
French as a Second Language (FSL)

LISTENING TO LEARN

A Differentiated Approach to
Teach Listening in Core, Extended,
and French Immersion

November 2015



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Table of Contents

Introduction	4
What do we mean by “listening”?	5
What makes listening difficult?	7
Differentiating listening instruction and assessment	8
Dials of Difficulty	9
Teaching /Learning Samples	11
Sample 1: Listening to a Video Clip	12
Sample 2: Listening and Critical Literacy	15
Sample 3: Listening During Group Discussions	17
Professional Resources	20

Introduction

Listening is the springboard for language acquisition and the most prominent ongoing source of language input for most learners. Although listening is a pervasive communicative event, it is usually not made visible or explicit. Therefore, students in French as a Second Language (FSL) programs derive great benefit from direct instruction and feedback related to their listening skills and strategies. We know that listening to a variety of French speakers, in different situations and for different purposes, are important aspects of a quality FSL program. But how exactly can this be accomplished? How can we support students' ability to understand and think about oral French texts across a range of proficiency levels?

This resource presents a differentiated approach to teach listening in FSL, by identifying six key factors that influence the difficulty level of oral texts. We will call these factors "dials of difficulty", because each of the factors can be turned up or turned down, in order to meet students' learning needs. These factors are demonstrated through a series of teaching/learning samples. Each teaching/learning sample describes a listening activity, the context in which the activity might be used, and strategies that can be used specifically to differentiate for varying degrees of competency in listening. By deconstructing what exactly makes listening tasks difficult, FSL teachers can strategically design lessons to meet the needs of all students. FSL teachers can make this strategy even more powerful by helping students to understand and reflect on the dials of difficulty. In that way, students can learn to identify personal areas of strength as listeners, take increasing control of their language learning, and apply these strategies to a variety of situations.

What do we mean by “listening”?

It is often taken for granted that listening is a natural skill or that listening skills are mastered through learning one’s first language. However, very little of what a person hears is actually listened to with attention and reflection.

“Researchers suggest that we think of listening as thinking – predicting, hypothesizing, checking, revising, and generalizing information (Ronald & Roskelly, 1985), holding information in memory, focusing attention, forming images, interpreting, comparing and evaluating (Grunkemeyer, 1992).”

— *Let’s Talk about Listening* (Ontario, 2009)

The Ontario curriculum policy documents (henceforth referred to as the Ontario curriculum) guide the teaching and learning of listening in elementary and secondary FSL programs. This mandatory learning is assessed and evaluated based on the achievement chart and the principles outlined in *Growing Success. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Teaching, Learning, Assessment* (henceforth referred to as the CEFR) may be used as a support for teaching and learning.

The Ontario curriculum recognizes the interconnectedness of Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing, while at the same time, underlining the central importance of oral communication and the need to explicitly teach Listening. The curriculum states that “well-developed listening skills in French are essential for students’ development of language proficiency.” (p. 19). It outlines three overall expectations for listening that are taught and assessed throughout the grades in all FSL programs:

- A1.** Listening to Understand: determine meaning in a variety of oral French texts, using a range of listening strategies;
- A2.** Listening to Interact: interpret messages accurately while interacting in French for a variety of purposes and with diverse audiences;
- A3.** Intercultural Understanding: demonstrate an understanding of information in oral French texts about aspects of culture in diverse French-speaking communities and other communities around the world, and of French sociolinguistic conventions used in a variety of situations and communities.

Reflection Question

What thinking skills do I incorporate into my FSL listening activities?

In addition to listening as an activity to learn vocabulary and to make meaning, the specific curriculum expectations further highlight the social and metacognitive aspects of listening. All of these overall expectations include linguistic components (such as understanding sounds, vocabulary, and syntax) and cognitive components (such as thinking about what one is hearing and strategies one can use to listen effectively).

