

Exploring Origins

A Communication Development Process for Science Classrooms

THE ART OF LISTENING

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INTRODUCTION



This listening skills feature centers on strategies to help your students advance their ability to listen attentively. Learning to listen effectively and clearly is an often-overlooked way to improve communication skills. The best communicators not only speak clearly, they are also excellent listeners. The goal of this listening exercise is to reveal strategies to your students that will enable them to: 1) understand why many people are poor listeners, 2) overcome obstacles to effective listening, and 3) enhance their listening skills with four classroom activities.

Even though we live in an age of electronic communications where the World Wide Web, facsimiles, and e-mail maintain a viable presence, face-to-face communication is still alive and well. Some industries rely on rapid-fire verbal communications to survive. Have you ever seen the floor of the New York Stock Exchange when trading is in a flurry of activity? "Buy 2000 shares of XXX! Sell 1000 shares of XXX!" Can you imagine what would happen if everyone on the floor talked, but no one listened? What if the traders paid little attention to listening closely? One mistake could cost millions of dollars. Additionally, it is not just in dollars that high prices are paid. Think about the consequences of testimony given in error on the witness stand as a result of poor listening. Costly mistakes can happen in the corporate world, in the court room, at the negotiating table, and in an interview—all as a result of poor listening.

The student who today is offered the opportunity to improve his or her ability to listen will have a distinct advantage in school, at work, and in interpersonal communications. By offering students the opportunity to become better listeners, teachers facilitate learning and help students become tomorrow's communicative and attentive leaders in science and industry.

NATIONAL STANDARDS

The "National Science Education Standards" mandate that "teachers of science guide and facilitate learning." It is important that they "orchestrate discourse among students about scientific ideas," and that they "promote many different forms of communication." This listening skills communication exercise allows the science teacher to "structure and facilitate ongoing formal and informal discussion," as put forth in the national standards. When students engage in science communication activities, their abilities to think, understand, explain, argue, and conclude become greatly enhanced.

RATIONALE

According to listening experts like Dr. Lyman K. Steil of the University of Minnesota, Americans spend 9 percent of the time they devote to communication each day in writing, 16 percent in reading, 30 percent in speaking, and 45 percent in listening (Ailes, 56). Yet, most people are poor listeners. Poor listening skills often result in a lack of comprehension, which affects a student's ability to conceptualize, analyze, and consider solutions. In short, the inability to listen effectively directly impacts critical thinking skills.

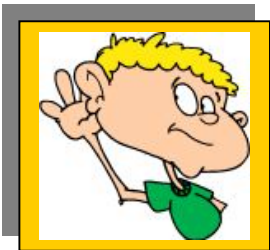


Classroom teachers often search for ways to engage their students in critical thinking exercises. Expanded critical thinking skills invites effective questioning, which in turn opens the door to engaging debates in the classroom. The end result is the creation of an environment that is rich in the energy of learning. Students find out that they can offer

their own ideas, concepts, questions, and perspectives in an environment that respects individual opinions. And most importantly, they learn the benefit of listening—to their peers, to experts, and to their instructors.

WHY ARE MOST PEOPLE POOR LISTENERS?

Perhaps it goes back to childhood. Did a parent ever say to you, "I'm only going to ask you once! . . . If I've said it once, I've said it a thousand times. . . . Are you listening to me? . . . OK, I've said it for the last time," . . . and on, and on, and on. What were the dynamics of the situation? Were you engaging in play and, by all measurements, having a glorious time? Perhaps you were testing the limits of a parent's patience. Whatever the case may be, you were hearing a negative signal at a time when you were experiencing a positive feeling. What is a common childhood reaction? Tune Mom or Dad out. People learn early in life not to listen. Then many of them spend the rest of their lives trying to overcome a well-reinforced lesson.



As teachers, our job is to help students understand that listening is an art. Individuals who develop this aptitude and carry it throughout their schooling, professional lives, and personal relationships have a distinct advantage over poor listeners. Attentive listening is reflected in good grades on report cards, successful job interviews, and rewarding friendships.

There are a variety of reasons why most people are poor listeners. Three of the most common reasons are: 1) they don't concentrate, 2) they jump to conclusions, and 3) they get distracted by focusing on appearance and delivery.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Have you ever seen a rerun of *Saturday Night Live* in which Gilda Radner played a character called Emily Litella? Emily would go off on a tirade that usually started with, "What's all this I hear about . . . ?" and she would go on about "violins on television" or "moron poverty." After a few minutes, she would be stopped and told that she had heard wrong. She had not listened. It was "violence on television" or the "war on poverty" that people were talking about. At that point she would peevishly look into the camera and say, "Well, that's different. Nevermind!" Emily was a popular character because she put forth tremendous energy and passion. She showed us that she truly cared about "violins on television." But in the end, she never got the message right (Collins, 39). She was the epitome of someone who is listening-impaired, and she had obstacles that she needed to overcome.

There are methods for becoming a better listener. They are simple strategies that with attention, produce results in a short period of time. These strategies require work and practice in learning how to listen effectively.

Listed below are six tips on effective listening to share with students. Questions for class discussion are included and may open the dialogue regarding advantages in refining classroom listening skills.

1. Listen for main points

It is important to listen for content. Watch for signals from the speaker's eyes, body, face, voice, and gestures. Pay attention to visual materials. At the end of this presentation, can you list the main points?

2. Listen for evidence

Resist the temptation to form a conclusion early in the discussion. Let the speaker complete his or her thought and then evaluate the evidence by distinguishing the specifics vs. the generalities, the believable vs. the incredible, etc. When does a point move from the believable to the incredible?

