

**Socialising (4): Active listening****Topic:** Socialising and active listening**Aims:**

- To raise awareness of the importance of active listening skills, and some situations where they are especially important;
- To teach some language and techniques for active listening, including effective use of body language;
- To provide practice and feedback of the situation of actively listening to a friend or colleague talking about a difficult experience.

**Level:** Intermediate (B2) and above**Introduction**

Perhaps the most important skill connected with socialising is to ‘shut up and listen’. In practice, it can be very difficult to resist the temptation to turn every conversation into a conversation about what we consider the most interesting thing in the world, i.e. ourselves. The most skilful active listeners include nurses, social workers, psychotherapists and counsellors, so this lesson focuses especially on the techniques studied and used by these professionals.

**1. Lead-in game**

Avoid any mention of the topic of this lesson, as this might spoil the lead-in game. Divide the class into pairs, and distribute Student A and Student B role-cards. The Student C role-card should only be used if you have an odd number of students. Make sure students do not look at each other’s role-cards.

Allow about 1 minute for students to prepare. You could draw student’s attention to a clock in the classroom, and stress the importance of Student A speaking for two minutes. When everyone is ready, tell Student A to start speaking. Watch what happens very carefully, paying particular attention to both students’ body language.

Some things you might notice:

- Student A initially finds it very difficult and stressful to keep talking while student B is not reacting, and may try a range of strategies (e.g. speaking more loudly or using stronger language) in order to try to catch Student B’s attention.
- As Student B starts to pay attention, Student A should find it much easier and more enjoyable to talk. He/she may decide that a particular strategy caused this change (e.g. speaking more loudly), and will therefore continue doing this.

At the end of the game, ask Student A and Student C if they noticed anything unusual, and how they felt as they were speaking. When you reveal what was really happening, discuss again with the class how much difference it made to the speakers whether the listener was listening actively or not. You could also elicit some concrete examples of what Student B did in order to show that he/she was listening.

You could also elicit some examples of real-life situations where listeners don't listen actively enough (e.g. a teacher asking students about their weekend, but marking the register while the students are answering).

Finally, repeat the game with the Student A and B roles reversed. Even though the speakers are now aware of the trick, they should still feel some of the same emotions, i.e. stress while trying to attract someone's interest, or guilt that their story is too boring, and then satisfaction and pleasure as the other person starts to enjoy the story.

## 2. Active listening quiz

Elicit from the class the differences between a therapist and a counsellor, and the similarities between the skills that they need.

### Answer

A *therapist* (or *psychotherapist*) offers long-term support to help people to deal with psychological or emotional problems. A *counsellor* offers shorter-term help to deal with a specific situation (e.g. a stressful or unpleasant event) or problem (e.g. an addiction). See <http://www.thecounsellorsguide.co.uk/difference-between-counselling-psychotherapy.html>. There is a good deal of overlap between the skills they both need, most obviously the need to listen actively and encourage their patients to talk and to find their own solutions.

Distribute copies of the quiz so that each student has a copy. Point out that the aim of the quiz is to generate discussion, so encourage students to discuss their answers carefully in pairs or groups of three. After about five minutes, discuss the questions with the class.

## 3. Active listening quiz – Commentary

Distribute copies of the Commentary. Students work alone to read it to compare the advice with their answers from the quiz. Discuss any differences with the class. You could also go through the difficult vocabulary from the Commentary with the class (e.g. *to encourage sb to do sth*, *to resist the temptation to do sth*, *a monologue*, *to have sth in common with sb*, *a dialogue*, *to make an excuse*, *to upset sb*, *to furrow your brow*, *to nod your head*, *impatient*, *to tilt sth at an angle*, *curious*, *to fold your arms*, *intonation / tone of voice*, *neutral*, *disappointment*, *judgement*, *personality*, *annoying*, *criticism*, *to paraphrase sth*, *to relate sth to sth*, *frustrated*) to elicit what was said about each word or phrase. You could also ask students to demonstrate the various examples of body language and intonation of 'listening noises'.

