

Defining needs, setting targets and looking at strategies
Listening

You have decided to improve your listening skills but you are not sure about which area to work on. Before you can set a target for your independent study plan you will need to take the following steps:

1. Think about why you want to improve your listening skills.
2. Work out more precisely where your main problems are in listening.
3. Find out what causes your problems and which skills and techniques you may need to work on.

1. Why do you want to improve your listening skills?

Think about the following reasons, tick the one(s) that most affect you and add your own if they do not match your situation.

- I need to listen to lectures in English.
- I would like to travel overseas and need to understand things in an English-speaking environment.
- I have to take a test before graduating and it involves a listening component.
- I would like to be able to speak to native speakers more easily without fear.
- I want to use listening as input for improving another skill (speaking, writing)
- I want to learn new vocabulary / grammar structures through listening.
- Add your own _____

2. What are your problems in listening?

a) Look at the problems described below. They are all problems related to listening skills. Tick any problems you have.

a) I can't follow what is being said by a native speaker		b) I can't get the main ideas clearly.		c) I can't hear key details successfully.		d) I feel nervous when I'm listening in English.	
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b) What do you think might cause these problems? Look at the list below and match the possible causes with the problems you ticked above. You may find more than one cause for each problem.

1. The speech is always too fast and I can't hear the words separately.	2. I'm not used to different accents in English.	3. I can't control the speed in many situations.	4. I don't know many of the words used.	5. I don't know what the speaker is going to say.
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c) Are there any other factors which cause you problems when listening in English?

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3. How to identify your problems if you are not sure what they are

What if you don't know your problems in listening? Sometimes it's difficult to know with listening exactly what the causes of our problems are.

First of all think about what you guess may be the cause of your problem, then try the following exercises to help you make sure.

Problem: Controlling the input

Next time you listen to a lecture or live tv programme in English, notice how long it takes before you lose your concentration and your mind 'switches off' – that is, you can no longer focus on understanding the meaning of the speaker. Then try using a prerecorded video with similar content (eg Pearl Report in MLC). When your mind starts to switch off, stop the VCR. Rewind or take a quick break. If you feel better when you can control the source of your listening, your problem may be related to feeling 'out of control'.

Problem: Recognizing accents

Watch a few minutes of an American movie and a British one. There are also Australian accents on the CDROM in the MLC, "Issues in English". Do you find one is easier to understand than others? If so, you may need more exposure to different accents in English.

Problem: Pre-listening preparation

Think of two listening situations – a lecture where you don't know what the content will be about, and one where you've done some preparation beforehand. Perhaps you've done some reading around the topic, and you have a good idea what the lecturer might talk about. Which situation is more likely to cause listening problems?

Problem: Speed and linking

Watch 5-10 minutes of a movie in English with subtitles. Write down some sentences from the script where you could not catch the spoken words. Replay those parts several times. Do you find that you cannot understand clearly the words you copied down from the script? It could be that you need more practice in recognising linking – where spoken words run together and it's difficult to hear the separate words.

Problem: Lack of Vocabulary

Use the CDROM 'Issues in English' in the MLC and watch one of the videos on it, choosing a topic you like. Use level 3 or 4 and make sure the level is challenging for you. Once you find an extract that is quite difficult for you, watch it a second time with the script on at the same time. How many words did you not know? If there are many, and they are key words for understanding the content, you may need to work on vocabulary.

4. Techniques to use for your problems

Have a look at some suggested techniques and strategies – there could be many more. Mark the ones you think would be interesting and useful for you.

Skills and techniques that will help you improve on the problems above.
(on next page)

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1. Speed and linking

- Graded listening practice – start with simpler material and build up to more difficult
- Understanding linking better – pronunciation practice
- Listening with text / subtitles
- Replaying the same section

2. Accents

- Increasing exposure to different accents
- Try techniques from other sections

3. Controlling the input

- Doing listening practice in situations you can control
- Predicting the content
- Predicting key vocabulary
- Finding out more about the topic before listening

4. Pre-listening preparation

- Predicting the content
- Predicting key vocabulary
- Finding out more about the topic before listening
- Using your existing knowledge of the topic

5. Vocabulary

- Learning more words in related areas
- Listening to other input on the same topic
- Reading around the topic
- Linking practice (as in problem 1)

5. Summarising your needs

*Write a short statement summarizing your **purpose** and **problems** in listening.*

6. Writing a Target

Now write a target for your listening study plan. Remember that your target should be measurable and achievable, appropriate for your needs, and include a time-frame.