The Ontario curriculum emphasizes the central importance of language learning strategies, and instructional approaches in the curriculum are based on the communicative and action-oriented approaches. The CEFR, a document based on 30 years of language learning research, describes a continuum of proficiency levels in receptive, productive, and interactive communication skills. The CEFR recognizes the learner's role as a "social agent" (p. 18) who is selecting, applying, and evaluating strategies in order to accomplish a task in given context. Analyzing the learner's role in this way (i.e. the learner's knowledge and strategies, the context of the listening activity, and the purpose of the listening activity), gives us valuable insights into the factors that contribute to task difficulty.

Given the complex nature of the skills and strategies described in the curriculum and the CEFR, it is not surprising that there is no concise definition given for listening. Multiple theories describe how people listen, make meaning, and interact with oral text, providing a fairly complex theoretical landscape. Drawing from some of these theories, several different conceptions of listening that may be particularly interesting for FSL teachers are presented in the next section, in order to address the question: "What makes listening difficult?"

What Makes Listening Difficult?

Although listening is not a passive activity, it is often an internal or invisible activity. For this reason, educators might draw comparisons between teaching listening and teaching reading. Unlike reading, however, listening may be particularly challenging for learners based on factors such as:

- The pace (speed) of oral texts (especially unrecorded texts) is controlled by the speaker, not the listener;
- Oral texts typically do not have the same structural markers as written texts (e.g., titles, headings, spacing, other text features);
- Oral texts are often less linear than written texts (especially in spontaneous and informal contexts); and
- Oral texts can be much less predictable (e.g. in length, form, topic), for example, listeners are not usually able to ‘skim and scan’ an oral text prior to listening.

A greater awareness of our own understanding of listening will enhance our ability to differentiate and strategically move between paradigms in different contexts or with different groups of learners. It is important to be sensitive to the factors that influence not only the difficulty level of the oral French text, but also the difficulty of the activity that students will be doing related to the text.

Before exploring these factors further, FSL educators are invited to consider and reflect on the implications of the following research paradigms.

Which conception(s) of listening best describe(s) your current teaching and assessment practices?

Listening as Oral Comprehension	Listeners receive knowledge by processing the words and information they hear; <i>checking for understanding</i> is an evaluative process (to confirm a match between the intended message and the understood message)
Listening as Interpretation	Listeners make inferences based on what they hear and their previous knowledge, ideas, and opinions; <i>checking for understanding</i> is a conferencing process (to discover the listener’s interpretation of the message)
Listening as Interactive	Listeners demonstrate understanding and respond in an ongoing conversation loop; <i>checking for understanding</i> is a self-assessment process (to make adjustments to one’s own communication)
Listening as Negotiating Meaning (Transactional)	Listeners collaborate with the speaker by contextualizing and inferencing; <i>checking for understanding</i> is a mutual process (to achieve an objective or complete a transaction)
Listening as Recreational	Listeners appreciate texts; <i>checking for understanding</i> includes personal, subjective components

Reflection Question

Which expectations related to listening skills or strategies are the most challenging to teach/assess and why?

What role(s) do your students currently engage in as listeners?

Role of the Listener

- Addressee (e.g. listening to a lecture)
- Participant (e.g. a group member in a discussion)
- Overhearer (e.g. non-group member listening to a discussion)
- Judge (e.g. listening to evaluate a debate)
- Consumer (e.g. listening to make a purchasing decision)
- Other

Reflection Question

What conceptions and roles of listening could I incorporate to improve my students' skills, confidence, and achievement of curriculum expectations?

