

*It is the province of knowledge to speak;
it is the privilege of wisdom to listen.*
—Oliver Wendell Holmes

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Listening

OBJECTIVES

After completing this chapter you should be able to:

- Explain the physiological process of hearing.
- Identify and provide examples of techniques used to become better listeners.
- Discuss strategies teachers can use to create an atmosphere for encouraging students to be better listeners.
- Explain various types of ineffective listening that teachers should avoid when interacting with others.

KEY TERMS

Ambushing

Attention

Concentration

Defensive listening

Empathy

Eye contact

Insensitive listening

Insulated listening

Listening

Objectivity

Pseudo listening

Receptive body language

Restatement of the message

Selective listening

Stage hogs-conversational

Strategic pauses

The process of listening is both physiological and psychological. This chapter will discuss the various contributing factors that influence effective and non-effective listening with regard to teaching.

PHYSIOLOGICAL PROCESSES OF HEARING

To better understand the hearing process, which influences how well we listen, a brief explanation of what occurs physically while we are hearing is necessary. The process of hearing begins with the outer ear receiving sound waves that are then funneled through the auditory canal (also called the ear canal). Once through the ear canal, the sound waves activate the eardrum by causing it to vibrate. This vibration then extends to three bones within the middle ear (the hammer, anvil, and stirrup). Combined, these three bones are known as the ossicles, which operate in a chainlike reaction with the eardrum vibrating the hammer, which strikes the anvil, and thus activating the stirrup. The stirrup, or last part in the chain reaction of the ossicles, is connected to the oval window. The oval window serves as a connector for the middle ear to the inner ear through the cochlea. The striking of the stirrup on the oval window causes fluid inside the cochlea to move. This motion of fluid in the cochlea causes vibration in the basilar membrane, and in turn causes the organ of Corti, which rests on the basilar membrane, to rise and fall. The organ of Corti has hair cells projecting from it that brush against the tectorial membrane located above it. These hair cells serve as auditory receptors that, when sufficiently activated, send messages through the auditory nerve, and finally send auditory information to higher brain centers for processing.

The sound waves we hear that create this chainlike physiological reaction are measured in two ways: frequency and amplitude. Frequency, measured by hertz, determines the pitch of a noise. High-frequency pitches are recognized as higher tones, whereas low-frequency pitches are heard as low tones. Amplitude, measured in decibels, is the intensity or energy produced by the sounds we hear—the stronger the amplitude, the louder the noise.

Why this quick lesson in physiology? Because without the knowledge of this physiological process, we would not be able to discuss the process of hearing or listening. Obviously, if a student has damage to any of the structures or neural pathways for auditory processing, the process of listening will be impaired. In the United States alone, more than 13 million people communicate with some degree of hearing impairment and on a given day, one fourth to one third of the students in a typical classroom don't hear "normally" (Adler & Towne, 1999). Although these astounding statistics are worthy of much further investigation, throughout this chapter, we will assume students have unimpaired hearing so that we can focus on psychological and environmental factors that influence the listening process.

PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS OF LISTENING

For the purposes of this chapter, **listening** is a complex process that entails the physiology of hearing, paying attention, developing understanding, responding to information provided, and remembering the interaction. Teachers are forced on a continual basis to interact and listen to individuals on many different levels (i.e., students, colleagues, parents, and administrators). Here are some guidelines that will assist the teacher in that process.

Listening

Process that entails hearing, attending, understanding, responding, and remembering

BECOMING A BETTER LISTENER

Campbell (2003) offers the following attributes as characteristics of good listening. There is overlap, but obviously all of these attributes work together to contribute to effective listening skills.

1. **Concentration.** Although this is not the easiest task, concentration is the beginning process of good listening. Campbell suggests focusing attention on the verbal message (words being said), and nonverbal messages being sent (e.g., posture, eye contact, tone of voice) during the conversation. When analyzing the content, it is best to concentrate on the main ideas or points being presented.

Concentration

Focus on verbal and nonverbal messages being sent during a conversation.

