How We Listen

Teacher's Key | Level B2 | EnglishBridges.com

Sections follow the student handout. Delete a section here when you delete it from the handout. The handout uses the short (quick) version of the reading.

Vocabulary: Fill in the Blank

1. cuts in / cuts-in
2. rhythm
3. pushy
4. overlap
5. tolerate
6. cues
7. ambiguous
8. steady
9. gaze
10. confrontational
11. dominance
12. status
13. exaggerates
14. interpret

Word Partners

Part A. 1 c 2 a 3 h 4 e 5 g 6 b 7 d 8 f

Phrases: get into a rhythm; meet her gaze; a high status; pick up on subtle cues; an ambiguous wording; a pushy salesperson; challenge a stereotype; a confrontational meeting.

Part B. 1 interpretation 2 ambiguity 3 exaggeration 4 dominant 5 tolerant 6 confrontation

Comprehension Questions: Model Answers

1. *What happens in the opening scene, and what question does the writer ask?*
   A listener cuts in, finishing the speaker's sentence and adding a detail. The writer asks whether this feels supportive or like an interruption.
2. *What did researchers find when they compared turn-taking in ten languages?*
   In every language, speakers avoided talking at the same time and left only a tiny gap before replying. The average gap differed between languages by only a fraction of a second.
3. *Why can a tiny difference in timing cause a misunderstanding?*
   A person who waits a little longer may seem cold, and a person who replies a little sooner may seem pushy, even when both are polite.
4. *Describe the style in which listeners talk along with the speaker. How might it feel to someone with a different style?*
   Listeners talk along with the speaker to show enthusiasm. Someone who waits for a clear pause may find the same behavior rude.
5. *Why does the writer say that the numbers about silence in Portugal and China should be taken lightly?*
   Nobody seems to know how the numbers were measured.
6. *Why might a Japanese listener and an English-speaking speaker misread each other?*
   A Japanese listener may think that a silent English-speaking audience is not listening, because Japanese listeners use short sounds and nods far more often. (The full reading adds that an English speaker may find the constant sounds a little much.)
7. *What does the reading say about eye contact in different places, and what do eye-tracking studies add?*
   In much of the English-speaking world, steady eye contact signals honesty, but in other places a long gaze at an older or senior person can seem confrontational. In some eye-tracking studies, British viewers fixed on the eyes, while Chinese viewers looked more at the nose and the area around it.

8. *What did later research find about gender and interrupting, and what matters at least as much?*
   Men interrupt slightly more, but the difference is small, and it is larger for aggressive interruptions that show dominance. Social status matters at least as much: people with more power tend to interrupt more.
9. *Do you agree with the writer's advice to interpret behavior generously? Give two reasons.*
   Open answer. Accept reasons such as: it avoids unfair judgments; the same behavior can mean different things; people may be using a style they learned early. Accept a reasoned disagreement, for example that it is hard to be generous when someone really is rude.
10. *True, False, or Not Given: "Researchers found that all ten languages had exactly the same average gap between turns." Explain your answer using the reading.*
    False. The average gaps differed between languages, but only by a fraction of a second.
11. *Yes, No, or Not Given: "The writer believes that people should memorize listening rules for every country." Explain your answer using the reading.*
    No. The writer says that you should not memorize rules for every country, and suggests interpreting behavior generously instead.
12. *Author's purpose: Why does the writer begin with a listener who finishes the speaker's sentence? Is it (a) to show that the same behavior can feel supportive or rude, (b) to prove that women interrupt more than men, or (c) to explain how researchers record conversations?*
    (a) To show that the same behavior can feel supportive or rude. The scene asks the reader to decide before the evidence begins.

True or False

1. **T.** In every language, speakers left only a tiny gap before they replied.
2. **F.** In every language, speakers avoided talking at the same time.
3. **T.** The reading describes this style as a way to show enthusiasm.
4. **F.** Nobody seems to know how the numbers were measured, so they should be taken lightly.
5. **T.** Aizuchi are used far more often than by most English speakers.
6. **F.** It is often described as meaning anything from yes to maybe.
7. **T.** A long gaze toward an older or more senior person can feel rude or confrontational.
8. **F.** In some studies, British viewers fixed on the eyes, while Chinese viewers looked more at the nose area.
9. **F.** Men interrupt slightly more, and the difference is small.
10. **T.** The reading says power matters at least as much as gender.

