

Teaching Critical Listening

1. Definition of Critical Listening within the context of listening skills: What is critical listening?

Listening is the process of intentional selection, organization, and retention of verbal and nonverbal aspects of oral messages.

This means:

- Listening takes place in a sequence of steps.
- Listening begins with a goal, an intention, some motivation to gain information.
- Listening involves a selection process: Separate speech from noise, observe the contribution of verbal and nonverbal information to the message.
- Listening involves re-constructing the message and putting the information together, e.g., identify units of meaning, complement and complete information, infer information from the text and the context.
- Listening requires storage of information and combining new information with prior knowledge.

2. The developmental trends in listening skills: What are the typical capacities for critical listening in different age groups?

In order to accomplish all this and in order to listen well, any listener needs information processing skills. These skills typically develop during childhood and adolescence:

Attention: Developmental trends which need to be considered are in attention span, ability to focus and to maintain the focus, flexibility in changing focus, ability to control distraction, ability to attend to detail.

Knowledge base: Across childhood and adolescence, the knowledge becomes broader and deeper, is increasingly better organized, more intricate and intertwined, world-knowledge increases, larger vocabulary and skillful usage of language, knowledge of pragmatic aspects of the language (style, diction, rhetorical structure, persuasion).

Memory: Developmental trends in childhood and adolescence in terms of memory include: Capacity of short term memory and long term memory expand and become more differentiated, hierarchical ordering of information and increasing ability to categorize and classify and to re-classify.

Metacognition: Growth in metacognition increases ability to control understanding, to understand when one did not understand, ability to ask questions to fill information gaps, ability to separate content and delivery, to consider form and intention of a speaker, finding alternative interpretations of a message

Learning Strategies: Ability to use mnemo-techniques to memorize material, increasing ability to take effective notes, to identify main information units and gists of a story, ability to contrast and compare, take into account text types and stylistic characteristics

These developmental trends are reflected in the Wisconsin Standards for Oral Language Performance as illustrated for grades 4,8, through 12: Students learn to **understand** and **recall** stories and sequences of information, they proceed to being able to **distinguish** fact from fiction, to consider purposes and finally to **evaluate** content and style of delivery.

As a consequence: As a teacher prepares any kind of listening practice he or she needs to take into account two perspectives and find answers to these two questions:

- a) What are the specific tasks, challenges, pleasures involved in a particular listening situation? (e.g., what makes listening to a lecture different from reading a text? What makes listening to a presidential speech different from reading it?)
- b) What are the developmental considerations which have an impact on the type of information processing which is possible or required? (e.g., what do I know about the state of cognitive development of my students? How can I help them to proceed?)

In listening, much of the language skills are needed and used which students have acquired in formal and informal learning situations. They learn vocabulary, communication skills, and ways of self-presentations from parents, peers, and other models real or fictitious. But still: Listening needs to be practiced, too, because it requires a special set of information processing skills. Consider this: It is certainly helpful that a child knows how to ride a tricycle, when she wants to learn how to ride a bicycle. But, we all know, that practice on the tricycle alone is not sufficient to ride a bike safely.

3. Examples for teaching critical listening

Examples: Let's practice listening on a selection of texts.

4. Principles for teaching critical listening skills

All things considered, I would suggest the following guidelines for teaching critical listening:

1. Choose **authentic listening situations**, e.g., story telling, speeches, conversations, sermons, discussions, poetry readings, (student) presentations, oral exams, f2f negotiations, instructions.
~~✘~~Avoid unnatural listening situations, e.g., listening to a lecture for 2 hours and no notes!
2. **Set a task** for listening. In order to be able to listen well, an intention is an absolute prerequisite. Support learning by providing this intention through a specific perspective, e.g., ask students to retain the story for recall, to consider the vocabulary, to attend to form and style, to listen for emotional key words, to watch the nonverbals.
~~✘~~Avoid: "Just listen! We'll see later what we make of it."
3. **Use a variety** of listening situations. In order to train listening, the students need to reflect on how listening to a friend who needs help is different from listening to a lecture from listening to a political discussion from listening to grandmother telling her story the umpteenth time over.
~~✘~~Avoid: Monoculture in listening.
4. Provide for the opportunity to **exchange and discuss** the results of a listening task. The skilled listener understands that it is part of listening that every listener comes up with a different interpretation of what she thinks she understood.
~~✘~~Avoid: Presenting an easy solution: "This is what was said and, therefore, this is what you should have understood."
5. Present **yourself** as a **role model** for critical listening. Reflect on your own listening behavior and consider, e.g., how you show that you do not rely on the first interpretation of what you have heard, how you ask questions to double check and fill knowledge gaps, how you pay attention to nonverbal parts of the message.
~~✘~~Avoid: Preaching water and drinking wine. Saying how important it is to attend to a person if you listen to somebody, while clearing the material from your desk during a conversation.