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# UNIT 30 LISTENING TO ENGLISH OVER THE MEDIA

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## 30.0 OBJECTIVES

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- to think of the media as self-help tools to learn English,
- to become aware of how to listen to English spoken naturally, to get at the meaning, and
- to familiarize the reader with exercises and tips for improving listening ability.

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## 30.1 INTRODUCTION

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In India, we are lucky to have English all around us, in the print media, and more insistently, in the electronic media of radio and television. Yet very few people consciously use the media as self-help tools for learning English. Why is this so?

When you learn English in a classroom, you are often exposed to this new language in its most explicit, formal form. Especially in the case of speaking and listening, your experience is probably limited to single words being spoken out precisely and slowly many times over (as in single word dictation), or short sentences carefully and slowly pronounced. In the early stages of learning a new language, this is the only practical approach. But if you do not move out of this stage of carefully, explicitly pronounced language to seek exposure to more everyday varieties of English, you will miss out on the wealth of English available to you on the media: radio and television, and audio and video.

Speaking English slowly and clearly is not such a bad idea; that is, the classroom variety of careful speech, although it may sound a little bookish, can be easily understood if you speak it. But in order to listen effectively to news and entertainment programmes, you need to start listening to ordinary speech outside the classroom, even if at first it sounds too fast for you, and you feel that you can understand nothing. Let us see how we can make this transition from the classroom to the real world of speech easier for ourselves.

## 30.2 THE “GRAMMAR OF SPEECH”

### 30.2.1 Strong and Weak Forms

First, you have to become aware that there are “strong” and “weak” forms of certain words in English. This feature of the language was mentioned in Block 2 of this course (*Speaking in informal contexts*). The word **and**, for example, is often shortened to **n**. You may remember the example phrase **bread ‘n butter**. Here is another real-life example, contributed by a college student. This student happened to fill in a demand draft for paying application fees for a postgraduate entrance test, with the following spelling:

**A hundreden ten rupees only.**

What is the strange new word ‘hundreden?’ You’ve probably guessed it: it’s the two words ‘hundred and!’ This was a creative student whose listening skills were good, but whose spelling skills were weak! Children in fact do make a lot of such spelling mistakes when they first write English, if they already know the spoken language.

When we speak, a **refrigerator** becomes a **fridge**, **because** becomes **’cos**, and so on. The word **not** is regularly shortened to **n’t** as in **haven’t, won’t, can’t ....** Here is a joke which uses the spoken form of a negative word (**wouldn’t**) in a pun.

Q: What would happen if you had a wooden car with wooden seats and wooden tyres and a wooden engine?

A: It wooden go.

We often have to make meaningful guesses about what we hear, because two or more different words may sound the same when they are spoken in their weak form. The verbs **has** and **is**, for example, both sound like **’z**. Compare:

**He’s here.** (= he is here)

**He’s got a ticket.** (= he has got a ticket)

In such cases we have to use our knowledge of the language – its grammar, or what words are used where – to understand what is meant.

#### ✓ Check Your Progress 1

1. Can you write out the full forms of the spoken words, phrases and sentences below? Remember that many words may have the same reduced, weak form. Try to make an educated guess about the right word.

1. What’re you doing?
2. I’m on a bus.

3. Where'll I find a pen?
4. What's the matter?
5. Who'd you wanna see?
6. Why'd I do such a thing?
7. Who'd you see yesterday?
8. Wha'd he say?

### 30.2.2 Where are the Words?

A second feature of spoken language is that people may run words together in such a way that the sounds at the ends and beginnings of words may change a little. For example, "I miss you" may sound to you like 'amishu'. "What did you do"? may sound to you like 'Wadidjudu'? and "What did he say"? may sound like 'Wadisay'? The fact is that there are no spaces between words in speech, as there are when words are written down on paper. Yet somehow we all learn words in our own languages, long before we learn to read and write!

Given below are a number of puns made on the basis of lazily pronounced words. The puns are in a verbal game called "Knock knock". This is a child's game which is like a set conversation, and the challenge is to come up with a funny line at the end. When the words "knock knock" are said, a question is asked: Who's there? A name is given in answer.

Then the full name is asked for. The answer turns out to be a pun on a well-known saying or phrase. So the answer is like a riddle.

