

Basics

Listening is often considered the most difficult skill because you can't control it like when you are speaking, reading or writing. For that reason, it's very important to concentrate when you are listening so that you can understand and respond appropriately.

The academic context

The classroom offers many distractions, apart from your own thoughts. Whether for a test or in a discussion, you must be able to focus when listening in order to understand the speaker.

Key features

- Be present. Don't let your mind think about past events or worry about the future. Try to clear your mind before listening.
- Don't try to understand every word. Your focus should depend on what you are listening for (see **Understand the purpose of listening**). You could spread your attention to understand the general idea of a text, for example, or focus on a specific detail that you need.
- Focus on understanding what the speaker is saying at the moment, not on what they have already said. When we try to make sense of what was said before, we waste time and miss more information.
- Don't panic or give up if you get lost in the middle of the listening. Stay calm and try to pick up again. When you do, don't worry about the information you missed.
- Try to picture what the other person is saying. Mental images will help you understand and remember the information better.
- Pay attention to what **isn't** said, too. What you see is also important: the speaker's body language and facial expressions can help you understand the message.
- Don't be distracted by the way someone speaks (e.g. their accent) or if they are moving around too much. Focus on the content.
- We can process information a lot faster than we can produce it, i.e. our ears are a lot quicker than our mouths. For that reason, we sometimes stop paying attention to the speaker, especially if we think we have already understood the message. Don't jump to conclusions: keep your focus until the end.
- In a conversation, we also might get distracted thinking about what to say next, instead of actually listening to the other person. Practise this three-step technique:
 - 1 Pay full attention to what the other person is saying.
 - 2 React to what the person said (e.g. agree, disagree, ask further questions).
 - 3 Only then make a new contribution to the discussion.

Challenges / difficulties

Lots of things can make listening more difficult:

- when the speaker talks too quickly or quietly
- background noise
- when you can't see the speaker, e.g. on the telephone
- words you don't know
- your own thoughts or feelings

Knowing what is distracting you can help you deal with it.

How can I develop this skill?

Try to reflect after listening to someone speak. The key is to notice when you were engaged and when you were distracted. It will be slightly different every time, but you may notice patterns emerging. What do you often find distracting? Is there anything you can change to help yourself to focus?

Learning outcome

Even if the content is difficult, keeping your focus while listening will help you understand as much as possible.

Theory to practice

1 When listening to a lecture, how big would these distractions be for you? Order them from 1 (biggest) to 5 (smallest).

- a** my own thoughts and feelings _____
- b** noise in the background or other people speaking _____
- c** my mobile phone _____
- d** the speaker's appearance _____
- e** if I'm physically uncomfortable (e.g. tired, hungry or thirsty) _____

2 Match the problems above (a–e) to the advice below.

- 1** Make sure you are rested and have had a snack before you start. Take some water with you. _____
- 2** Shut down any external interference, and focus only on the speaker. _____
- 3** Take some deep breaths and clear your mind before you start. _____
- 4** Turn off any electronic devices. _____
- 5** Close your eyes, and only pay attention to what they're saying. _____

Ways to get more practice

Concentration is a skill that needs to be practised and developed. Try out the tips above, find out which ones work best for you, and make a habit of using them.

In addition, studies indicate that students who regularly do meditation or mindfulness exercises improve their concentration in a short period of time.