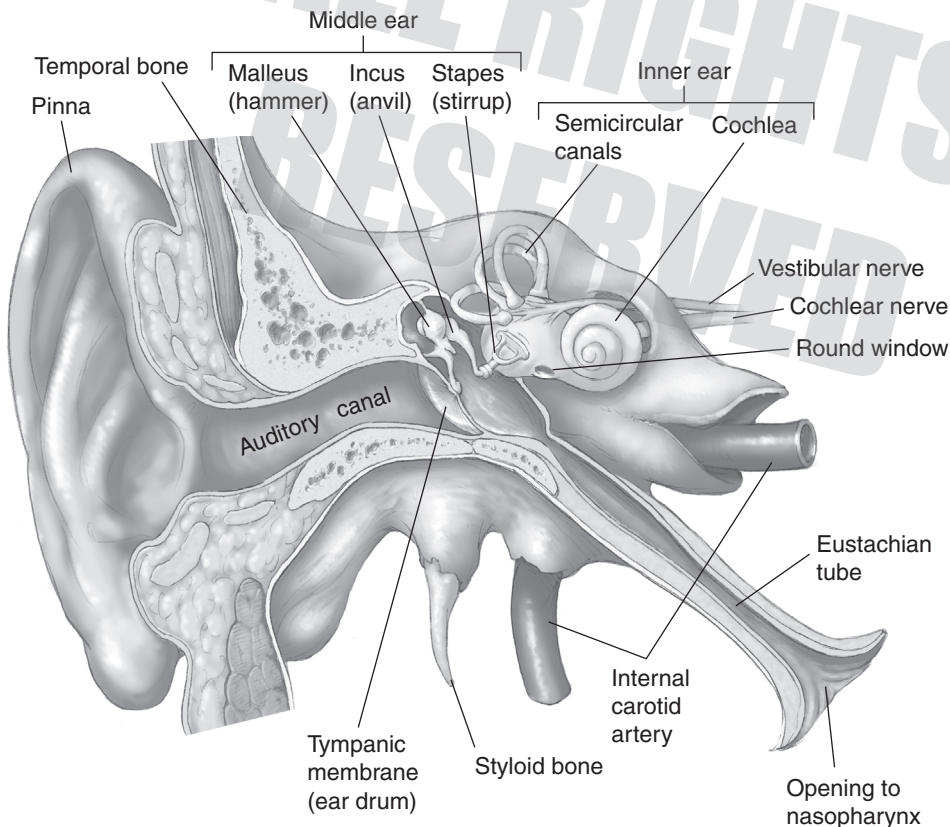


Figure 4.1 Ear anatomy

Attention

Visual portion of attention; including eye contact and receptive body language.

Eye contact

Means for eliminating distracting visual information and attending to facial cues during conversation

Receptive body language

Body posture that communicates attentiveness to the speaker

Objectivity

Open and unbiased listening process

Restatement of the message

The process of paraphrasing a speaker's message in an attempt to fully understand the speaker.

