

**DEVELOPMENT OF LISTENING SKILLS  
THROUGH PLAY (Based on Teaching Russian  
as a Foreign Language)**

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**Key words and phrases:** effectiveness of training; listening; game tasks; speaking; stages of learning.

**Abstract:** The article generalizes the experience of teaching Russian as a foreign language with the use of different types of games in teaching listening to non-natives. Details of selected games and methods of their implementation are given.

The process of teaching Russian to foreign students involves comprehensive introduction of linguistic material i.e. lexical, grammatical and phonetic material is aggregated in certain complexes that involve real communication. Speaking requires students' skills and abilities in a variety of language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Listening (perception and understanding of oral speech) is an active creative process. Listener perceives and understands already formulated thoughts. This is accompanied by a complex mental activity and hard work of memory.

A student can choose a pace that is useful to independently determine the length and number of pauses when reading, speaking and writing. The listener is totally dependent on the source of information.

Initially, listening must be developed in close connection with speaking. This helps to establish strong links between articulatory and auditory sensations. Therefore, listening should precede speech and phonetic exercises, singing, imitation.

Teaching listening skills begins with the development of phonemic and tonal hearing. Clear pronunciation skills are one of the conditions that facilitate the process of perception. There are different types of exercises for the development of speech of hearing. These include "Listen and repeat the

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following words (phrases, sentences)”. Students are supposed to repeat the proposed material after a single presentation. Exercises based on imitation on the phrase level can be as follows: “Repeat the phrase observing intonation”, “Repeat the phrase transforming the narrative tone into the interrogative tone and vice versa”. Exercises to distinguish sounds, syllables, words, phrases, semantic units in the proposed isolated or connected material are useful for the development of speech hearing.

Probabilistic anticipation plays an important role in the development of listening skills. Linguistic experience helps to ensure that students can hear some of the words, sentences or messages and anticipate. Probabilistic anticipation is manifested from syllable to the text at all levels of language. For example, the understanding of word-building depends on phonemic hearing, knowledge of the laws of word formation and combinations of words, the ability to relate the semantic meaning of words, especially the multi-valued meaning, with the context. Knowledge of types of syntactic relations is essential for anticipation on the level of phrases.

A student is supposed to develop lexical, grammatical and phonetic skills. Student’s attention can be concentrated on the content and not be distracted by the form only in the event that these skills are sufficiently automated. One of the types of exercises to develop the skills of probabilistic anticipation at the sentence level is as follows: “Listen to sentences, finish them: Я написал письмо, положил его в конверт и пошел...; Я опустил письмо в почтовый ящик. Теперь оно лежит...; Мой брат хорошо плавает, потому что...; Моя сестра любит путешествовать, поэтому она...; Работа продолжалась, несмотря на то что... (I wrote a letter, put it in an envelope and went... I dropped a letter in the mailbox. Now it is... My brother is a good swimmer, because... My sister loves to travel, so she... I kept working, despite the fact that...)”.

It is recommended to use the sentences the length of which is not more than 5–7 words when teaching listening at the initial stage. It is possible to increase the length of sentences up to 10–12 words. The same applies to the number of sentences and conceptual pieces of the whole text.

We may speak about the full understanding of the perceived message only when the listener is able to convey its main content in a few words. If the student understands all the words and phrases in the message they have heard but cannot describe the main idea of the story, this means that the highest level of understanding is not reached. It is necessary to train students in paraphrasing sentences, develop their skills in finding equivalents for certain words of the text with the aim of reducing, compressing the information. This contributes to a more profound understanding of the perceived message.

The success of listening, on the one hand, depends on the listener himself (his memory, attention, interest, and the level of speech hearing) and, on the other hand, on the conditions of perception (rate of speech, number of presentations, duration, etc.), as well as the complexities of the verbal messages. It is important to consider how the proposed messages match the experience and knowledge of students.

The average rate of speech (about 220–240 syllables per minute) is the most common in the process of verbal communication, with small deviations in either direction which are designated as the rate “above average” or “below average”. It is recommended to start training with a slightly slower rate (by increasing the length and number of pauses) at the initial stage. This rate is approximately 180–220 syllables per minute or 60–70 words per minute.

The message volume is measured either by the number of words or sentences, or by speaking time. Simple descriptive or narrative texts consisting of 3–6 sentences, the number of which is then increased to 10–15, are recommended for the initial stage. It is usually recommended to start teaching listening with texts up to 3 minutes long. This amount of text is considered to be optimal as it does not exceed the students’ capability to retain information.

