

Can They Understand What I Say? Part 1

Listening is a learned skill. Not only must students be patient and attentive to what you are saying, but they must also differentiate between phonetic sounds and then package those sounds into identifiable bits of meaning.

English language learners not only translate words, but also phonetic sounds. Not all languages use the same set of sounds. Many languages do not include the phonetic sound for the English “th” or the English version of short a (as in “cat”).

Some languages may associate one sound from the English language with a different letter. For example, the letter “j” may be associated with the English “y” sound, letter “a” may be associated with the sound of short “o” as in “hot,” or the letter “h” may be silent, but the “h-sound” may be associated with the letter “a.”

Additionally, when students listen to what you say, they may not differentiate between common phonetic English sounds; that is, two sounds are heard as the same sound. This happens when that phonetic sound is not particularly important in their native language. For example, for some English language learners, our short “i” sounds like long “e,” short “e” sounds like short “a”, or “s” and “sh” sound identical. Therefore, when you say “ship,” they may hear “sheep” or “sip,” leading to confusion and misunderstanding. Discriminating between these sounds takes focused practice.

One way to support understanding for English language learners is to explicitly connect spoken words with written words. Pronounce essential vocabulary slowly and clearly while pointing to the word. This gives beginning and intermediate ESOL students time to differentiate between the phonetic sounds, translate, and then connect that sound with the word's meaning.