Special Edition
C21
ENGLISH FOR THE 21st CENTURY
B1 Pre-intermediate / B1+ Intermediate

# Factsheet

## Listen for gist

### Basics

We sometimes need to listen for a specific detail: the time of a film or a phone number. However, in other cases, details are not important, and we just need to understand the general idea. This is called listening for gist, and it can be very useful in many different contexts, especially if you're not listening to your first language.

Think of it as like taking a photograph: you can zoom in and focus on a specific detail, or zoom out to get the whole picture. Listening for gist is like zooming out. It means not worrying about the specific details, and instead focusing on seeing the big picture.

### The academic context

When you are studying, you often have to listen to and understand longer texts, such as lectures. In these cases, the details mean very little if you are not able to understand the speaker's general ideas and the overall structure of the talk.

### Key features

When listening for gist, it's important to:

- Identify the outline of the text. What's the general topic? What's the speaker's purpose? What are the most important ideas?
- Compare what you are listening to with what you already know about the topic. Does the new information fit in with what you knew already?
- Focus on key content words, the words that carry more meaning. These are usually stressed by the speaker and repeated several times.
- Notice not only what they are saying, but also how they say it. The speaker's intonation can help you understand important aspects of the meaning, such as the overall tone (e.g. provocative or ironical) or the speaker's attitude towards something (e.g. cautious or dismissive).

The gist of a text can ideally be expressed in one sentence, including the topic and the main ideas.

When you are able to listen more than once to a recording, it can help to listen for gist the first time, then listen to get more details later – see ***Listen to summarize***, ***Listen for reasons and examples*** and ***Listen to take notes (2)***. That way, you can see clearly how the details fit in the overall structure of the text.

### Challenges / difficulties

People often think that you need to understand every word to understand the whole, when in fact you can have a good understanding of a text even if there are lots of unknown words. With longer texts, even if you are able to understand all the words, focusing on every small detail can make it very difficult to understand the overall idea.

### How can I develop this skill?

Practise writing summaries. At the end of a lecture, seminar or tutorial, try to write one or two sentences summarizing what was discussed.

### Learning outcome

Learning this skill helps you to identify and understand the most important ideas when listening. This is especially useful when listening to difficult texts with complicated vocabulary. If you understand the gist, you can guess any difficult words more easily and fill the gaps in your understanding.

### Theory to practice

**1 Read the transcript. What is the speaker talking about?**

a The difficulties students have learning languages.
b The characteristics of a good language learner.
c How important it is to think critically about the learning journey.

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## Transcript

As a professor of language teaching I am often asked the same question: 'What's the best way to learn a language?' Well, that's a very difficult question to answer because it depends on so many factors, such as 'What language are you learning?' 'What languages do you already speak?' 'What do you need the language for?' and so on. But we do know from decades of research that most successful language learners share certain characteristics. So, I'm going to give you a profile of a 'good' language learner.

Broadly speaking, I can say that a good learner experiments with language and she takes risks. That's the first thing. And she is realistic. By realistic, I mean she knows that learning a language is not simple or easy. It takes time and effort. She accepts that sometimes progress will seem slow. Next, she is independent, meaning she doesn't just sit in the classroom expecting to learn. Instead, she is always looking for opportunities to learn, to practise, to improve. And importantly, a good learner is able to find the right balance between accuracy and fluency. And by accuracy we mean communicating correctly, not making mistakes or errors, and by fluency we mean communicating freely and easily.

Right, the final feature of a successful learner is that she thinks critically about her learning journey. By this I mean she is aware of her progress and knows what she needs to improve. And she knows which methods work for her, and which methods don't. Because we are all different, and we learn in different ways.

**2 Read again and tick the characteristics the speaker mentions.**

A good language learner …

- ☐ has a good memory
- ☐ is realistic
- ☐ takes risks
- ☐ balances fluency and accuracy
- ☐ thinks critically about their learning
- ☐ likes grammar
- ☐ is independent
- ☐ is curious

**3 Now use this information to write one or two short sentences with the gist of the transcript.**

It is about _____

_____

## Ways to get more practice

Practise listening to longer extracts without using a pen and paper. If you make notes while listening, you are likely to register details that won't necessarily help you get the big picture. When you finish listening, write one sentence that describes the whole extract. It could start like this: *It was about* …


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