

Let's Take a Trip: Exploring the Effect of Listening Styles

Stephanie L. Dailey

Courses: *Public Speaking, Introduction to Communication, Interpersonal Communication*

Objectives: *The goal of this classroom activity is for students to understand listening styles better and recognize the effect of different listening preferences.*

Keywords: *Basic Communication Courses; Listening Styles; Active Learning*

Introduction and Rationale

Listening is a core component of developing effective communication skills. Thus, a common objective of many basic communication courses is to help students become better listeners (Johnson & Long, 2007). Often, the teacher's goal is to show students that there are different listening styles or preferences and that people decode messages in various ways based on their unique approach to receiving information. It is crucial for students to learn listening preferences, as research continues to demonstrate the importance of strong communication skills, such as listening, for entry-level employees. According to the 2013 Job Outlook Report, "what makes a new graduate stand out from equally qualified competitors is evidence of the 'soft skills' needed in the workplace" (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2012). Listening continues to be a crucial proficiency throughout an individual's career, as Mumford, Campion, and Morgeson's (2007) survey of more than 1,000 employees demonstrated listening as one of the most required competencies for junior, mid-level, and senior-level personnel. Similarly, Bambacas and Patrickson (2008) found that human resource practitioners expect prospective managers to possess effective listening skills.

Despite the need for learning listening skills, students are not adequately developing these competencies. According to a recent study by the American Society for Training and Development, today's college students—the millennial generation—are highly

Stephanie L. Dailey is a Doctoral Candidate in Organizational Communication in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. Correspondence to: Stephanie L. Dailey, Department of Communication Studies, The University of Texas at Austin, 1 University Station A1105, Austin, TX 78712, USA. Email: Stephanie.Dailey@me.com

qualified in technical skills but lack soft skills, such as listening, communication, diplomacy, and relationship building (Galagan, 2013). Anne Mulcahy, former Xerox Corporation Chairman and CEO, referred to listening as a “lost art” because listening is “one of those things that is easy to talk about, [but] difficult to do” (Pomeroy, 2007, p. 14). Thus, there is a need for instructors to actively teach listening skills to prepare for students’ futures.

This in-class activity, which asks students to plan a vacation, shows how various listening preferences impact our day-to-day communication. This enjoyable exercise helps students apply the concept of listening and see how it influences their everyday actions. Through applying listening styles in this simple activity, students are able to see the practical value in understanding the listening preferences of themselves and others.

The Activity

To begin, students are divided into groups based on their listening style—people, action, content, or time-oriented (Watson, Barker, & Weaver, 1995)—and tasked with planning a trip. By creating a description about their trip that appeals to their own listening style, students are able to see the effect of the four different listening preferences.

Preparation

Before the activity, students should have a basic understanding of the four listening styles and which preference they have for making sense out of messages (see [Appendix A](#) for a description of listening styles). The instructor should prepare the room by labeling each corner of the room with a P, A, C, and T (for people, action, content, and time-oriented listeners) and ask students to self-select their primary listening style by sitting in that corner of the room. Depending on class size and students’ listening styles, the instructor may want to split some groups in half. For example, if there are 10 students who identify themselves as people-oriented listeners, the instructor may want to divide the people-oriented listeners into two groups of five. Another option is to have students take the listening styles inventory before class to better direct students to their appropriate listening group (see [Appendix B](#) for this instrument).

Procedure

Once students are divided into groups, the instructor should explain that each team gets to pick a place where they would like to travel and design their dream vacation. Each group should generate an explanation of the trip to share with the class, based on their own listening preference. During their brainstorming, students should think about all the details of their trip that someone from their listening style would be interested in knowing. The instructor can give a few examples to get students thinking in the right direction.

