

Listening Activities

Activity 1

Listening for Differences in Communication Strategies

Assign your students to listen to a lecture in one of their other classes. Ask them to analyze the lecture in light of the following questions:

1. Does the speaker meet your expectations in terms of the structure of the lecture? What does the speaker do most effectively? What would you suggest to improve the speaker's lecture?
2. Did you have any difficulty following the speaker? If so, is the difficulty because you had problems understanding the speaker, or does the difficulty stem from the structure or content of the lecture? Is there anything you can do to improve your ability to keep track of the speaker's ideas?

During a follow-up meeting with your students, discuss the following questions:

1. Did they notice rhetorical devices such as previewing main points in the introduction, using connectives, or avoiding language that is inappropriate for the audience?
2. Could they understand the speaker? If they could, was it due to the structure of the lecture, the speaker's language, or both? If they could not understand the speaker, was it due to structure, language, or both?
3. What can they do to increase their comprehension of the speaker's ideas?

Activity 2

Listening Behaviors for the Classroom

This exercise is designed to help students consider whether or not interactions between native and nonnative speakers of English are the same as those that involve only native speakers of English. It should help students see similarities and differences between these two types of interactions. The discussion may also bring out students' prejudices about dealing with nonnative speakers. Some students may feel frustration or anger when dealing with nonnative speakers, especially if the speaker is a teacher or teaching assistant. On the other hand, nonnative speakers may express anxiety about speaking and listening in such interactions. If nonnative speakers do not express the reasons for their anxiety, the instructor can point out how difficult it is to communicate in another language. For example, ESL students must not only work to follow the conversation, but must also respond in an appropriate manner. They may have limited or no knowledge of slang, or they may miss ideas due to the speaker's rate of speech. Or they may take extra time to formulate a response, which may lead to impatience on the part of the native speaker.

Lead a discussion in which students develop a code of listening behavior (see Activity 4) for their classroom in combination with that described in Chapter Three. Students should pay special attention to listening behaviors in situations in which they are participants. Students should consider whether there are listening behaviors that might be distinct for interactions between native speakers of English and ESL speakers. If so, students should try to identify those behaviors.

Activity 3

Phrases and Expressions for Active Listening

Below are some useful phrases and expressions that may help your students become active listeners. List them on a handout and then meet with your students as a group to discuss appropriate usage. During the discussion, encourage your students to ask about and/or to describe other expressions they may have heard.

Asking for Clarification

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Sorry, but I don't understand."

"Could you explain what you mean by ...?"

Paraphrasing

"What she means is ..."

"I believe his point is ..."

"I think she feels ... Isn't that right?"

Clarifying or Restating

"I mean ..."

"In other words ..."

"The point I'm trying to make is ..."

What I'm trying to say is ..."

Checking for Understanding

"Do you see what I mean?"

"Is that clear?"

"So, you think that..."

To reinforce these phrases and expressions, give your students an optional assignment in which they observe a class (either your public speaking class or another class) and take note of the expressions that demonstrate active listening. You may want to hold a follow-up meeting with your students in which you discuss their observations.

Another option might be to ask your students to participate in a class discussion and then write a one-page paper in which they evaluate the extent to which they were active listeners. In their papers, students should:

1. Describe the ways in which they actively listened.
2. Describe how they felt about their ability to actively listen.
3. Describe how they might have been a more active listener.

Activity 4

Lead a class discussion in which students develop a code of listening behavior for their speech classroom. The final product of this discussion will be a list entitled “Listening Behavior for Our Speech Class.” By the end of the discussion, the entire class should not only agree on the content of the list but should also pledge themselves to follow it throughout the term.

Discussion: This activity is especially helpful for relating general issues about listening directly to the classroom situation. As students create their listening code, encourage them to be specific in their criteria. For example, rather than saying “Pay attention to what the speaker is saying,” they should try to develop more precise statements such as “Write down the speaker’s main points,” “Look attentive and interested while other students are speaking,” and “Do not read the newspaper or work on other assignments during speeches.”