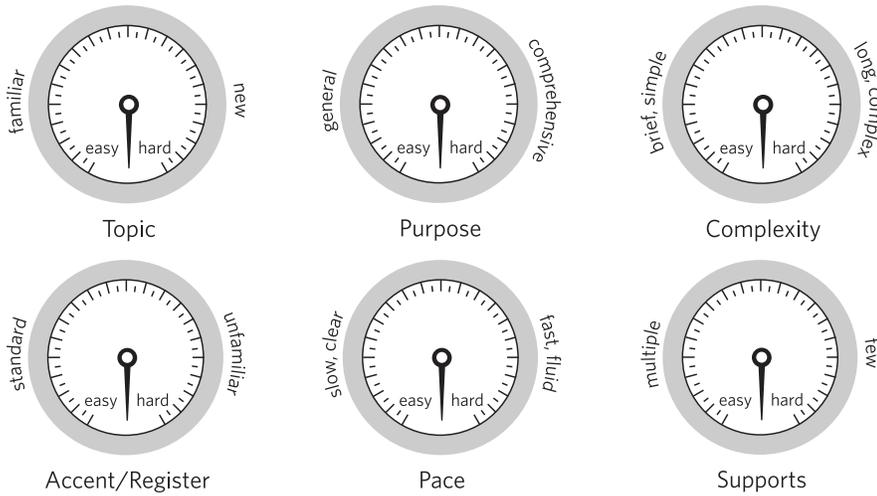
Differentiating Listening Instruction and Assessment

Carol Ann Tomlinson (1999) describes differentiated instruction (DI) as “an organized yet flexible way of proactively adjusting teaching and learning to meet kids where they are and help them to achieve maximum growth as learners.” DI can occur in a planned or spontaneous way (i.e. “teachable moments”). Planned DI is often associated with formal structures such as choice boards, learning centres, Role-Audience-Format-Topic (RAFTs), learning contracts, or tiered assignments. More information about these structures is available in the *Student Success Differentiated Instruction Educators Package* (2010, pp. 28-29), which can be accessed at [Edugains](#).

Many approaches to DI are based on making a change to the learning content, learning process, or learning environment. Such changes are made strategically and respectfully to address students' interests, readiness, and learning needs. In the context of listening to learn in FSL, the teacher might want the whole class to have opportunities to listen and respond to authentic oral texts, based on a common learning goal. How does differentiated instruction apply to this context?

The next section outlines “dials of difficulty” to unpack the factors that can be manipulated to differentiate listening activities, followed by a series of teaching/learning samples to illustrate the use of the “dials of difficulty” in different FSL contexts.

Dials of Difficulty



The “dials of difficulty” are subjective in the sense that the perception of difficulty will vary from student to student (and from teacher to teacher), even for students who are judged to be at a similar proficiency level. For this reason, it is very important to engage students directly in the process of determining what makes tasks difficult for them. In this way, FSL teachers unlock some of the mystery of why learning a second language is a complex multi-skill process, requiring ongoing practice and experiences.

Involving students in the process fosters a disposition towards continuous learning, placing a high value on effort, use of strategies, and metacognition, all of which support a growth mindset in French as a Second Language.

The following chart presents factors related to each dial of difficulty and identifies for each factor elements that can be strategically selected or adjusted to increase or decrease the difficulty level of the listening tasks.

Factors	Elements
Topic	<p>Strategies to adjust the difficulty level:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select a very familiar, concrete topic (or a less familiar or abstract topic) • Generate interest in the topic • Activate prior knowledge about the topic and genre of text • Use contextual cues • Make predictions; make connections
Purpose	<p>Purposes for listening with varying difficulty levels:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening for simple, familiar expressions • Identifying the main idea(s) • Listening for key points or a general understanding • Listening for detailed understanding • Discovering and appreciating culture • Listening to respond/react
Complexity	<p>Elements contributing to complexity of oral texts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Background noises, overall sound quality • Structure (predictable/repetitive vs. complex/unpredictable) • Length (number of ideas, themes, degree of detail) • Linearity (does the text have a beginning/middle/end) • Spontaneity (redundancy of information, rephrasing, reformulation within text)
Accent / Register	<p>Elements contributing to difficulty:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Careful or natural diction • Standard or regional dialect (familiar or unfamiliar accent/expressions) • Formality of register (colloquial, informal, standard, formal, professional, etc.) • Use of humour, irony
Pace	<p>Strategies to control the pace:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slowing the speech or recording • Adding pauses strategically during listening • Repeated listening to all or parts of the text
Supports	<p>Additional supports for comprehension:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visual and contextual aids (more or less directly related to the audio text) • Asking for repetition or reformulation • Non-verbal communication • Questions and discussions to clarify, confirm, elaborate, or synthesize understanding • Analyzing predictions • Visualizing elements of the text

Reflection Questions

Which dials and strategies do I currently use to adjust the difficulty levels of oral French texts?