2. **Attention.** Campbell defines attention as the visual portion of concentration on the speaker. Through eye contact (discussed below) and other body language, we communicate to the speaker that we are paying close attention to his or her messages. Unfortunately, we are often forced to divide our attention among many demands in our lives, but when teachers listen to their students, it is important to give them their undivided attention. The preservice teacher needs to be aware that *the greatest compliment you can give to your students is your full attention.*
3. **Eye contact.** Quality eye contact is essential in the listening process for several reasons: First, strong eye contact can eliminate potential competing visual information. Second, although it often occurs without us knowing, when engaging in eye contact, we are also reading the individual's lip movement. This lip reading can assist in the understanding of verbal messages. This process is especially true for students with hearing impairments. Third, nonverbal communication is often easier to read when focusing on a person's face. Campbell notes that by watching the eyes and face of a person we also become aware of unspoken clues to the content. Finally, eye contact with the person speaking sends a clear message to that person that we are listening and paying attention. Teachers should teach students to *listen with their eyes as well as with their ears.*
4. **Receptive body language.** The listener's body posture and positioning also send messages about how attentive you are being to the speaker and his or her message. For example, crossing the arms and legs may be perceived (correctly or not) to mean a closing of the mind and attention. Nodding of the head vertically can be read by the speaker as agreement or assent to the message. Campbell notes that we must be aware of the messages sent through nonverbal cues. Teachers should be cognitive that students *are always in the process of nonverbally communicating.* Often this communication is unintended, or even unconscious, but nevertheless, the communication is present.
5. **Objectivity.** To effectively listen, one must be open to the message the other person is sending. This openness is not always easy because we each have our own biases and past experiences that we draw from (discussed in chapter 3); however, if we allow our own personal biases to enter into the listening process, we have put ourselves into a position to misinterpret the message the speaker is sending. Teachers can be instrumental in teaching their students to quiet their internal dialogues that distract the listener from the message being sent.
6. **Restatement of the message.** A technique that is sometimes used in humanistic therapeutic practices is to restate the speaker's verbal content as part of feedback. This restating of the content can enhance the effectiveness of good communications. Campbell suggests making comments such as "I want to make sure that I have fully understood your message . . ." and then paraphrasing

the message. Restating the message can allow for more effective communication through clarification of what is heard. This process can involve asking questions for clarification as well.

7. **Empathy—not sympathy.** Campbell notes that empathy is “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another . . .” whereas sympathy is “having common feelings. . . .” While a listener can take the perspective of another in the communication process, trying to understand where the individual is coming from, he or she does not have to share the same perspective to be an effective listener.
8. **Strategic pauses.** Silence can be very powerful in the communication and listening process. These pauses not only allow the listener to process the information being sent but also send the message to the speaker that the listener is offering consideration to the message. When dealing with a complex issue, a few well-chosen, deliberate words with a pause for contemplation is much more effective than a room full of words that add to the complexity.
9. **Interjections.** Although tempting, especially when working with students who may take longer to formulate what they are attempting to say, it is crucial to not complete sentences or over-speak a person who is trying to communicate. This interjection sends the message to the students that not only is the teacher not interested in hearing them fully speak their mind, but also the teacher is rushing them in the process.
10. **You cannot listen while you are talking.** This may seem obvious, but in the process of communication and listening, one must strive to find a balance of appropriate give and take. Larry King, a notable news talk show host, is known for saying, “I’ve never learned anything while I was talking.”

Empathy

Understanding the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of another

Strategic pauses

Silence in conversation that allows for comprehension and consideration of the message

HELPING YOUR STUDENTS BECOME BETTER LISTENERS

Jones (2007) states that the “teacher’s role in developing speaking and listening is crucial” (p. 570). Jones explains that there are four different techniques that teachers can use to promote effective speaking and listening. The interactive approaches include dialogical teaching, developing metacognitive awareness, planning, and assessing. She believes that most classroom interactions consist of teacher initiation through questioning, student response, and feedback from the teacher closing the interaction. These exchanges tend to be brief and focused on correctness in answers. In place of these brief interactions, Jones cites suggestions by Alexander (2003) that assist teachers creating a classroom with dialogical teaching to increase the effectiveness of speaking and listening in the classroom: collective (i.e., focusing on learning as a collaborative purpose rather than working alone), reciprocal (i.e., interactions between teachers and students should be a sharing process and exchange of

ideas), cumulative (i.e., it is important to build upon each others ideas), and supportive (i.e., the classroom should be an environment where children can express their ideas without risk of judgment, but with an opportunity for understanding). Additionally, Jones suggests that by increasing the student's metacognitive processes, or acknowledgement and awareness of one's own thought processes, helps them to become more self-reflective, which in turn can increase students' attentiveness and listening to others. In the planning process, Jones proposes that teachers consider the "nature" of the speaking and listening interchange. Teachers should plan for developing relationships, sharing meaning in communication, understanding that meanings come with different understandings (often bound by culture), and using the spoken word as a means for learning. Finally, teachers need to develop some kind of assessment to examine the effectiveness of improving students' speaking and listening abilities. Jones (2007) also notes that students should be a part of the assessment process as well.

