



Active listening

Have you ever sat in a lecture listening to the lecturer and then suddenly realised they have already progressed through a handful of slides and you don't know what you've missed? When you've finally conquered the art of **Communicating your ideas** (PDF, 58 kB) and **Preparing to participate** (PDF, 53 kB), you need to make sure you have the capacity to listen to what is being said.

Let's look at the Chinese symbol for the verb 'to listen':

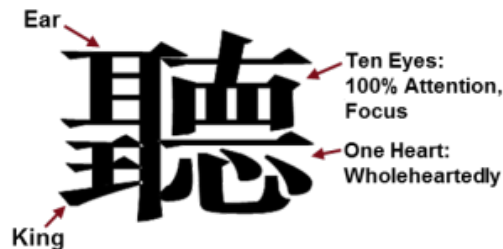


Figure 1. Chinese Symbol *ting* 'To Listen' (Kaufmann, 2011)

The symbol has six parts that combine to represent an active, focussed form of listening:

- Ear: having your ears open;
- King: showing respect to the speaker, as if they were the king;
- Attention (10 eyes): making eye contact and looking for visual cues that enhance understanding;
- Wholehearted (1 heart): engaging your feelings to show empathy for the speaker.

One symbol can represent so much more than a singular concept. So why is this important for your classes? Is there even a need to be an active listener? After all, aren't all the lectures recorded now and most information can be found online?

The listener as a person

To look at this in more detail we need to focus on what active listening allows us to achieve:

