

USING ACTIVE LISTENING STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE THE COLLABORATIVE SKILLS OF GRADE FOUR BOYS.

Lynn Terman

St. Mark's School of Texas, United States

Abstract

Students who work together successfully embody a broad range of skills and abilities in order to contribute to the success of collaborative work. One such skill is the ability to listen and respond in a meaningful way. The goal of this action research was to determine how teaching nine and ten year-old boys to actively listen would impact on their ability to collaborate. During August and September, 2016, sixteen boys in my Homeroom/Humanities class at the St. Mark's School of Texas participated in four, direct instruction lessons on active listening and applied those skills as they worked in collaborative groups to draft a classroom constitution. The qualitative data collected before, during, and after the project show the growth in the boys' understanding of active listening and document their attempts to fully engage in active listening with their peers. At the conclusion of the project, fifteen of the sixteen boys felt that they were better listeners and collaborators due to their more evolved understanding of active listening. Most importantly, the idea of empathizing with the listener, rather than listening because it benefits "me," evolved mid-way through the project.

Glossary

Active Listening Traits: These are traits modeled by the listener, such as making eye contact, not being distracted by "things," nodding in agreement, etc. They are passive in nature and while important, don't always guarantee that a listener is truly listening to a speaker.

Active Listening Behaviors: These are the behaviors that I taught during my mini lessons, including asking questions, paraphrasing, keeping the conversation on the speaker, and actively responding in a way that shows the speaker he/she is being listened to.

Introduction

As an educator of high performing, competitive boys, it is not surprising that I have found effective collaboration in the classroom can be a struggle. For years, my students have

collaboratively written a classroom constitution to serve as the cornerstone of how we operate as a class. As a teacher, I preface this work with a general statement about respecting others' opinions, the importance of listening, and the goal: to work together to write a constitution that we can all agree upon. Over the past two years, this activity has proven difficult. What I have learned is that boys hold tightly to their ideas. While the end product has been well written and something about which my boys are proud, the process has been labor-intensive. During this writing process, I have had to intervene in disagreements that often resulted from boys failing to listen to one another. This lack of listening has stymied collaboration and ultimately slowed the writing process. At times, boys would "dig in their heels" and simply refuse to participate, listen, or compromise.

Due to the above past difficulties, this action research project focused on the direct instruction of active listening skills prior to the writing of the constitution. I wanted my boys to enter this process equipped with the tools to listen effectively, respond appropriately, and collaborate meaningfully. Hence, I proposed the following research question: *How might a focus on active listening strategies enhance collaborative writing skills for 9-year-old boys?*

Research Methodology

The most effective educators are reflective in their practice. Action research offers educators a framework within which to strategically evaluate their practice in the spirit of continual improvement and meeting student needs. Stringer (2014) notes that action research is a systematic approach that enables people to find solutions to "real life" problems they face.

Action research affords teachers the opportunity to guide their own efforts in improving instruction for their students. Collecting and analyzing data both serve to create relevance in the process, as the educators who create the project "are also the primary consumers of the findings" (Sagor, 2000, para. 2). Communicating and collaborating by students on the constitution project have been very real problems in my classroom. Through action research, therefore, I was able to "engage in a systematic inquiry and investigation to design an appropriate way of accomplishing a desired goal and to evaluate its effectiveness" (Stringer, p.6).

Literature Review

It is no secret that listening—active listening—has become a lost art. In a society of soundbites, 140 character Tweets, and instant messaging, we seem less likely to listen to understand and more to respond and share our viewpoints. While Verizon’s catch phrase, “Can you hear me now?” was meant to imply clear connectivity, it causes me to pause and wonder, “Do we really hear one another or, sadly, do we even care to hear one another?” Margaret Wheatley (2010) states, “I believe we can change the world if we start listening to one another again.... Not mediation, negotiation, problem solving ... [but] simple, truthful conversation where we each have a chance to speak, we each feel heard, and we each listen well” (p.6).