## 4. Active listening: useful phrases

Elicit from the class the most useful phrases from question 4 of the quiz, and write them on the board. Elicit some different words that could be used in each phrase.

### Suggested answers

That must have been really disappointing / upsetting / frustrating / difficult.

So, in other words, ...? / So, what you're saying is ...

Why do you think she / you / he behaved / reacted / spoke to you / him / her like that?

How did that make you / her feel?
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### 5. Therapist game

Cut up the cards from the Therapist game. Divide the class into pairs or groups of three and give each group a pack of cards. Go through any difficult vocabulary from the cards with the class (e.g. *scared, to fail, unwelcome, fault, rude, guilty*). Make sure everyone knows that this is just a game – they will not need to talk about their own difficult experiences in class. All the stories can be invented – they may even be funny.

Ask a volunteer to ask you one of the questions (e.g. *Tell me about a time when you were scared*). Start answering hesitantly (e.g. *It was last week ... I was walking through the forest*) Pause a few times so that some students can use listening noises to encourage you to speak (e.g. *Go on*) and to use some of the active listening techniques from this lesson.

Students then work in their pairs or groups. They place the question cards face down on their desk and take turns to be the therapist. The therapist chooses a card and asks a partner to describe the experience on the card. Note that it is the therapist's skills that are being practised here, not the storyteller's. Each story / therapy session should last around two minutes, and then they should swap roles.

Monitor carefully during the game, and be ready to give and elicit feedback on the therapists' techniques at the end. Finally, discuss with the class some real-life situations where these skills would be most useful, and some situations where they would not.



**Worksheets – Socialising (4): Active listening****Lead-in game: The Power of Active Listening****Student A**

You are going to talk for two minutes about a time when you didn't know anybody and had to try to build relationships with strangers. Your story could be a success (i.e. how you managed to build relationships) or a failure (i.e. how you failed). If you can't think of a true story, use your imagination to invent one.

Use some of the following ideas to help you plan your story. Remember: you will need to speak for two minutes.

- Where were you? Why were you there?
- Who were the other people?
- Why didn't you know anyone?
- What did you do? Did it work?
- How did you feel?
- What did you learn?

**Student B**

Student A is going to tell you a story for two minutes. You are going to try to change student A's mood just by the way you listen to the story. Here's how you're going to do it:

- For the first minute, listen to student A's story, but don't react in any way. Just look at student A with a neutral expression on your face.
- For the second minute, gradually start to appear more interested in student A's story, so that by the end of the second minute you seem to be fascinated.

**Student C**

Your job is simply to watch your classmates as they take part in an experiment. You have to work out what the experiment is, and how effective it is.

Be ready to report back to the class on what you observed.

**Active listening quiz**

1. What are the differences between the ways you listen and respond in the following situations?
  - a. You have met someone for the first time, and are finding it difficult to keep the conversation going.
  - b. You are engaged in a good conversation with someone you've just met.
  - c. A friend is telling you a personal story, such as a sad or unpleasant experience.
  - d. A boring person is telling you a dull story, and showing no interest in giving you the chance to speak.
  
2. Imagine you are a counsellor or therapist. When one of your clients is telling you a personal story, what is the best and the worst thing to do with ...
  - a. ... your face?
  - b. ... your head?
  - c. ... your hands?
  
3. What "listening noises" can you use to encourage the other person to keep talking? Are there any dangers with these listening noises?
 

a. Really?	e. Right.	i. Oh.
b. Mmm.	f. I see.	j. Uh-huh.
c. Wow!	g. Go on.	k. A-ha.
d. OK.	h. Oh dear.	l. Oh no!
  
