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# Listening: The First Step in Teaching

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## Abstract

Active listening requires concentration and effort from both students and teachers. It is not an automatic occurrence because numerous internal (listener-related) and external (speaker-related or environmental) distractions can create listening barriers. Students can be distracted by their own thoughts and feelings, something the teacher says, or the teacher's behavior and/or appearance. Some external listening barriers are environmental, such as noise, room temperature, lighting levels, visual distractions, and seating arrangements. Perhaps the greatest stumbling block to student listening is the one-sided nature of lecturing. To overcome these barriers, effective teachers use both visual and vocal aspects of communication, work to create an environment conducive to listening, and involve, react to, and interact with students during class. They are continually cognizant of three factors which shape the answer to the unspoken question, "Why should I listen?": student self-interest, teacher perception, and teaching style and technique. Most importantly, effective teachers work to develop and strengthen their own listening skills.

## Introduction

How do teachers communicate with students? Generally, it's by the use of language: messages are sent by writing and speaking, messages are received by reading and listening. Throughout the educational process, reading, writing, and even speaking receive a great deal of attention. But, what about listening? As teachers, are we trained to listen? Do we know how and why students listen? If we don't, we run the risk of broadcasting on the wrong frequency. We may be articulate and fluent, our classroom presentations clear and powerful, but are students listening? And if they aren't, what's the point of our efforts?

## Why Do Students Listen?

Three factors shape the answer to every student's unspoken question: "Why should I listen?":

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- Self-interest
- Teacher Perception
- Teaching Style and Technique

## Self-interest

As teachers, our job is to get students to listen. The first step in accomplishing this is to ask ourselves what it is that motivates them to listen. To answer this question, we must think about ourselves and what prompts us to do the things we do?

The center of all our activities is self-interest. It motivates us to want, to follow, and/or be attracted to anything that looks practical, rewarding, or useful. And, what if someone tells us it's good for us? Don't we have to see its applicability for ourselves. The same is true for students.

One way to stimulate students to listen is to show what's in it for them. Teachers can do this by focusing on the student's point of view before sharing theirs. When what teachers have to say intersects with what students want or need or care about, they will be compelled to listen. Because the teacher's message is built on the student's self-interest, he or she will respond instinctively by thinking, "I want to know that. I need to know that." Clearly, understanding students and knowing what turns them on is an important step in getting them to listen.

## Teacher Perception

Students listen in accordance with their perception of the teacher. Needing to know "who's telling" is built into the nature of listening itself (Hamlin, 1988). To a large extent, success as a teacher is governed by the impressions created in the classroom, during student-teacher conferences, meeting with student groups, and other day-to-day encounters. If students' perception is positive, it's like putting money in a bull market: the investment will pay big dividends. But, a negative perception may be difficult, and perhaps impossible, to change. Like it, or not, the students' perception of the teacher is their reality.

Consider how the following positive personal traits attract students to listen. **Warm, friendly, honest, and accessible** teachers immediately put students at ease and invite them to come closer. A climate is quickly created in which teacher and students relate directly and openly with one another. **Creativity** spawns student curiosity about the teacher and subject matter so they become interested to the point of for-

getting about themselves in anticipation of what is coming next. **Knowledgeable** and **confident** teachers become so because they do their homework. These traits assure students they can trust the teacher. Then, they automatically assume listening will be beneficial. These same teachers will be **organized**, which satisfies the student's need for order and logic. Organization by teachers focuses student attention and fosters a systematic approach to learning. Teachers who possess these characteristics are also **sincere** in their endeavors and **considerate** of the student's need to build confidence in the learning process. **Inspiring** and **enthusiastic** teachers appeal to students' willingness to follow a leader and even rise above their own thoughts to absorb another's excitement. As Campbell (1972) said, "Enthusiasm for teaching changes the quality of instruction because it changes the teacher." Students become inspired to learn from enthusiastic teachers.

Student perception of any one or a combination of these positive qualities can motivate them to become willing and interested listeners. On the other hand, negative personal traits can cause the opposite by making students uncomfortable and creating an environment in which they search for ways to keep from listening. For example, **formal** and **stuffy** styles exemplify someone operating from a rigid set of rules. In this case, the teacher's greatest effort seems to be spent hiding behind a formalized lecture instead of genuinely trying to reach students. **Closed** and **artificial** teachers subconsciously worry students. They don't really know who the teacher is nor can they predict anything about what the teacher means, feels, or believes. **Arrogant** behavior attempts to set teachers above students. This creates two problems. First, students wonder who put teachers above them and what evidence permits such behavior. Secondly, students won't listen to teachers if they have not deemed them worthy of being listened to. **Monotonous** teachers put students in a passive state of learning. Being trapped in a dull lecture forces students to search for the nearest escape hatch tuning out. **Lethargic** teachers frustrate students because they ask for students' time and effort, but fail to reciprocate. **Vagueness** creates anxiety and confusion. **Irrelevant** messages violate the first rule of motivating students to listen—their own self-interest. Listening to something which matters only to someone else precipitates boredom. An excessively **nervous** behavior can breed an uncomfortable environment. Since students have all experienced some degree of nervousness when speaking before a group, they easily recognize it in teachers. Although they can tolerate controlled nervousness, excessive cases become so distracting listening becomes impaired. An **uncertain** behavior is a more serious negative trait because students aren't sure of the importance of the material being taught or their position with the teacher. **Overly-intense** teachers start students at too high a level. These teachers are already running, while students can only walk. If students are "lost" in the subject matter, neither listening nor learning will occur.

