

Listening Skill: a method

When we talk, the sounds of language blur, merge and even disappear altogether. We do not say “The cat sat on the mat” – we say “`ca’sa’oth’ma’ ”. Only those who already spell know that cat has a “t” in it. Conversational listening must rely heavily on context and uses criteria too woozy for spelling purposes.

When seeking a candidate spelling, a legitimate strategy is to replay the sounds of the word mentally or aloud and listen to the result. To do this, though, you need to differentiate these sounds far more precisely than you do when the word comes in a conversational flood of smeary sound. The ear must be much more tightly “tuned up” for spelling than it is for talk, must train itself to use tighter criteria and seek finer detail. This “tuning up” turns out to be “phonemic awareness”.

Phonemic awareness is easily taught. Although even as a novice tutor I could dimly see the need for the skill of accurate listening I did not, initially, realise how easily it can be taught, nor what a difference to performance (and, very importantly, to confidence) it can make, cheaply and in a very short time. Using the technique was a real eye-opening experience. My method is as follows:

1. Make lists of words. Each word should contain only one of two or three alternative sounds which your student confuses and needs to distinguish.

For example: a list might exercise the ear in distinguishing between the sounds of “*cl*” and “*cr*”, or those of the “*short e*” and the “*short i*”.

In the first case your list might read “*cream, climb, crumb, clean, cliff, creek, clone, criminal* ...and so on.

In the second case your list might go “*will, well, till, bill, end, spend, better, hit, blister, bitter* ...and so on.

2. Make the student aware of the need for detailed listening and of how this exercise goes in practice.
3. Tell the student which letter or letter patterns to listen for in an upcoming list. (These may be jotted down as an aide memoire if this is felt helpful – eg “*s/sh*” or “*er/y*” or *a/o*.)
4. Read the list aloud to the student one word at a time. All the student does is to listen and declare, after each word, which of the letter patterns it contains. The student sings out, for example, either “*bee / ell*” or “*bee / ar*”, (if the list is rehearsing *bl* & *br*) or perhaps “*eye / enn / gee*” or “*why*” (if rehearsing *-ing* or *-y* endings).

Note that the student sings out letter names – not weird noises. Learning to listen carefully is not the same as learning that spelling is primarily a phonic activity!

The student is very specifically not asked to do any more than recognise the previously agreed letter patterns, particularly not to spell any of the words. This must be made clear from the very beginning. The exercise is pure listening, pure aural letter pattern discrimination, nothing more.

Place the student under no additional pressure – such a choice exercise is stress enough. Make sure that you allow time to assimilate and that the student can “hear” any errors before banging on. As with any such exercise, if it doesn’t go well and easily, stop. Keep it light and this will make a cheerful break with big payoffs in terms of learning to listen accurately and of becoming just a little, but precious, bit more confidently autonomous.

Short i / e

his win when net pet pit bit sit set bet

pin Fred did link Tim Ken Bill sell tell well

fill sill fell grim sin zen send pill pen stem

bend bent dip step sled Kent pink drink sink next

debt wish hill risk wreck peck pick neck stick nick

grip guess kids hip will crisp dim den bliss grill

this list miss mess kick speck rest nest wrist hiss

disc deck sick stink men less dill smell spill slipped

step bill slept sex them beck slim slip peg pig

wren mint sent limb hem wig big dig beg rig

Short a / e

hat	pet	mat	gnat	pat
went	had	band	bent	bend
ban	zen	rat	net	send
ten	tan	man	men	bat
bet	wreck	sack	pack	pen
rack	rap	wrench	ram	clam
when	lent	hand	sand	sent
grand	mess	best	test	ham
next	fax	fan	map	tap
clap	celt	tramp	wet	wham
jet	stamp	jab	lamp	stem
tell	mash	crash	dash	cash
pelt	sad	grab	flab	stab
step	leg	brag	lag	rag
match	fetch	catch	wretch	desk
slang	knack	hemp	gran	gland
bell	kept	cat	rent	rant
mad	yell	spell	spam	slam
jam	jelly	rally	sell	bank