While actively and effectively listening has the potential to change the world, it is the communication skill to which we pay the least attention. Listening is a skill required of everyone, yet in the 21st Century, it seems to be mastered by few. Yook (2012) states, “In purely quantitative terms, listening has long been shown to take up most of our time spent in communication activities, when juxtaposed with other activities, such as speaking, writing, or reading” (p. 6). This would imply the critical need for listening skills, since it is how we spend most of our communicative time. However, listening is the skill least likely to benefit from formal instructional time in the classroom (Coakley & Wolvin, 1997). Adams and Cox (as cited in Yook), note that students in our schools are “inadequately prepared to be good listeners” (p. 7). One can simply think back to his/her classroom experience. There is time in the day for reading, writing, and math, but little to no time dedicated to teaching students how to listen, unless one considers the phrase, “You need to listen,” as instruction.

Not only are we untrained listeners, we process information much more quickly than a speaker can speak (Lee & Hatesohl, 1993). As Lee and Hatesohl note, the average person can speak about 125 words per minute, whereas we can hear and process about 400 words per minute. The discrepancy between the two results in listeners using only 25% of their mental capacity to listen, which means the other 75% has the propensity to wander.

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) deems the skill of listening so important that it incorporated Listening & Speaking content standards into its K-12 curriculum (Texas Education Agency, 2009). What is important is that the TEA combined listening with working collaboratively in noting, “Students work productively with others in teams.” This particular content standard can

be found in the listening strand, thereby making an important connection between listening and teamwork/collaboration. Texas is not unique in its focus on listening. The Common Core State Standards (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2017) adopted by 48 states in the United States also contain a listening and speaking strand.

The standards referred to above point to the importance of listening and the need to transparently teach listening skills. However, what is the impact of listening on students? What is the benefit to a student who is able to listen effectively? Brommeljie, Houston and Smither (2003) found that students who demonstrated more effective listening skills performed better in school. In fact, Yook (2012), citing Buttery, states that, “Listening is one of the most important aspects of children’s learning that impacts academic success” (p. 7). It makes sense to think that if students’ listening behaviors can be correlated to their success in school, such behaviors could also help them to be better collaborators?

Research shows that boys tend to arrange themselves in groups, especially in play (Grose, 2013). Harvard evolutionary biologist Joyce Benenson (cited in Grose) speculates that the instinct for boys and men to align themselves in groups goes way back in human history. Men hunted in groups and so they had to learn to get along quickly in a bunch. However, communication in such groups can be marred. Bronson and Merryman (2013) note that the communication style of boys in groups is assertiveness. Therefore, the loudest and most assertive communicator “wins.” Thus, if boys naturally gravitate toward group work and play, yet struggle to communicate within said groups, teaching boys how to effectively listen as part of the communication process is imperative to their success, not only in school, but in life.

Research Context

The St. Mark’s School of Texas is a non-sectarian, college-preparatory, independent day school for boys in grades one through twelve located in Dallas, Texas. St. Mark’s currently enrolls 865 boys in Grades 1 through 12. Forty-six percent of our student population are students of color. We are guided in all that we do by our Statement of Purpose:

St. Mark’s aims to prepare young men to assume leadership and responsibility in a competitive and changing world. To this end, the school professes and upholds certain values. These values include the discipline of postponing immediate gratification in the interests of earning eventual, hard-won satisfaction; the responsibility of defending one’s

own ideas, of respecting the views of others, and of accepting the consequences for one's own actions; and an appreciation for the lively connection between knowledge and responsibility and the obligation to serve.

The research participants for this project were sixteen students in my Fourth Grade Humanities class. This group was my Homeroom class, and as such, I taught them every day for ninety minutes. The development of a classroom constitution served as the backbone for how we operated and interacted with one another as a classroom community. Selection of this group, therefore, was appropriate for this project.

Permission for the students to participate was secured via an electronic permission form. Every parent readily agreed to have his/her child participate in this research project. While video footage was secured and used for research purposes, anonymity has been maintained with the use of student letters, rather than names.

Data Collection

Padek and Padek (as cited in Mills, 2000) assert that, "Any information that can help you answer your question is data" (p. 267). To this end, data collection methods for this project consisted of pre- and post-instruction surveys, attitude scales, observations, journal reflections, and tracking lists. It was important to remember that multiple sources of information ensure a reliable and rigorous action research project. This process, known as triangulation (Stringer, 2014), allowed me to capture a wide array of data that may have otherwise been overlooked.