Because students initially operate on an instinctual level, these personal-quality perceptions are the first things they

notice and respond to. Then, they proceed through a series of subconscious questions to determine if their attention is justified: "Do you know what I need to know?", "Can I trust you?", "How can you affect my life?", "What's my past experience with you?", "Are you reasonable?" The answers to these questions determine whether students listen.

### Teaching Style and Technique

Campbell (1972) refers to teaching style and technique as the way in which the environment is arranged to expedite learning. Although teachers may possess the positive personal traits described in the previous section, they can't be truly successful in gaining students' attention without knowing how to apply correct teaching techniques.

Just as there is no single, best means by which students learn, there is no single, best method of teaching. The traditional lecture format, class discussion method, or a combination can be useful techniques of instruction. The usefulness of each depends the teacher's personality, course content, class size, classroom arrangement, and the students themselves. As Campbell (1972) and Fincher (1977) suggest, teachers should develop a number of different approaches to enhance student listening. These should be flexible and adjustable to the conditions best suited to the needs, backgrounds, and interests of a particular group of students. Whatever the technique, course materials should be relevant and well-prepared, visual aids used liberally, and class participation encouraged. The latter is especially important because only when students are active participants is listening maximized. Roush (1980) summarized the literature on college teaching and agreed that teaching modes which require students to become actively involved in learning result in higher student achievement.

### Listening Barriers

In general, contributors to listening barriers can be classified as either internal or external. Internal contributors are listener-related and include physical (fatigue, stress levels, time constraints, discomfort) and psychological (emotional state, boredom, daydreaming, attitudes, expectations) factors. External contributors may be either speaker-related or environmental. The former includes the way the speaker is dressed, distracting mannerisms, facial expression, body language, and speaking style. The latter includes such factors as noise, room temperature, lighting levels, visual distractions, and seating arrangements.

In the classroom, lack of student concentration, the one-sided nature of lecturing, ineffectual note-taking, and poor physical arrangements are listening barriers that deserve further discussion.

### Lack of Concentration

Although students may hear, they may not listen because they do not concentrate. They become distracted by thoughts totally unrelated to the subject matter being presented. Because most lecturers only speak at a rate of 120 to 180 words

per minute (Kline, 1983), students have a lot of spare time while supposedly listening.

Stuart (1989) refers to this as “going down Route 350”. The human mind processes words at a rate of approximately 500 words per minute and if we speak 150 words per minute, the difference is 350. While on Route 350, they may be planning what they’ll do when class is over, jumping to conclusions, mentally arguing, or worrying about personal problems. Sometimes they anticipate what is coming next and tune the teacher out, or they may allow an initial lack of interest to prevent them from listening to an explanation of why they should be interested. Whatever their reason for not listening, they are “going down Route 350” and what is said is irretrievably lost.

### **Lecturing**

Perhaps the greatest stumbling block to communication in the classroom is the one-sided nature of lecturing. Typical preparation for lectures begins with “I” (“I’ll start by ...”, “Then I’ll tell them ...”) and ends with “I” (“I’ll conclude by ...”). The student is merely the recipient of the teacher’s plans and activities. This one-sided approach presents a major obstacle for student listening because teachers may become so involved in their own activity they forget students are on the other side of the message. Ironically, Humphreys (1989) is of the opinion that

teachers prefer the lecture method of instruction because they value “active learning” so deeply. While the lecture does allow teachers to be active, unfortunately, students become passive receivers whereby there is a transfer of teacher notes into student notes without passing through the minds of either (Sutherland, 1976). If not supplemented with discussion, the lecture becomes the most ineffective method of teaching because students become passive receivers via listening impairment.

### **Note-taking**

Ineffectual note-taking, a condition promoted by lecturing, can also create a listening barrier. Ideally, notes taken during the course of listening, together with what their memory retains, should provide students with material for further study. However, students may be so busy taking notes they can’t listen. Then, they miss the teacher’s intent and interpretation. Long (1993) theorizes some students have a second self, a stenographer, whose only function is to write down everything the teacher says. Their attitude is, “I’ll worry about what’s important later.” This type of note-taking inhibits listening. Most often, it occurs because students are uncertain about what’s important, are inexperienced, or lack focus.