Short a / e

hat	pet	mat	gnat	pat
went	had	band	bent	bend
ban	zen	rat	net	send
ten	tan	man	men	bat
bet	wreck	sack	pack	pen
rack	rap	wrench	ram	clam
when	lent	hand	sand	sent
grand	mess	best	test	ham
next	fax	fan	map	tap
clap	celt	tramp	wet	wham
jet	stamp	jab	lamp	stem
tell	mash	crash	dash	cash
pelt	sad	grab	flab	stab
step	leg	brag	lag	rag
match	fetch	catch	wretch	desk
slang	knack	hemp	gran	gland
bell	kept	cat	rent	rant
mad	yell	spell	spam	slam
jam	jelly	rally	sell	bank

Short a / o

hot	shop	hat	not	spot
cot	cat	match	mat	mock
long	rang	rank	song	sang
on	am	and	off	lamb
hand	bomb	Tom	wrong	slang
top	cop	tap	lap	God
glad	shot	spat	pod	bad
man	slop	bag	bog	slog
slag	slap	moggy	boggy	baggy
bap	plot	flat	plonk	plank
pot	gnat	knock	knack	plan
stop	toss	moss	sock	sack
lack	lock	tack	stock	stack
gone	nod	had	fan	fond
blonde	bland	fog	fag	ban
sop	sap	dock	back	rock
pop	pap	rap	hop	wrap
romp	stamp	pomp	camp	maths

Short a / u

nut	fun	gnat	sang	lamb
slam	slum	but	ram	rum
bum	sand	clump	strand	man
stamp	stump	stumble	rump	ramp
stand	stunned	rat	rut	cap
cup	suck	muck	sap	sack
crash	cab	sad	crush	duck
sun	pack	patch	band	clutch
grunt	gap	buck	land	lump
sung	bang	stunt	bung	flung
stung	slat	slut	gut	hat
grab	mud	grub	dud	dad
clunk	clank	tank	gas	bunk
sap	sally	rally	gully	funny
bag	sag	bug	rug	hug
lack	fag	luck	stuck	ham

Short e / o

when	wet	net	not	pod
ten	God	sex	song	long
men	Fred	bed	nod	kept
cop	neck	sock	wreck	knock
fell	tell	sell	gone	top
jet	crop	them	Tom	hop
stop	step	then	shop	pen
pet	zen	set	hot	tot
cod	next	Kent	lots	sled
slops	bomb	bond	bend	bell
job	shot	shed	shod	hod
help	hock	cross	mess	loss
less	body	rest	crock	nest
lost	letter	knocker	hopper	cropper
stroppey	message	copy	knotty	settle
bottle	bottom	borrow	belly	hollow

Short e / u

west	vest	clutch	net	hum
bum	nest	Fred	crest	duck
nuts	crumb	bet	but	bud
dud	slum	jet	jut	bent
dump	them	fell	smell	smut
tell	dull	sump	cull	rest
rust	must	mess	dust	best
fuss	bust	guest	next	suck
peck	deck	luck	muck	buck
neck	pun	strut	stretch	clutch
gun	hen	pet	pest	bunk
lent	lend	skunk	sunk	sex
ten	zen	spud	spend	run
tug	beg	bug	wreck	ruck
crush	mesh	telly	supper	number
member	jelly	dumped	dugout	beggar

Short i / o

his	not	Tom	bond	sin
will	top	song	sing	pick
pill	zip	slop	not	knock
soft	rift	gift	sift	golf
sick	stick	stock	crop	stop
stiff	till	wrong	will	ring
sip	sop	wing	pong	nod
rid	dip	did	rod	pop
job	sit	rot	big	rig
God	limb	dog	dig	pip
lop	lip	sink	drink	plonk
dock	nick	romp	limp	bomb
with	toff	snotty	little	bottle
tipple	toss	bliss	cross	boss
miss	moss	kiss	bother	bitter
hopping	shopping	winning	cobble	riddle