For instance, people-oriented listeners might explain their trip in terms of the emotions and feelings it is going to elicit, or they may tell stories of common interests about their destination. Action-oriented listeners, on the other hand, are interested in information that serves a purpose or function, so they should share information about what they are going to do on the trip and why. Content-oriented listeners want complex information, so this group might share every possible detail about the vacation. Lastly, time-oriented listeners prefer brief, short messages, so this group should explain their trip in the most succinct way possible.

As each group plans their trip, they should elect a scribe to take notes that will be shared with the rest of the class later. Allow 5–10 minutes for students to plan and generate an explanation of their trip. During this time, the instructor should walk around to each group to ensure they are on the right track for their listening style.

After groups have planned their vacations and formulated how their listening style would prefer to hear about the trip, have each group share with the entire class.

Debriefing

Finally, the instructor should debrief with students, using discussion questions such as:

- (1) What were some of the main differences between the four groups and the way each group presented information?
- (2) When listening to other groups' trips, was there information you wanted to know or details that you thought were lacking? What information could have sparked your interest more?
- (3) Think about how you could adapt your group's trip to fit another listening style. How would you change the information or details you shared to appeal to a different listener?
- (4) In the future, you might pitch an idea for a trip to your friends to see if they would like to join. Or perhaps you need to convince your parents of an upcoming vacation (either for permission to travel or potential finances). What information would they want to know? Which listening style best describes your friends and family?
- (5) Think about past instances where conflict or misunderstanding may have occurred because of listening differences. What role did listening preferences play? How could you have adapted your communication to fit the audience better? How might knowing your own and others' listening styles help you become a better communicator in the future?
- (6) Now that you understand your approach to listening, how might your preferences help or hurt you? What situations lend well to your style (e.g., personal stories, long lectures) and what situations will be more challenging for you? Knowing this information, how can you enhance the accuracy of your own listening?

Appraisal

Overall, this active learning experience allows students to apply the concept of listening styles to their everyday lives. It also teaches them the skill of adapting listening styles in various situations and adjusting messages to suit diverse audiences better.

I find that students quickly engage with this activity because it is interactive and allows for informal group work. It is always interesting to see the differences between each group's journey too. By using this activity in class, students can see the stark contrasts between listening styles and the effects of listening preferences. It helps students better understand their own listening style in action as they generate information about their trip that is targeted to their own listening preferences. In addition, the activity allows students to take in information about others' trips that may not be presented toward their preferences and experience the effects that different styles have on their level of interest and interpretation. Students are also pushed to explore how they may adapt their future messages to fit a variety of listening styles.

This activity is also effective in getting students to reflect on their listening preferences, and the exercise produces a great deal of discussion. Particularly with the debriefing question that asks, "Which listening style best describes your friends and family?" students enjoy sharing examples from their personal lives and reflecting on past experiences (e.g., "that makes sense why my dad always asks...").

Although the activity is generally quite simple and successful, there are a few challenges with implementing this exercise. Because many individuals use more than one listening style, a few students may have trouble identifying their listening preference. Also, the instructor should be aware of dominant group members (typically the scribe) who monopolize the activity and may not allow for others to share their ideas. It is beneficial to let groups know that it is okay if their list of information is incomplete in some ways (e.g., people-oriented listeners may not have details like the date of their trip).

This activity could be modified for other common activities that students encounter. Instead of planning a trip, groups could explain a movie they would like to see, an event they could all attend (e.g., music festival, community event), or even a diet or exercise routine to try. In addition, the activity or debriefing questions could be adapted to suit specific classes better. As is, this exercise could be used in public speaking to help students become more skilled at listening to speeches, which in turn might help them learn what will and will not work for their own presentations. Furthermore, an instructor of a public speaking course might adapt this activity to teach audience analysis. The instructor could choose a common speech topic (e.g., underage drinking) and have each group adapt information about that topic according to what would appeal to their listening preference. Either way, the activity provides an opportunity to help students apply the concept of listening preferences and recognize its influence on their everyday communication behaviors.

