

**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.