See if you can make out what this saying or phrase is in the examples below. The answer to each pun or riddle is given at the end.

#### √ Check Your Progress 2

2. This is a child's game with a funny answer in the last line of each conversation. Can you guess what the pun is between the name and a common saying or phrase?

#### Knock Knock

1. Who's there?

Luke.

Luke who?

Luke before you leap.

2. Who's there?

Marion.

Marion who?

Marion haste, repent at leisure.

3. Who's there?

Lyndon.

Lyndon who?

Lyndon ear and I'll tell you.

4. Who's there?

Nuisance.

Nuisance who?

What's nuisance yesterday?

5. Who's there?

Oliver.

Oliver who?

Oliver troubles are over.

6. Who's there?

Midas.

Midas who?

Midas well relax, we're not going anywhere.

7. Who's there?

Olivia.

Olivia who?

Olivia but I forgot my key!

### 30.2.3 Spoken Words Versus Written Words

A third problem is that the kinds of words and expressions used in spoken language may be unfamiliar to you. We in India tend to know the big words: **consider, observe, investigate** ... But there are ways of saying these words using two smaller words: **think about, look at, look into**. These expressions are called 'phrasal verbs', and they consist of a verb plus a preposition or adverb (both often just called a particle). Instead of expressions like 'the size **increased**', you may hear 'the size **got bigger**'. In the broadcast media, the word **big** is often used to mean **important**, as in 'he's **a big man**', but also as in 'this is **big news**'. Instead of the word **received**, you may hear the word **got**; and instead of **numerous** or **plenty of**, you may hear **a lot of, hundreds of thousands of**, and so on.

## √ Check Your Progress 3

3. Can you match the big word in the column on the left with a small word or words, equivalent in meaning, in the column on the right?

Tolerate	try
Improve	go
Allow	pick up
Attempt	put up with
Depart	let
Arrive	call upon
Discover	fix
Repair	call
Invite	find out
Exhort	come

### 30.3 TRAIN YOURSELF TO LISTEN FOR MEANING

You are probably quite familiar with the written language, but feel lost when it comes to speaking and listening. Well, get a tape recorder and record short stretches of about two or three sentences, and listen to these again and again until you can make out what is being said. You may need some help if you are not sure of the words. Do not be discouraged if you make mistakes while listening. All beginners in language do so. For example, one child heard the words 'Bakeman's glucose plus' in a television advertisement as 'Make your slippers glass!' As you can guess, this child was fond of the Cinderella story, where the fairy godmother gives Cinderella glass slippers. Another child consistently heard the words 'your narrator,' which introduced a newsmagazine programme, as 'ray-on-the-rater', because she was too young to know the word 'narrator'!

As an adult you have the advantage that you have a lot of world knowledge, and can make good guesses at what it is you're hearing. But it is important that you play the entire stretch of speech over and over again, instead of playing it word-by-word. If you go on listening to it, you will find that it suddenly 'becomes clear' after a point, as the words and sounds become familiar to you.

Gillian Brown, author of the book *Teaching the comprehension of spoken English*, gives the following examples to show that educated guessing at sensible meaning in a context is more important than trying to catch every sound that the speaker makes.

Suppose there is an item about power cuts, and you hear that someone

... escaped [therispektid] power cuts

What did the speaker say? Did he say "escaped their respected power cuts", or "escaped their expected power cuts?" Although the first version is perhaps more

accurate, it makes very little sense. It is more probable that the speaker meant to say “expected”, but pronounced it in a somewhat lazy way.

A second example she gives is a phrase

... government’s insensitivity to the [ni:z] of the working people

Did the speaker say that government was insensitive to the **knees** of the working people? Or did he mean that government was insensitive to the **needs** of the working people? What do you think?

By now you will have understood that listening is an active process. It is your knowledge of the language, of its words and sentences, and your knowledge of the world, which allow you to predict what a speaker is probably saying. As your knowledge of the spoken language picks up, you will find it easier and easier to listen.

### 30.3.1 Begin Small, Listening to Short Stretches at a Time

Begin, then, by listening to (and imitating, if you like):

- The beginnings and ends of news broadcasts
- The beginnings and ends of sports features and commentaries
- Weather bulletins
- Announcements about programmes, general public service announcements
- Interviews
- Advertisements

You may then go on to look for recordings of plays, poems, speeches and so on, on the Internet or from a library. After listening to the recording, you may try to speak along with it.