How could sharing these dials and strategies with my FSL students support their metacognition?

How does understanding what makes a task difficult and what listening strategies can be used to address areas of difficulty support a growth mindset for FSL teachers and learners?

Teaching/Learning Samples

During the selection, adaptation, or creation of oral French texts, there are multiple “dials of difficulty” that can be manipulated (turned up or turned down) in order to make the listening activity more or less difficult for students. By setting a purpose for listening, creating success criteria, and planning activities before, during, and after listening, FSL teachers have the opportunity to use whole class and differentiated approaches that support the success of all students. The following teaching/learning samples illustrate ways to apply the “dials of difficulty” for different student proficiency levels and learning goals. These samples are intended to support professional reflection and effective lesson planning, with the understanding that there are many effective ways to approach the instruction and assessment of listening activities.

Some points to consider as you read the teaching/learning samples:

- Two of the samples are written with a specific language proficiency range in mind; however, the ideas and strategies illustrated within the samples can be adapted to suit different listening activities, grades, and programs based on students’ learning needs and their interests.
- Each sample outlines a curriculum expectation, learning goal, and success criteria, in order to provide a relevant context for the listening activity. Many curriculum expectations and skills are interrelated; therefore the expectations described serve as an example which could easily be changed. When selecting and developing curriculum expectations, learning goals, and success criteria, FSL teachers are encouraged to ensure their internal consistency (they should directly relate to one another). FSL teachers are encouraged to limit the number of learning goals and success criteria, based on what they judge to be achievable and helpful for students at their current stage of learning. (*Note: learning goals do not describe everything that is happening in the class; they describe the focus for teaching and observation/feedback during a given period.*)
- The samples do not represent complete lesson plans; however, the ideas presented in the samples could be used within an effective lesson plan, which would typically include more details such as warm-up activities, consolidation/assessment activities, lesson timing, resources, student groupings, etc.

Listening to a Video Clip

Teaching/Learning Sample 1:

This teaching/learning sample is designed for a primary French Immersion or junior Core French classroom, for students with an introductory or basic level of French proficiency (CEFR level A1).

Curriculum Expectation/ Contenu d'apprentissage	Learning Goal/ Objectif d'apprentissage	Success Criteria/ Critères d'évaluation
A3.1 Intercultural Awareness: using information from oral French texts, find out about aspects of the cultures of French-speaking communities, and make connections to personal experiences and their own and other communities.	Nous apprenons à faire des liens entre nos intérêts et ceux des autres jeunes dans les communautés francophones.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Je peux identifier des caractéristiques des jeunes francophones (dans la vidéo). • Je peux identifier les intérêts des jeunes francophones (dans la vidéo). • Je peux faire des liens en utilisant un organigramme.

Listening/Viewing Text

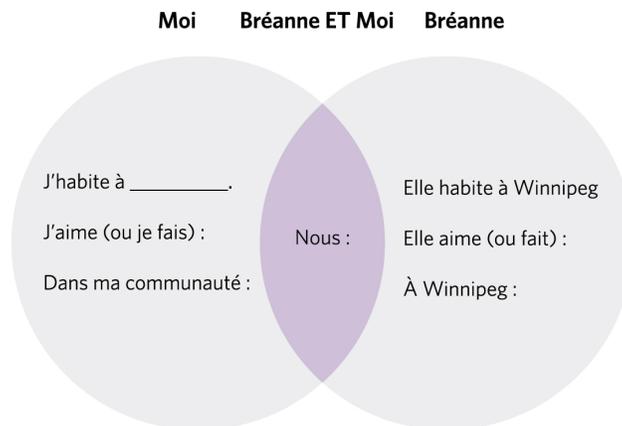
Là où je dors (video series from TFO Éducation, available at <http://www1.tfo.org/education/Series/50314/la-ou-je-dors>)

These short videos each focus on a different child living in a francophone community from around the world, including different parts of Canada. The children take us on a tour of their rooms and describe themselves and their interests.

