

ALMS LEARNER SUPPORT ALMS

LISTENING GUIDE

A. HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is intended to help you improve your skills in listening. It will tell you a little about the types of listening we all do and it will suggest ways in which you can practice different strategies whenever you are listening to English.

It would be a good idea to read parts B and C of this guide before you begin your listening programme. You could start by thinking about your own strategies when you listen, and deciding on what your aim or objective is. Do this every time you are listening for ALMS. Try to reflect during and after your work on what you are doing, what your problems are and what you have achieved.

Choose your material carefully! If your aim is to develop your vocabulary, choose something with relevant subject matter and think about the language before you start. If you want to pay attention to the details of the language, you could look for something with a transcript so that you can check your own work or study using your eyes and your ears. In other words, plan carefully. Think about your problems and your aims and objectives before and after you listen for ALMS.

B. DIFFERENT WAYS OF LISTENING

The way we listen to something depends on our reason for doing so. If we have the radio on in the background, we are probably not listening very carefully, and may simply want to get a general idea of what's being said. If we have asked for instructions on how to get somewhere, we are obliged to listen more attentively. We might have some very specific aim - waiting for a particular item of information. Thus we can distinguish three main types of listening:

1. Global listening or listening for gist.

This is when we simply want to get the main point of what we are listening to. We might only want to know the topic of a conversation, radio or TV programme, or we might be vaguely following it at the same time as doing other things like driving or cooking. Native speakers do this type of listening frequently and automatically because they need pay little attention to get the general idea. Learners of a language may find it more difficult. They may feel the need to understand every word, and give up completely if they don't, and they may be disturbed by distractions such as noise and poor sound quality, which are not generally a problem for native speakers.

2. Listening for detail

We do this when we need to understand practically everything – public announcements at railway stations or airports, for example. However, even here, it may not be necessary to understand every word. Did you know that approximately 40% of the words used in spoken language are non-essential? Important announcements are often repeated in any case. You just need to be able to separate the essential information from the non-essential.

3. Selective listening

We do this when we are waiting for a specific item of news, for example. We listen globally but wait for the signals that tell us that the item we are waiting for is about to come up.

C. LISTENING STRATEGIES

1. How to improve your global listening.

Remember, it isn't necessary to understand everything! Many words are not essential - you can get the "message" without getting all the words. Often what is important is emphasised or stressed, so try concentrating on that. You could try to predict or guess what the words you are unsure of mean.

Prepare yourself before you start listening for ALMS. Think about what you expect to hear. Use the context or the situation, the intonation of the speaker and, if you're watching a video, the expressions and body language of the people involved.

There are also clues in the language which help you predict what's coming:-

signals such as "There's one point I'd like to make.....", "I'm afraid that....."

(signals something negative will follow)

connectors such as "Although.....", "On the one hand.....",

sequencers such as "Firstly.....", "Next....."

2. How to improve your listening for detail.

Using or making your own transcription is useful here. If you make your own transcription of parts of a passage, you can then study it and try to fill in the gaps by reading around the problematic areas and predicting or guessing what might be there before listening again. It's useful to compare your transcription with the original one, if it is available. Study the transcript before and after listening particularly if the language is new or difficult for you. Use a dictionary.

To help you understand the uses of intonation and stress, listen and read the transcript and mark the stressed parts. You could then read aloud and record your reading.

D. WAYS OF EXPLOITING LISTENING-COMPREHENSION MATERIAL

You can use the following suggestions regardless of where and when you are doing your listening, or looking and listening. There is plenty of material in the Self-access Centre, and access to radio and television programmes and the Internet. You may well have such opportunities at home, too. Find out if there are any lectures in English that would interest you. You could also work with a partner or partners.

Whatever you do, try to keep a record of what you are doing and why, what you are learning. Note the strategies that work for you. Evaluate your skills and your learning.

Activities focused on specific problems

1. **(Vocabulary)** Read the transcription before listening to the recording. Look up the words and expressions you don't understand. Learn the words that will be useful for you. Listen to the recording, paying particular attention to the pronunciation of the words on your list. Read the transcription again. Listen to the recording again without looking at the transcription.

2. **(Vocabulary)** Listen to the recording with the transcription in front of you. Underline the words you don't understand, or which are problematic in pronunciation. Look them up in a dictionary. Listen several times to each one. Finally, listen to the recording without the transcription.