Short i / u

pig	pug	stick	stuck	sick
suck	duck	luck	lick	fudge
fridge	bridge	sump	grudge	nudge
tip	tup	fin	mug	fun
rig	fig	big	rug	bug
but	sit	nit	hit	till
hut	dull	sill	putt	mill
grill	mull	cull	grunt	gust
grist	chip	mumps	puff	mist
Dutch	much	clutch	glitch	pitch
ditch	hitch	hutch	muck	pup
pip	did	nip	nipple	pick
shut	slum	slit	spud	prim
dumb	crush	fish	him	mush
hum	gut	gun	gin	whist
rugby	lumber	riddle	muddle	humble

Short o / u

God	dog	hum	hug	dug
log	dud	lug	fun	stun
rug	cod	slug	Mum	slop
sock	rod	mud	mug	duck
dock	suck	muck	nut	not
got	hop	hot	such	much
stop	gum	gone	gun	sludge
drudge	budge	bodge	cost	rust
must	bun	clutch	botch	moss
rump	stomp	sorry	slurry	hurry
curry	lorry	soft	dust	knob
rub	run	rob	fudge	mock
muck	long	song	strong	sung
strung	plonk	rum	luck	stock
knock	lock	cluck	clock	lung
long	mock	buck	dung	wrong
spun	bottle	huddle	muddle	copy

Short Vowels A E I O U

hand	pond	fun	shut	hat
pen	pin	still	hell	next
stop	step	strip	strut	back
nap	cap	help	hutch	much
rich	bet	but	bat	hop
long	will	hum	man	stamp
can	next	grill	blot	blush
mushy	sand	if	on	am
wrong	bent	sorry	handy	welly
smell	rest	band	song	moss
happy	silly	rust	wish	miss
crush	crash	dish	pill	dull
tell	pal	cringe	gunge	hubby
nappy	lorry	curry	battle	little
bottle	rattle	kettle	riddle	muddle
weld	cup	stuck	sick	stock
suck	pack	muck	under	off
chock	chick	check	chuck	stack
blonde	fund	clump	clamp	chimp
stamp	wimp	ban	bit	land
bend	willing	shopping	standard	lamp
man	win	sin	Mum	men
is	up	in	of	it
gong	gang	wing	dung	clang

s / sh

simmer	shimmer	summer	shut	ship
silk	shot	shape	show	soft
simple	silly	soppy	shopping	shiver
sit	same	shame	shine	sign
save	shave	shift	sift	silver
seem	sheep	sieve	she	saint
shake	shore	shove	sip	sump
shudder	sill	supper	sheet	sauce
sausage	side	shoe	soggy	shilling
sun	sand	sea	shy	sharp
sergeant	shaft	shifty	sad	shone
shop	sop	shambles	seen	suffer
some	shuffle	subtle	shunt	seam
shameful	similar	satisfaction	shambolic	surreptitious
syllabus	shopaholic	salivate	shaving	soup

Er / y endings

happy	snappy	silly	bitter	letter
zipper	proper	copy	paper	potty
pepper	slobber	sloppy	chatter	Paddy
sweater	faster	slower	easy	cheesy
harder	randy	copper	windy	winner
bigger	policy	fatter	nappy	body
spotty	grotty	hotter	handy	winter
summer	sunny	funny	many	any
noisy	tiny	never	brother	ever
father	city	after	mother	other
picky	sticker	lucky	mucky	rugby
soccer	supporter	sorry	mugger	story
drinker	gambler	singer	filly	dancer
belly	runner	teacher	welly	telly
rider	older	smelly	water	holly

or / ar

pork	north	car	army	dart
part	start	port	sport	for
star	far	mark	storm	lord
fort	lark	lard	sort	cork
park	born	normal	market	farm
Norfolk	Portsmouth	dark	marmite	starve
porter	marksman	Yorkshire	carpenter	gargle
chortle	cordless	inform	report	harmful
torture	carnival	corn	fortune	farce
forgo	carpet	corner	garbage	horse

sm / sl beginnings

small	smile	sleep	slip	slug
smell	slipper	smart	smallpox	sly
smack	slap	slope	smother	slumber
slot	smoke	Smith	smudge	sludge
smuggle	smallholding	slime	slut	smash
slave	slander	smutty	slither	slate
slang	smiling	smarmy	slant	smock
smear	smog	slender	sliver	slide
smoky	sleek	slippery	slum	smooth