Listening Activity

Before doing the activity, students should be able to describe some of their own personal characteristics and interests using simple vocabulary, sentence models, and visual supports.

Students listen to (view) one video from the series, identify characteristics and interests of the child in the video, and make connections to themselves and their community, using a graphic organizer such as the one to the right.



Difficulty Level

Some factors that make this text challenging for learners are:

Pace - the children speak with a natural pace and intonation; and

Complexity - there are multiple ideas and points of information in each video clip.

Factors that make this text less difficult are:

Informal register - first person;

Supports - relevant images and visual supports throughout; and

Purpose for listening - to identify interests and characteristics of the speaker.

Suggestions to Support All Students

As this task is linguistically and cognitively demanding, all students benefit from strategies to support their ability to make meaning from the videos, including:

- activating their prior knowledge and vocabulary related to their own interests (for example, prior to viewing, students could do a one-minute oral description of one or two items in their own bedroom to generate vocabulary);
- inviting students to share what they know or make predictions about the region in the video;
- using a model or anchor to practise the success criteria (for example, one video could be viewed as a class and the organizer could be completed as a shared writing activity).

Suggestions for Differentiation

To support all learners' comprehension of the videos, while using authentic texts from the same series and a common purpose for listening, there are a number of ways to control the difficulty level of the listening task. The videos in this series include francophone children from around the world; therefore there is tremendous opportunity to differentiate the content. **Strategic selection of the video**, keeping in mind the students' familiarity with the accents they will be hearing, and considering how similar (or dissimilar) the students' interests are in comparison with the topics in the video, will greatly impact the difficulty level of this task for students. For this reason, the FSL teacher may have **different groups of students working with different videos**, or the whole class may view and discuss multiple videos before students select one video for the task.

Difficulty at a Glance



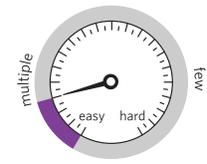
Pace



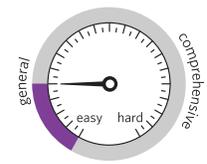
Complexity



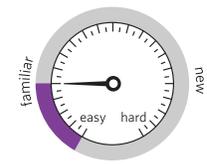
Accent/Register



Supports



Purpose



Topic

Additional **supports** may also be needed for some students to be successful with this task. Second language learners will often vary in the number of times they need to listen/view a text, and should be encouraged to use the strategy of **repeated viewing and listening**. In addition to teaching the students how to ask “Puis-je regarder encore une fois?”, the teacher might group students together who would like the chance to listen to all or parts of the video an additional time before completing their task. Another effective support for comprehension is to have **students converse in small groups** about the video, in order to confirm their understanding, ask questions, and get additional ideas to enhance their intercultural understanding before completing the task.

Listening and Critical Literacy

Teaching/Learning Sample 2:

This teaching/learning sample is designed for an intermediate French Immersion or Extended French class or a senior Core French class, for students with an intermediate or independent level of French proficiency (CEFR level B1).

Curriculum Expectation/ Contenu d'apprentissage	Learning Goal/ Objectif d'apprentissage	Success Criteria Critères d'évaluation
A1.4 Responding to and Evaluating Media Texts: evaluate the effectiveness of the treatment and presentation of ideas and information in a variety of oral media texts about familiar, academic, and personally relevant topics, with teacher support as appropriate.	Nous apprenons à évaluer des publicités à la radio et à exprimer nos réactions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Je peux décrire le produit / le service et le message de l'annonceur.• Je peux identifier le marché pour le produit / le service.• Je peux évaluer l'efficacité de la publicité à l'aide des questions de pensée critique.

