Quiz

1) When you don't understand something, you can say:

a. Hang on - you've found me!
b. Hang on - you've missed me!
c. Hang on - you've lost me!

2) Which sentence is correct?

a. Hold out - I don't think I follow you.
b. Hold on - I don't think I follow you.
c. Hold down - I don't think I follow you.

3) What form of body language can we use to show we understand?

a. Nod your head
b. Open and close your mouth
c. Wave your hands

Answers
1) c
2) b
3) a
Transcript

William
Hello and welcome to How To, the programme from BBC Learning English where we help you to help yourselves in some everyday situations.
My name's William Kremer. Now, when you're in English class, are you ever unsure how to show your teacher that you understand what he or she is saying? Do you just wait for your teacher to finish explaining a point and then say something like thank you: I understand? If you do, you might feel that that sounds a bit unnatural - and you'd be right, it is unnatural.

In English, as in many other languages, we tend to signal to the person who is talking, that we are listening to them, and that we either understand or don't understand what they're saying. The most obvious way to do this is to -

Well, you couldn't see me but I just nodded my head: I moved my head up and down! Nodding can show that you're listening carefully and that you understand - or follow - what someone is saying. Nodding can also mean that you agree with what a person is saying or asking.
Now, the body language of showing that you're not following what someone is saying - that you don't understand - is more complicated. It's basically to look confused. Here in Britain, this tends to be by frowning or squinting your eyes to show that you're thinking very hard.
OK? Let's practise looking confused.

That's great! You don't understand a word I'm saying, do you?!
So much for body language. But what noises can we make to show that we understand? We're going to hear a clip now of Tim talking to Elena. Tim is a sound engineer who works for BBC Learning English - and he's talking about sound technology. Don't try to understand what he's saying, but listen carefully to Elena. What noise does she make?

EXAMPLE

Tim
The pressure wave is leaving my mouth and it's going to the microphone just over where you're sitting.

Elena
Umm-hmm.
Tim
And what's happening is there's like a, sort of like a, drum skin.

William
Did you hear Elena?

EXAMPLE
Umm-hmm.

William
Elena made a noise like this: umm-hmm. This means that she is listening to Tim and she's following what he's saying. Umm-hmm. Another noise that English speakers make is this one: uh-huh.

Notice that Elena only made the noise once, when Tim paused to check that she was following him. She wasn't going umm-hmm, umm-hmm, umm-hmm, umm-hmm, umm-hmm. That would be totally crazy!

Let's listen to another clip. Once again, don't listen to what Tim is saying - listen for Elena. Is she still following Tim?

EXAMPLE

Tim
So as I'm speaking to you, pressure - air pressure - is leaving my mouth.

Elena
Right...

Tim
And it's going to your ear.

William
Elena said:

EXAMPLE
Right...

William
Elena says right. But, is she following what Tim is saying? Well, I think her
intonation - the way that she says the word - means that at the moment she's listening very hard and isn't yet sure if she understands completely.

EXAMPLE
Right…

William
Intonation is really important in showing whether you understand someone or not. Let's listen to a different clip.

EXAMPLE

Tim
It's not an exact representation of what the analogue sound is actually doing.

Elena
Right. OK!

William
Now Elena is speaking more confidently and brightly. She sounds like she understands:

EXAMPLE
Right. OK!

William
Well, we've looked at body language, we've looked at noises and words and we've looked at intonation - the way we say words. But there is also another way you can show that you've not understood something or someone: just say so! You might even wish to interrupt the speaker.

EXAMPLE

Tim
Making an electrical signal into an acoustic signal -

Elena
Hang on. Run me through that again.

Tim
Right, OK. A microphone is basically one way of turning -
William
Hang on means stop. Elena might also have said hold on, which has the same meaning.

EXAMPLE
Hang on. Run me through that again.

William
Run me through that again. To run somebody through something means to explain it to them. But what else might Elena have said?

EXAMPLE
Err - you've lost me there.

William
You've lost me. This means that Elena was following Tim, but she's not anymore: now, she doesn't understand.

EXAMPLE
Err - you've lost me there.

William
Well, if you're listening, I hope that I haven't lost you! That's all we've got time for on How To this week, but we'll be back next week with more useful language for everyday situations. Goodbye!