ay / oy

day	boy	stay	delay	may
ploy	away	annoy	pay	Roy
toy	play	stray	enjoy	gay
employ	hay	way	say	pray

th / f

thirsty	first	thirst	thing	fond
free	three	fat	think	finger
fool	this	that	then	them
after	bath	if	path	thought
though	thimble	food	forecast	thumb
forest	croft	soft	lift	with
throw	these	those	there	fender
fair	funny	thump	fix	thistle
fall	thaw	thanks	front	frost
floor	thief	flimsy	flannel	thin
thermometer	fabulous	force	theatre	fame

bl / br

bridge	brick	broken	blood	bleed
blind	break	Bristol	blister	brandy
broad	blemish	brim	black	breed
broody	block	broom	bloom	bleep
bright	brine	bride	blast	blow
blink	brink	abrupt	sublime	abroad
feeble	bloke	blame	brush	blush
able	comfortable	reasonable	brittle	blinkered
brilliant	blade	brim	bristle	blonde
blight	bliss	brunette	blue	broolly

sh / ch

chip	shop	ship	chop	shape
she	show	choke	cheap	wish
push	teach	reach	rush	cheese
speech	smooch	sheep	ash	cash
crush	chatter	shatter	rash	shallow
sharp	chap	charm	much	each
shudder	children	shutter	shiver	shine
chime	dash	chest	challenge	shed
dish	wish	wash	shambles	chin
chocolate	chopper	chisel	shoddy	shelf
share	torch	march	fashion	churn

ng / nk

bang	bank	sting	stink	sing
sink	sung	lung	drunk	plank
ring	pink	rink	link	spring
bunk	mink	dung	pong	stink
wink	bring	string	honk	rang
hank	hung	bring	brink	sung
sang	fling	hanker	belong	among
long	rank	blank	wrong	tanker
hangman	bongo	bonkers	sprinkler	angry
sprinkle	mingle	angle	ankle	dangle
tinkle	wrangle	wrinkle	single	monk
think	thing	wonky	drinker	singer

pl / bl

blink	plonk	blue	plough	please
blind	plan	plywood	blister	plug
blow	blood	plumber	bladder	platform
pleasure	plaster	bleeding	blade	blast
bloke	plate	plastic	bluff	pleasant
plenty	black	pledge	plunge	blank
blatant	place	plain	play	blonde
bleach	explain	plutonium	explosion	complain

ing / er / ed endings

pepper	peeping	potted	canned	peeped
spanner	spanned	banner	banned	standing
roller	smoker	smoked	smoking	spelling
writer	writing	sister	sitting	walked
runner	running	paper	painted	stopped
blender	shopping	stopped	stopper	driver
driving	danger	sleeping	mother	father
baking	baker	baked	heaped	noticed
liver	screwdriver	locked	knocker	locker
locked	worked	sanded	making	working
authenticated	manufacturing	manufacturer	manufactured	liberated

sp / st

stay	spill	spell	spy	storm
space	style	stage	spider	stew
stop	sponge	stray	specimen	stitch
spindle	stopcock	strict	sparrow	stubborn
spare	stare	stomach	spade	steep
spanner	staple	stable	strike	spring
stock	spot	spit	spectacular	stupendous
stool	strap	spike	stone	sponsor
spinster	spin	strange	straw	stigma
spaghetti	splinter	standard	stamp	spelling
aspirin	astrology	conspiracy	instinct	desperate
history	inspection	insist	consistency	inspire

spl / spr

sprinkle	spray	sprout	splint	splinter
spruce	splendid	sprain	spread	splice
spring	spleen	sprint	sprung	sprocket
split	sprat	splash	splutter	sprawl

cl / cr

climb	crime	clamp	cramp	cluster
crawl	creep	crumb	claw	cream
cry	cross	climate	clothes	criminal
crazy	client	creature	clutch	clever
clip	crib	craft	cranberry	clean
claret	clinic	crackling	crab	crumpet
club	clap	clotted	creepy	crash
cloudy	crunch	class	cliff	critical
claustrophobic	clairvoyant	crucifixion	cleanliness	creation