### **Physical Arrangements**

Classroom environment is an important link in the teaching and learning process (Campbell, 1972). When physical arrangements in the classroom are poor, listening barriers often result. Listening may be obstructed by noise, poor acoustics, an uncomfortable room (too hot or too cold, too humid,

too stuffy), inadequate lighting, and visual distractions inside and outside the classroom. In addition, if students can’t see the teacher or visual aids, listening is inhibited. Uncomfortable seats in cramped or crowded conditions also make it difficult for students to concentrate.

## **Overcoming Listening Barriers**

Effective teachers employ a variety of techniques to overcome listening barriers.

### **Add Interest Prompts**

Educational psychologists have determined the attention span of the typical college student is only 15 to 20 minutes (Elkins, 1983). This may vary according to their initial interest in the subject, time of day, whether or not they think the teacher will ask them a question, their own opinion and assessment of the teacher, their need to know about a subject, and/or their background and expectations. Generally, students concentrate most during the first 10 to 15 minutes of the class, but their attention decreases thereafter. Their interest will remain on a low plateau until they hear “Let me conclude by ...”.

Given this fact, effective teachers add interest prompts to maintain attentive listening throughout a 50-minute class. They aim for a variety of facts, personal illustrations, examples, and explanations. Some material may be heavy and more difficult to comprehend, so it can be interspersed with lightweight examples. Sections of essential information can be made more interesting with relevant illustrations. Also, teachers who maintain continual student listening use visual aids to explain main points.

A natural break between main points provides the opportunity to ask transitional questions. A question can be rhetorical and prompt mental responses. It can be a general question answered by a show of hands, or one that is answered by one or two students with direct answers. Or, it can be a direct question answered by a specific student. Whatever the type of question, teachers must be careful to wait for an answer because students need time to adjust from passive to active participation.

Any student-involving technique can serve as an interest prompt. For example, when students think they can predict what is going to happen or how the teacher will act, attention levels decline (Orme, 1986). Thus, doing something unexpected such as tossing the chalk or an eraser can prompt student listening. Another technique is to involve the class in action by asking them to work out a calculation or briefly discuss, with a nearby classmate, a point just raised. Humor can also be a tool to build student attention, activate listening, and develop positive expectations. Once students are actively listening, they can get the point being emphasized.

Even changing physical positions in the classroom helps maintain attention. Teachers can come from behind the lectern, move to one side of the room, or walk among the students. Although too much movement can be distracting, an

occasional change of positions enables students to re-focus on the material being presented.

### Get to Know Students

Teachers may know why they are teaching and the importance of what they teach, but do students? In order for students to know this, teachers should answer the following questions.

Why are students in the class? If a course is required to fulfill degree requirements, they may be there because they have no choice. Initially, they may not be receptive and resent the time required for the course. Effective teachers will be aware of this attitude, and try to overcome it with positive personal traits. In the end, students will have listened and learned because of their attitude toward the subject and teacher.

What do students expect? Confusing student objectives with teacher expectations can create student resentment. Beginning a class with "I'm going to convince you ..." will create this situation because students want to make up their own minds. If not allowed to do so, they will erect a mental barrier to further listening. On the contrary, if students can see how attaining objectives can change their behavior, they can become immersed in listening.

What do students want to know? The message must satisfy their self-interest. This doesn't mean the content of the presentation has to change, but that teachers put themselves in students' shoes and present it from their point of view. If teachers want to avoid unwilling listeners, they must show students in the beginning how listening will benefit them. To do this, teachers must know student interests.

What is the student background with regard to the subject matter? How much do they need to know initially to attain the objectives? This is always a problem when students have diverse backgrounds. Students with little or no background need to develop some foundation. On the other hand, care must be taken to not talk down to more experienced students. A rule of thumb is: teach the class at a level that is 25 percent above the average.

What else should teachers know about students? Teachers should always be cognizant of students' perception of them. If students harbor some prejudices toward teachers and their views, positive personal traits must be practiced before these listening obstacles can even begin to be overcome.

### Learn to Listen

Not surprising, Vieter et al. (1985) concluded over 90% of all lecture classes were spent in "teacher talk". Learning to listen, both in and out of the classroom, is perhaps the most important step teachers can take to improve communication with students. Teachers who are good listeners magnetize students and make them feel valued. Students feel comfortable with the teacher, which leads to increased credibility and an increased willingness to listen. It becomes easier to get the message across and lead students in the direction teachers want them to go. In contrast, teachers who are poor listeners convey a lack of interest, boredom, indifference, or

even hostility to students. These characteristics create student distrust and tension in the classroom. The cycle created is one in which students listen initially, discover the teacher doesn't listen, so they stop listening.