Thompson, Grandgenett, and Grandgenett (1999) offer the beneficial advice that listening is a skill that can be taught, even though it is often ignored as a topic for teaching in our classrooms. Specifically, these authors were interested in developing strategies for teachers working with students who are disadvantaged or "at-risk." However, the suggestions they offer should be considered as important for all students regardless of status. Far too often "the primary emphasis on listening skills [in the classroom] involves the teacher asking students to be quiet so the child can take notes or attend to the day's activities" (p. 131). Additionally, these authors point to previous literature (DeVito, 1991; Hanna, 2005; Walker & Brokaw, 1998) citing general barriers to effective listening in our classrooms: a preoccupation with the self, preoccupation with external noise (distracting environments), psychological filters (e.g., preexisting personal biases), and hidden agendas or a process of hearing only what we want to hear (p. 132). Ultimately, Thompson et al. (1999) offer 12 strategies for teachers to consider using in the classrooms to help students become better listeners.

1. Prior to the educational experience, teachers should create an environment that is conducive to listening. Teachers can use a catch phrase or hand gesture that calls children's attention to become active listeners.
2. Make learning to listen a skill that is taught within the classroom. Although teachers are often already asked to follow a taxing curriculum, it is essential that they help their students learn how to be better listeners. Parents and teachers assume that children develop these skills naturally and without direction, but in fact, listening is a skill that can be honed through educational experiences.

3. Allow time for processing of information. Teachers often will ask questions or move on to new information before full processing occurs. Silence after delivery of new information can be very useful to the learners. This time for processing may not only be useful for learners, but also essential for students who may experience learning disabilities.
4. Give structure to the message. That is, specify the important features of the information provided. Giving students numeric or bulleted information to break apart a larger message can help them better understand the information. Providing examples of the information also can offer structure and meaningfulness to the message.
5. After stating important information, restate that information. When teachers restate information, they allow students to catch parts of the message they may have missed previously. This process, in connection with the third point (i.e., allowing time for processing), will help students to make meaningful connections.
6. Identify diverse ways to communicate information. Every classroom has diversity in learners (learning style), yet many teachers use one approach to teaching. Thompson and colleagues (1999) suggest that teachers should “paint a picture of the message” through verbal illustrations or examples that bring information to life.
7. Help students keep their minds open to the content of what they hear. When receiving information, learners are encouraged to listen without preconceived notions, opinions, or ideas. True open-minded listening (easier said than done) involves listening objectively.
8. Acknowledge active listening in learners. Teachers are encouraged to be aware of students’ intentional listening and then reward that behavior. This process is a beautiful example of reinforcing good behavior. Through this recognition, all students will learn the importance of actively engaged listening in the classroom.
9. Although external reinforcement for engaged listening is a great way to encourage the behavior, teachers should have a plan for helping students move to more intrinsic reinforcement. Thompson et al. note that the ultimate goal is “learning for learning’s sake, not to create a generation of youth who desire a reward for what they should want to do anyway” (p. 134).
10. Be diverse in the presentation of material. In addition to presenting a verbal picture of information (see point 6 above), teachers should, where possible, integrate the use of supplemental material in their delivery of material. For example, multimedia presentations are a great way to excite and interest students in information that may be difficult, “boring,” or obtuse. Remember, classrooms come with diverse learners, thus diverse presentations are beneficial.
11. Teachers should be aware and responsive to physical and emotional needs of students that can affect students’ abilities to actively listen

within the classroom. If students' personal experiences interfere with their classroom performance, teachers should consider having them evaluated by a school counselor.

