

# Active Listening Strategies to Boost Language Acquisition

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<b>Pedagogical skill:</b> Teaching Listening Skills	Teaching	<b>Topic:</b> Active Listening Strategies
<b>Curricular Thread:</b> Oral Communication & Speaking	Oral (Listening & Speaking)	<b>Sub thread:</b> Listening Skills

## Strategy 1: Listen and Act

### Description

This strategy develops student's understanding of content or input through oral language which can be achieved through active practice and participation. Through this strategy, active listening is promoted through Total Physical Response (TPR). Further, this strategy necessitates response to specific oral information from the learners by using hands or body movement to develop active listening skills through an adaptation of the TPR approach. The learners actively participate in the activity and not only listen, but they interact, acquiring the ability to transfer the knowledge gained translated into a semiotic modality,

in a form of mediation. We will aim at improving the learners listening competence through their active participation in group dynamics.

In order to avoid potential interferences in the practice of the listening skill, we will not use any form of written language when conducting this strategy. In other words, learners will associate the sounds of language to body movement or signals that could be aleatory or have a cultural or semiotic meaning, whereas no reading or writing is included or mediating this activity. Thus, only the listening and comprehension is practiced as an independent ability.

The spoken information (input) or the contents in each activity can vary when using this strategy: for instance, we could tell a tale where students have to mimic as they identify certain words each time they hear them, or to a higher level of acquisition, some students could narrate a story while others improvise its enacting. Also, different subjects or transversal concepts can be included (by application of CLIL), thus, this strategy can be implemented at all levels, and can be applied at a wide range of activities. A single example of how to develop this strategy within an activity designed for early stages of language acquisition is described below.

For pre-basic user such as children in Year 2-3, the ASL (American Sign Language) song for the alphabet can be conducted to encourage active listening.

Through this activity, learners will do more than just listen. They will be engaged in the activity by learning not only the sounds of the English alphabet, but also the official sign language that is used among the deaf community.

As indicated above, we will not use any form of written language, but instead, sounds will be associated to the hand signs, that will be displayed by the teacher either on a screen, by the use of flashcards or manually.

The content of this activity will then include the alphabet in its oral form, the ASL, and some transversal content such as inclusive and cooperative values and motor skills.

This content represents a form of genuine not graded material or *realia*, and the acquisition of this knowledge aims at being meaningful to students in their real lives as an extension to their communicative competences, by adding the ability to speak a basic sign language in English.

The Companion Volume of the CEFR (2018), extends the concept of mediation and emphasizes the idea of the second language learner as a social agent and as an “intermediary between interlocutors who are unable for whatever reason, to communicate with each other directly” (p.33) and to “act as an intermediary between interlocutors who are unable to understand each other directly, normally (but not exclusively) speakers of different languages” (p.33). By using this strategy, learners translate the oral message into a different language and modality, and if there is a receptor, this activity constitutes a great example of the practice of mediation as a skill itself.

One of the advantages of using this strategy is that the teacher can visually evaluate the acquisition of the listening skill by the students, by monitoring the body responses of learners to the input. Also, since motor abilities, musical content and visual skills are involved, a range of learning styles are put into practice.

### **Implementation of the Teaching Strategy**

In order to carry out this activity, in the preparation phase, the teacher must find the materials that are going to be used to display the ASL in a way that is easily seen by students, and in its case, some rehearsal is advised beforehand to become familiar with the song and the ASL. We recommend the song of the *ABC Song of the Alphabet* available in the link referenced on this section, but any song selected by the teacher could fulfill this aim.

The implementation of the activity otherwise is simple and generally enjoyable and motivational.

Errors will not be penalized, to reduce learners' anxiety, and we will offer positive feedback to all students. Training to understand the sounds of the foreign language takes a different amount of time to each learner depending on the previous knowledge of the second language and of the mother tongue itself (and the interlanguage), the physiological and cognitive aspects, the motivational factor, etc.

Before the activity, a brief introduction in the mother tongue about the use of this language as a form of communication by the deaf community is paramount to contextualize the aim pursued. Students will, by this point, be familiar with the Spanish alphabet, so acquiring the inner language structure of it and its correspondence will not entail a difficulty, thus the emphasis is placed in the integrated content (CLIL) that corresponds to learning this other language and this song in order to be able to communicate with American English sign language speakers, but the vehicle we use is the English spoken language, that should be acquired naturally.

Once the learners have understood that they are going to listen to the ASL song for the alphabet and learn it at the same time, we can play the song and display the signs at the same time for the first time. Learners should be allowed to just look and listen for the first time.

