

Communication Skills: Learning to Listen to Learn

Description

Although the terms “hearing” and “listening” are used interchangeably, they describe different processes. “Hearing,” refers to the physiological processes that enable listening to happen. “Listening” refers to the process of receiving a message from another person, giving the message meaning, and then responding to the message. Listening, then, is a verbal or nonverbal response, or both, to someone else’s message.

Learners

Listening plays an integral role in learning. If learners are also good listeners, they increase the chances they will acquire knowledge from their classes. Because listening is an active process requiring a response to others’ messages, when learners are good listeners, they also have the opportunity to consider varying viewpoints: others and their own. A good listener is also a valued person because others feel valued when they receive the attention a good listener gives.

Equipment

There is no equipment required to practice listening skills.

Facilitator

This exercise can be used at critical points throughout lectures or discussion to test students’ understanding of material. The exercise can become the framework for review for exams or for exploring their own and their classmates’ viewpoints on controversial disciplinary issues. Questions that remain unresolved during discussions that focus on the practice of listening skills can become the springboard to other assignments. If the purpose of the exercise is to practice listening skills, students can write a self assessment of their listening skills, including an action plan for strengthening weaker skills. If students routinely work in pairs or groups, they can provide feedback to their partner(s) about listening skills, incorporating paraphrasing and questioning into the feedback session.

Instructions

Practicing Responsive Listening Behaviors: Students are in pairs with one partner instructed to discuss an issue. The other partner should not speak but should respond with nonverbal actions to the commentary of the first partner. A third party can act as observer, if desired, and record the nonverbal actions of the responder. The exercise can be timed or the topic given to the talking partner can be one easily discussed in a reasonable period of time.

When the responding time is completed, the responding partner summarizes what he or she heard the talking partner say. Partners then discuss the role of the nonverbal behaviors in helping the responding partner listen to the message and the way the talking partner felt as a result of interacting with the responsive listener. Partners can also discuss situations when this type of listening, i.e., one person talking, the other responding, would be appropriate. Partners can exchange roles and repeat the exercise if desired.

With the assistance of the observer, if used, the partners should make a list of all the nonverbal actions the responder used. Some of these behaviors are:

- a. posture
- b. direct body orientation
- c. appropriate facial expression
- d. nodding
- e. eye contact
- f. appropriate proximity
- g. nonverbal utterances “hmmm,” “oh,” “ah,” etc
- h. use of space

Practicing Listening Behaviors to Understand Another Person: Students are in pairs and given a discussion topic. Their purpose is to express their opinion(s) about the topic while achieving an understanding of their partner’s opinion(s). For this exercise, a controversial topic or topic of some complexity works best. Both partners should practice the nonverbal actions listed in the previous exercise. One partner explains his or her views on the assigned issue. The other partner, besides displaying the nonverbal actions from the previous exercise, is instructed to ask questions to enhance understanding of the others’ commentary. When the questioning partner believes he or she understands the first partner’s viewpoint, the partners discuss the extent to which the questions combined with the nonverbal behaviors enhanced the understanding. They create a list of the questions asked and categorize them according to the roles the questions played. Some types of questions that learners might identify are questions:

- a. to clarify meanings
- b. to learn more about the other person
- c. to encourage elaboration
- d. to encourage discovery
- e. to gather facts and details

Partners should discuss the manner in which questioning integrated with nonverbal responses contributed to understanding. Finally, if an observer is used, the observer should keep track of the number of questions each partner asks. It could be “the talker” and “the listener” will begin to be less obvious than was the case when partners practiced responding behaviors. If desired, partners can exchange roles and repeat the exercise.

Practicing Listening Behaviors to Attain Common Understanding: Ideally students are partnered with an individual with whom they disagree. If the disagreement does not occur “naturally” partners can agree to assume different viewpoints for the exercise. The purpose of this exercise is to express differing opinions with the goal to reach an understanding of the other’s opinion. Both partners practice the nonverbal actions described in the first exercise and ask questions described in the second exercise. In addition, before expressing their own opinion, they should state in their own words (paraphrase) what they believe their partner said. The partner must agree that his or her opinion was accurately stated. When the partners have demonstrated they understand each other’s view, they discuss the role paraphrasing contributed to their mutual understanding. They should also attempt to identify the kinds of paraphrasing they used that contributed to their understanding. Types of paraphrasing are:

- a. content paraphrase: the content of the message is stated in the listener’s own words (“What I believe you are saying is that some of the same challenges of growing plants on earth also exist when growing plants in space. Is that correct?”).
- b. emotion paraphrase: the perceived emotions of the speaker are described by the listener (“You seem to be very proud of the results of your research.”).
- c. intention paraphrase: states what has not been stated; i.e., the intentions of the speaker as perceived by the listener are stated (“It sounds from your comments as though you plan to move in another direction with your horticulture research.”).

Partners should discuss the value of paraphrasing. In what instances is it especially important to paraphrase? Are there circumstances when one type of paraphrase is particularly useful? If so, what are these circumstances?

References and Resources

The International Journal of Listening (continuing the *Journal of the International Listening Association*) publishes scholarly articles on listening-related issues.

The International Listening Association promotes the study, development, and teaching of listening. Their web page includes a section of resources about listening.

<http://www.listen.org/>

The name Andrew Wolvin has long been associated with listening. With Carolyn Coakley, Wolvin wrote and/or edited some of the earlier textbooks on listening:

Wolvin, A. & Coakley, C. (1996). *Listening* (5th Ed.). Madison, WI: Brown & Benchmark.

Wolvin, A. & Coakley, C. (Eds.). (1993). *Perspectives on listening*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publ. Co.