It seems reasonable to start training with standard monologue speech because it provides a foundation for further development of speech skills. After students have learned the basic intonation patterns, they need to be taught to understand simple conversations. Thus, dialogue and monologue should interact in the learning process from the very beginning.

Teaching listening involves not only the development and training of speech mechanisms but also the development of skills to overcome difficulties that complicate reception. The largest group of difficulties is those related to the conditions of perception (single presentation of information, understanding the speech of people with different vocal characteristics and manner of pronunciation, the rate of speech used by the speaker, the diversity of and intonation tones, etc.) The second group is the difficulties associated with the perception of linguistic form. The third group is the difficulties associated with the perception of the subject matter of the sounding speech, the general idea, the meaning of the text and comprehension of the speaker’s intent.

Consistent development of listening comprehension skills involves the use of two exercise groups - language and speech exercises. Language exercises prepare students for listening; speech exercises teach students listening as a speech activity. The exercises should provide for interaction of listening and speaking as the two forms of oral communication.

Auditory text material must be adequate to the speech and life experience and interests of students and any other type of speech activity training. However, there are some specific requirements for audio texts. Total playing time of text at the beginning of training should not exceed 1.5–2 minutes. The time of productive listening should be gradually increased.

An audio text should have a clear structure. It is usually divided into three parts: introduction, main part and conclusion. At first, it is preferable to use texts consisting of familiar language material. After six to eight weeks students may be offered messages containing unfamiliar vocabulary (first 1.5–3 % of the total number of words). However, these should be words that do not affect the overall understanding of the text.

Understanding of verbal messages can be checked in different ways. For example, when students find the required information, they raise their hands or make non-verbal notes in a graphic manner using certain signs; when they are

shown pictures that reflect the content of messages, they accept or reject the utterance (“yes” or “no”) depending on whether the pictures match the message content. Here, the teacher can use multiple choice tests which offer the listener a number of statements, out of which the correct one has to be chosen. However, these methods make it possible to check only a general understanding of the message.

If the goal is to verify the completeness and depth of understanding, students may be offered the following tasks: fill in the blanks in the printed version of audio texts, answer questions, reproduce selected pieces of text (orally or in writing), comment on the recording by expressing their own attitude to it, use the obtained information in a discussion to prove or refute the statement discussed.

Checking general understanding does not give a complete picture of how adequately the text is perceived. At the same time, monitoring the completeness, depth and level of development of auditory skills requires the use of speaking, reading and writing in one way or another. This is further evidence of the close interconnection of speech activities, which proves that an integrated and balanced development of all speech skills is needed in the learning process.

Game tasks usually bring variety into the learning process and increase its attractiveness to students. Besides the function of entertainment, games also promote effective acquisition of vocabulary, phonetics and grammar of the Russian language [1–6]. Tasks with game elements are a way to reinforce knowledge and a method of training.

The positive side of the game is that, being creative in itself, it stimulates the mental activity of students and contributes to the development of a creative approach to the language itself, creates an atmosphere of open communication in the classroom.

The other side of game situations is that the speech of students is assessed not by indirect criteria (speed of speaking, the number and nature of the errors, the number of phrases, etc.) but by the communicative effect: if a student performs the task and reaches the goal using the target language, he gets a good mark.

Game activities can be used at all learning levels (from beginner to advanced). As mentioned above, listening exercises should be included in the earliest lessons with foreign students. We propose some examples of games that can be used by teachers in the development of students’ listening skills at the beginner and intermediate levels.

Examples.

***Fast delivery***

*Implemented material.* The number of nouns (clothing, items etc.), adjectives (colors, shapes, sizes etc.) and numbers (1–10). Words known by the students can be used in the game.

*Preparation for the game.* Each team must have items that can be found in any classroom: a clock, chalk, pencils, markers etc.

*Description of the game.* The purpose of this game is to get items as soon as possible.

Divide the class into groups. Each group is in one of the four corners of the room. Put a chair in the middle of the classroom. Each group must have a “runner”. The runner is the only person in the group who can leave his place and run up to the center of the room. Other group members should remain in their place but they can give items to the runner. The teacher asks him to bring a variety of items but only one at a time.

Examples: a Russian language textbook, a letter, five red pencils, a scarf, a jacket, a sock, a watch.

The runner gets a point for his team if he is the first to put things on a chair in the middle of the room. The team that scores more points wins the game.