In the following rounds this song is played and displayed, learners should be encouraged to perform the hand signs themselves in a group dynamic, as they listen and watch their teacher or the screen for guidance.

In a next step, once some of the signs and sounds have been learnt by students, they can be grouped in small teams of four or five students. Once the learners are arranged in small groups, the song will be played again, but students will only be able to look at each other in order to perform the signs, helping each other in a collaborative way, so in case one forgets the sign that corresponds to the phoneme, maybe another student will remember and so it can be copied.

The amount of times we repeat this sequence in a single lesson will depend on the learners' response to the activity. The teacher should assess if students are engaged and learning, or if the activity should be repeated in other lessons.

## **Differentiation**

Class size does not necessarily entail a major determinant to carry out this specific activity, whereas if more movement is required from an adapted form of this strategy into another activity, class size should be taken into consideration to permit movement of all participants.

If possible, the *YouTube* video of the song could be displayed on a screen using a computer with a set of speakers and a projector.

With the use of technology, signs or movements can be acted upon any English song, tale or set of vocabulary that the teacher can perform in case ICTs are not available. A poster or flashcards can also be used instead of the audiovisual resource. The song can also be sung by the teacher.

In terms of space, students can act from their positions in the classroom, though access to ample space is advisable; a big classroom would be ideal, but not necessary.

If the projector is available, the ideal environment is the classroom, though it can also be realized at home with a regular computer. In case ICTs are not available, this strategy can be performed anywhere (pitch, yard, park, etc.).

## **Suggestions**

Consider using content vocabulary and concepts from other subjects of the same school year (CLIL). This would allow students to relate their

1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> languages and have the required previous knowledge. In case new vocabulary is being used, consider displaying it visually beforehand.

A variety of resources like tales, flashcards, real objects, etc., can be used to display the new vocabulary without having to use written words. Once students master some of the body or hand signals demonstrated, a variety of guessing (speaking and interacting) games can be developed. Depending on the activity, collaboration or cooperation can be encouraged through the formation of groups.

If a series of related activities prove to be effective, a public presentation would be a good way of turning this strategy into a project-based activity. For instance, a specific song can be played in front of an audience in the school or at a celebration, we can do video recordings and upload them to our website, social network or blog, etc.

There is no need for specific materials, though, the use of speakers, costumes, make up, drawings, videos, recordings, etc., could be used in any case.

Asking students what they have learnt and if they have enjoyed the activity will give the teacher valuable feedback.

## ***Strategy 2: Situational Role Enacting***

### **Description**

This strategy aims to develop active oral skills by performing situations, daily vocabulary, by conducting situational role play strategies to help students acquire communicative competence, sociocultural oral competence and practice active listening.

This strategy stems from the Open-ended scenario approach to SLA (second language acquisition) by Di Pietro (1982), where an artificial context (scenario) fosters a strategic language exchange between reciprocal roles (costumer/grocer; host/guest, etc.) with common goals (completing a sale; booking a room, etc.). It is also inspired in a dynamic study of *A Didactic Experience: Learning by Doing*, published in 2016 by Piquer, I. Sola, A., where TPR and the Oral Approach (Giralt, M. 2012; Cantero, F. J. y Giralt, M. 2019) are put into practice.

By these performances, learners will practice active listening and interactional skills, and by doing so, they will acquire the strategic competence of negotiating meaning, sociocultural and linguistic competence in the second language, as well as the specific vocabulary and protocols in each given situation.

In order to prevent written language interferences in the practice of oral abilities, the materials used when conducting this strategy will avoid the use of this language modality, and images and *realia* will be used instead.

For basic users of the language, the activity, “The Restaurant” can be a good opportunity for students to immerse themselves in a situational role-play.

### **Implementation of the Teaching Strategy**

To put this strategy into practice, a scenario of a restaurant will be designed by the teacher, turning the classroom into the contextual environment needed for students to enact their assigned roles: cooks, chef, waiters/waitress, and costumers.

Materials such as menus, tables, cutlery, fake food, money, etc. Need to be provided and arranged to create this scenario. Also, the disguises of the different roles will be prepared (a cap for waiters and waitresses, an apron for the kitchen staff, casual complements for clients, etc.)

First of all, students' previous knowledge about the protocols that need to be put into practice should be ensured. The specific vocabulary can be displayed by showing students the items in our scenario and the main protocols (I would like to have..., Can I get the check..., etc.) could be made available to students in previous lessons by different means (video play and repeat, order the conversation activity, matching text and images, etc.).

It is important to make sure that students understand the nature of the activity before they start. Students have to freely play the roles assigned by the teacher (cook, waiter or waitress, and client) and fulfil the common goal: clients will have dinner (or not), cooks will provide the dishes ordered and the waiting staff will serve.