### 30.3.2 Make a Guess

While you’re listening, try to guess what the message is. To do this, you need

- Background knowledge: If there is an election, it helps to know where and when it is going to be held, and you can then identify these features from the listening text.
- Body language: is the speaker sad, angry, surprised, happy? This will allow you to guess at some of the words used. When a stressed or important content word is used, the speaker will often indicate this in some way – with a raised eyebrow, or puckered forehead, or a tilt or nod of the head, and so on.

### 30.3.3 Predict the Language

Try to locate the pauses between word groups, and the rises and falls of the voice on these groups, as you listen. Prepare to listen by becoming aware of grammatical cues about how a sentence is likely to continue. For example, if you hear the words

**On the one hand,**

you should watch out for the matching phrase

**on the other (hand).**

You should know that these phrases are used to introduce two probabilities that are opposite or complementary to one another.

Play this game of 'sentence completion' with yourself as you listen, and even as you read. It will develop your skills of guessing or anticipation. Listening to spoken English is largely a matter of using world knowledge, text construction, sentence context and grammatical knowledge, rather than knowing particular sounds of English. For example, the context will make it clear whether someone **beat** the dog or **bit** the dog!

### √ Check Your Progress 4

4. In the passages below, some words have been left out. Try to guess what these words are. There can be more than one right answer.

#### 1. Driving instructions:

All right, \_\_\_\_\_ the car, put the key in the ignition. Now \_\_\_\_\_ over your right shoulder to \_\_\_\_\_ if the road is \_\_\_\_\_. Pull the car \_\_\_\_\_ of the parking slot. You're doing \_\_\_\_\_ well! Oh be careful – don't hit that \_\_\_\_\_! My, that was scary. Let's \_\_\_\_\_ now. You're still not a \_\_\_\_\_ driver you know!

#### 2. Settling into a new university:

Our university has grown from strength to \_\_\_\_\_. With its \_\_\_\_\_ grounds and \_\_\_\_\_ academic record we feel sure that it really is a \_\_\_\_\_ rate university. The \_\_\_\_\_, who is sitting on the \_\_\_\_\_, has stated that our university's \_\_\_\_\_ will soon be increased. We are \_\_\_\_\_ that everyone at our university will be \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

#### 3. Plane flight:

Ladies and \_\_\_\_\_, we are currently cruising at a \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_ feet. Our \_\_\_\_\_ is \_\_\_\_\_ an hour. There is no need for passengers to be \_\_\_\_\_. Our cabin crew are here to \_\_\_\_\_ you if you \_\_\_\_\_ anything. In a \_\_\_\_\_ while we shall be \_\_\_\_\_ at Rajiv Gandhi \_\_\_\_\_ in Hyderabad.

## 30.4 A GUIDE TO USING THE NEWS OVER THE RADIO

The radio with a cassette tape recorder is very old technology today, but it is a cheap and portable medium for listening to news broadcasts in English. Its reception range allows you to listen to local, national and international varieties of spoken English. The local spoken English comes from announcements made at the local stations; national broadcasts allow you to access a standard variety of Indian English that is acceptable internationally. And international news from British, American, Australian and other stations from around the world broadcasting in English allows you to listen to and understand a variety of accents in this language.

### 30.4.1 Why Listen to the news?

It is useful to begin by listening to news broadcasts. There are three reasons for this:

- News broadcasts have a regular, predictable structure day after day.
- They are of current interest, so the subject matter is useful as well as of general relevance. You don't have to have special subject or topic knowledge to understand the news.
- If you follow the news everyday (or even every hour!) you find that some news items develop into 'news stories.' The visit of a foreign dignitary; a natural disaster; or a political development such as elections and government formation, are all events that unfold over a period of time. In speaking of them, newscasters naturally tell you what has happened before, what is happening now, and what is likely to happen tomorrow. So news stories have content that gets familiar to you as you listen, and language that recurs or occurs again and again. This helps you to build up familiarity with the language.

