplish; in other words, what is the purpose of the speech or conversation? Is the speaker apologizing, complaining, making suggestions, etc.?
- Pay attention to the way each speaker talks. Is the level of language formal or casual? Is the speaker's voice calm or emotional? What does the speaker's tone of voice tell you?
- Notice the degree of certainty of the speaker. How sure is the speaker about the information? Does the speaker's tone of voice indicate something about his/her degree of certainty?
- Listen for changes in topic or digressions.
- Watch a recorded TV or movie comedy and pay particular attention to how stress and intonation patterns are used to convey meaning.

3. Listening to connect and synthesize ideas

- Think about how a lecture is organized. Listen for the signal words that indicate the introduction, major steps or ideas, examples, and the conclusion or summary.
- Identify the relationships of ideas in the information being discussed. Possible relationships include: cause & effect, compare & contrast, and steps in a process.
- Listen for words that show connections and relationships between ideas.
- Listen to recorded material and stop the recording at various points and try to predict what information or idea will be expressed next.
- Create an outline of the information discussed while listening or after listening.

*****For additional listening tips & valuable practice activities, be sure to check out the following ESL Pro Systems products:**

- Learning English Listening Workbook**
- Learning English Advanced Listening Workbook**
- Listening Workbook for the TOEFL® iBT Test**
- Listening Workbook for the TOEIC® Test**