

## Listening Circle – A Path to Better Listening Skills

Ingrid C. Nordli

Department of Education, University of Tromsø (Norway)

[Ingrid.c.nordli@uit.no](mailto:Ingrid.c.nordli@uit.no)

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### Abstract

“What do you mean, *listen*?” Listening is an essential part of language and communication skills. It is crucial for teachers, as it is for students. However, students have demonstrated low listening comprehension and reported that learning how to listen was not part of their school curriculum.

### Introduction

With the students’ low listening comprehension and limited listening skills as a backdrop, using a listening circle helps learning. The goal is to help *inexperienced* listeners increase their listening knowledge and comprehension. Specific training objectives are:

1. *Increase listening knowledge and listening comprehension.* Acquire knowledge about the listening process, types of listeners, types of listening, and listening markers.
2. *Practicing active and attentive listening.* Learning to listen actively while intently focusing on the message being communicated.
3. *Practice taking responsibility as both listener and speaker* during dialogue with multiple voices. This is about knowing when to listen silently and when to contribute verbally.
4. *Practice being patient, concentrated and focused during communication with others.* Learn to listen to others and not just think about a response or the next message. Take in what others convey, implement it in your own thoughts and possibly use it in your response.
5. *Experience performance as a listener.* Learn to be aware of listening practically and socially, and find answers to questions like: Who am I as a listener? How do I act when listening to others? Do I respect others’ opinions?

6. *Start developing a listening vocabulary.* Given no curriculum or teaching sessions of listening during school years, concepts of listening have not developed thoroughly.

### **Defining Listening**

Listening is something we decide to do consciously (Bodie et al., 2015; Floyd, 2014). It is mastering the *activity* of listening (Wolvin, 2010, p. 9). That means we are cognitively active when receiving and sending messages, and possibly also physically active when sending messages (Adelmann, 2002). Definitions of listening varies across contexts (Bodie et al., 2015, p. 152) but most have roots in Carl Roger's (Rogers & Sanford, 1985) conceptualization of empathetic listening. This concept was further developed by Thomas Gordon (Weger et al., 2014) who labeled it *active listening*, also referred to as active-empathetic listening (Jonsdottir & Fridriksdottir, 2020, p. 178).

Most definitions “stress the importance of both nonverbal and verbal behaviors that function to demonstrate attention, understanding, responsiveness, and empathy; to encourage continued expression of thoughts and feelings” (Bodie et al., 2015, p. 153). The International Listening Association defined listening as “the process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages” (Purdy & Borisoff, 1997, p. 6; Wolvin, 2010, p. 9). The definition implies listening is a distinct behavior (Wolvin & Coakley, 1996) and a process containing *steps*.

The steps occur in a natural order at the same time as they happen more or less simultaneously, given their interrelatedness (Brownell, 2018). One example includes six steps – receiving, identifying, understanding, remembering, evaluating and responding (Nordli & Skog, 2022).

### Learning Active and Attentive Listening Skills

Attentive listening is *paying attention* to what you are listening to while you are listening to it (Wolvin & Coakley, 1996). This skill is a “perceptual, cognitive and social act” (Boudreau, et al., 2009, p. 23) that “necessitates the formation of new habits” (p. 24). In order to form a new habit, the listener needs to be receptive, take to heart the speaker’s personhood and concerns, and be able to shift between being open minded and aware of interference (p. 24). Depending on the situation and who enters into a conversation, markers of active and attentive listening vary in character. Examples of listening markers are silence, verbal language, and/or nonverbal activity like eye contact, head nodding, arm gesturing, smiling and/or other facial expressions (Otnes, 2007).

Acquiring active and attentive listening skills require practice (Itzchakov & Kluger, 2017), and like any other skill, listening skills can be learned (Brown, 2011). In cases where listening has not been taught or actively learned in school, a *listening circle* stands out as an appropriate tool for acquiring listening skills. A listening circle is a structured group dialogue and learning strategy for experiencing listening and improving listening skills (Bommelje, 2012). It is a method for listening, talking, reflection and evaluation in communication with others (Itzchakov & Kluger, 2017).

