

**Mindful Ears:
Teaching Active Listening Strategies in an Oral Communications Course
at New Mexico State University**

Taylor Rodriguez
Graduate Teaching Assistant
New Mexico State University
taylorrr@nmsu.edu

Greg Brooks
Graduate Teaching Assistant
New Mexico State University
gbrooks@nmsu.edu

Trevor Rawdon
Graduate Teaching Assistant
New Mexico State University
ttrawdon@nmsu.edu

Shannon Norris-Parish
Assistant Professor
Texas A&M University
shannon.parish@ag.tamu.edu

**Mindful Ears:
Teaching Active Listening Strategies in an Oral Communications Course at
New Mexico State University**

Introduction

Active listening is a fundamental communication skill. Sadly, the ability to listen effectively remains a critical growth area outlined by the Association for Public Land Grant Universities (APLU, 2024). Engaging students in active listening strategies can help improve oral communication skills in multiple settings; however, active listening does not necessarily mean listening to grievances (Rogers, 1979), which can sometimes feel exhausting for the intended listener before the interaction even begins. Incorporating creative listening strategies can also be valuable when helping students retain information, when helping students take more accurate notes, and when teaching debate skills (Weger et al., 2014). Rogers (1979) further noted it is a way to approach daily problems and considered listening as a fundamental role in every job. It is particularly key for future communicators to practice listening skills so they may be better prepared for workforce needs (APLU, 2024). By creating an interactive learning activity students can learn active listening.

How it Works

Guided by the Rost and Wilson (2013) model for active listening, four components guide a mindful listening model. Therefore, the purpose of this innovative teaching idea was to improve active listening skills using a “mindful ears strategy” with students ($n = 144$) in an oral communications and effective leadership course at New Mexico State University. We engaged this activity in a small and large group setting. Our small group consisted of pairs of students where the large group consisted of the whole class listening together to the same objective.

Rost and Wilson’s (2013) four steps to improve active listening include engaging a host, activating the senses, what the listener considers, and how they respond to a key message. The host typically provides the information that will be given and providing a comfortable environment, which includes supportive body language and relevant emotions. Second, when listening to someone, it's important for the listener to keep their senses in mind. This includes seeing the person they are talking to and hearing what they have to say. It is key for listeners to not letting their minds wander into the next tasks or what they want to say next but keeping on track of what they are saying and how your facial expressions are reacting to what they have to say. These two steps show how to engage with a speaker what follows in active listening, including the consideration and the response. Third, the listener should consider what message they are receiving and associate a response to their feedback after the listener has expressed their statements. Finally, the listener should prepare a response that is relevant, connected, and related to the sender’s message. They should reiterate statements and sentiment in a way that matches the sender’s message like a mirroring effect (Rost & Wilson, 2013).

We taught this activity using two phases. In the first phase, we broke the students into pairs and encouraged them to find a partner who were unfamiliar with. Each person then introduced themselves to their partners by elaborating on five questions about themselves in five minutes. These questions were all personal (age, favorite color, favorite restaurant, favorite animal, and hometown). We did not allow students to write anything about their partner during

the discussion and encouraged them to uphold a conversation where these questions were answered but where they talked the full five minutes. The students then switched and allowed their partner to answer and converse on these same five questions. After the time had passed, students could capture as much as they could remember from the conversation and answer the five questions about their partner on a piece of paper before sharing their recollection of their partner's stories to seek accuracy.

In the second phase, students applied the Rost and Wilson (2013) four-step active listening framework to popular culture music references. For example, we included six songs, with selections like *Working 9 to 5* by Dolly Parton and *Dear Future Husband* by Megan Trainor. We played roughly 25 seconds portions of each song with matching phrases without the displaying lyrics, titles, or artist. Students then identified the matching lyrics in each clip to the second song. With each song clip, the phrase was hidden in the context of the song, making the student engage in new listening skills, such as interpretation rather than just reiteration.

Results to Date/Advice to Others

Students enjoyed this activity due to not only having a competitive background but also, they got to bridge connections between learning and popular songs that they can predict the words to. These songs not only had connections to each other but also built connections into new learning material. To be successful in both phases of the activity, students needed to actively listen and retain the information being given without becoming distracted. The information ranged in personal connections to predicted connections.

In future classes, we recommend using mindful listening to connect in small group discussions. Active listening is crucial skill in education, as it fosters meaningful communication between educators and students (Paramole, 2024) to teach students to better grasp learning materials and find key points to discuss or capture in notes. By using an active listening framework to connect small group discussions students can respectively listen to one another and use key points in effective communication. We did identify that this teaching active created challenges for students with hearing impairments, so we will modify future teachings to include captions and QR codes to songs where they can listen on their personal devices.

Implications

To comprehend what each speaker is saying, listeners must focus on the central message without implying a second meaning. This is how listeners support key points without making personal conclusions. When responding, listeners should highlight relevant verbal prompts, as well as key terms to support communication, as well as show the speaker they were heard. Listeners have two ears and one mouth for a reason, so we support reinforcing this training for future communicators and other students preparing to enter the workforce.

Costs and Resources

We designed a handout to support this innovative teaching approach, and we also included a few audio clips. It may be helpful for instructors to have access to the internet and YouTube or Spotify to play desired clips. We also recommend that instructors include QR codes to the desired songs for phase two so students with hearing impairments can listen on their personal devices.

References

- Association for Public Land Grant Universities (APLU). (2024). *Employability skills in agriculture and natural resources*. <https://www.aplu.org/our-work/1-driving-student-success/preparing-students-for-the-workforce-and-post-collegiate-success/employability-skills-in-agriculture/>
- Paramole, O. C., Adeoye, M. A., Arowosaye, S. A., & Ibikunle, Y. A. (2024). The impact of active listening on student engagement and learning outcomes in educational settings. *International Journal of Universal Education*, 2(2), 77–89. <https://journal.umpr.ac.id/index.php/ijue/article/view/8898>
- Rogers, C., & Farson, R. E. (1979). Active listening. *Organizational psychology*, 57, 168–180.
- Rost, M., & Wilson, J. J. (2013). *Active listening*. Routledge.
- Weger Jr, H., Bell, G. C., Minei, E. M., & Robinson, M. C. (2014). The relative effectiveness of active listening in initial interactions. *International Journal of Listening*, 28(1), 13–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10904018.2013.813234>