### ***Right or wrong***

*Implemented material.* Words and structures that are used must be familiar to students. The game can be adapted to any level.

*Preparation for the game.* Make a list of suitable sentences. Put 2 chairs by the blackboard so that there is enough room and students can run up to the chairs. Write the word “true” over one of the chairs and “false” over the other.

*Description of the game.* Divide the class into two teams and assign numbers to the players. Then pronounce a sentence, such as “St. Petersburg is the capital of Russia”. After a pause name a number: “Five”. Player number five from each team has to run out and sit down on the “true” or “false” chair (in this case, the “false” one). If he chooses the right chair, he gets a point for his team.

Examples

We are playing the game now.

We play football every Saturday.

Today is Friday.

Tambov is in the north of Russia.

The sun is shining brightly now.

We will have a party tomorrow.

We all live in Moscow.

There are 52,000 inhabitants in our town.

*Comment.* Fragments of the studied texts can be used in the game. The teacher prepares several texts (sentences) that are right or wrong in relation to the text that the students know. This can be an easy way to check homework.

Games which involve movement are usually very popular. But if the teacher thinks that the students make a lot of noise and bustle, they can remain in their places and shout “true” or “false”. They can also mark their answers on the answer sheet individually or in groups.

### ***Yes or no?***

*Implemented material.* This game can be used at any level of understanding. Model questions and the words used must be known to the class.

*Preparation for the game.* Prepare a list of suitable questions in order of increasing difficulty. There must be three times as many questions as the students. The same questions can be used more than once.

*Description of the game.* All students have a number of “lives”. Give them, say, 4 lives each and let each have 4 books on the table representing those lives.

The teacher asks questions that require a “yes” or “no” as the answer. Questions should be addressed to the whole class. The teacher asks questions quickly allowing very little time for students to think. If the student answers incorrectly, he “loses a life” and removes a book from the table. Since the

players have several lives, they do not leave the game too quickly and thus keep interest in the game.

Examples of questions depending on the level of language proficiency:

Is this a cat? (demonstration of a picture)	Are there 26 students in this class?	Do the University courses end in July?
Do you speak English?	Do you go to the university 7 days a week?	Was the day before yesterday Sunday?
Is your textbook in English blue?	Do we have a TV in the university?	Did Napoleon live in the 17th century?
Can you read Chinese?	Is New York a city in South America?	Does St. Petersburg have over five million people?
Is three plus six eight?	Are there lions in India?	Is Vladimir Putin the President of Russia?
Are there three lamps in the classroom?	Does John live in Moscow?	Does Ahmed live in Palestine?

*Comments.* Students have to answer “yes” or “no” when the game is played for the first time. Thus the game checks their general understanding. Later they can answer in short sentences: “Yes, I can”, “No, I cannot” or with auxiliary verbs in any tense etc.

*Alternative.* If the teacher wants to test all students in the class by the same questions, the students can write “yes” or “no” on pieces of paper to answer. Questions must be numbered in this case.

### ***Who is who?***

*Implemented material.* Students must be sufficiently trained and know a lot of words about the objects, their color, shape, size and location.

*Preparation for the game.* Cut out some pictures from newspapers, magazines, catalogs etc. Images have to be large enough to ensure that all students can see them from their seats. Cut, for example, 5 pictures of cars, 5 men and 5 women, 5 dogs etc. Mark each picture from (a) to (e).

*Description of the game.* Choose one set of pictures and show it to the class. Describe one of the cars (one of the men, one of the women etc.) to the students and give them some time to decide what kind of picture you are talking about. They must answer verbally saying the letters (a) to (e) or write down a letter.

This game can be easy or difficult depending on the degree of similarity between the images and the language used in the description. Every student can describe this picture to a small group of students, once students have seen the picture. The rest of the group must try to guess what picture he or she is talking about.

These and other types of game tasks aimed at development of listening skills are useful and allow presenting difficult material in a form attractive to the students. If a wide variety of games is used, foreign language classes will become more significant for the students, since language will be studied not on its own but as a means of knowing the self and the world and as a means of communication.

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### **Формирование навыков аудирования посредством игры (из опыта преподавания русского как иностранного)**

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**Ключевые слова:** аудирование; игровые задания; речевая деятельность; этапы обучения; эффективность обучения.

**Аннотация:** Обобщен опыт обучения русскому языку как иностранному с использованием различных типов игровых заданий при обучении иностранцев аудированию. Даны подробное описание отдельных игр и методика их проведения.

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