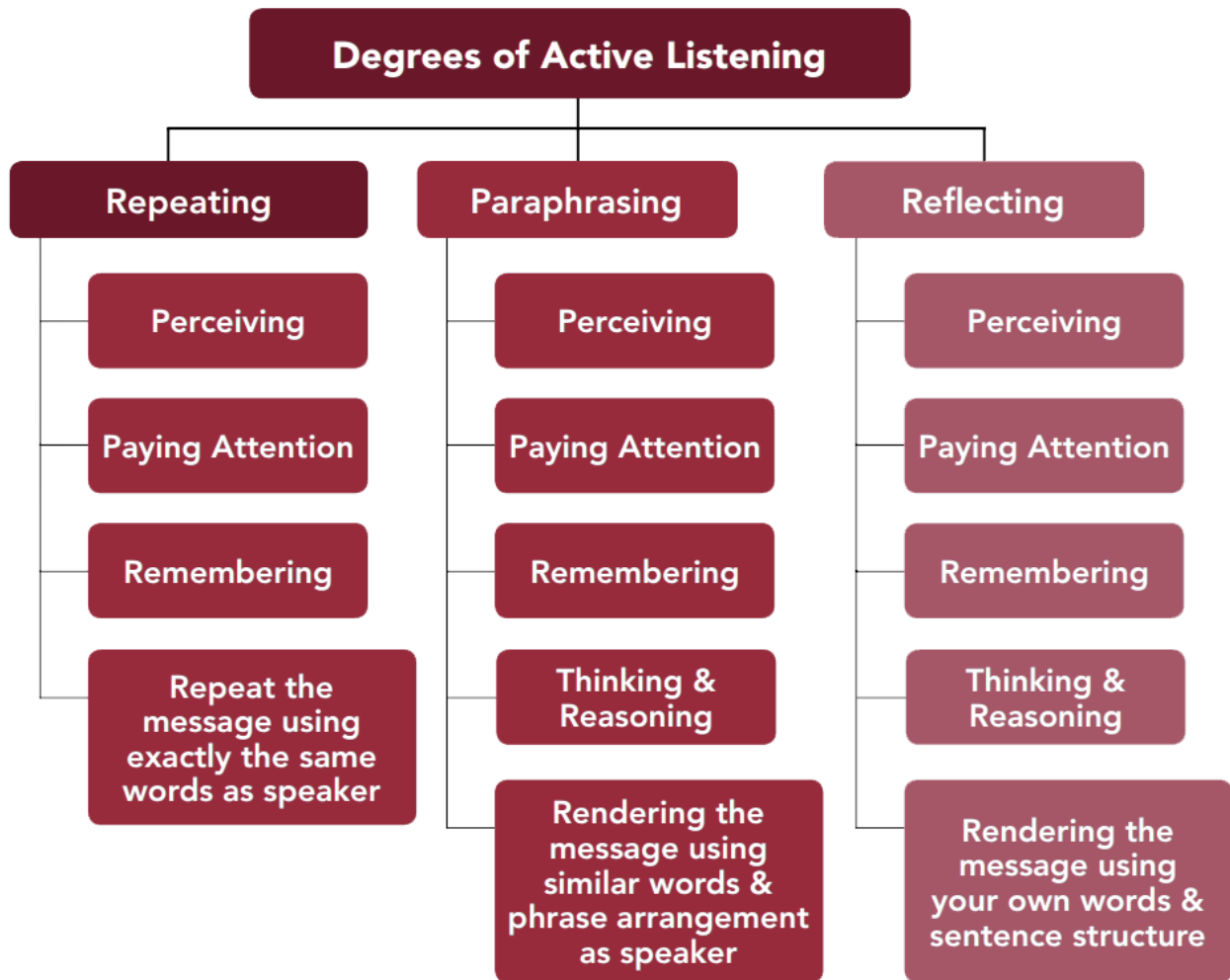


Figure 2. Degrees of Active Listening (Team FME, 2013)

As you can see, there are many elements to active listening. As a student, your aim is to achieve the 'reflecting' stage. This allows you to truly engage and involve yourself with the content so as to integrate the content with what you already know and how you think, and to increase your ability to share the knowledge with a wider audience.

Now the trick is, how do you become an active listener and make the transition through the degrees of active listening? The first step is to put the car into neutral; that is, we need to let go of any judgement we might have about the people or the situation. Most importantly, we then need to be engaged from start to finish (figure 3). That is hard and takes concentration and practice, but the time you invest helps down the track. It's also a skill you won't stop using your entire life.

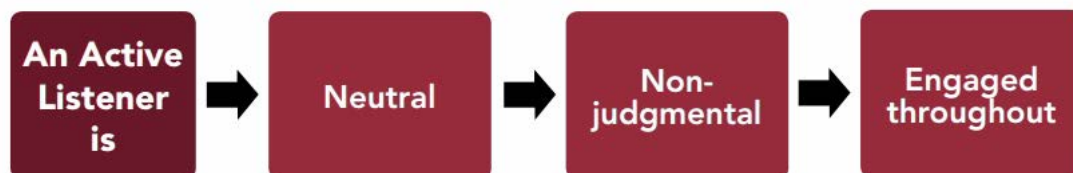


Figure 3. The Active Listener Person (Team FME, 2013)

When you begin the process of active listening, you're faced with a number of different levels of listening. One level is listening to yourself and what your self-talk (that inner voice in your head that isn't spoken out loud) is asking or telling you to do in response to the person talking. You have to be able to park those thoughts until you've begun listening.

Another level is listening to both verbal and nonverbal cues. You need to be able to tell when someone is using body language to try and emphasise or change the meaning of a point. You need to discern the importance of what is being presented at the time.



Figure 4. What you need to do as a Listener (Team FME, 2013)

Components of listening

Now that you're in a position to start 'really' listening, we need to break down the main components of active listening to become a better listener.

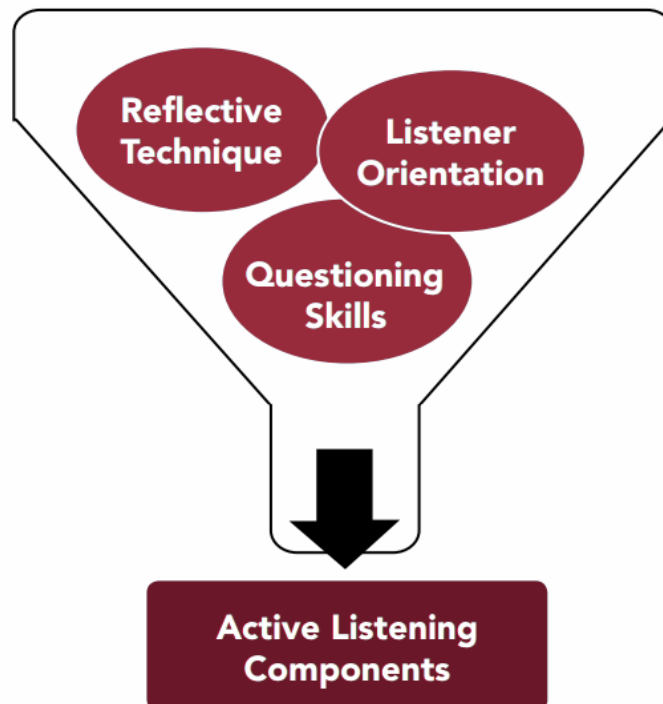


Figure 4. Components of an Active Listener (Team FME, 2013)

Listener orientation

Change your perspective by moving away from questions like 'how do I feel?' and asking instead 'how does the speaker feel?'. By understanding better where the speaker is coming from, you'll have a better chance of discerning what they mean and how they mean it.