Listening Texts

Select a small number of radio advertisements to share with the class. You may wish to select advertisements with similar themes in order to add opportunities for students to compare and contrast. You may also wish to do a listening activity prior to this one, with a focus on listening to interact (curriculum expectations A2.1 and A2.2). Student discussions will clarify their understanding and generate ideas as they listen to the radio advertisements.

Listening Activity

Students listen to one of the advertisements that they think was effective, and evaluate the advertisement, using critical thinking questions such as the ones below (keeping in mind that the questions should be selected or modified based on the radio advertisements).

Produit/Service

- Est-il utile? Unique? Cher? Important? Comment le sais-tu?
 - Marché
 - Qui est le client /la cliente (âge, sexe, caractéristiques)?
 - Quelle est la stratégie de marketing (comment le client sera-t-il amené à acheter rapidement)?
 - Message
 - Est-il créatif? Drôle? Comment capte-t-il votre attention?
 - Est-ce la «valeur ajoutée»?
- Impressions générales (avec justification).

Difficulty Level

Some factors that make this text challenging for learners are:

Purpose - evaluating the texts requires higher order thinking;

Pace - radio advertisements are generally very fast;

Supports - a recorded audio text has fewer inherent supports than a video text or a live speaker might have.

Topic, accent/register, and complexity - are variable in difficulty, based on the teacher's (or students') selection of text. It may be helpful to many students to intentionally select 'easier' texts based on these remaining factors, in order to help students cope with the inherent difficulty of authentic radio texts.

Suggestions to Support All Students

- Group advertisements based on like products, messages, or markets, in order to support deeper comprehension of techniques that advertisers may be using.
- Activate and make connections to prior knowledge and critical listening skills (e.g. media literacy, critical thinking, questioning, and reflection skills) that students have developed in other subject areas.
- Invite students to listen to each text multiple times, evaluating only one of the areas each time.
- Practise evaluating media as a whole class and in small groups before asking students to practise individually.

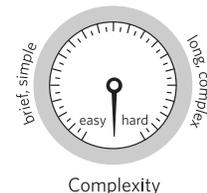
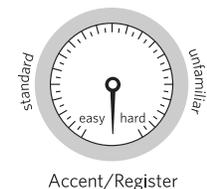
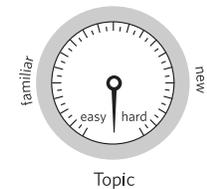
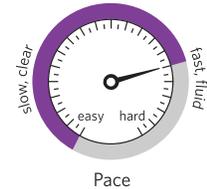
Suggestions for Differentiation

The difficulty of this listening task can be adjusted up front through the strategic selection of radio texts to increase or decrease the difficulty of the topic, keeping in mind students' individual competencies and prior experiences.

Some students may need more support in order to be successful with this task. Some additional suggestions to consider for these students include:

- having different groups of students working with different oral texts (e.g. based on student interests, or based on the degree of similarity to a previous oral text that the student understood);
- 'chunking' the task by giving only one critical thinking question at a time (not the whole list, as suggested in the task);
- changing the student's output from written to oral by providing an opportunity to conference with the teacher or record their ideas orally.

Difficulty at a Glance



Listening During Group Discussions

Teaching/Learning Sample 3:

This teaching/learning sample can be adapted to a variety of proficiency levels, depending on the topic and purpose of group discussions that are expected. For beginning French learners, the success criteria can be simplified and reflect a higher level of support, such as “en utilisant les expressions familières.” For more advanced French learners, the success criteria could include more sophisticated strategies, such as “J’identifie pourquoi je suis/je ne suis pas d’accord avec mon interlocuteur.”

