I have just returned from a trip to Saudi Arabia where I was doing some training for a group of teachers from the Preparatory year of a university. The students are extremely fortunate in that they have a complete year to get themselves ready for their undergraduate studies with a course covering English, Maths, Science, IT and study skills. The majority of the hours are dedicated to language work and this particular university spends one semester on general English and one on ESP so the students study English appropriate to their undergraduate studies with courses ranging from Medicine to Engineering to Applied Sciences. The main skills work is in Listening, Reading and Writing and we looked at a number of challenges the learners face. The one which causes the most concern is the first of these so let’s look more closely at listening and how we can help our learners.

Listening is the skill which most people struggle with and which can lead to the quickest breakdowns in communication. It is the key to all effective oral interchanges requiring the listener to receive and interpret correctly the vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation as well as any non-verbal information. It is a complex and immediate process which cannot ever be fully tested and assessed since there is no immediately verifiable proof. Answering comprehension questions about the content and the context give limited insights into actual comprehension. Good notes taken during a lecture are proof of listening but not necessarily understanding. The only reliable test is that the listener responds and acts on the information received. In a social context this might simply mean nodding in agreement. In an academic context it usually means reconstructing or reformulating the
new information in a discussion, a presentation or an essay. Being able therefore to listen and reconstruct is a key skill to practise. Encouraging students to use synonyms and their own words to answer questions or to give a summary of a listening has a dual purpose. It confirms understanding whilst encouraging them to enlarge their active vocabulary. The comprehension section in Bloom’s taxonomy includes subskills like paraphrasing, summarising and extending. Any listening practice which encourages development of these skills is useful. The comprehension questions in many mainstream coursebooks stop short of this so you will need to develop your own or encourage the class to form their own.

My group of Saudi teachers came up with a number of useful listening strategies they try to convey to their learners as they prepare them for the academic world. Listening to lectures and attending seminars involve a number of skills which need to be practised on a daily basis. This list is not complete but includes

- Listening for gist, trying not to listen and understand every single word
- Listening for particular information
- Listening and taking notes to remind you (notes which need to well written in order to share with other students)
- Listening for attitude, noting if the speaker is being opinionated or neutral
- Noticing facts as opposed to opinions
- Being able to spot discourse markers and other signposts

All of the above help learners in what can be a very anxious time. Not being able to follow is one of the most distressing things we go through. If you are going to be marked and ultimately judged on this, it becomes even more stressful. We know anecdotally how much certain students tense up when doing a listening. We also know from feedback that it is very upsetting if you feel the rest of the group are following but you are not. Imagine how tough it is for an international student sitting in a lecture delivered at pace in English. We must do all we can, as frequently as we can, to help them prepare for this particular activity. Students themselves need to be confident about which skills they are practising to be able to work on these skills independently as well.

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