References and Suggested Readings

- Bambacas, M., & Patrickson, M. (2008). Interpersonal communication skills that enhance organisational commitment. *Journal of Communication Management*, 12(1), 51–72. doi:10.1108/13632540810854235
- Bodie, G.D., & Villaume, W.A. (2003). Aspects of receiving information: The relationship between listening preferences, communication apprehension, receiver apprehension, and communicator style. *International Journal of Listening*, 17(1), 47–67. doi:10.1080/10904018.2003.10499055
- Cheesebro, J.L. (1999). The relationship between listening styles and conversational sensitivity. *Communication Research Reports*, 16(3), 233–238. doi:10.1080/08824099909388722
- Galagan, P. (2013). *ASTD Research: Leadership Development for Millennials*. Retrieved from <http://www.astd.org/Publications/Newsletters/LX-Briefing/LXB-Archives/2013/03/ASTD-Research-Leadership-Development-For-Millennials>
- Imhof, M. (2004). Who are we as we listen? Individual listening profiles in various contexts. *International Journal of Listening*, 18(1), 36–45. doi:10.1080/10904018.2004.10499061
- Johnson, D.I., & Long, K.M. (2007). Student listening gains in the basic communication course: A comparison of self-report and performance-based competence measures. *The International Journal of Listening*, 21(2), 92–101. doi:10.1080/10904010701301990
- Kirtley, M.D., & Honeycutt, J.M. (1996). Listening styles and their correspondence with second guessing. *Communication Research Reports*, 13(2), 174–182. doi:10.1080/08824099609362084
- Mumford, T.V., Campion, M.A., & Morgeson, F.P. (2007). The leadership skills strataplex: Leadership skill requirements across organizational levels. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 18(2), 154–166. doi:10.1016/j.leafaqua.2007.01.005
- National Association of Colleges and Employers. (2012, November 8). *Employers look for communication skills, ability to work in a team in new college grads* [Press release]. Retrieved from http://www.naceweb.org/Press/Releases/Employers_Look_for_Communication_Skills,_Ability_to_Work_in_a_Team_in_New_College_Grads.aspx
- Pomeroy, A. (2007). CEOs emphasize listening to employees. *HR Magazine*, 52(1), 14. Retrieved from <http://www.shrm.org/Publications/hrmagazine/EditorialContent/Pages/0107execbrief.aspx>
- Sargent, S.L., Weaver III, J.B., & Kiewitz, C. (1997). Correlates between communication apprehension and listening style preferences. *Communication Research Reports*, 14(1), 74–78. doi:10.1080/08824099709388647
- Watson, K.W., Barker, L.L., & Weaver III, J.B. (1995). The listening styles profile (LSP-16): Development and validation of an instrument to assess four listening styles. *International Journal of Listening*, 9(1), 1–13. doi:10.1080/10904018.1995.10499138
- Weaver III, J.B., & Kirtley, M.D. (1995). Listening styles and empathy. *Southern Journal of Communication*, 60(2), 131–140. doi:10.1080/10417949509372970
- Weaver III, J.B., Watson, K.W., & Barker, L.L. (1996). Individual differences in listening styles: Do you hear what I hear? *Personality and Individual Differences*, 20(3), 381–387. doi:10.1016/0191-8869(95)00194-8
- Worthington, D.L. (2003). Exploring the relationship between listening style preference and personality. *International Journal of Listening*, 17(1), 68–87. doi:10.1080/10904018.2003.10499056
- Worthington, D.L. (2005). Exploring the relationship between listening style preference and verbal aggressiveness. *International Journal of Listening*, 19(1), 3–11. doi:10.1080/10904018.2005.10499069
- Worthington, D.L. (2008). Exploring the relationship between listening style and need for cognition. *International Journal of Listening*, 22(1), 46–58. doi:10.1080/10904010701802154

Appendix A: Description of Listening Styles

People-Oriented Listeners

- Have paramount concern for others' feelings
- Interested in hearing personal information and try to find areas of common interest
- Responsive to the "emotional states" of others

Research has found this style associated with a relationally oriented communication style (Bodie & Villaume, 2003) and the Myers–Briggs feeling construct (Worthington, 2003). People-oriented listeners have more empathic tendencies (Weaver & Kirtley, 1995), conversational sensitivity (Chesebro, 1999), are less verbally aggressive (Worthington, 2005) and less apprehensive when communicating (Sargent, Weaver, & Kiewitz, 1997).

