

# An integrated skills approach to speaking and listening

**Kat Robb** suggests some activities for improving listening and speaking which students will find engaging.

I think it would be fair to say that teaching is like baking a cake. We as teachers follow a recipe; whether it is one in our heads, on that back of a beer mat or prudently following a series of steps from a lesson plan. Our goal is for the end result to be a perfectly rounded lesson, with all learning outcomes achieved, smiling students, a calm teacher and everybody is happy. The reality is somewhat different if we look carefully under the layer of icing. The book or syllabus may specify speaking practice for a lesson, but somehow I always feel I am cheating my learners if I dedicate an entire lesson to speaking. I therefore endeavour to focus on pairing the development of oral and aural skills, so there is a variety of activities which compliment each other by combining the productive and receptive skills. This helps learners feel more satisfied that they have done something fun in class: speaking, and accomplished a skill they find somewhat challenging: listening.

In authentic real-life everyday communication, there is a common partnership between speaking and listening, quite simply because we listen to what we say while we are saying it, and we listen to what others say in response to our utterances. Therefore, by applying an integrated skills approach to the development of listening and speaking skills in the language learning classroom, I find I am better matching the pattern of

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real and authentic communication more closely. The synergy of using audio to scaffold speaking is perfect from many angles: language is modelled, lexis is provided, the features of connected speech are demonstrated, to name but a few, and all this helps to build a framework from which to base speaking and pronunciation activities around.

I have taught the Cambridge main suite exams for many years, and really enjoy the challenge of sharing the learning journey with students. While their backgrounds and learner histories vary drastically, there are mainly three motivations for taking the exam: work or study (instrumental motivation), or for personal achievement (intrinsic motivation). Whatever the motivation, there is no doubt that preparing for the exam can prove an extremely challenging and at times demotivating experience. Challenging because learners are faced with learning and producing language, in addition to performing under time restraints, and responding accordingly to set tasks. The listening paper is more often than not the part of the test that worries candidates most, because invariably any listening done outside the classroom is in the format of music, or accompanied with visual prompts while learners watch films, television series and YouTube clips. Despite all attempts to lure learners into the dark depths of listening to interviews, weather reports and radio programmes,

my experience has demonstrated that I am lucky if they listen to a snippet of a podcast I have recommended. I often feel the word *listening* instantly puts up a learning barrier, so I attempt to develop skills in this area inside the classroom on a regular basis to help break this barrier, in addition to encouraging the development of autonomous listening.

Here are some activities that I find helpful for learners taking the Cambridge main suite exams:

*Desert Island Discs* has long been a favourite radio programme of mine. I select an interview with someone appealing, like Sheryl Sandberg COO of Facebook that will provide the foundations for lots of discussion. Because most learners have Facebook accounts it is something they can relate to, and it also brings the real world and learners' own lives into the classroom. The first step would be to discuss social media accounts, uses, dangers and the language that emerges. After explaining what the programme is about (if this is the first time I am using DID in class, I then get students to decide what luxury item, book and four songs they would take to a desert island and why). I play the first 3–5 minutes of the audio and learners write down any words they hear that are unfamiliar, repeated or lexical items that jump out at them and they understand. At the end of the audio clip, all words are boarded and we predict the content of the interview, and the life story of the castaway. Learners continue to listen to different 2–3 minute

excerpts of the full audio (given by the teacher), and take notes in order to design 3–5 comprehension questions with multiple-choice answers that they will give to their partner. This mirrors both parts 1 and 4 of the Cambridge listening paper, and is an effective way to practise listening by integrating speaking and writing into the lesson too. Learners can listen to the full interview in their own time, and if the teacher explains how the interviews are archived, there is sure to be something that appeals to the interest of all learners, so they can be encouraged to listen to other interviews in their own time.

The same steps can be followed with a short Ted Talk. Learners can choose a talk of their interest from the 0–6 minute category and listen 2–3 times to note down the main ideas. They then make a 60-second oral summary that they record on their phones. This can be made several times until the student is happy with their recording. The playback of the recording is useful to help them hear their own pronunciation, stress and intonation. The summary is then given to a partner to listen to. While listening, the student should note down the key points from the summary. Students then compare the extent to which their summaries match. To finish the activity both learners can watch the original Ted Talk and discuss any points they missed, and the topic that is presented.

This is a short insight into how I try to incorporate an integrated skills approach into teaching listening, by

padding out the main focus with other activities to provide variety, and to help entice learners to listen to authentic audio both inside and outside the classroom. I use the activities I have outlined here specifically to help support learners preparing for the Cambridge main suite exams, but they can of course be modified to suit different teaching contexts. I do however believe that listening needs to be given regular attention during lessons, so by breaking down activities into tangible chunks, teachers can slowly help learners develop their ear, and by using authentic materials as the basis for the activity, learners are exposed to 'real English'.



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