4. Imagine you are a counsellor or therapist. Your client has just finished telling you about a problem they have had. What is the best way to respond?
  - a. Explain what the person did wrong, e.g. *Do you know what you did wrong?*
  - b. Suggest a solution to the problem, e.g. *I think you should ...*
  - c. Tell a story about a similar problem you once had, e.g. *A similar thing happened to me a few years ago. I was at the ...*
  - d. Comment on the story, e.g. *That must have been really disappointing.*
  - e. Ask for more details, e.g. *Where did this happen?*
  - f. Summarise the story in your own words, e.g. *So, in other words, ...?*
  - g. Ask about the underlying reasons for someone's behaviour, e.g. *Why do you think she behaved like that?*
  - h. Ask about the speaker's emotional reaction, e.g. *How did that make you feel?*
  - i. Explain that you know how the other person feels, e.g. *I know exactly how you feel.*

**Active listening quiz – Commentary**

1. In situation (a), you will probably need to ask as many questions as possible in order to encourage the other person to talk. You should resist the temptation to fill the conversation with your own monologue. In situation (b), you can relax, and bring in more of your own stories. A nice strategy is to find things that you have in common with the other person. This is very different from situation (c), where you should listen and encourage the other person to speak, and keep the conversation focused on that person for as long as he/she feels the need to speak. Of course, listening to another person speaking for too long can be very boring, so if you find yourself in situation (d), you'll need to find a way out, either by turning the monologue into a dialogue, or simply by making an excuse to walk away. Just make sure you do it in a way that doesn't upset the other person.
2.
  - a. Eye contact is very important – if you start looking around the room, it's a clear sign that you're not really listening. You can also show that you are concentrating on the other person's story by furrowing your brow, i.e. tightening the muscles above your nose.
  - b. Nod your head slowly to show that you are listening. Don't nod too fast – it makes you look impatient for the other person to finish. You can also try tilting your head at an angle to show that you are curious.
  - c. Keep your hands still while you are listening – it might help if you're holding something like a cup of tea. And whatever you do, don't fold your arms – it shows that you are closed to what the other person has to say.
3. All of these listening noises can be good or bad, depending on how you say them (your intonation or tone of voice) and the situation. Neutral sounds such as *mmm* and *uh-huh* are safest, as they show you are listening without expressing an opinion. *Go on* is useful for encouraging the other person to continue. Most of the other listening noises can be said in at least two ways: an emotional way to express surprise (e.g. *Really?*, *Wow!*, *A-ha!*) or disappointment (e.g. *Oh dear*, *Oh*, *Oh no!*) or in a neutral way, expressing understanding without an emotional judgement. In general, this neutral way is better if you want to encourage the other person to speak. *OK*, *right* and *I see* can show that you're listening, but they are also often used to show that you want to move the conversation forward, i.e. that you have heard enough, so be careful with your intonation.
4. Of course, the 'best way to respond' will depend on lots of factors, such as the personality of the other person and the type of story they have told. But for many people, it can be very annoying to receive advice (a) or, even worse, criticism (b), when in fact all they really wanted was someone who would listen to their story. The best way to show that you've really been listening is to paraphrase the most important parts (f). Another very common mistake is to turn the other person's story into a story about yourself (c). As discussed in question 1, there's a time for finding things in common, and a time for staying quiet and listening. It's better to show that you are trying to understand the other person's feelings (d) rather than relating everything to yourself (i). Questions are a good way of showing you've been listening, but the speaker may be frustrated if you only ask fact-based questions (e). It's better to ask about emotions (h) or, to encourage the speaker to think about the reasons for what happened.

**Therapist game**

Tell me about a time when you were scared.	Tell me about a time when you failed (e.g. an exam).	Tell me about a time when you felt unwelcome.
Tell me about a time when you were late, and everything seemed to go wrong.	Tell me about a time when you were angry with someone.	Tell me about a time when you were disappointed.
Tell me about a time when someone was angry with you, but it wasn't your fault.	Tell me about a time when you were embarrassed.	Tell me about a time when you had an accident.
Tell me about a time when someone was rude to you and you didn't know why.	Tell me about a time when you felt guilty.	Tell me about a time when you lost something important.