## **Differentiation**

This activity can be carried out with any class size, though, the bigger the class size the easier to conduct the activity. Materials that can be used as substitutes: instead of disguises, and flashcards instead of the real objects

The recommended classroom space is from medium to big size spaces. Every classroom can be arranged so that a few tables function as restaurant tables and a corner of the classroom is reserved for the kitchen section. Further, this activity can be carried out outdoors or at a different setting as far as the materials are appropriate.

## ***Strategy 3: Collaborative drawing***

### **Description**

Collaborative drawing is a strategy that develops competence through the negotiation of meaning. Collaboration is developed through drawing and visual related activities. It also facilitates the development of inter-



pretative skills through activities that promote construction of meanings and associations.

This strategy entails exercising active listening through collaborative drawing in accordance to what the teacher, a classmate or a recording indicates orally. In this fashion, we facilitate the development of interpretative skills through activities that promote collaborative construction of meaning and associations. The instructions should be appropriate to the students' competency level and should be based on the curriculum described for each stage. CLIL related concepts may be incorporated to contextualize learning.

Written words should not be used when practicing this skill, as listening and reading are two different and independent abilities that need to be practiced independently (Oral Approach), instead, students will listen and draw the story as they perceive it to be.

The practice of this strategy will develop oral communicative competence through the negotiation of meaning that takes place among the group of students.

### **Implementation of the Teaching Strategy**

Independent users of the language can capitalize on the use of Collaborative Drawing to develop their communicative skills particularly their listening abilities. The activity, "Traditional Tale Collaborative Drawing" is a good example. This activity consists of a collaborative drawing or sketching of an Ecuadorian folk tale.

By including this content, we are working on the cultural mediation skill of our students. They will translate their ancestral knowledge into a different language in order to convey these traditions to a foreign person or group.

Through collaborative work, students are given the opportunity to participate in sharing their perceptions and interpretations of a literary material, as well as having the chance to participate based on their own level of comprehension and to benefit from each other's performance. Students need to be aware that this is not a competitive activity. The common goal is to draw a sketch or simple storyboard of the story to then be shared to the rest of the big group.

For the materials, we will provide students with paper to draw on, and other drawing materials. The 'funkier the materials' (stickers, glitter, collage material, etc.) the more attractive the activity may result. For this sample activity, we have selected the tale: *Etsa and the demon Iwia?* referenced below. As in every activity, it is advisable to check students' previous knowledge and relation to this content.

This activity has to be performed in teams, in a way that each member of the team has the opportunity to collaborate. Thus, teams of more than four members are not advised. Once the materials are distributed, students are advised to listen carefully, as they will have to draw a storyboard of what they understand. The first time the story is read, students can be allowed to simply concentrate and listen, so that they understand the length of the tale and can adapt it to the drawing space they have got.

The second time the story is played, the recording can be stopped after each scene for students to discuss what they are going to depict, or it can be left to the end of the tale so that students need to recall and negotiate the whole story. The teacher can decide the number of times the tale is played depending on the learners' progress.

Once the drawing part of the activity is considered concluded by the group, each group must show their results to the rest of the group, explaining what they understood about the story.

## **Differentiation**

This activity can be carried out with any class size. Materials that can be used as substitutes: If the materials indicated above are not available, plain paper and pencil can be used. Further, this activity can be carried out at any place. The indications can simply adjust to the environment and play with these possibilities offered by the world outside the classroom walls.

## **Suggestions**

Depending on the contents, this activity can develop the acquisition of a specific type of vocabulary which can be related to sciences, math, and other subjects or areas of knowledge.

Groups can be formed in different ways. For example, visual cards that contain different colors, numbers, animals may serve as grouping schemes. The ending of stories can be open-ended, and students can be requested to finish them and then share their own versions to the rest of the class.

This strategy has several versions: For instance, students may be asked to draw the same pictures by following the same instructions and then compare the drawings with their peers. They can also do cooperative drawing where they draw the same picture in pairs negotiating what they have understood. The teacher can also group the class in teams of 3 or 4 students giving each student a piece of information, for him or her to create different pictures and try to build his or her knowledge from it; or for them to construct one picture reflecting their understanding of the instructions given. If students use a language portfolio, these pictures would be susceptible to be used as part of their dossier; otherwise, the teacher may display them in the classroom or in bulletin boards for the rest of the school to see. In this way, the strategy would turn meaning-

ful to them. The same strategy can be used to other creative expression techniques, like modelling, cutting and pasting, etc.

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