Reflective technique

This allows you to ensure you and the speaker are of a similar understanding. This provides a sounding board for the speaker to restructure their approach if there is no understanding from those they are trying to reach. Clarification is an integral step in this process and ensures your understanding is in line with everyone else (Figure 5).

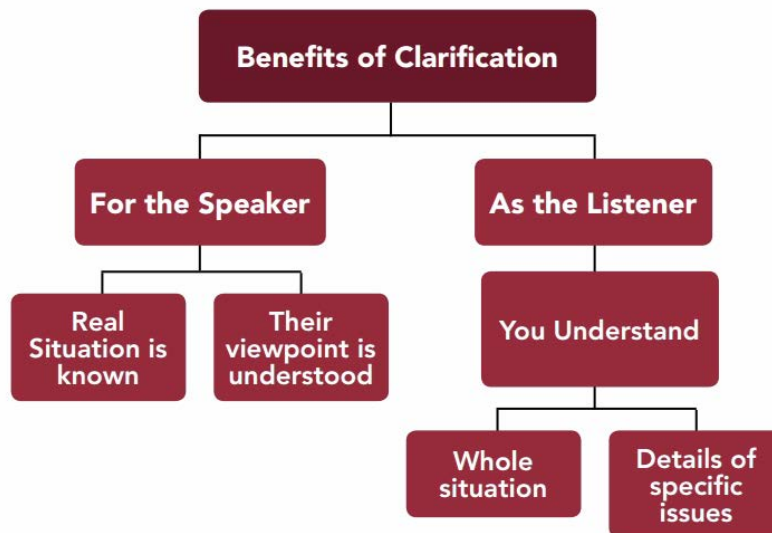


Figure 5. Benefits of Clarification (Team FME, 2013)

Questioning skills

To be able to best prepare, reflect, and understand, you have to be able to know how best to ask a question that will result in the answer you need. This means asking the right questions at the right time. Have a look at [Communicating your ideas](#) (PDF, 58 kB) for more information on how to do this.

Blocking active listening

Finally, be aware of the barriers that will block you from being an active listener. There are many! Figure 6 helps to identify some of those key ones that come up time and again.

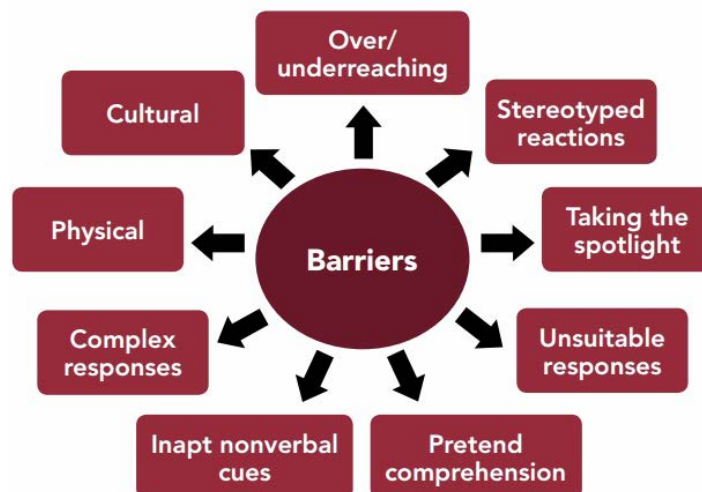


Figure 6. Barriers to Active Listening (Team FME, 2013)

Reflection activity



The next time you have a free chance with a close friend/spouse/partner or even a favourite pet (although don't expect an in-depth philosophical conversation with your pet!), try the following steps and see what you get out of the conversation.

1. PUT DOWN YOUR PHONE. Better yet, turn it off! The same goes for the TV, computers, etc.
2. Start by asking the other person open-ended questions (one or two only).
3. Let the other person know what you think they said (paraphrasing).
4. If you didn't understand them properly, let them explain it again without interrupting them.
5. Watch their body language and listen to their words. See if they tell the same story.
6. If you suddenly realise you let your mind wander, clarify what was said during that time if you need to.
7. If you don't feel like you can focus properly, be honest with yourself and the other person. Make sure you identify when you can continue the conversation.

References

Kaufmann, U. (2011). Seven habits ... – habit 1: VOC. Retrieved from <https://coe-partners.com/ting-listen-to-your-customer/>

Team FME. (2013). Active listening, communication skills. Retrieved from <http://www.free-management-ebooks.com/dldebk/dlcm-active.htm>



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