

An Active Learning Approach to Listening: The Coin Drop Activity

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Abstract

There is considerable research examining listening, as it is an important skill. While listening skills are important, very little instructional time is devoted to developing those skills (Hopper, 2007). After completion of this activity, students are able to describe their own listening process and assess listening techniques. This activity works well to introduce the concept of listening and various components within the listening process. Students do not typically think of listening as a skill that they can improve. When we discuss the listening process, we can recall this activity to illustrate the connection between sensing and processing.

Keywords: *Communication Pedagogy, Listening Process, Listening Techniques*

Intended Courses: Any communication course that has a listening module

Learning Outcomes: Upon completion of this listening activity, students will be able to: 1)

Discuss when they choose to listen, 2) Explain barriers to effective listening, 3) Describe their listening process, and 4) Assess their own listening techniques.

Rationale

There is considerable research examining listening, as it is an important skill. Drollinger et al. (2006) explained three broad dimensions of the listening process: sensing, processing, and responding. Sensing refers to hearing, but also taking in the message through nonverbal cues.

Processing involves assigning meaning to and evaluating the messages. Responding involves sending messages/feedback to the source of the message. The following activity and discussion touch on all three dimensions, but particularly illustrate the connection between sensing and processing. Students also focus on barriers to listening. Golen (1990) found five common barriers including: “(1) listen primarily for details or facts; (2) become distracted by noise from office equipment, telephone, other conversation, etc.; (3) daydream or become preoccupied with something else when listening; (4) think of another topic or detour because of what the speaker has said; and (5) lack of interest in the speaker's subject” (p. 29). Bond (2012) explained barriers beyond these, such as the context of the classroom, cognitive dissonance, and staying focused when ideas conflict with the students’ beliefs.

While listening skills are important and barriers are numerous, very little instructional time is devoted to developing those skills (Hopper, 2007). Sypher et al. (1989) concluded that listening is associated with success at work. “Better listeners held higher level positions and were promoted more often than those with less developed listening abilities” (Sypher et al., 1989, p. 301). Another benefit of effective listening is performing better academically (Bond, 2012). Therefore, if students understand the importance of listening, they may be more willing to enhance their listening skills. Ferrari-Bridgers et al. (2017) found that students can significantly improve listening skills over a 4-week period by 20 percent, and these improved listening skills lead to an increase in learning. The following activity provides students with an initial consideration of barriers to effective listening, their individual listening abilities, and the listening process.

Description of the Activity

This activity is used as an introduction to listening processes and skills. Students are told they will be taking a “listening quiz.” The quiz consists of listening to coins drop and determining which coin dropped. We use a quarter, dime, nickel, and penny because they are familiar objects which make similar, yet distinctive, sounds. We give the students a baseline first by dropping each coin and telling the students which coin it is. The coins are out of sight of the students, so they cannot see what coin is being dropped. We use an open three-ringed binder to hide the coin and drop each coin from the top of the binder to keep the height of the drop consistent. Prior to dropping the coins, we set up the benefits or consequences of missing an answer in a variety of ways. We typically say: 1) there are not any negative consequences if you do not get an answer correct, 2) the quiz is not for a grade in class, and 3) you will be grading your own quiz once completed. Another way to set up the activity would be to provide some benefit of getting all the answers correct; for example, anyone who gets 100% on the quiz will receive extra credit or some tangible prize.

The coin drop activity begins and each coin is dropped twice so there are a total of eight questions on the quiz. After all coins have been dropped twice, we let students score their quizzes by letting them know which coin was dropped for each question. After students “grade” their own quiz, we then ask them to raise their hands based on how many questions they missed. Very rarely do any students get all of the questions correct. This semester we had over 70% of the class miss four or more questions on the quiz, which would result in a failing grade on an actual graded quiz.

Debriefing and Appraisal

When debriefing the activity, students discuss various listening concepts. We discuss the importance of active listening, that we choose to listen, when we are better listeners, physical and psychological barriers to listening, how students approached listening in the activity, etc. Student learning outcomes include students being able to better explain when they choose to listen and when they do not. Students are also able to explain the barriers in their own lives that inhibit effective listening.

Examples of some questions to ask after the activity include:

- 1) Why did you perform the way you did on the quiz? What were you listening for? Why did you get certain sounds wrong? Students typically discuss there was little motivation to do well since there were not any negative consequences of performing poorly. Students indicate that they have never paid attention to the sound of coins dropping before and do not have the frame of reference to differentiate sounds. Emphasizing the importance of effective listening prior to the activity could improve student motivation and could be used in the discussion to explain the motivation to listen in general.
- 2) Were there any barriers to listening during the activity? Students talk about physical and psychological noise. In one class, a student arrived late and was trying to get settled in during the activity. It was a good example of a distraction that was then used as part of the learning process.
- 3) When do you actively listen? Why do you choose or choose not to listen? Students are able to apply course material to this activity, but also bring in other concepts about the benefits of listening well or the consequences of poor listening.

- 4) How do you change your listening when the stakes are high versus low? What are situations in your life that have barriers to listening? Work, home, etc.? Students realize they choose to listen and discuss that they listen better when the information is important or the stakes are high.
- 5) How does the activity illustrate the processes of sensing, processing, and responding? This activity works well to introduce the concept of listening and various components within the listening process. Students do not typically think of listening as a skill they can improve. When we discuss the listening process, we can recall this activity to illustrate the connection between sensing and processing.

Further Considerations

This activity could be altered in a few ways. For example, one could consider adding a reward, such as an extra credit point or candy, for 100% correct answers to see if students perform better on the listening quiz. Instructors may want to ask a student to be a confederate in the activity and arrive during the activity so that there is physical noise present during the activity. When arranging the order in which coins will be dropped, one recommendation is to drop the same coin back to back so that students do not guess that each coin is dropped once before repeating.

Another variation could be to use different sounds from audio files instead of coins dropping. For example, students could listen to *Mairzy Doats* by the Pied Pipers or different YouTube links with audio illusions (e.g., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tG9HSvNPVKQ>). Both alternative exercises require students to interpret ostensibly nonsense words to make sense of the words in each utterance (e.g., "mairzy doats" as "mares eat oats"). Instructors could play the audio clips and then quiz students on the accuracy of their interpretations. Based on the

breadth and depth of the discussion, instructors can recall the activity and students' comments when teaching the listening module and throughout the rest of the semester.

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