ing / y endings

nappy	willing	silly	shilling	lazy
baking	driving	early	penny	happy
shopping	easy	many	any	sorry
writing	fatty	fattening	greasy	gravy
sleeping	dozy	sleepy	charming	reading
spelling	welly	lorry	evening	handy
telly	viewing	stunning	lightning	mighty
lady	waiting	amazing	nothing	party
parting	anything	somebody	something	only
army	enemy	attacking	defending	definitely

scr / str

scream	stream	stroll	scroll	scrawl
strong	scrum	strain	stroke	struck
screw	strike	straw	scrape	scratch
strategy	strength	scramble	scribble	stretch
strut	stripe	straight	scrabble	scrub
screech	scrawny	scripture	street	stranger
describe	Australia	inscription	destroy	destruction

Triple consonant beginnings

scr / spr / spl / str / shr

shred	strike	spring	shrimp	shrug
string	string	strong	splint	sprint
strategy	stroke	spleen	sprout	scrape
scramble	shrub	strung	sprocket	strychnine
stretcher	sprawl	scrawny	shroud	sprinkle
scrub	strength	spray	strap	spread
strip	scripture	scream	scramble	stroppey
shrink	sprightly	sprawling	splinter	strange
shrapnel	sprain	splendid	sprang	shrill

Double consonant beginnings

blue	brick	plonk	primitive	creek
small	grease	plywood	glands	fly
try	spy	cry	frown	brown
crown	swallow	speak	spoken	tree
plumber	driver	priest	free	clutch
crutch	break	bloke	bloomers	broken
slippers	transformer	twenty	small	stall
smoulder	spanner	glow	snow	smile
pray	play	spot	droopy	glider
blind	frame	breed	crime	prune
trumpet	spider	twin	glitter	grim
treat	trump	standard	blister	slave
sniper	sting	sleep	click	block
prove	drove	clove	black	block
brave	spindle	stone	brink	blunder
glue	frozen	dream	trouble	cross
twice	trip	trap	clue	true
spend	blend	stop	grow	friend
brake	blow	Brighton	flicker	fraud
fright	bright	flight	spite	speech
crime	bride	blonde	brunette	brilliant
speed	blinkers	grudge	green	flop
drink	brink	France	grapple	brittle
fragile	brother	fresh	planning	pretty

p / b

pink	bath	patio	biscuit	Beethoven
peace	post	pumpkin	bumpkin	puzzle
potato	beast	pest	best	bottom
picture	public	better	bottle	puppy
bingo	bundle	politics	boredom	balance
pizza	book	picnic	bicycle	basket
piano	percent	pathology	partner	pond
boundary	botany	become	petrol	payment
perspiration	pesticide	billiard	ball	pot
bovine	pet	bullock	portrait	belly
bun	pin	pass	bin	bet
big	pig	pong	bang	bung

qu / cl / cr

quite	crime	climb	cream	clean
quick	crawl	crumb	clamp	cramp
queen	crystal	client	clutch	quadrangle
quack	creepy	claustrophobia	cross	quantity
club	claw	clouds	crash	quiz
cluster	criminal	creature	clever	clinic
quote	quid	cranberry	crazy	clip
clothes	cry	climate	quiet	cracker
clap	creation	quilt	click	clock
cress	creep	crutch	quote	quit
crucify	craft	claret	quiver	crud
clarinet	class	cruelty	crib	quota
quirky	credible	quantum	cricket	clam
clay	crisps	clear	query	clerk

n / m

nail	mail	Nile	mile	mint
mister	never	night	might	miserable
not	naughty	nippy	misty	most
nuts	natural	much	many	may
net	my	mine	normal	modest
nibble	muddle	melon	nettle	number
another	amount	rain	green	harm
harmless	arms	harmless	window	Spain
danger	claim	some	painful	somewhere
any	anything	sun	sunset	broken
time	pint	smile	indoors	inside
impossible	indirect	inspect	into	on
down	round	enthusiastic	impolite	sound
taken	dream	made	make	nitpicking
antique	ambulance	America	Andover	Amsterdam
plane	cram	clan	clandestine	hamster
handle	camera	candle	same	stain
nasty	mouse	nice	meet	mortgage