Prior to the launch of this research project, students completed a pre-instruction survey (Appendix A) to gauge their understanding and attitudes at the time towards active listening. This survey contained both open-ended questions as well as rating scales about listening habits. Rating scales were user-friendly for young boys. When compared against an exemplar, e.g. 1 equates to "Always" and 10 equates to "Never," the rating scale helped the boys reflect on their behavior and identified where they felt they best fit on such a continuum. To promote an honest and accurate self-reflection, surveys were anonymous and developed with the guidance of Di Laycock's (2016), *The Questionnaire as a Data Collection Tool*.

I taught four active listening lessons prior to the writing of the class constitution. The boys responded with interest as they learned more about how to listen, rather than simply how to

demonstrate listening habits. I scaffolded the constitution writing work, which took about three weeks to complete. Through voting, the class identified and then narrowed behaviors they felt were critical to the success of our classroom. These behaviors served as the foundation for the constitution. Students then participated in a whole-group activity to identify active listening traits and behaviors. As a class, the boys then generated a tracking list (Appendix B) of active listening skills and behaviors to capture during their group work. Finally, I broke them into four random groups of four students to draft group constitutions. One boy per group was randomly selected to serve as the recorder of behaviors during all three group writing sessions.

Each time a skill and/or behavior was displayed, the recorder captured the incidence with a tally mark. It should be noted that if other group members noticed a trait, they could also add a tally. The official recorder captured his own behavior as well. Individual groups added traits and behaviors to the whole-class generated list as they observed them during the collaborative writing work.

During the collaborative work of each group, I drafted observation notes, some written and some captured via video, throughout the collaborative writing process by rotating between groups. Such notes are a great way for a teacher to capture anecdotal data that documents the behavior of research participants. My notes and observations helped me to capture the words and actions of the boys, without adding any personal value or judgment to their statements, by simply recording what was seen and heard. These notes helped me to identify patterns in behavior and repeated phrases/language from the boys. At two points in the project, students journaled their thoughts about active listening and the role it played in the group writing process.

After the final constitution was “ratified” during a ceremonial signing, students were administered two final surveys. The first was an exact replica of the pre-instruction survey. These data were then compared to identify any changes in understanding and behavior in regards to active listening. The second survey (Appendix C) asked the boys, via open-ended questions and rating scales, to evaluate their active listening and that of their peers during the project. Questions also asked students to evaluate the project itself. Like all of the questionnaires, this final one was anonymous as well.

Data Analysis and Findings

To analyze my findings, I used the process of categorizing and coding to search for relevant themes. I applied the “verbatim principle” (Stringer, 2014, p. 139) when transcribing my interview notes and video recordings. The rating scales on my surveys offered the opportunity to quantify the data.

I was surprised, yet thrilled, to find that the idea of “empathy” and “making a listener feel valued” emerged throughout the data. It was this “ah-ha” moment during the analysis process that I realized I had stumbled upon what Stringer (2014) refers to as “a key experience that provides people with greater clarity” (p. 144). I could not help but be moved by the development of this idea in my boys; what they learned went much deeper than simply listening actively and responding appropriately.

Pre-Project Understanding

As noted above, a pre-project survey was administered to all sixteen boys to gather information about their attitudes toward and awareness of active listening. The analysis of the survey revealed the following:

1. The boys were able to identify traits of good listeners, but knew very little about the skill and purpose of listening itself;
2. At the time of this survey, the boys viewed themselves as skilled listeners, but doubted others would see them in the same light; and
3. The boys identified the importance of listening in a very egocentric manner—as it related to them, and not the speaker. While this may appear disappointing, I knew the results meant the boys were “ripe” for instruction.

Post-Project Evolution

After the constitution was written and signed, I re-administered the pre-project survey. The results clearly showed the evolution of the boys’ understanding of active listening and their ability to demonstrate such skills. Three new themes emerged:

1. The boys now understood the difference between active listening traits and active listening behaviors;
2. Listening involves responding; and

3. Active listeners are empathetic.

The difference between active listening traits and behaviors. On the post-project survey, rather than noting listening traits such as, “I look the speaker in the eye, I nod my head, and/or I don’t play with things,” as they did before the project, the boys were now able to articulate *how* to listen and respond to a speaker through various behaviors. In response to the open-ended question, “What is active listening?” student E noted, “I didn’t realize that I could ask questions to show I was listening. I thout [sic] I had to be quiet to listen.” Additionally, student H commented, “If I paraphrase I’m listening to [sic]. That shows the speaker I’m listening better than if I just look him in the eye.” Prior to instruction, the boys could not speak to such listening behaviors nor demonstrate them meaningfully.