12. When finished presenting information, offer a summary of that information in a way that requires students to use varied listening skills. For example, students can get into small groups and describe what they've just learned. This process would not only require active listening to the teacher's lecture, but also listening skills in small groups. They need to be attentive to the accuracy of their classmates' description of the material covered. Teachers can also have students do a quick writing assignment connecting what they have just learned to previous class material. This process would require listening and connective thinking skills.

Finally, these authors point out that it is ironic that in the teaching profession, which is focused on the "spoken message," educators do not give more consideration to the process of listening and teaching of those skills.

Brent and Anderson (1993) also offer ideas for developing students' listening skills. These authors suggest that through the modeling of good listening skills by the teacher, providing specific listening instructions, and providing opportunities to practice effective listening in the classroom, students can learn to be effective listeners. Some examples for providing opportunities to practice effective listening include reading aloud to the class, providing writing workshops where the students engage in conversations and listening skills relating to the process of writing, cooperative learning groups, reader's theater (where the students turn a story into a script for reading aloud), and retelling, which includes students sharing (while other students practice listening) their favorite stories.



Figure 4.2 By reading aloud to the class, a teacher offers students an opportunity to practice effective listening.

The Classroom We Shape

Interestingly, Wilhelm (2004) suggests that to better promote dialogue and listening skills in our students, we must reconsider the physical properties of our classrooms and traditional classroom rituals. He argues that these interaction rituals set barriers to communication and encourage monologue rather than dialogue between teacher and students. For example, the arrangement of desks in rows facing the front of the classroom communicates to students that the teacher, or authority, is the only person with anything important to communicate. Rather, by putting students' desks in a large circle, groupings of smaller circles, or sets of squares (four desks together), although forcing the teacher to be creative in presentation of information to the large group, sends students the message that they are to attend to each other and value input from their peers in addition to the teacher.

Another suggestion of Wilhelm is that teachers should refrain from commenting on student responses. When the teacher comments on student responses, this author suggests that the teacher is in control of the flow of ideas and may limit the dialogue between students and teachers and students and peers. Wilhelm suggests, instead, to have students call on each other. He also suggests that teachers need to create situations where students interact with each other without the teacher being in charge (e.g., small book clubs, discussion groups, group structures, or learning center groups).

TYPES OF INEFFECTIVE LISTENING

Not only is it important to discuss the attributes of effective listening, it is also important to note the characteristics or styles of ineffective listening. Adler and Towne (1999) offer examples of ineffective listening that the teacher should avoid in his or her interactions with students, parents, colleagues, and administrators.

1. **Pseudo listening.** Students give the appearance of listening, but in fact they are not. Whether because of distraction (physical or mental) or lack of interest, students who pseudo listen are unengaged with the conversation.
2. **Stage hogs-conversational.** These students have at their basic interest a desire to turn the conversation back to them. Because of this hidden agenda, they lack attentive listening.
3. **Selective listening.** Both students and adults sometimes engage in a listening style whereby they pay attention only to information directly related to them and disregard other important information.
4. **Insulated listening.** For some students, if they do not want to discuss a topic, they will "tune out" and not listen effectively.

Pseudo listening

Giving the appearance of listening, when in fact the listener is not attending to the message

Stage

hogs-conversational
Individuals whose intent is to turn attention to themselves

Selective listening

Attending to information that is only of interest or relevant to the self

Insulated listening

"Tuning out" or ineffective listening because of a desire to not discuss a topic

Defensive listening

Taking other people's comments as personal attacks

Ambushing

Listening to gather information to personally attack someone

Insensitive listening

Taking the speaker's comments at face value and not considering the full message

5. *Defensive listening*. Students who use defensive listening tend to take others' comments as personal attacks and thus listen defensively rather than effectively.
6. *Ambushing*. Students who listen for ambushing purposes listen to gather information that might be used to personally attack someone at a later point.
7. *Insensitive listening*. Students who listen insensitively take the speaker's comments at face value and again, listen ineffectively.