Language Focus: Generalizing with Quantifiers and Frequency Adverbs

Model answers. Accept any answer that uses the form correctly and makes sense.

1. Most people in my country enjoy spending time with family on holidays.
2. Few people I know listen to the radio.
3. Some of my friends reply to messages right away.
4. When I am nervous, I usually talk faster.
5. In my family, we rarely watch TV during dinner.
6. Most people hug or shake hands, but some just wave.
7. Many people check their phones.
8. I often reply within a minute, but I sometimes forget.
9. Few people talk to strangers on the bus.
10. They usually listen quietly, and they tend to ask questions at the end.

Accept any natural quantifier or frequency adverb that fits the starter; model answers show one possibility.

Notes on the Evidence

Turn-taking (paragraph 2): Stivers et al., Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 106(26), 2009. Ten languages. The abstract says all of them avoided overlapping talk and kept silence between turns short, and that language averages fell within about 250 milliseconds of the cross-language mean. The authors suggest that sensitivity to such small differences may explain reports of dramatic cultural differences. The reading gives no millisecond figures and names no languages. Figures for individual languages were not checked.

Overlap and silence (paragraph 3): The linguist is Deborah Tannen, whose terms are high-involvement style (talking along to show enthusiasm, called cooperative overlap) and high-considerateness style (waiting for a pause); this was checked only in a radio-show summary, not in her books. The regional picture (Mediterranean and Latin America versus northern Europe and East Asia) is a popular generalization that the reading labels as a stereotype. The silence figures come from a report of remarks by the business author Erin Meyer (Observador, 2 July 2025): about 2.5 seconds for Portugal and 8 to 10 seconds for China. The report gives no sample or method, so the reading hedges them. The same report lists Japan, Thailand, South Korea, China, Finland, and Indonesia among the cultures most comfortable with silence, and Italy, the United States, France, Spain, the United Kingdom, Mexico, Portugal, and Brazil at the other end; the reading does not repeat that list.

Listening sounds and gestures (paragraph 4): The aizuchi claim follows a language-learning column (Expat Career Guide, 2015), which says Japanese speakers use them much more than English speakers and that overusing them in English can seem rude. The sentence about how each side may feel is a reasoned inference and is hedged with may. Head movements: a Language Log post reports Jakobson on Bulgaria (a side-to-side turn for yes) and a commenter on the upward nod for no in Greece and Turkey; the post does not say what the Indian head wobble means and doubts that it means the same thing across India. The reading says only that it is "often described" as ranging from yes to maybe, which is a popular description, not a research finding.

Eye contact (paragraph 5): The eye-tracking comparison is from a 2012 ESRC press release on a study by Kelly and colleagues at Royal Holloway (British versus Chinese adults). It is one study reported through a press release; the reading says "some" and "tended". A popular claim that Japanese listeners look at the speaker’s neck was not used, because no solid evidence was found. The statement about English-speaking countries is a general cultural observation, not a measured result.

Gender (paragraph 6): The review is Anderson and Leaper, Sex Roles, 1998, which pooled 43 studies. Men interrupted slightly more overall (d = .15, negligible by conventional labels) and the difference was larger for intrusive interruptions (d = .33), more so in groups of three or more and in natural settings. The 1970s studies are Zimmerman and West; the decade comes from memory and was not confirmed in the pages opened. The power point follows Kollock et al. (1985), as summarized on Wikipedia: partners with more social power interrupted more regardless of gender. Smiling and gaze follow a textbook passage citing Judith Hall’s review, which gave no effect sizes and linked part of the smiling difference to social expectations. The connect versus solve idea is presented as part of the popular picture and was not tested in the sources opened. All research figures are as published; newer studies may exist.