g / c

gun	cunning	good	cop	collar
candle	gamble	gorgeous	Cornwall	calendar
cook	go	gum	cap	cast
cow	gown	gumption	Cumbria	general
gin	game	cure	garden	cotton
grow	crow	climb	grime	crime
glands	grand	green	club	grub
grunt	glimmer	clamber	creepy	crawl
gristle	crystal	claw	glue	clue
acorn	agree	become	ago	across
agony	concert	concern	catch	grisly
grateful	incoherent	ungrateful	describe	description
disgusting	disgrace	discord	disgraceful	disgruntled
argue	committee	argument	calculator	commitment

ck / k endings

luck	lock	lack	lick	neck
nick	look	cook	book	took
duck	sick	sack	seek	soak
week	walk	talk	tack	back
beck	buck	beak	speak	Greek
dark	park	lark	mark	muck
stuck	stick	stock	steak	stork
work	shark	shirk	jerk	jack
smack	sleek	creek	sneak	snick
tick	teak	hook	crook	cheek
tuck	track	truck	bleak	pork
perk	clerk	hack	knack	weak

Double consonant endings

act	insect	reject	pact	contract
connect	correct	instruct	reflect	conduct
inspect	detect	construct	deduct	concoct
mend	send	grand	band	hand
found	round	sound	ground	pond
wind	mind	bland	blend	fond
weld	mild	mould	old	told
sold	fold	bold	gold	wild
bald	scald	cold	hold	held
nest	boast	best	toast	roast
cast	last	past	coast	fast
test	nest	lost	post	insist
assist	consist	desist	most	must
sink	drunk	link	stank	pink
sunk	honk	plonk	drink	drank
chunk	monk	kink	wink	bank
thank	think	mink	spank	sank
lamp	wimp	limp	lump	stamp
clump	pimp	hemp	stump	hump
bits	lots	rats	hits	gets
spots	pockets	bets	spits	guts
lilt	tilt	wilt	halt	cult
twins	buns	pins	pens	sins
went	hint	grunt	lent	dent
count	want	amount	account	mint
stint	hunt	meant	pant	spent
long	song	sing	thing	sung
fling	wrong	thong	ring	rung
bung	sting	stung	hang	hung
bring	gang	dung	pong	strong

pre / pro beginnings

precaution	prepare	precise	precious	previous
probable	probation	problem	proceeds	process
precipice	precision	precocious	precondition	predator
proliferate	prolong	prohibit	procure	procedure
precursor	predestination	predicament	prefab	predict
prodigal	professor	profile	professional	prolong
preparation	predatory	predictable	prescription	preserve
profound	promise	project	promenade	programme
present	Presbyterian	prescribe	premature	prefect
proper	promote	pronounce	property	protein
predominate	presentation	prepared	prediction	preparation
protective	provide	proviso	protest	protestant
pregnant	presume	preliminary	presumably	pretend
produce	propose	production	promotion	progress
prefer	prediction	preferably	prejudice	premonition
prospect	proposal	productivity	problematic	prosecution

in / en beginnings

infatuated	individual	incorrect	insufficient	indifferent
entire	enthusiasm	envelope	enjoy	engage
interrupt	intention	invention	inability	institute
entrance	engine	engaged	entitled	enclose
instead	install	interrogate	interpret	inbuilt
enough	encourage	enthusiastic	endurance	enlarge
instruct	inform	instruction	information	intelligent
enable	engineer	enjoyment	enterprise	environment
intimidate	income	invitation	intermediate	invite
entice	entertainment	enlist	envisage	enumerate

of / off

Stop the world, I want to get off!

A pound of sugar.

A lot of nonsense.

Shove off!

Off the record.

A cup of tea.

Did you see her off on the train?

I owe, I owe, so off to work I go!

They drove off into the sunset.

Quick off the mark.

And they're off!

A matter of time.

A piece of cake.

Of all the bars in all the world ...

The prawns have gone off.

Off you go!

What a waste of time.

The offside wing mirror is cracked.

Off with his head!

The battle of Britain.

We all want more time off.

A pint of lager.

A bottle of plonk.

That's a bit off, don't you think?

Lift off; we have lift off!