This exercise works well when the class is divided into groups of 4 to 5 students. Give each group 10 to 15 minutes to come up with a list of 8 to 10 items to guide listening behavior in the class. Then, working from the group lists, conduct a general discussion that eventuates in a listening code that is agreed upon by the entire class. Another approach is to have each student create her or his own list as part of a homework assignment. You can then move immediately to a general class discussion rather than first dividing the class into small groups.

Activity 5

Have one student step outside of the classroom with you. Give her or him a written copy of the following message: “To get to Lou’s place, turn left at the first traffic light and go two blocks until you see a yellow house.” Leaving the written copy with you, the student should return to the classroom and whisper the message to the person in the next seat. This person should then whisper the message to the person sitting next to him or her, and so on until the message has been relayed through the entire class. Have the last student receive the message, write it down

on a sheet of paper, and read it to the entire class. Then have the student to whom you gave the original message read that message to the class. There will almost always be an enormous variation between the original message and the message received by the last student.

Discussion: This exercise takes only a few minutes to complete. It illustrates dramatically—and often humorously—the great distortion that can take place between what a speaker says and what a listener hears. You can, of course, substitute any message you wish for that given in the exercise. (An alternative, extended version of this activity is provided at the end: “The Amazing Squirrel Story.”)

Activity 6

Bring two short editorials to class. Read one of the editorials to your students. Have them take notes and try to identify the main points and evidence of the editorial. Check the results in the class discussion, and give pointers for listening and taking notes more effectively. Then read the second editorial and give students a chance to apply those pointers. Again, check the results in a class discussion. Discussion: Although this exercise takes up much of a class session, it can be very helpful because it prepares students for listening to speeches. Because many students do poorly on the first editorial, the exercise also serves the useful function of illustrating to students how poorly they listen and how much they need to work to improve their note-taking. For an alternative, see the next Additional Exercise/ Activity.

Activity 7

Show your class one of the selections from the videotapes of student speeches that accompany the text. Have them take notes in which they try to demarcate where the introduction of the speech ends, list the main points and subpoints in the body, and identify where the conclusion begins. Check the results in a class discussion and give pointers for listening and taking notes more effectively. Then play another speech and see if students do a better job of note-taking. Again, check the results in a class discussion. Discussion: Because student speeches on the videotapes are 6 to 8 minutes long, this activity takes a whole class session, but it is extremely helpful for students. It can be made even more helpful by selecting speeches for viewing that are connected with whatever speech assignment is coming up in class. That is, if you use this exercise as students are preparing the informative speech, show two informative speeches. Not only will this help students with their listening skills, but it will also give them additional exposure to the principles of informative speaking.

Activity 8

For each round of speeches, assign students specific listening tasks. For example, you might have a particular group of students (or all students) take notes on their classmates' speeches in an effort to identify the speakers' main points and evidence. After each speech, make a quick check of two or three listeners to see what they recorded. Discussion: This is one way to help students improve their listening and note-taking skills throughout the course. An added benefit of the exercise is that as students try to take notes on their classmates' speeches, they discover how helpful it is when the speaker follows a clear method of organization, previews the main points at the end of the introduction, uses connectives to help listeners keep track of main points, recaps the speech in the conclusion, avoids distracting nonverbal mannerisms, and uses her or his voice to emphasize ideas. This helps students learn what they need to do as speakers to help listeners take good notes.

Activity 9

Have students keep a personal journal of their listening activities for a full day. The journal should include brief descriptions of all the listening situations each student experienced during that day. It should also include the student's analysis of how well he or she listened in each situation and of why he or she did (or did not) listen effectively in each situation. Finally, the journal should conclude with the student's honest assessment of her or his strengths and weaknesses as a listener and an explanation of what specific steps the student should take to become a better listener.

Discussion: This exercise is a way to get students to think about their personal listening habits and how to improve them. Some teachers have students complete a listening journal two or three times during the course, as a way for students to keep track of their progress (or lack of progress) in strengthening their listening skills.