3. Develop note-taking skills

Listening is not exclusively memory related. Part of developing good listening skills is learning to write down the important parts of the discussion. What are some distinct advantages to taking good notes?

4. Resist distractions

Clear your mind if someone is speaking. This will help you to be more receptive to what they are saying. Can you name some common distractions in a classroom?

5. Suspend judgment

Never assume that you have heard correctly because the first few words have taken you in one direction. Some people only hear the first few words of a sentence, finish the sentence in their own minds, and miss the second half. These people represent most of the listening mistakes. Do you know someone who is inclined to finish your sentences?

6. Don't be diverted by appearance or delivery

Don't tune out a speaker just because you don't like his or her looks, voice, or general mannerisms. Pride yourself on remaining open to new ideas and information. When was the last time appearance or delivery impaired your ability to listen?

FOUR CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE YOUR STUDENTS' LISTENING SKILLS

By the time students reach middle or high school, most have spent thousands of hours listening to teachers, administrators, and their peers. Yet many of these students have no idea how to rate themselves when it comes to measuring listening skills. When it comes to helping students develop close listening skills, many teachers recognize the need, but are unsure of where to begin. Listed below are four activities that are designed to help students improve their listening skills. Each activity will encourage students to stop and consider their abilities to listen.

1. This activity serves as a measurement to determine your students' listening ratios. Are they listeners? Do they prefer to do the talking? Ask them to rate themselves on the Communicator Measurement Chart on page 5. Students should then ask three other people in the class to rate them. Impress upon the class that it is important to score each other as accurately as possible. When students have collected their ratings sheets, ask them to do a self-assessment while charting the responses. Ask them to compare their peers' assessments with the way that they rated themselves. Are there discrepancies? What are potential reasons for identified discrepancies? Discuss the importance of reflecting on how others view us. Encourage students to set goals to improve their listening scores.
2. This activity is an exercise in developing close listening skills. Ask your students to write the lyrics of a favorite song or the text from a favored poem, quotation, or brief story on a piece of paper. On a second copy, ask them to change the words in a number of places within the text. Specify how many changes that they should make. Then ask each student to read aloud the original words followed by the changed copy. The task of the student listeners is to record on a piece of paper only those instances of change that were heard in the second reading. Students who have the highest number of correct responses will be recognized as the most attentive and accurate listeners.
3. Videotape several television and/or record several radio commercials. Play them for the class, asking them to listen carefully. Ask questions about specifics included in the commercials. These may include the gender of the main characters, the narrator's voice, the number of times the product is mentioned, catch phrases or slogans, etc. Student listening skills may be assessed by the number of correct answers.
4. Ask students to name an American who has made an outstanding contribution through invention, research, human rights, or creative effort which, in large measure, depends upon a person's ability to listen. One example might be Dr. Martin Luther King who, through his "I Have a Dream" speech, is considered one of the great orators and human rights advocates of the twentieth century. Summarize the individual's achievement and its relationship to listening. Discuss how the inability to listen might have drastically changed this individual's contribution to society.

**CONCLUSION**

By nature, the act of hearing, perceiving, and retaining spoken information that we call listening is an inefficient process. Not getting the message, the song, or the story right is an every-day occurrence for many of us. We often suffer lapses in listening. This can result in costly mistakes—in the board meeting, the media interview, on a witness stand, or on an exam. People who are effective listeners have a distinct advantage. They can react more quickly to a

question, respond more effectively in an interview, and remember what was said as it supports fact finding or their own interests.

REFERENCES

Ailes, R. (1995). You are the Message. New York: Doubleday.

This book centers on the tools to persuade and influence people by focusing on words, voice, movement, facial expression, and attitude.

Collins, P. J. (1998), Say it with Power and Confidence. Paramus, NJ: Prentice Hall.

This book offers tested ideas for becoming a better listener and more powerful communicator.

Lucas, S. E. (1998). The Art of Public Speaking. New York: McGraw Hill.

A resource book that is widely used in higher education classrooms across the U.S. and offers basic instruction in communication strategies and techniques.

Lucas, S. E. (1992), The Speech Communication Teacher. New York: McGraw Hill

Published four times a year, *The Speech Communication Teacher* contains a variety of articles on teaching communication courses.

Communicator Measurement Chart

Do you talk more than you listen? Rate yourself on chart #1. (Ailes, 55) Separate charts #2-4, write your name on each chart, and ask three of your classmates to score your talk/listening ratio. Compile the averages of charts #2-4. Does the final score reflect how you rated yourself? Were there discrepancies? If so, what are some reasons why?

Name _____

#1

Check the line of the ratio that best represents the percentage of the time that you generally:

Talk	Listen	
10	90	
20	80	
30	70	
40	60	
50	50	
60	40	
70	30	
80	20	
90	10	

Name _____

#2

Check the line of the ratio that best represents the percentage of the time that I generally:

Talk	Listen	
10	90	
20	80	
30	70	
40	60	
50	50	
60	40	
70	30	
80	20	
90	10	

Name _____

#3

Check the line of the ratio that best represents the percentage of the time that I generally:

Talk	Listen	
10	90	
20	80	
30	70	
40	60	
50	50	
60	40	
70	30	
80	20	
90	10	

Name _____

#4

Check the line of the ratio that best represents the percentage of the time that I generally:

Talk	Listen	
10	90	
20	80	
30	70	
40	60	
50	50	
60	40	
70	30	
80	20	
90	10	