In a listening circle, participants take part on equal grounds, can express themselves and be heard. Every participant will get time to speak, from the heart, without being interrupted, judged or fixed (ILA, 2023; Itzchakov & Kluger, 2017). Equality in dialogue prevails.

When listening actively and attentively, a listening circle is an appropriate arena for reflection and learning, for new thoughts, new understanding, and new connections. It has three main foundations: All participants must (1) *speak with intention*, (2) *listen with attention*, and (3) *pay attention* (Itzchakov & Kluger, 2017). This entails speaking about something that is relevant to the circle conversation, to be respectful of the learning process and the circle members, and to

be attentive to the focus of the circle discussion and all contributions. These foundations create the framework listening circle guidelines.

### **Listening Circle in Practice**

A listening circle has a framework with the following guidelines:

- *Speak from the heart* about what is true to you. Use singular “I”, not plural “we”.
  - *Listen from the heart* in silence and pay attention to the speaker. Do not interrupt, comment or try to fix anything.
  - *Rehearsal not needed*. Be open minded, stay in the moment, and do not plan what to say. Listen to others’ voices and take in the meaning of what’s being said. When your turn comes, say what’s on your mind at that moment.
  - *Beware of the time*. Make room for all speakers to share, by choice. Its ok to “pass”.
  - *Respect the circle members*. What is spoken in the circle remains confidential.
1. *Teaching session*. Although there exists an agreement saying listening can be taught, there exists no consensus regarding *what* should be taught (Janusik, 2010). The teaching session is an arena for establishing trust and for showing that participating in listening circles is safe (ILA, 2023). The teaching session content:
- *The ILA definition of listening* (above) constituted the foundation of the teaching session and the listening circle event.
  - *The listening process and its steps*. A listening model is presented with the following steps: receive, identify, understand, remember, evaluate and respond.
  - *Listening markers* confirm communication from the listener to the speaker, including a combination of verbal, non-verbal, vocal and/or non-vocal signals. Examples include combining use of voice, intonation variation, sigh, and scream (Otnes, 2007).

- *Active and attentive listening* (see above) (Bodie et al., 2015; Boudreau et al., 2009; Floyd, 2014; Wolvin & Coakley, 1996).
  - *Types of listening and types of listeners* was shortly introduced. The first category is about *why* we listen (Purdy, 1997; Wolvin, 2010; Wolvin & Coakley, 1996), the second is about *how* we listen (Carnegie et al., 2017; Gingerich & Kaden, 2023).
2. *Process description of the listening circle.* After introducing the guidelines and implementing the teaching session, the students were presented with the following process description for taking part in a listening circle:
- *Form a group* of 4-5 members.
  - *Prepare to listen.* Remove all distractions: cell phones and non-academic activities.
  - *Choose a group leader*, whose task is to ensure everyone stays on the subject in question. Respect the leader.
  - *A question or theme for the dialogue* is chosen by the facilitator or the group.
  - *The speaking order* is agreed upon or set by the leader. The first speaker talks, says “I am done” or nod towards the next speaker when finished. The next speaker might pause to prepare to speak, or “pass”. This procedure is followed until all have had the chance to speak, once or several times. Mutual agreement on number of circle rounds.
  - *Keep in mind:* listening takes place in silence by directing your attention towards the speaker. No crosstalk or interruptions.
  - *Sum up.* At the end of the circle, all get to offer their final thoughts on the dialogue.
3. *Listening circle feedback.* After each circle, participants give feedback on their experiences regarding *being silent while listening, listening with an open mind, being in the moment, not planning what to respond, and the silence itself.*

4. *Follow-up* (if necessary). Around two months after the listening circle, a follow-up may occur. The purpose is to get an impression of the participants' experience of the activity, hear their views on listening and being a listener.

## **Efficacy**

A listening circle is a learning method for improving listening skills with the following outcomes:

- Increased listening knowledge and comprehension
- Increased understanding of the listener role

*In summary*, the listening circle is an appropriate learning method for improving listening skills. Outcomes have a positive impact on listening comprehension and practical attentive listening skills.

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