SUMMARY

Why don't we listen better? Many reasons, stemming from internal and external forces, cause a breakdown in the listening process. Recognition of these potential distracters can assist in the listening process; however, effective listening requires continuous conscious effort. Some of the external forces that distract us from effective listening include factors such as message overload and external noise. We live in a culture that presents us with constant information, to the extent that we can become overloaded. For effective listening to occur, we must focus and filter out the constant stream of information and distraction. The listening process can also be influenced by internal forces. For example, our minds are designed such that rapid thought occurs. Specifically, according to Adler and Towne (1999), we can understand speech rates up to 600 words per minute, but the average person speaks 100–150 words per minute. Thus, with our minds working faster than the spoken word, we have time to be distracted by other internal thoughts, which can lead to distraction and a decrease in effective listening. Teachers should teach students to use the extra time to summarize what the speaker is saying. It is evident by the research presented in this chapter, effective listening is an ability that can and should be taught in our curriculums. Through direct instruction, modeling, and encouragement, effective listening is a skill to be shared inside and outside your classroom. Teachers may teach their students without ever listening to them, but teachers can never get to know their students without listening to them. The best conversationalist in the room is also the best listener.

CASE 4.A

Mike is a student in Mr. Johnson's seventh-grade science class. While Mike is generally a good student who can turn in quality work, he frustrates Mr. Johnson daily in class. When Mr. Johnson gives directions orally, Mike never seems to follow the directions. Whether it is to get back to his seat or to open his book so class can start, Mike never seems to hear Mr. Johnson. It seems to Mr. Johnson that Mike doesn't want to follow directions. One day before school, Mr. Johnson is talking to his colleague about his frustration with Mike, and she asks him where Mike sits in class. Mr. Johnson tells him that he is in the back of the room. She then wants to know if Mr. Johnson has talked to Mike about this issue.

QUESTIONS

1. What questions could Mr. Johnson ask without embarrassing the student?

2. Could it be that Mike has a hearing problem?

3. Where could Mr. Johnson find this information?

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CASE 4.B

Mrs. Burris, a veteran teacher, and Mrs. Nichols, a first-year teacher, are discussing their parent-teacher conferences from the previous night. As her mentor, Mrs. Burris asks Mrs. Nichols how she enjoyed meeting the parents of her second-grade students. Mrs. Nichols expressed frustration that the parents of the students in class who really needed to listen to her about their child did not seem to care as much about what she told them as she would have liked. She had expressed concern at how their daughter was unable to focus in the mornings and wanted to put her head down and sleep until lunch. She told them that one of the most valuable parts of the school day was the reading block at 10:00, but their daughter did not seem to want to be learning like the rest of the students. Mrs. Nichols's frustration came from the parents not listening to her. Mrs. Burris asked if Mrs. Nichols listened to what the parents told her about their daughter and more importantly what they didn't tell her. Mrs. Nichols sat back and thought about the conference and came to the realization that she didn't give the parents much of an opportunity to speak during the conference. It was a primarily a one-sided discussion, so she never had much of an opportunity to listen to the parents.

QUESTIONS

1. What could Mrs. Nichols have done to facilitate a stronger conference with the parents?

2. What could she have done to more effectively listen to the parents?

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CASE 4.C

Mr. Swanson is the principal at Mediate Middle School. He is planning and scheduling for the initial teacher in-service workshops at the beginning of the year. He reflects that many of the teachers do not listen to the presenters of the workshops and formulates the idea that he should have a session on effective listening skills and strategies. He knows that not only would that make his in-services more effective for his staff, but the strategies learned could also benefit the teachers and students in the classroom.

QUESTIONS

1. What are some important points from this chapter that Mr. Swanson should incorporate into his workshop?

2. What are the justifications for these points?

3. How could they benefit both teachers and students?

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SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

Visit the following websites to find many classroom activities for enhancing listening skills. Many of the activities are short and can be used to enhance the information in the chapter.

- a. http://www.stbirinusliteracy.hostei.com/index_files/Resources/Intensive_Listening_Activities.pdf
- b. http://www.healthyschoolsms.org/health_education/documents/listeningskills.pdf

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