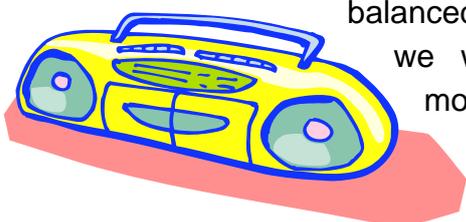


# Teaching receptive skills – reading and listening

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There are four basic skills in any language; receptive skills – reading and listening, and productive skills – speaking and writing. All are equally important and wherever possible we should try to incorporate all of them into our lessons if we want to have a

balanced approach. Often we will want to focus more on one particular skill but still bring others in to create an ‘integrated’ skills lesson.



In this unit we will focus on the receptive skills – reading and listening. This is a shorter unit than most but is still very important.

Read and digest the information completely before completing the worksheet.

## ***Reasons for reading and listening***

When we read instructions as to how to operate a video recorder, our motives for reading are very different from when we pick up a novel by our favourite author; when we listen to directions from a stranger on how to get to the beach, our motives are different than when we listen to our friends telling us a joke.

We can divide the reasons and motives for reading and listening into two fairly wide-ranging categories:

**For a purpose** – this type of reading and listening takes place because it will help us achieve some particular aim or goal. In the examples above, reading instructions on your new video recorder and listening to instructions are examples of this type of motivation.

**For entertainment** – very often we listen to or read information because we find it pleasurable or enjoyable in some way. Such as reading a novel or listening to a joke from the examples above.

Quite often our reading and listening may be a mix of the above two motives. We may find reading a tour guide to a particular city to be enjoyable but it may also achieve some specific purpose if we are on holiday in that city. So there will be times when our reasons for listening and reading will include both motives.

### ***How we read and listen***

Most people would say with our eyes and our ears! This may be true but there is more to it than that. Our minds must not only be able to recognize and understand the words but also be able to grasp their overall meaning from a pre-existing knowledge of the world. For example if an American was to walk past a newspaper stand and see the headline 'Bears destroyed by Cowboys', he/she would automatically be able to recognize that this was likely to be a text about an American football game and nothing to do with animal cruelty. This would be based upon his/her pre-existent knowledge. A non-American, seeing the same headline and understanding every word might reach an entirely different conclusion.

So we can see that reading and listening are not simply matters for the eyes and ears, but also a matter of using our minds to literally understand words and process them in our 'pre-existent knowledge' to gain true understanding.

Readers and listeners employ a number of specialist skills when reading or listening, and their understanding of the context will depend on their expertise in these areas:

**Predictive skills** – for example, predicting the content of an article or dialogue from a headline or introduction.

**Specific information – scanning.** We often listen or read for specific information. For example, we look in a newspaper to find a football result (we don't read the whole newspaper before finding it!), we listen to the news, only concentrating when a particular story comes up.

**General idea – skimming.** This is where we read or listen for the gist of a text/dialogue, we don't focus on every single word but are just trying to get a general understanding of the content.

**Detailed information.** Sometimes we read in order to understand everything in detail. For example, when reading or listening to detailed directions on how to get somewhere. We need to read/listen in a concentrated manner to gain full benefit.

**Deduction from context.** Sometimes we need to be able to understand or deduce the meaning of individual words or phrases from the context in which we hear/read them. We sometimes also need to see beyond the literal meaning of words. 'You are in a non-smoking zone' isn't intended solely for information but also as an order to not smoke and if you are smoking, to extinguish your cigarette.

### ***Problems with listening and reading***

The teaching and learning of receptive skills presents quite a number of potential problems which need to be addressed. These are mainly in connection with the language contained in the text, the topic and the tasks the students will perform.

### ***Language***

Sentence length, word length and a number of unfamiliar words can also present problems to learners of English. Reading presents fewer problems as the text is 'captured' on paper and students may read it countless times. This gives them the opportunity to think about it or deduce the difficult language from context. Listening is another matter. The language isn't 'captured' and listeners have no time to really deduce the meaning and think about the language, as they hear it only once.

Obviously the more language we expose the students to the more they will learn. Fortunately, there are many ways of approaching language difficulty.

**Pre-teaching vocabulary** – One way of helping students is to teach them difficult/unknown language and structures, prior to commencing a reading or listening activity. This should at least help to remove some of the obstacles that they are likely to come across. However, if students never get past the stage of having to understand each and every word, they'll never really feel

comfortable with receptive skills. Learning to understand texts without knowing every word is a skill that we should also encourage in our students. So, some kind of balance needs to be struck between pre-teaching structures and letting students access unknown language. A sensible solution would be to only pre-teach the words that are essential to understanding and leaving other vocabulary work until later.

