

Active listening

“We read books to find out who we are. What other people, real or imaginary, do and think and feel... is an essential guide to our understanding of what we ourselves are and may become.”

— Ursula K. LeGuin

Understanding is essential when reading. To understand ourselves and our lives, we need to understand the texts we read, and one way of getting to an understanding of a text is talking and listening to others about what we read.

To increase the quality of the conversations in the classroom it may be useful to start by first focusing on listening. Here is a series of exercises to get you on track:

1. **Class:** Buzz for a second with your nearest neighbour(s) on what you think makes a good and active listener. The brainstorm is recorded on the board.
2. **Pairs:** Each person introduces themselves as a famous person, and the other person tries to figure out who the other part is. This is done through the repetition and paraphrase of what the first person says, and through questions for clarification. The idea is to have a proper dialogue, not a guessing competition. Both parties should be attentive of each other and maintain a friendly tone.
3. **New pairs:** The younger person in the pair begins a story about a recent news item. The second person responds to every statement with a “Yes, but ...” and completes a fitting counter statement. The first person comments, and after about a minute the second person should respond with a “Yes, and?” and wait for a relevant reply. Switch roles, and try the exercise again.
4. **New pairs:** The first person tells the other person about their hobby or interesting spare time activity. The second person is absolutely silent.
5. **Class:** A listening Kim’s Game. The teacher reads a list of 20 words concerning the same topic: school/ the weather/ sports, etc. One obvious word relating to the topic is omitted, one of the words actually in the list should be repeated a couple of times. As the list is read out, students just listen. After this they may write down as many words as they remember with pen on paper.
6. **Class:** Debrief by comparing what you experienced in the exercises with the notes on the board. Add whatever is necessary and delete ideas that are not really important.

For more inspiration on listening, try out this [TED Talk](#) by William Ury:

Active listening is a special aspect of communication. It requires the listener to provide feedback to the speaker. It enhances good relationships and builds cooperation. It increases the group members’ understanding of each other and of the texts and tasks they are working with. An essential element in active listening is asking constructive questions to take the conversation forward.

Key elements in active listening:

- Be attentive to what is said AND to the speaker.
- Signal that you are interested.
- Maintain a good tone in the conversation.
- Repeat/ summarize what you hear (in parts).
- Paraphrase the main points of what you hear.
- Reflect on what you hear.
- Reflect feelings you sense.
- Request clarification if necessary.
- Ask open-ended or probing questions as relevant.
- Respond appropriately.