

# How to learn a language on your own – The Ultimate Guide (Part 5 – Effective Listening)

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Here we are – the fifth part of the guide. Listening.

You wouldn't believe how long I've ignored it!

I was actually convinced that mastering grammar and vocabulary is (more less) enough to have a decent conversation with foreigners. And that these competence will take care of the rest.

Boy oh boy, was I wrong!

Of course, like all the theories, it all seemed rosy until it got confronted with reality.

## My “Brilliant” Theory

Just don't laugh too hard!

Years ago I was obsessing about German. I rolled up my sleeves, got down to work, learned about 8000 words and got a pretty good grasp of grammar. Basically, I could say almost anything I wanted without being too vague. It felt great!

Not so long afterwards, I got a chance to visit France. There, I met an elderly German couple. “That's my chance to socialize! That's my chance to SHINE!”, a naive thought crossed my mind.

I approached them and asked them some questions. You know, just an ordinary small-talk. What happened just a moment later left a nasty scars on my linguistic self-esteem.

What came out of their mouth was an absolute babble. They could have, as well, farted with their armpits.

My face went red as I asked them, time and time again, to repeat what they had just said. Just one more time. But slower. DAMN YOU! Slower and clearer I said!

And there I stood with glassy eyes, staring at the debris of what was once my theory...

## Listening As A Key Skill

I guess, what i am trying to say is that listening is extremely important. Since then, I've met many people who are fully functional in the language of their choice just because they understand what they hear.

It's not that surprising when you think about it.

**EVERY complex skill is comprised of a number of smaller elements.**

These elements, in turn, are comprised of even smaller elements.

So you can say roughly that communication is nothing more than being able to understand what you hear and being able to express yourself.

But as I so painfully learned, listening is much more important. That's what makes any kind of social interaction possible.

Since then, I established **listening and speaking as a core** of my language skills. These skills require an immediate response.



Listening provides you with more sensory channels, such as: emotions, hearing visual stimuli (when you listen and watch something).

That's why it's much easier for you to remember real life conversations than excerpts from articles.

The final and essential reason to opt for listening is that nobody cares if you read or write slowly. While doing these things, you can typically take your time to double-check anything your heart desires.

"Smith is such a slow reader. I think I'll fire him."  
Yep, I also have never heard of such a situation.

However, it is important to note that writing and reading are interconnected with speaking and listening. And the progress in any of these areas influence one another

### **Preparation**

Do you have to go through the preparation before listening practice? Of course not. But don't be too surprised if you end up getting frustrated quickly or bitterly realize that your progress is excruciatingly slow.

So where should you start?

### **FIND RIGHT RESOURCES**

You might wonder what "right resources" means. And as everything it depends.

- **Beginners / Intermediate Learners**

If you fall into this category, you should find some simplified materials where the speech is slower, clearer and ideally – transcribed. You can find resources to over 100 languages on my other website: [Language Links Database](#).

- **Advanced Learners**

If you're at least on B2 level, it means that the only right solution for you is to lay your hands on programmes, talk shows, movies, etc. in original.

## **GET YOUR RESOURCES HANDY**

Do you know this annoying feeling when you promise yourself something and then you can't seem to force yourself to follow through?

Why is that?

Well, the research (and experience) has it that **if you need to spend more than 20 seconds to start doing something**, there is a big chance that **you'll fail**. The "activation time" should be as short as possible.

Choose one or two programmes to listen to and make sure that they are just a click away.

## **Some Tips Before You Start Listening**

### **MENTAL PREPARATION**

- Come to terms with the fact that **you are not going to understand everything** for a long time
- **Listen as often as it's only possible**. Listen while doing household chores. Listen when you're at the gym. Listen when you're in a car. You get it – **LISTEN**.
- **Don't get annoyed** when you don't understand something. **Stress is your archenemy** in learning. It's like with Tibetan throat singing, you won't be able to wrap your head around it at the beginning. Hmm, I need to work on my comparisons.
- And no matter what, **don't give up** you softie! Grin and bear it!

### **MATTER-OF-FACT PREPARATION**

- **Do not translate** into your native tongue. You should be fully focused on a speaker not the translation process.
- Listen to something you **enjoy**
- **Prepare before listening** – quite often it's possible to check what the news or some programme is about. Thanks to this knowledge you can prepare vocabulary beforehand. If you're not sure about words which might be used, try to brainstorm them.
- **Remove distractions** – you know why. They're welcome addition when you already understand much as they make your listening practice more natural.
- **Make a goal**. You can listen for meaning, for sounds, for tones, for melody, for stress.
- If you know that listening is extremely boring for you, try to **gamify your practice** – e.g. give yourself 1 point each time when you hear word starting with P. Or drink one shot of Tequilla. Whatever, just make sure it's fun for you.
- **Build sound recognition**. Do you know the most distinctive sounds of your target language? No? Then move to Part 3 of this course. Such knowledge can considerably accelerate your understanding capabilities!
- **Be aware of how the language changes** when it's spoken. I can't stress this one enough. If you know how the sounds connect, when they are deleted or inserted, you'll need much less

time to progress!

Look at this example:

What are you going to do – Whaddya gonna do?

Being aware of the fact that when a consonant of one word neighbours a vowel of another word, it makes you pronounce these two separate words as one, can help you tremendously with your listening practice.

That's why you pronounce "it is" as one word "itis"

Another example from English is transformation of [d] and [y].

When these sounds neighbour each other they are transformed into [dʒ]

[d] + [y] = [dʒ]

### Strategies To Follow During Listening Practice



Throughout the years I've managed to come up with quite many solutions to how I can improve my listening capabilities.

Digest them at your own pace, **take what you need and ignore the rest** .

- **Listen for the gist** of the conversation. Once you understand it move on to details.
- When you watch materials in original, **observe mouths** of actors / hosts and **read their lips**.
- Try to **understand non-verbal communication** of your speaking partner (actors, etc.)
- **Listen to the melody** of the language
- Once you get accustomed to the melody of the language try to **separate the ongoing flow of words by** (e.g.) **pressing your fingers** against a table every time when you hear that some word is accented. It's my favorite trick. What's shocking that sometimes when I listen to French and do it, I can understand almost every word as my brain effectively separates them. Once I stop my understanding goes down significantly.

- **Concentrate on sounds which are foreign** to you. This technique can also help you to maintain your concentration
- **Listen to first and last letter of the word.** It's especially helpful when you're just starting your listening practice. In this case this technique will help hunt down various words. Why? The first letter influences the sound that the word makes; therefore, when we are trying to hear various words, the first letter will be very important.  
s ..sm...(smile?), smi...(smirk? smite?), smit... (smite?!), smith (I knew it!)
- **Use logic to conclude** what will follow (get in the habit of guessing)
- **Listen** to a recording **more than once**. At first to understand the gist and then to get details.
- **Slow down the speed** of recording. For this purpose use [Audacity](#) or [AllPlayer](#).
- **Speed up the speed** of recording to extend your comfort zone and then move back to an actual pace.
- Remember that **listening is an active process**, note down any phrases or words which you find interesting or simply don't understand

That's all folks!

Do you have other (weird?) listening strategies which you frequently use? I'd love to hear them!

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