3. Make for yourself, or get someone else to make for you, a personalised text in which certain words that interest you are missing. These should be words you would like to learn: connectives, numbers, words distorted by accents, words you have previously worked on from the same recording.

Activities focused on prediction

4. Look at the title of a recording and make a list of the words you might find in it. Use a dictionary if you need to and note how the words are pronounced. Then listen to the recording and underline the words on your list that you hear. You might also like to predict what will be covered in the recording in more general terms.

5. Ask someone to take out every tenth (or more, or less) word from a page of transcription of a recording. Try to guess the missing words. Listen to the recording and check your work. If you want some variety, ask a sadistic colleague to take out the words or groups of words that will cause you most trouble.

6. Listen to the first minute of the recording (or more if necessary) and try to guess what will follow. This exercise is particularly good with radio and news programmes. Then listen to the whole recording to find out what really went on. You could stop the tape every two or three minutes, make new predictions, listen again, and so on until the end.

Activities for general understanding

7. Listen to the recording straight through without stopping at the passages you do not understand. Try to get the gist. Try to guess what you do not understand.

8. Listen to the recording and take notes. Only note the main ideas. Pause the tape as you need to at first: the more often you listen, the less you will need to pause, until you don't need to stop the tape at all.

9. Make a summary of the recording - in English or in your native language, or in the form of a diagram or table.

10. If there are questions about the recording, answer them – or you could make up your own questions.

Activities for understanding the details

11. Make two photocopies of a page of transcription. Take out (with a fountain or felt-tip pen) words or groups of words at random. You can control the difficulty of the exercise by taking out more or fewer words. Several days later, try to reconstruct your hole-ridden text as you listen to the recording. Check your work by comparing it with the intact copy.

12. Choose a recording you can understand without too much difficulty. Go through it in small segments. Write down what you hear. Compare what you have written with the transcription. Use a "window" to unveil the transcription segment by segment, and to prevent you from seeing ahead. When you can remember all the words in one segment, lengthen it. Make your own transcription.

13. Listen to the recording, noting the words that “stand out” (that seem to be stressed). List them, leaving some space between. Listen a second time (or more) to check your work. Try to write a summary using the words you have listed.

14. Choose a minute or two of a recording and try to transcribe in English all that you hear. First listen to the entire abstract once or twice to get the gist. Then listen to a few words at a time. Listen to bits you don’t understand again and again until you do, or until boredom sets in.

If you’re working with others, ask a partner if you could check his/her transcription. Listen to the transcribed extract and note on a separate piece of paper the differences between what you hear and what the other person has written. Finally, give your suggestions for correcting any errors.

15. Choose one minute from a video recording you have not seen before. Look at the extract **without the sound**. Try to infer as much as you can from what you see. Who are the participants? What is the situation? What are they saying? Look at the extract as many times as you wish. Then check the accuracy of your predictions by turning up the volume.

16. Listen for a few minutes to an extract taken from the middle of a video recording you have not seen before **without looking at the screen**. On the basis of what you hear, try to reconstruct the picture (the ages of the participants, what they are wearing, what they are doing, the place, the period and so on). Confirm or disprove your predictions by listening again and looking at the screen.

17. Transcribe about a minute of a sub-titled videotape without looking at the sub-titles (cover them up). Then make your own sub-titles by translating your transcription, and compare yours with the “official” ones.

D. SOME TYPICAL PROBLEMS

The following problems with listening are frequently mentioned by learners. We hope the information in this guide will help you to solve or avoid them.

- ❖ Lacking vocabulary
- ❖ Losing the thread of the passage (because of lacking vocabulary)
- ❖ Failing to get the details, although understanding the main ideas
- ❖ Coping with the speed and pronunciation of the speakers
- ❖ Making the tasks meaningful

E. SOME SUGGESTIONS

1. Listen to the news in English, on TV or radio. The subject matter is topical and you are likely to have heard about it in your own language. You could also listen to current affairs and Arts and Science programmes.
2. Find out what lectures are being given in English and choose some that interest you. Do some background reading beforehand, especially if the subject matter is unfamiliar or complex.
3. Focus on listening when you watch films – you may hear a story that is different from the one you get from the subtitles.
4. Try to distinguish between the different varieties of English that you hear: African, American, Australian, British, Indian, Irish – the list is endless!
5. Listen to songs and poetry on the Web.

F. USEFUL WEB ADDRESSES

For authentic listening, try BBC Radio, BBC World Service, Capital Radio, CNN ...

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