**Careful selection of texts** – if the teacher is careful as to the listening and reading materials presented to the students, he/she can expose the students to a variety of authentic and non-authentic texts. Authentic texts are not designed for language students whereas non-authentic texts are. Non-authentic texts will allow students access to material that contains language more suited to the students' abilities, whereas authentic texts will expose students to texts that should give them confidence in their skills. Authentic materials (and the tasks that go along with them) must be carefully selected so as to focus on what the students know, rather than how much they don't know.

### ***Topics***

The topic of the text or dialogue can also help to motivate the students. If the topic is not interesting it is less likely that the students will really engage with material. Therefore we really need to think about how we choose topics and the tasks that go with them. Knowing our students and what really interests them is vital here. Obviously individual students have individual interests and a topic may interest some of the class but not others. A variety of topics, over a period of time, is needed to ensure that all of our students are equally catered for in the end. Do not assume that because a topic interests you that it will be of equal interest to your students. Get to know them and their interests. It will assist you greatly in selecting suitable material.

### ***Create interest***

If the teacher can get the students motivated and engaged in the tasks, there is a much greater possibility that they will read and listen with real enthusiasm, whether or not they were originally interested in the topic. We can get students engaged by discussing the topic, showing pictures, predicting what the text will be about and other 'engage' phase activities.

## **Tasks**

An important feature in the teaching of receptive skills concerns comprehension tasks. We need to provide comprehension tasks that promote understanding, as opposed to just checking understanding. A good task shouldn't be too easy or too difficult; in other words a challenge that is realistically achievable. A quite common activity is jigsaw reading, where students are placed in pairs and each reads part of the text. They then share their information to complete other tasks. Another technique that can be used is 'jumbled texts'. This is where the paragraphs of a text are jumbled up, for the students to re-order. You can even jumble two stories together, for the students to sort out both.

### ***A typical receptive skills lesson (Patchwork)***

*Example* – students are going to read or listen to a text about the life of Elvis Presley. The learner objective would be for the students to learn more about his life and be able to write one or two paragraphs about him.

**Engage** – start the class with an extract from a famous Elvis song. Who is it? Do you know any of his other songs? What do you know about him? What would you like to know about him – use this type of question to create interest amongst the students. Allow students to quickly read/listen to the text to see if it answered any of their questions (set time limit to ensure quick reading).

**Study** – pre-teach potentially problematic vocabulary. A practice exercise or two to check and reinforce understanding and pronunciation.

**Engage** – students read/listen to text again for detailed understanding.

**Study** – give students comprehension tasks based upon the text. For example, true/false questions. Students compare answers in pairs and feedback.

**Activate** – remove texts from the view of the students and ask them to write a brief review of the life of Elvis. Students compare in pairs and feedback to class.

**Study** – If necessary deal with any language problems from review. Allow students access to the text again and 'discover' the meaning of five more unknown words from the text.

**Activate** – In pairs students write a brief account of a famous person that they both know/are interested in without mentioning his/her name. Each pair reads out and other class members try to guess which famous person it was.

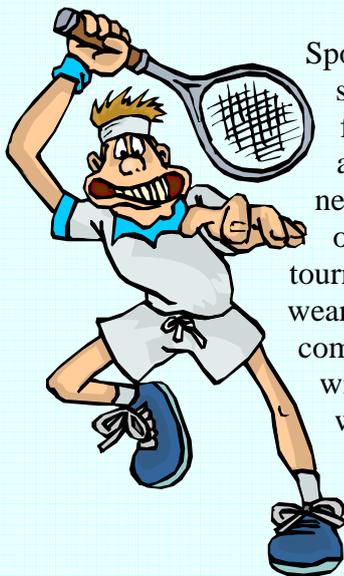
Again, there are different and equally effective ways of approaching the same lesson. There is no strict right or wrong. The basic keys to successful receptive skill lessons are:

- Choose material that interests/motivates the students
- Build interest before reading/listening
- Pre-teach complex vocabulary or structures if necessary, but don't overdo it!
- Vary the type of material
- Use the material to practise different skills
- Use realistic comprehension tasks that aid understanding
- Incorporate activate phases that naturally lead on from the text



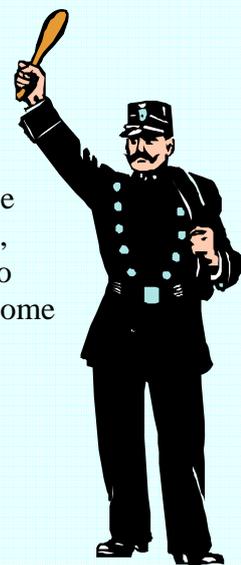
## Making comparisons – what people wear

The clothes people wear in England vary in style because of the different nationalities living there. There is no particular traditional style but casual wear is influenced by America. Men and women working in offices often wear business clothes. Men usually wear suits, with a shirt and tie, and women wear suits with blouses but no tie. Women will sometimes use accessories to enhance their business-wear such as wool or silk shawls. Some companies in England allow their employees to wear smart casual clothes on a Friday to make them feel more relaxed at work. At the weekend, many people wear jeans and a shirt or t-shirt with trainers. Some people prefer to wear shirts with a collar and cotton trousers with informal shoes. In the cities and towns of England, fashion varies because dress is influenced by Asia, America, Africa and Europe. For example, Japanese-British people often wear a different style of Western clothes than Indian-British.