Listening to respond. During the writing work, I circulated around the room documenting student interactions. I noticed more intent listening every time boys had the opportunity to collaborate. In one group, I heard Student I respond, “Are you saying you think we should combine these two sentences?” In a second group, Student J stopped himself from interrupting by saying, “I don’t think I agree, wait, I didn’t mean to interrupt you. You finish and then I’ll share what I was going to say.” In another group, a student probed his group mate and asked, “If we put that last, do you think it makes it sound not important?”

I noticed the boys’ increased attempts to paraphrase, respond with questions and/or appropriate comments, and make concerted efforts to engage in listening unlike they ever had before. Their behaviors were a clear demonstration of their attempts to respond in a way that showed the speaker had been heard. Additional proof of their improved skills and ability to respond meaningfully can be found in the final draft of the constitution. Never before, in eight years of students writing classroom constitutions, has the language “listen to understand” been included.

Empathy, listening and collaboration. The unexpected idea of empathy and listening in order to make the speaker feel valued emerged mid-way through the project. The boys started to focus on the speaker and his feelings, rather than view listening as important only for what the listener gains. This is much different to listening because it benefits “me” or impacts “me.” The emergence of this was a surprise to this researcher and an unanticipated, yet thrilling, result of the project. As I analyzed survey results, reviewed my transcribed videos and interview notes,

and read their journal reflections, I felt the most interesting data arose out of the boys' responses to the question, "Why is listening important?" Before the project, their responses focused on themselves and the benefit of listening for them. This time, however, most boys responded with: To hear the speaker, to make the speaker feel valued, and to learn new things.

The idea of empathy and collaboration also emerged through a final survey that I administered to afford the boys the opportunity to provide feedback on the project, process, and to reflect and evaluate how well they listened and collaborated with their peers. One student noted, "I never thought about the speaker's feelings before. I always thought about myself and why I needed to listen." Additionally, four students noted their new understanding of how a speaker feels when the listener asks questions or tries to paraphrase.

Further evidence of the potential of enhanced listening to benefit collaboration can be found in the words of the boys. A final prompt, whereby the boys were asked, "Do you think this experience of learning about listening has helped your group work together?" allowed the boys to reflect on their experience. The majority of boys, 12 out of 16, felt that the collaborative efforts of their groups improved as they learned how to actively listen. Student N responded, "In my group, I know that since the first day we came together we have improved alot [sic]. When our group listens, we get so much more done then [sic] if we don't listen." Student E noted, "I think we are working pretty well together and our listening is going really well to [sic]." Student A summed up his feelings by writing, "I think that we listen well, we've gotten more comfortable around each other, and cooperate better because of [sic] our listening skills have improved."

In a final question, fifteen boys responded, "Yes," when asked, "Did you become a better listener during this project?" The one who responded, "No," clarified by adding, "I've always been a good listener." In whole, the data show that the boys feel that listening has had a positive impact on their ability to collaborate. Thus, the effects of the instruction were improved listening skills and collaboration.

Conclusion and Implications for Future Practice

Considering the evolution of the boys' understanding of active listening, the change in their listening behaviors, and the improved collaboration during our writing project, I consider this research endeavor to have been a success. As I explored the data, I realized that the most impactful part of this project was the benefit of providing direct instruction in listening skills. While the boys understood how to display good listening habits, they had no prior knowledge of how to actively listen and respond to a speaker.

I think this project lends itself to expansion in the lower school where we lay the groundwork for all future teaching and learning. The connection between empathy and listening is worthy of further exploration as well. I stumbled upon a number of scholarly articles that document the connection between listening and empathy building. Therefore, I would like to initiate curriculum discussions about scaffolding such instruction from first to fourth grade, recognizing that an added bonus may be earlier developments of the idea of "empathy and listening" in our boys.