To evaluate listening skills, teachers should consider the following questions (adapted from Bethel, 1990; Noe, 1986; Elsea, 1984) about the way they listen to students. Once done, they can conclude whether they just hear the words of the students or really listen to what they have to say.

- Do you put away all preoccupations and biases and concentrate on what the student says? Do you look directly at the student, avoid distractions, and use body language to encourage communication?
- Do you search for the meanings behind the words by asking questions, restating what you think you heard, and watching for nonverbal cues? Or, do you react to trigger words and statements in students' biases and attitudes? Open-minded teachers avoid overreacting to prevent detrimental effects on student-teacher communication, and they continue to probe if there is any doubt what the student means.
- Do you listen regardless of the student's manner of speaking and choice of words? Good listeners separate the person from the words. They respect what is said and are careful not to dismiss things as being unimportant.
- Do you listen even though you anticipate what is going to be said? Students are more likely to get a fair hearing by teachers who refrain from interrupting. These teachers don't let the student's ability (or lack of ability) of expression get in the way of listening.
- Do you listen equally well to a compliment or a complaint, regardless of the student's tone of voice? Effective teachers value student opinion by listening. They stifle any sarcasm to keep from silencing students and breeding resentment. To correct misconceptions and eliminate false expectations, they make sure the student knows what action will be taken after the interchange is over.
- Would students describe you as a good listener? Master teachers never forget what it was like to be a student, and they exploit the communication characteristics they liked in their teachers. They take responsibility for their own communication skills. They ask, "Have I made myself clear?" rather than, "Do you understand?"

Fortunately, listening, like other communication skills, can be improved by learning more about it and practicing it more often. Effective questioning in the classroom is often the first step. Master teachers invariably ask questions in class. They are interested in students and their ideas. Concurrently, they improve their own listening skills, and rather than always looking for good answers, they also look for good questions.

### Be Visual and Vocal

It has been estimated 55 percent of a speaker's impact comes from visual observation, i.e., appearance, facial expression, eye contact, gestures, body language, and posture, while

38 percent comes from the voice (Mehrabian, 1982; Hegstrom, 1979). Thus, actual words account for a mere 7 percent of a speaker's effect on an audience.

If asked to think back to your favorite teacher, the first person who comes to mind is probably someone who was enthusiastic, animated, and had vocal and visual impact, not a person who relied only on words. It's not that words aren't important. But, if students don't like what they see, or if they get past the body language only to be stopped by the tone of voice, they may not care what is said. Their minds are already made up, their perception indelibly formed.

Often these opinions are formed entirely on visual impact before teachers say anything. Some teachers look inspiring and enthusiastic while others appear dull, uninterested, and lethargic. Based on this visual impression, students will have made up their mind as to whether it's worthwhile to listen. Recognizing this, Daloz (1986) concluded students learn as much from the way they are taught as from the message itself.

### Pay Attention to Physical Arrangements

Because noise level, room temperature, ventilation, acoustics, lighting, visual distractions, seating arrangements, and time of day may also obstruct or complicate the listening process, they should not be forgotten as teachers plan their strategy to maximize student listening. Attention spans are longer when both teacher and students are comfortable. Naturally, room temperature should be controlled at a moderate level, air flow should be adequate, and lighting and acoustics should be excellent. Noise factors should be minimized. To eliminate the temptation to "switch channels" to other stimuli, doors and draperies should be closed.

Seating should not be crowded, and students should be encouraged to sit to the front of the room. Several studies (Shires, 1980; Dykman and Reis, 1979; Becker et al., 1973; Sommer, 1967) have shown the closer students sit to the front, the more likely they are to listen, participate in class discussions, and ask questions. Furthermore, it appears students who prefer to sit toward the front and center of the classroom receive higher grades and have a more positive attitude toward teachers and learning than those who choose to sit in the back or near the windows. To combat this, teachers can move around the room and intentionally direct comments and questions to those students seated to the back and fringe areas of the classroom.

Finally, students have different biological clocks (energy levels, low/high times of the day, hunger). Thus, time of day when the class is scheduled may influence students' concentration and receptivity. Eight o'clock in the morning may be the teacher's best time of day, but it may not be students' preference. Being aware of this helps teachers overcome the listening barrier it may impose.

### Conclusions

Teachers cannot force listening, but they can increase the chances it will occur by understanding which barriers block

messages from sender to receiver. They can create a climate so conducive to listening that students can't avoid it. Perhaps the following anonymous saying, quoted by Campbell (1972), says it best: "There are three kinds of teachers: those students listen to, those students can't listen to, and those students can't help listening to."

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