

Listening for Specific Information:

Guessing Vocabulary from Context- Guessing meaning from context is an important skill.

Even native speakers often hear unknown words in speech and must try to guess the meaning through context. Those who are successful at this skill usually use many of the other strategies discussed in the Listening Strategy Guide to help them guess the meaning of new words and phrases:

- they make predictions and prepare themselves before they listen
- they pay attention to the repetition of key words
- they use their intuition to make inferences
- they pay attention to discourse markers.

In addition to the above, here are 4 strategies that will help you make better guesses about the meanings of words you don't know.

1. Use the words and phrases surrounding the unknown word to make quick guesses about its general meaning. For example, in Part 2 of Lecture 7, Professor Vicenti discusses the result of trying to identify the inventors of certain things: Countries vie with each other and argue about it. And there's.... somehow it rarely seems to be settled. You might not be familiar with the verb vie, but because you know what argue means and because you may understand the phrase "rarely seems to be settled," you can infer that vie must refer to some form of conflict or disagreement. (This inference would be correct, of course, as vie means compete.) When guessing, however, you should not worry if you don't know exactly what type of conflict or disagreement vie may refer to. When you are listening, you need to make very fast guesses regarding the general meanings of words. If you stop to think about a word for too long, you will probably sacrifice your understanding of the speaker's next point. In sum,

make your guesses quickly and learn to be comfortable with less than 100% certainty. Also, be confident! You will see from the exercises in Advanced Listening that, with practice, your guesses will usually be right!

2. Recognize when the speaker offers a definition or an explanation of an unknown word. For example, in Part 5 of Lecture 7, Professor Vicenti says, “Moving forward in this direction – right to left – would cause resistance, which is called drag.” Here, the professor is explicitly defining drag as resistance. Similarly, Professor Vicenti says in Part 1

3: Now by stability, you mean that the airplane, when it has some kind of a chance disturbance by a gust or whatever – not a control by the pilot – when it has a disturbance that throws it out of equilibrium, there is something that will return it to that ... automatically... to that direction. In this way, he is telling us directly that stability, in aeronautical terms, is the characteristic that enables an airplane to return to a balanced state after a natural disturbance. (See Listening Topic 5 for a list of discourse markers that signal a definition or explanation.) In addition, speakers sometimes define words or phrases using appositives. An “appositive” is any word or phrase – a noun, pronoun, noun clause, infinitive phrase, prepositional phrase, etc. – which stands after another word or phrase without a grammatical link. For instance, in Part 6 of Lecture 8 we hear: Starting from about early school age on – six, seven – what begins to weigh in is what we call personality characteristics. Here, Professor Steiner clarifies the phrase “early school age” with the appositive “six, seven.” 3. Pay attention to body language. A speaker’s gestures (movements) often provide obvious clues to the meaning of words or phrases. For example, in the last part of Lecture 7, Professor Vicenti purposefully uses physical movements to illustrate the terms yaw, pitch, and roll. That is, he demonstrates with his hands and arms (and his model airplane) the three aeronautical movements mentioned above. Of course, there are other visual clues in addition to body language. For instance, speakers often provide the meaning of words and phrases by

referring to pictures, photographs, notes on the board, and other types of visual aids. In Part 9 of Lecture 7, for example, Professor Vicenti says, “Some of them were monoplanes; some of them were biplanes, as this one.” Here, the professor refers to a photograph, showing us that a biplane is an airplane with two sets of parallel wings. In sum, listening is a multi-sensory activity, so make sure to have your eyes open, as well as your ears!

4. Finally, try to build your vocabulary as quickly and broadly as possible, since the more words you know, the easier it is to guess unknown words from context. As you complete this course, keep a vocabulary log of the new words and idioms you learn, and review this log frequently.