Action-Oriented Listeners

- Prefer information to be well organized, concise, and error-free
- Want to do something with the information they hear; task-oriented
- Particularly impatient and easily frustrated with disorganized presentations

Research has found this style associated with the Myers–Briggs thinking, sensing, and judging constructs (Worthington, 2003).

Content-Oriented Listeners

- Responsive to complex and challenging information
- Systematic information processors
- Carefully evaluate facts and details before forming judgments and opinions

Research has found this style associated with second guessing information (Kirtley & Honeycutt, 1996) and a need for cognition (Worthington, 2008). Content-oriented listeners also exhibit more conversational sensitivity (Chesebro, 1999), are less verbally aggressive (Worthington, 2005), and less apprehensive when communicating (Sargent et al., 1997).

Time-Oriented Listeners

- Prefer brief or hurried interactions with others
- Often mention how much time they have to listen or meet
- Likely to interrupt others and openly signal disinterest

Research has found this style associated with second guessing information (Kirtley & Honeycutt, 1996).

Remember, we are all combinations of every listening style, but you will probably see more of yourself in one style than the others. Recognizing this dominant listening preference will help you understand your needs and expectations as a listener.

Appendix B: Listening Styles Profile

In this questionnaire, you are asked to indicate how well each statement applies to you. For each statement, note how frequently you engage in that behavior. At the end of each section, add up your score for that section.

For example:

	Always (4)	Frequently (3)	Sometimes (2)	Infrequently (1)	Never (0)
1. I focus my attention on the other person's feelings when listening to them.				1	
2. When listening to others, I quickly notice if they are displeased or disappointed.		3			
3. I become involved when listening to the problems of others.			2		
4. I nod my head and/or use eye contact to show interest in what others are saying.		3			
Total Score for People-Oriented Listening				$1 + 3 + 2 + 3 = 9$	

Questionnaire:

	Always (4)	Frequently (3)	Sometimes (2)	Infrequently (1)	Never (0)
1. I focus my attention on the other person's feelings when listening to them.					
2. When listening to others, I quickly notice if they are displeased or disappointed.					
3. I become involved when listening to the problems of others.					
4. I nod my head and/or use eye contact to show interest in what others are saying.					
Total Score for People-Oriented Listening					

	Always (4)	Frequently (3)	Sometimes (2)	Infrequently (1)	Never (0)
1. I am frustrated when others don't present their ideas in an orderly, efficient way.					
2. When listening to others, I focus on any inconsistencies and/or errors in what's being said.					
3. I jump ahead and/or finish thoughts of speakers.					
4. I am impatient with people who ramble on during conversations.					
Total Score for Action-Oriented Listening					

	Always (4)	Frequently (3)	Sometimes (2)	Infrequently (1)	Never (0)
1. I prefer to listen to technical information.					
2. I prefer to hear facts and evidence so I can personally evaluate them.					
3. I like the challenge of listening to complex information.					
4. I ask questions to probe for additional information.					
Total Score for Content-Oriented Listening					

	Always (4)	Frequently (3)	Sometimes (2)	Infrequently (1)	Never (0)
1. When hurried, I let the other person(s) know that I have a limited amount of time to listen.					
2. I begin a discussion by telling others how long I have to meet.					
3. I interrupt others when I feel time pressure.					
4. I look at my watch or clocks in the room when I have limited time to listen to others.					
Total Score for Time-Oriented Listening					

Now, find the section where you have the largest total score. This is your dominant listening style.