In my own classroom, I intend to not only teach the foundational lessons I taught for this project, but also additional lessons throughout the year. The beauty of listening is that students are required to practice this habit every day. I learned the importance of "slowing down to move ahead" by taking the time to explicitly teach my students how to listen. As a class, we reaped the benefits of this improved skill all year long.

Reflection Statement

When I first started this project, I was a bit worried that the instruction would fall flat because of the boys' prior knowledge and expertise in listening skills. "Clearly they know how to listen," I often found myself thinking during the arduous days of writing (and re-writing) my research question in Vancouver. I learned quickly, however, never to make assumptions, even if it seems obvious that students *should* enter the classroom with such prerequisite skills and habits.

Additionally, I learned the importance of re-evaluating my use of time. All too often, educators feel the pressure of time, or lack thereof. We are concerned with covering the content without realizing that "soft" skills' lessons could (and do) enhance, enrich and extend our students' thinking and achievement. These listening lessons proved just that. While I worried about the

content I pushed back on the calendar, I soon realized how important doing so was for my students.

The experience of engaging in action research, itself, has been one of the most meaningful professional development opportunities in which I've participated. I approached my instruction in a strategic manner that demanded accountability on my part to meaningfully track my boys' progress, document growth and transformation, and draw reliable conclusions. While I consider myself a reflective practitioner, I've never been so prudent in contemplating my instruction and its impact on my boys. It is with such precision and care that all educators should approach their craft. Another aspect of action research that I had not previously thought of, but benefitted from greatly, was the fact that I was learning alongside my boys. What a wonderful opportunity to participate in this shared experience of learning!

Beyond my classroom and my individual project, it has been my great pleasure to be part of a global team of educators seeking to better themselves for their students. I found myself challenged, supported, and encouraged by this group of like-minded individuals who span the globe. I like to say that my action research team is now "my people". I will always have individuals with whom to collaborate, problem solve, and learn from long after we bid one another adieu in Baltimore. In particular, I want to thank my patient team leader, Trish Cislak, whose thoughtful attention and support to this project kept me going, even when I didn't think I had it in me to continue.

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Appendix A

Beginning of Year Survey

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers! 😊

What is listening?

How do you know when someone is listening to you?

How would you rate yourself as a listener? Circle the number you think best describes you as a listener. (1 = I don't listen to others; 5 = ok, sometimes I listen, sometimes I don't; 10 = I always listen to those who are speaking to me)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

How would others rate you as a listener? Circle the number you think others would use to describe you as a listener. (1 = I don't listen to others; 5 = ok, sometimes I listen, sometimes I don't; 10 = I always listen to those who are speaking to me)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Who is a great listener in your life?

What does this person say and/or do to make you think he/she is a great listener?

How does it make you feel when this person (or any person) listens to you?

Why is listening important?

Appendix B

Tracking Sheet

Below is a chart of the student generated behavior tracking sheet and total tally marks recorded by all four groups over the three writing sessions:

Behavior	9/26/16	9/30/16	10/5/16
Eye contact	18	24	26
Not interrupting	16	22	26
Responding appropriately	24	24	26
Body language	13	21	25
Not distracted with “things”	20	23	20
Keeping on topic	18	24	21
Paraphrasing	12	18	16
Questioning	8	14	19
Interrupting	20	3	0
Distracted	11	3	2
Off topic	11	0	7

Appendix C

End of Year Reflection

Just like you did on the original survey, I want you to answer as honestly and openly as you can. This paper is for my eyes only!

How well do you think you listened during the constitution activities? Please circle the number that you feel best represents your listening. (1 = I didn't listen to others; 5 = ok, sometimes I listened, sometimes I didn't; 10 = I always listened to those in my group)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

How well would your teammates say you listened during the constitution activities? Please circle the number that you feel best represents how they would evaluate your listening. (1 = I didn't listen to others; 5 = ok, sometimes I listened, sometimes I didn't; 10 = I always listened to those in my group)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Do you feel you have become a better listener because of these activities? Circle one.

Yes No

If you answered yes, explain what you now do differently as a listener than you did before you participated in the active listening lessons and constitution writing.

If you answered no, why do you think that is so?

Which active listening skill (only one) would you like to work on this year? Circle one.

Paraphrasing Responding appropriately Making eye contact

Not being distracted by “things” Asking questions of the speaker

Keeping conversation on the speaker (and not me)

Other: _____