

Reading and listening basics

Here we describe some basic receptive sub-skills and outline a simple procedure you can use for any reading or listening lesson.

Reading and listening sub-skills

When we read or listen to a text, we usually do so with a particular purpose in mind. This purpose will determine the manner in which we read or listen, the **sub-skill** we use, on any particular occasion.

Three sub-skills which are commonly practised in coursebooks are:

- **reading / listening for gist** – when we read or listen to get a general idea of the content of a text. Reading for gist, sometimes known as **skimming**, is done at high speed.

Examples of texts we often read / listen to in this way: articles, emails, radio news.

Example coursebook tasks: tick the topics which are mentioned, match the headings and paragraphs.

- **reading / listening for specific information** – when we read or listen to a text in order find specific, predetermined items of information. Reading for specific information, also known as **scanning**, again happens at high speed.

Examples of texts we often read / listen to in this way: timetables, dictionaries, airport announcements.

Example coursebook tasks: find the significance of these numbers in the text, true or false.

- **reading / listening in detail** – when we read or listen to a text in order to gather as much detail as we can about every part. Reading in detail, in contrast to skimming and scanning, is a slow and careful process in which we often stop to think, go back, and re-read.

Examples of texts we often read / listen to in this way: contracts, poems, witness statements.

Example coursebook tasks: make notes on these topics, find differences between two texts.

Preparing students for reading and listening

In real life, we usually read and listen to things which interest us, and we usually have at least some idea in advance of what texts will say. It's a good idea to try and replicate the same conditions in the classroom. Here's a checklist of things to consider when preparing your learners for a reading or listening task:

- **raising interest.** Engage learners with the topic of the text. If you're going to listen to a radio programme about internet piracy, have learners discuss what they think and know about the issue. If you're going to read some restaurant reviews, ask learners to tell each other about their own good and bad experiences of eating out.
- **predicting.** Give learners some clues so that they can predict what the reading or listening text might say. This is a particularly popular way of raising interest. See the Teaching Tip on **Prediction activities**.
- **pre-teaching.** The texts in your coursebook will be roughly tuned to your learners' level but you may feel that it's necessary for you to teach some essential vocabulary items from the text before the reading or listening begins. See the Teaching Tip on **Pre-teaching essential vocabulary**.
- **text type.** Make sure that learners know in advance what kind of text they're going to read or listen to. If it's a reading, is it a magazine article, a personal letter, or a business email? If it's a listening, are learners going to hear a monologue, three monologues, or a conversation?

English Unlimited Teaching Tips

Tasks and time limits

Learners should always have a purpose when reading or listening so you need to **set a clear task**. Your coursebook will include tasks designed to practise specific sub-skills of the kind we discussed above. Make sure that learners are certain of their task before they start listening or reading.

In the case of reading tasks, it's also important to **set a clear time limit** – and keep to it! – in order to help learners develop sub-skills like skimming and scanning, which require reading at speed. Try to get into the habit of identifying which sub-skills your coursebook activities are trying to practise, and then use this to decide on an appropriate time limit.

Without clear tasks and time limits, most learners will tend to work slowly through texts word by word and worry about vocabulary rather than thinking about the meaning of the text. They won't develop the kind of purposeful, flexible approach to texts which proficient readers and listeners have.

Pair checking

Once learners have completed a reading or listening task, it's a good idea to ask them to compare their answers in pairs before going through the answers as a class. This helps build learners' confidence (they will be more willing to tell you what they think the answers are if they've already checked with a colleague) and maintain interest (for example, learners may find that they disagree on some answers and ask you if they can listen again).

Feedback

It's important that learners eventually get clear feedback on tasks, i.e. they know what the answers are! Here are some common ways of managing this stage:

- **class discussion**. Ask learners to tell you their answers and justify them. If learners had problems with particular task, establish the correct answer and then have learners find the evidence in the text. Or direct learners to the relevant part of the text and ask them to reconsider their answers.
- **answer key**. Simply give learners the answers, e.g. read them aloud, give them on a handout, show them on the board. Then discuss and resolve any problems learners might have had.
- **listening script**. If learners have just done a listening task, ask them to read the script (this is usually at the back of the coursebook) to check their answers. See the Teaching Tip on **Exploiting listening scripts**.