Sportspeople wear special clothes to suit their chosen sport. Female swimmers wear an all-in-one swimsuit but ladies swimming for fun usually wear bikinis. Male swimmers wear swimming shorts and leisure swimmers often wear swimming shorts with a special net lining. Tennis players must wear clothes according to the rules of the country and tournament they are playing in. The Wimbledon tournament in England has a very strict dress code. All players must wear white clothes but are allowed some colours, with the logo of companies displayed. Men must wear a white-collared cotton shirt with white shorts, white socks and white tennis shoes. Women must wear a white tennis dress or white skirt and blouse with a collar, with white socks and trainers. In some tournaments in America, players can wear any colours they like. Some players choose to wear black, blue and various rainbow colours.

Police in most countries must wear a uniform. In England, a regular policeman must wear a special tall black hard hat, a black tie, a white or blue shirt with a shoulder patch, a black jacket, black trousers and shiny black hard shoes. A police-woman wears similar clothes but will wear a blouse with a checked scarf, and her hat is shorter with a checked pattern printed on her hat. When English police work outside at busy events like football matches they all wear bright, fluorescent yellow jackets with "Police" printed in blue on the back so people feel safe and can find the police easily if there is a problem.. Some police officers ride horses on the street and the horses wear a special saddle and coat. All police officers in England carry truncheons, or batons. Some carry guns, but they have to have special training. In France, police wear a different style of jacket, trousers and hat with different but dark colours. They all carry guns.





## Exercises

### **A** Answer the following questions:

1. What is the dress code for the Wimbledon tournament?
2. What do some companies allow in England on Friday? Why?
3. What do police officers wear when working outside at busy events? Why?
4. Which countries have influenced fashion in England?

### **B** Choose a word from the box:

truncheons	jeans	colours	
trainers	batons	guns	America

**Example:** *Casual wear in England is influenced by America.*

1. \_\_\_\_\_ are carried by all police officers in France.
2. Players can wear any \_\_\_\_\_ in some tennis tournaments in America.
3. At the weekend many people wear \_\_\_\_\_ with \_\_\_\_\_.
4. \_\_\_\_\_, or \_\_\_\_\_ are carried by all police officers in England.



## Grammar

### Making Comparisons

*more than, less than, as...as, -er than*

Weekend clothes are **more** casual **than** business clothes.

Trainers are **less** formal **than** shoes.

Her police hat is shorter **than** his.

Her tennis clothes are **as** smart and white **as** his.

The dress on Friday is **not as** formal **as** the other days of the week.

It's **the same as** my country.

It's **different from** my country.



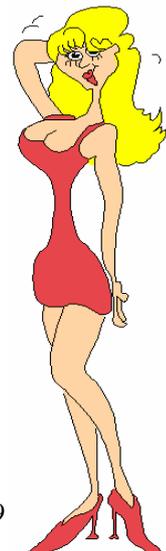
## Exercises

# A

Complete the sentences with *as, not as, than* or *from*:

Example: *She's much older than I am.*

1. He's much taller \_\_\_\_\_ I am.
2. The old lady is \_\_\_\_\_ attractive \_\_\_\_\_ the young lady.
3. Her shoes are different \_\_\_\_\_ mine.
4. He's got the same tennis racket \_\_\_\_\_ I have.
5. Business clothes are \_\_\_\_\_ casual \_\_\_\_\_ weekend clothes.
6. Guns are less common in England \_\_\_\_\_ in America.



**B** Use the adjective in brackets and *more* or *less* to agree or disagree with the following:

**Example:** *Snakes are more dangerous than rabbits. (friendly)*  
*Yes, rabbits are more friendly than snakes.*

1. Clothes are cheaper here than at home. (*expensive*)
2. He's more excited than she is. (*bored*)
3. The traffic is safer now than it was. (*dangerous*)
4. Studying English is easier than Japanese. (*difficult*)



**C** Write 5 sentences comparing the clothes you wear in your country and your appearance with other countries or people.

**Example:** *I wear a Sari which is red and gold and more colourful than an Italian business suit.*

