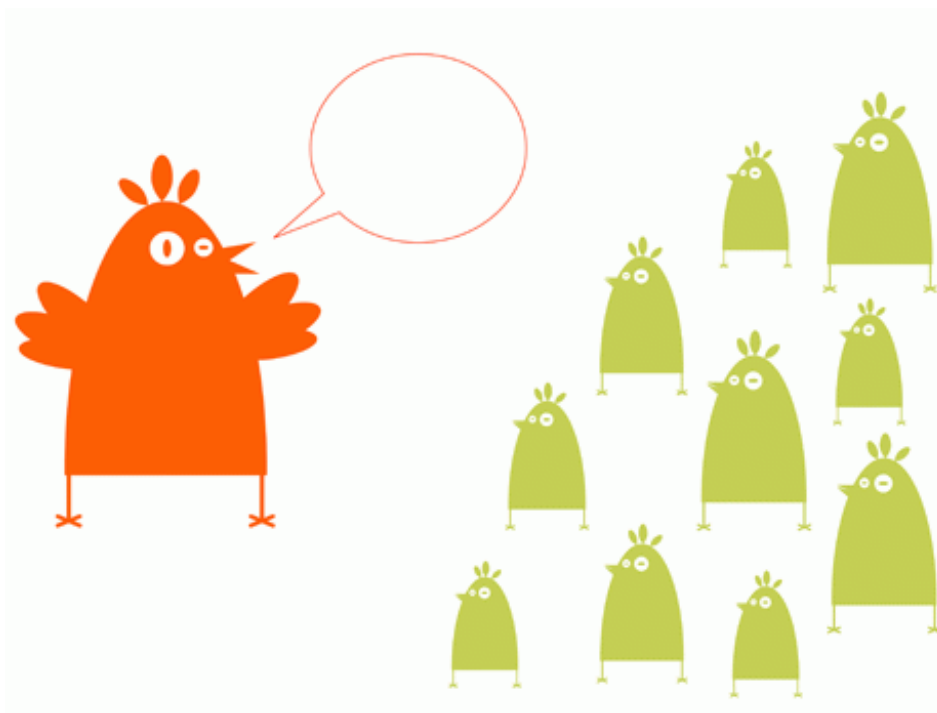


Say What? 5 Ways to Get Students to Listen

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Ah, listening, the neglected literacy skill. I know when I was a high school English teacher this was not necessarily a primary focus; I was too busy honing the more measurable literacy skills -- reading, writing, and speaking. But when we think about career and college readiness, listening skills are just as important. This is evidenced by [the listening standards](#) found in the Common Core and also the integral role listening plays in *collaboration* and *communication*, two of the [four Cs of 21st century learning](#).

So how do we help kids become better listeners? Check out these tactics for encouraging a deeper level of listening that also include student accountability:

Strategy #1: Say it Once

Repeating ourselves in the classroom will produce lazy listening in our students. If kids are accustomed to hearing instructions twice, three times, and even four times, listening the first time around becomes unnecessary. Begin the year by establishing that you are a teacher who rarely repeats instructions and this will surely perk up ears.

Of course you don't want to leave distracted students in the dust so for those few who forgot to listen, you can advise them to, "ask three, then ask me."

Strategy #2: Turn and Talk

One way to inspire active listening in your students is to give them a listening task. It might look like this, "I'm going to describe the process of _____. I will pause along the way and ask you to turn to a partner and explain to them what you heard." You can ask students to take turns talking each time you pause, and meanwhile, walk around observing their conversations (also allowing you to check for understanding).

Strategy #3: Student Hand Signals

Asking students to pay full attention and indicating that they will follow this with a non-verbal signal is a wonderful tool for sharpening those listening skills. It can look like this: "I'm going to read a former president's statement about why he believes war is sometimes necessary. When I'm finished, you will share your opinion by holding up one finger if you agree, two fingers if you disagree, and three fingers if you are undecided or if you have a question." This strategy allows whole-class participation and response. It's also a favorite for kids who are more on the shy side, giving them a "voice."

[Watch how hand signals encourage active listening](#) in a fifth-grade classroom.

Strategy #4: Pay Attention, Pause, Paraphrase

Children need structured opportunities to restrain themselves from speaking in order to keep their attention on listening, especially when working in groups. Try this strategy:

1. When students talk in pairs or small groups, assign one speaker at a time only (they can number off).
2. Ask all others to listen fully to whoever is speaking and to avoid formulating a response *while* the other person talks. Tell them to simply listen that is all. (This is a difficult task even for adults!)
3. When the person stops talking, the other takes a breath before she speaks and then paraphrases something her partner just said: "You believe that...." "You aren't sure if....".
4. After paraphrasing her partner, she can then follow that with an "I" statement: "I see what you mean...", "I'm not sure I agree...".

Discussion sentence starters are a helpful tool for students as they learn this new way of having a conversation. It's also incredibly helpful for students to see this in

action. Ask a couple of students to model it for the whole class or have an adult visit to partner with you.

Strategy #5: Creating Questions

If your students are listening to a speech, watching a documentary clip, or hearing a story read aloud, break it up by stopping a few times and having students write a question or two about what they just heard. This way, students actively listen for any confusion or wonderings they may have -- this takes a high-level of concentration. It's important to provide models for this since we are typically trained in school to look for the answers and information rather than to focus on what is not understood or is still a mystery.

Motivating Words

Good listeners are both rare and valued. It's important to share this with students, and to also share the fact that people who *really* listen -- make eye contact, show interest, and restrain from cutting others off in a conversation -- are easy to like and respect.

Here's also a few quotes to present to students and/or post around your classroom:

"If speaking is silver, then listening is gold." -- Turkish saying

"I think the one lesson I have learned is that there is no substitute for paying attention." -- Diane Sawyer, newscaster

"One of the most sincere forms of respect is actually listening to what another has to say." -- Bryant McGill, author

In what ways do you teach active listening in your classroom? Please share with us in the comment section.