Curriculum Expectation/ Contenu d’apprentissage	Learning Goal/ Objectif d’apprentissage	Success Criteria/ Critères d’évaluation
A2.1 Using Interactive Listening Strategies: identify and use interactive listening strategies while participating in social and academic interactions.	Nous apprenons des stratégies pour soutenir des discussions informelles.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• J’écoute en demandant de répéter ou de reformuler au besoin.• Je peux poser des questions afin de vérifier ma compréhension et afin d’en savoir plus.• Je peux répondre et réagir à mon interlocuteur.

Listening Texts

During informal class or group discussions, the oral text is generated by the group participants. The content will depend on the topic, purpose, and length of the discussion, in addition to the students’ ability to communicate in French.

Listening Activity

Students may be asked to have an informal discussion according to the following instructions:

Vous travaillerez en groupes de 3 ou 4 personnes. Chaque personne devra identifier un animal qui ferait une bonne mascotte pour l’école. Après avoir écouté les raisons de chacun, le groupe doit s’entendre sur le choix de mascotte. Vous avez 7 minutes. Reportez-vous aux normes de discussion et n’oubliez pas de mettre en pratique les stratégies que nous avons révisées et qui sont affichées sur le tableau blanc. Je vais vous demander de réfléchir à ces stratégies à la fin de la discussion.

Difficulty Level

When using group discussions to teach and assess listening to interact, instructional decisions about **topic, purpose, complexity,** and **supports** will largely contribute to task difficulty. FSL teachers consider:

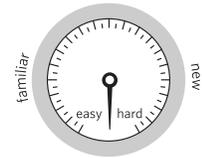
- Will the group discussion be highly structured or more spontaneous, and how will this impact the students' ability to sustain the discussion?
- To what extent does the speaker's ability impact the listener's ability (and vice versa)? How will this be accounted for in assessment? How will I group students for each activity? (Refer to the conceptions of listening on page 5 to further reflect on this question.)
- How can student, group, and teacher observations of the use of strategies become part of an ongoing learning-assessment loop?

Suggestions to Support All Students

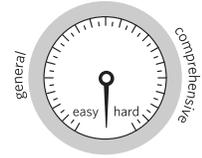
In this activity, students benefit from previous experience working in cooperative groups. It is important to note that FSL teachers will usually establish norms or expectations for effective group work based on the Learning Skills and Work Habits. These norms, which are evaluated separately from the curriculum expectations, may include speaking and listening attentively, staying on topic, taking turns, and contributing equitably to the discussion. This teaching/learning sample focuses on group discussion as it relates to the achievement of the identified curriculum expectation and learning goal, but it would be very natural to teach and assess both the curriculum and learning skills during this type of activity.

Explicit teaching of the listening strategies is often most effective when modelled one strategy at a time. If students do not have prior experience with the strategies identified in the success criteria, it is recommended to teach and assess each strategy individually over time during a series of listening activities.

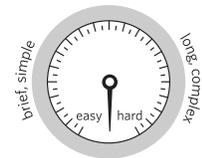
Difficulty at a Glance



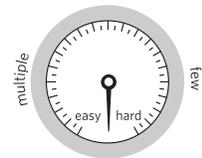
Topic



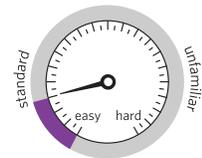
Purpose



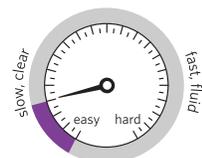
Complexity



Supports



Accent/Register



Pace

Suggestions for Differentiation

Listening to interact, as part of informal discussions with one's peers, is a highly flexible and variable example for differentiation. Consider inviting students to increase their awareness of strategies for listening, using the following activity. This organizer can be used before, during, or after a group discussion.

Reflection Question

How could teachers adapt this activity when they are planning lessons?

Sujet de la discussion: _____ Objectif: _____ Longueur: _____

Sur le diagramme ci-dessous, indiquez le degré de difficulté de chaque élément de la tâche (chaque cadran). Ensuite, identifiez au moins une stratégie d'écoute pour chaque cadran de difficulté.

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Professional Resources

Council of Europe. 2001. *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*. Cambridge: University Press.

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