### 30.4.2 The Structure of a News Broadcast

News broadcasts, we said, have a regular, predictable structure. For example, a 10 or 15 minute news cast may have the following structure:

- Headlines
- Each headline developed into a story:
  - local news
  - national news
  - international news
- Financial news
- Sports news
- News about the weather

You can begin by listening regularly to any particular segment that you like from the list above. You may record the news and listen to it repeatedly; or you may listen to it on air as it is repeated on the hour or every two or three hours.

### 30.4.3 Build up your Vocabulary Network

If your reading skills are better than your listening skills, begin by reading the newspaper reports that deal with the segments you wish to listen to. As you read, note down the words and phrases used to discuss or describe the event. This will serve as a preparation to listen to these words when they are spoken. You will find that certain events are associated with a characteristic vocabulary. For example, suppose there is news of an earthquake. You are likely to hear the following words:

Richter scale    magnitude    rescue and relief operations    aid agencies  
 international efforts    rocked    announced compensation    victims  
 died seriously injured    danger    aftershocks    supplies of food and  
 medicines

If therefore you maintain a diary of such words related to news stories, your vocabulary will develop in a meaningful way. Words associated in this way with a central concept are often referred to as 'semantic networks'.



You can also try to take down the headlines as they are read out. Headlines occur at more than one point in a news broadcast, so you can check your work when they are re-read at a later point in the broadcast.

The same techniques can be used for learning language from television newscasts as well. Remember:

- Begin with small, two to three minute news items on a subject you're interested in.
- Listen repeatedly to the item.
- Try to prepare by reading the news that pertains to the item. Keep a notebook for words and phrases that repeatedly occur when this item is reported or discussed.
- Listen regularly. Don't give up after a couple of days. Listen everyday for short stretches, but listen for a period of at least ten days. You will find yourself understanding a lot of language, and a number of words and phrases will echo in your mind.

It is useful in the beginning to work with a partner or in a group. You can then take down a sort of collective dictation and compare notes about what you have heard and written down.

### ✓ Check Your Progress 5

5. Here are some results of a group's collectively listening to a newscast and writing down what they heard. What do you think is the most likely phrase that the newsreader has said? Remember that the answer should make the best sense possible.

1. The situation in the Kashmir valley continues to be peaceful  
continued yesterday.  
conduction  
continuous

2. According to an official press relief ...  
official custody  
official press release  
efficient custody

3. The civil administration has taken suitable measures to ...  
is taken

4. The earthquake rocked the southwest parts of the country ...  
flocked

## 30.5 LET US SUM UP

1. We have English all around us in the media. Yet few people consciously use the media as self-help tools for learning English.
2. To listen effectively to news and entertainment programmes, you need to start listening to ordinary speech outside the classroom, even if at first it sounds too fast for you, and you feel that you can understand nothing.
3. First, you have to become aware that there are "strong" and "weak" forms of certain words in English.

4. Two or more different words may sound the same when they are spoken in their weak form. We have to use our knowledge of the language – its grammar, or what words are used where – to understand what is meant.
5. Secondly, people may run words together in speech in such a way that the sounds at the ends and beginnings of words may change a little.
6. Thirdly, the kinds of words and expressions used in spoken language may be unfamiliar to you.
7. Get a tape recorder and record short stretches of about two or three sentences, and listen to these again and again until you can make out what is being said. You may need some help if you are not sure of the words. Do not be discouraged if you make mistakes while listening.
8. It is important to play the entire stretch of speech over and over again, instead of playing it word-by-word. If you go on listening to it, you will find that it suddenly 'becomes clear' after a point, as the words and sounds become familiar to you.
9. Listening is an active process. Your knowledge of the language – of its words and sentences – and your knowledge of the world allow you to predict what a speaker says.
10. Begin by listening to:
  - The beginnings and ends of news broadcasts
  - The beginnings and ends of sports features and commentaries
  - Weather bulletins
  - Announcements about programmes, general public service announcements
  - Interviews
  - Advertisements
11. While you're listening, try to guess what the message is. To do this, you need background knowledge and must use knowledge of body language.
12. Prepare to listen by becoming aware of grammatical cues about how a sentence is likely to continue. Play a game of 'sentence completion' as you listen or read. It will develop your skills of guessing or anticipation.
13. Listening to spoken English is largely a matter of using world knowledge, text construction, sentence context and grammatical knowledge, rather than knowing particular sounds of English.
14. The radio with a cassette tape recorder is very old technology today, but it is a cheap and portable medium for listening to news broadcasts in English.
15. It is useful to begin by listening to news broadcasts. There are three reasons for this.
  - News broadcasts have a regular, predictable structure day after day.
  - They are of current interest.
  - Some news items develop into 'news stories'. Some events unfold over a period of time. In speaking of them, newscasters naturally tell you what has happened before, what is happening now, and what is likely to happen tomorrow.

