

# Centre for English Teaching Specialization

## MOOC 2: Problem-Solving Skills for University Success

### 5.3b Active Listening Guide

In the screencast for 5.3b we suggested that one way to overcome personality differences in group work is to use active listening. This is true; but active listening is useful for any group work or interaction in general. As Shotter points out, we usually listen as a way of finding opportunities to speak our mind and say our opinions, rather than really listening to the other person. This is where active listening can come in handy. Taking the time to listen and understand is useful in any interaction with others, and particularly in a situation as potentially vexed as working in groups at university.

Active listening is making the conversation about the speaker, not about the listener.

## What is active listening?

Active listening means taking the time to understand what someone is saying, and reflecting that understanding back to them to check that you are right. It means:

### Active Listening:

1. Focussing on and understanding what the other person is saying
2. Taking time to appreciate the other person's thoughts, and just as importantly their feelings
3. Not judging what they saying, nor trying to change their mind
4. Demonstrating to the other person that you are listening
5. Communicating your understanding of what the other person has said

We're assuming here that you don't need us to tell you how to appreciate someone's thoughts and feelings, or tell you how not to judge someone. We will, however, in this guide look at how to better understand what some is saying, how to demonstrate you are listening, and how to communicate your understanding.

## Understanding what someone is saying

While it might seem straightforward to understand what someone is saying, there are ways in which we can improve our understanding. Margarete Imhof (2003) writes of three related strategies for improving your understanding while listening.

**Asking pre-questions:** asking questions of what you will listen to, before you start listening, can help understanding and aid retention. This may either been done verbally, or simply in your head. What do you want to know about what they are saying?

**Interest management:** the level of interest you have in what you are listening to can also determine how much you understand and retain. There isn't much that

Be active in your listening: find something that is interesting to you, don't expect the speaker to do everything.

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you can do about how interesting someone's speech is, but you can generate interest by finding something of interest in what they're saying, whatever that may be.

**Elaboration strategies:** these are a set of strategies that contextualise what someone is saying by finding connections between it and your prior knowledge and other subjects and areas. This may also be done mentally 'highlighting' ideas and finding other contexts for what the speaker is saying.

## Demonstrating you are listening

There are a number of different means to demonstrate that you are listening. They are:

**Use of body language:** One way to demonstrate active listening and project empathy is to mimic (to some extent) the speaker's use of body language. Chantrand and Bargh (1999) write of the 'chameleon effect' – the tendency of members cohesive groups to mirror each other's body language. The trick here is not to mimic the speaker's body language too closely, but to broadly copy their posture. If the other person has their arms crossed, for example, try to mirror them with a broadly 'closed' body posture. This mirroring of body language should be as natural as possible, and indeed comes naturally if you are listening honestly and deeply. Andersen (in Shotter, 2009) suggests too that noticing the speaker's body language might also help you understand hidden meanings in what they are saying.

Broadly mirror the body language of the person speaking.

**Facial expressions:** this is a means by which you can demonstrate your happiness or agreement at what is said. Obviously it's not a good idea to grin like a fool while someone is being angry or telling a sad story though – use your discretion, as always. Eye contact, too, is another means to demonstrate your interest, but beware that there are cultural differences in the use of eye contact in communication.

Cultural differences come up often in listening. Be aware of your own cultural tendencies as well as other people's.

**Backchanneling:** use of words and phrases to show that the other person should continue talking – "uh-huh", "yeah" and the like. Use whatever feels natural.

## Communicating your understanding of what the speaker has said

Paraphrasing what the speaker has said, and allowing them the opportunity to correct any misunderstandings, is a crucial part of active listening. Beebe and Masterson (2015, pg 155) write about how best to paraphrase for active listening, noting that paraphrasing is quite different from just repeating back verbatim what the speaker said. They also note that paraphrasing involves not just restating the content of what someone said, but also the feelings. This can be a powerful way to defuse tensions in group work and increase rapport.

Clarify the emotion behind a statement, as well as any content the speaker has said.

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#### References

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