Sound-focused study on language learning

LEVEL B2


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I. WARM-UP

1. How do you usually start learning a new language?
2. What sounds in English are difficult for you to hear or say?
3. Do you learn more from classes or from daily listening? Why?

II. KEY VOCABULARY

exposure
regular contact with something over time, such as hearing a language often

pronunciation
the way a word is spoken

detect
to notice or identify something small or hard to hear or see

precision
being exact and accurate, with fine detail

MRI
a brain scan that shows which areas are active

sensorimotor
relating to brain systems that connect movement and sensing

vowel
a speech sound such as the middle sound in 'cat' or 'cup'

stereotype
a simple, often unfair idea about a group of people

III. READING

Learning a language may work best when learners focus on sounds before rules. A study by UCL and Tohoku University tested 67 Japanese learners of English, who tried to detect tiny changes in pitch, length and tone in non-speech sounds.

Those with higher auditory precision learned English pronunciation faster and more accurately. MRI scans showed they relied less on the brain's left sensorimotor system, and their activity looked more like the brain's response to non-speech sounds.

With less interference from their first language, they handled new vowel contrasts more clearly. Kazuya Saito-van Poeteren, who led the work at UCL Institute of Education, said many learners get too little meaningful exposure, so training the ear matters.

The results also challenge the stereotype that some nationalities are poor at languages. Padraic Monaghan, who is at Lancaster University, said the findings support the idea that listening and rich exposure are vital, while learners differ in how sensitive they are to sound.

Reading text adapted from reporting by **The Guardian***: "Stop making sense: focus on sounds to help...". Original article linked at theenglishwire.com.*

IV. COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. What should learners focus on first, according to the study?
2. Which institutions carried out the research?
3. How many participants were tested in the study?
4. What skill helped learners master pronunciation faster?
5. What change in teaching do the findings support?

V. DISCUSSION

1. Do you agree that listening should come before grammar? Why?
2. What practice could increase your daily exposure to a language?
3. Which English vowels or sounds are hardest for you, and why?
4. How should schools balance sounds, vocabulary and grammar?

VI. GRAMMAR FOCUS

Relative clauses (non-defining)

Use commas to add extra, non-essential information about a noun. Use who for people and which for things; do not use that in this kind of clause.

> *"Padraic Monaghan,* **who is at Lancaster University,** *said listening is vital."*
>
> *"Tohoku University,* **which is in Japan,** *worked on the study with UCL."*

VII. GRAMMAR EXERCISE

Circle the correct option in each sentence.

1. The results, (which / that) came from MRI scans, showed patterns. _____
2. My English teacher, (which / who) loves music, trains our ears. _____
3. The scans, (which / that) measured activity, showed patterns. _____
4. The study, (that / which) focused on sounds, studied 67 learners. _____
5. The 67 learners, (who / which) were all Japanese, took tests. _____

Teacher's Notes

TEACHERS ONLY

These notes are designed to help you get the most out of this lesson. Please do not share this page with students.


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I. LESSON GUIDE

- Timing: 8–10 minutes warm-up, 10 minutes vocabulary, 12–15 minutes reading, 10 minutes comprehension, 10 minutes discussion. Combine grammar timing with reading if needed.
- Pre-teach or check: exposure, pronunciation, detect, precision, vowel. Demonstrate a quick minimal-pairs task to prime listening.
- Run the reading in two passes: gist (What is the main claim?), then detail (numbers, methods, brain results). For discussion, start in pairs to build confidence, then open to whole class.
- Differentiation: stronger students design a 60-second ear-training routine; others list three concrete ways to add listening at home.

II. DISCUSSION FACILITATION TIPS

1. Take a quick show of hands, then pair students to give one reason for and one against.
2. Elicit daily moments (commute, cooking). Set a 30-second plan each and share in small groups.
3. Drill one or two minimal pairs first, then have students explain how their first language affects them.
4. Ask groups to rank sounds, vocabulary and grammar by importance, then justify a simple percentage split.

III. EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Role-play: In pairs, plan a 10-minute ear-training segment for a beginner class and present it in 90 seconds.

Survey: Run a class survey on hardest English sounds, chart the results, and write a 70-word summary.

IV. ANSWER KEY OVERVIEW

Comprehension questions: short factual answers from the text.

Grammar exercise: Relative clauses (non-defining)

Discussion: open-ended. Accept any reasonable ideas supported by examples and reasoning.

Answer Key

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These answers are for teachers only. Please do not share this page with students.


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IV. COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. What should learners focus on first, according to the study?
   On sounds, before rules.
2. Which institutions carried out the research?
   UCL and Tohoku University.
3. How many participants were tested in the study?
   67 Japanese learners of English.
4. What skill helped learners master pronunciation faster?
   High auditory precision to detect small sound changes.
5. What change in teaching do the findings support?
   More focus on listening and sounds, with rich exposure.

V. DISCUSSION

Open answers. Accept any reasonable ideas supported by examples and reasoning.

VII. GRAMMAR EXERCISE

Circle the correct option in each sentence.

1. The results, (which / that) came from MRI scans, showed patterns. **which**
2. My English teacher, (which / who) loves music, trains our ears. **who**
3. The scans, (which / that) measured activity, showed patterns. **which**
4. The study, (that / which) focused on sounds, studied 67 learners. **which**
5. The 67 learners, (who / which) were all Japanese, took tests. **who**

VI. GRAMMAR FOCUS

Key point: Use commas to add extra, non-essential information about a noun. Use who for people and which for things; do not use that in this kind of clause. (Examples constructed.)

> *"Padraic Monaghan,* **who is at Lancaster University,** *said listening is vital."*
>
> *"Tohoku University,* **which is in Japan,** *worked on the study with UCL."*