So news stories have content that gets familiar to you as you listen, and language that recurs or occurs again and again. This helps you to build up familiarity with the language.

16. A 10 or 15 minute news cast may have the following structure:

- Headlines
- Each headline developed into a story:
  - local news
  - national news
  - international news
- Financial news
- Sports news
- News about the weather

17. You will find that certain events are associated with a characteristic vocabulary. If you maintain a diary of such words related to news stories, your vocabulary will develop in a meaningful way. Words associated in this way with a central concept are often referred to as 'semantic networks'.

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## 30.7 FURTHER READING

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Gillian Brown, Teaching the comprehension of spoken English.

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## 30.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

1. 1. What are you doing?
2. I am on a bus.
3. Where will I find a pen?
4. What is the matter?
5. Who do you want to see?
6. Why would I do such a thing?
7. Who did you see yesterday?
8. What did he say?

### Check Your Progress 2

2. 1. Look before you leap.
2. Marry in haste, repent at leisure.
3. Lend an ear and I'll tell you.
4. What's new since yesterday?
5. All our troubles are over.
6. Might as well relax, we're not going anywhere.
7. I live here but I forgot my key.

### Check Your Progress 3

3. Tolerate	put up with
Improve	pick up
Allow	let
Attempt	try
Depart	go
Arrive	come
Diagnose, discover	find out
Repair	fix
Invite	call
Exhort	call upon

### Check Your Progress 4

4. The trick here is to work out what kind of word goes into each blank: is it the name of a person or object, is it an action word, or is it a describing word? Often more than one such word can fit in equally well. Sometimes only a single word is correct, if the blank is part of a set expression or fixed phrase.

#### 1. Driving instructions:

All right, START the car, put the key in the ignition. Now LOOK over your right shoulder to SEE if the road is CLEAR. Pull the car OUT of the parking slot. You're doing QUITE/ VERY well! Oh be careful – don't hit that [ANY OBJECT NAME WILL FIT IN HERE: BULLOCK CART, MAN, STONE ...] ! My, that was scary. Let's STOP/ GO BACK/ RETURN now. You're still not a VERY GOOD/ RELIABLE / GOOD/ SKILLED driver you know!

#### 2. Settling into a new university:

Our university has grown from strength to STRENGTH [this is a fixed expression]. With its VAST/ LUXURIOUS/ GREEN/ SPACIOUS grounds and GOOD/ GREAT/ BRILLIANT/ CONSISTENTLY GOOD academic record we feel sure that it really is a FIRST rate university. The Vice-CHANCELLOR, who is sitting on the DAIS, has stated that our university's BUDGET/ FINANCES/STUDENT STRENGTH will soon be increased. We are SURE/ HOPEFUL/ CONVINCED that everyone at our university will be [ADJECTIVE] and [ADJECTIVE].

#### 3. Plane flight:

Ladies and GENTLEMEN, we are currently cruising at a HEIGHT of [A NUMBER WORD] feet. Our SPEED is [A NUMBER WORD] an hour. There is no need for passengers to be [ADJECTIVE: ANXIOUS, IMPATIENT, UNCOMFORTABLE, UNHAPPY, UPSET ...]. Our cabin crew are here to HELP/ ASSIST you if you NEED/ REQUIRE anything. In a SHORT/ LITTLE while we shall be LANDING at Rajiv Gandhi AIRPORT in Hyderabad.

### Check Your Progress 5

1. The situation in the Kashmir valley **continued** to be peaceful yesterday.
2. According to an **official press release**
3. The civil administration **has taken** suitable measures to ...
4. The earthquake **rocked** the southwest parts of the country ...