

Active Listening: A Conceptual Framework for Language Learning

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Abstract

Listening skills are neglected within academia. Of all four language skills, listening has a history of receiving the least attention in educational institutions. Recent studies on developing listening skills advocate the significance of applying *Active Listening* skills to language learning. This paper investigates the potential application of *Active Listening* as a conceptual framework in the liberal arts context by drawing from the literature on listening skills strategies. In particular, I explore the components involved in *Active Listening* and the rationale of teaching *Active Listening* skills to students. With the insights I have gained as a course coordinator for S&L4 and the brief literature review on the topic, I aim to share the potential of integrating *Active Listening* as an invaluable skill that can help foster deeper engagement among students in the EFL context.

The Greek philosopher Epictetus had a famous quote, “We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak.” which reminds us of an utterly simple but important message - to listen more mindfully before speaking (Long, 2012). Despite ancient wisdom, listening is widely neglected in academic research and teaching practice. In a review study on academic listening research conducted over a decade, Lynch (2011) highlights the dearth of attention listening receives as a research subject. He argues that the complexity of listening may be one reason it attracts the least attention from researchers. Indeed, developing listening skills is a complex task, as external variables such as “novel expressions, rate of speech, accent, unfamiliar content and cultural references, ...” could influence one’s listening ability (Lynch p. 80). Another factor for this trend of overlooking listening can be explained by the lack of studies conducted on listening skills (Walker, 2014.) The vicious circle of a scarcity of studies and interest in listening skills directly has a negative impact on the quality of listening skills pedagogy in the classroom.

In the English for Liberal Arts (ELA) program at International Christian University (ICU), Academic Skills (AS) courses are offered to students as a means to enhance their learning, deepen their understanding, and actively participate in the core courses. One of the AS courses, Speaking and Listening (S&L) course, is offered to Stream 3 (Intermediate) and 4 (Low-intermediate) students to help with their speaking and listening skills by placing a special emphasis on discussion skills, listening, and note-taking skills in academic settings. In other words, students learn two

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academic listening skills: reciprocal (two-way) listening in academic setting events, which involves interactive communications in discussions, and one-way listening to lectures in which students mainly listen to the speaker and take notes (Lynch, 2011). Reciprocal listening is unique as it goes beyond passive hearing and involves active engagement, mutual exchange, and deeper understanding between participants in a conversation or discussion. It involves actively paying attention, engaging with others' perspectives, and responding thoughtfully. Such listening skills are essential in academic contexts because they foster critical thinking and develop practical communication skills. It is more than hearing words to absorb them; it is about comprehending, participating, and meaningfully contributing to the discussion. In the Spring term, the S&L course is offered twice a week, from 18 lessons to 20 lessons, depending on the academic calendar. While the current S&L course provides the ground for language practices and practical strategies, it needs classroom pedagogy that emphasizes the significance of listening skills as an *active* process that consists of invaluable components. In other words, students spend their class time practicing both speaking and listening in class, but they are not developing the cognitive ability of “how” and “why” when they are asked to participate in the class tasks because they do not conceptualize the critical process of learning listening skills.

Scholars have noted the value of *Active Listening*, illuminating that academically high-achieving university students display a variety of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor *Active Listening* skills (Canpolat et al., 2015; Eggenberger, 2021). Similarly, recent research on metacognitive strategies in listening comprehension reveals the positive effects of teaching listening skills with a metacognitive approach, suggesting “the importance of planning before engaging in listening tasks.” (Shihite et al., 2024). This paper explores the meaning of *Active Listening* in higher education by drawing from the literature on listening skills and strategies. In particular, I identify the components involved in *Active Listening* as a conceptual framework based on the work by Rost and Wilson (2013) and the rationale for teaching the skills to students. Finally, with the insights I have gained as an S&L4 course coordinator since Winter 2021 and the brief literature review on the topic, I attempt to share some potential listening pedagogy that can help foster deeper engagement among students in their language learning at university.

Literature Review

The definition of *listening* in the Merriam-Webster dictionary is “to pay attention to sound, hear something with thoughtful attention: give consideration, be alert to catch an expected sound.” (Crawley, 2004). As for the meaning of *listening* in language learning, the definition of *listening* is undoubtedly more sophisticated. In his book on listening for teaching and researching, linguist Rost (2013) showcases how the definition of listening has changed in the past century from the early 1990s as “reliably recording acoustic signals in the brain for later use.” to “include the notion of keeping multiple events and people in one’s accessibility network and connecting with others quickly and efficiently.” in the 2000s, explaining that the meaning of *listening* keeps evolving. People assign different meanings to *listening* depending on “their personal and theoretical interests

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in the topic.” This transient nature of *listening* may be the factor that perplexes both language learners and researchers, who want to understand genuinely what is involved in the process of *listening* in acquiring a language.

Yet, listening skills are neglected within academia. Historically, listening has received the least emphasis compared to the other three language skills in educational settings (Osada, 2004). Linguist David Nunan coined the term “the Cinderella skill,” which refers to listening as an overlooked skill compared to “its elder sisters: speaking.” According to him, speaking, not listening, is often viewed as a clear indication of one’s second language mastery when comparing speaking and listening (Nunan, 2002). Similarly, Alharbi and Al-Ahdal (2024) highlight the ongoing disregard for teaching listening skills to EFL students in Saudi Arabia, noting that listening is often viewed as a skill that develops naturally over time. As a result, students are simply expected to be “good listeners” during lectures. Their educational system, much like Japan’s, relies heavily on rote learning as the standard approach. The common but false perception held by many people is that listening is a *passive* process that develops naturally. This notion induces the attitude that learners acquire listening skills by simply trying to listen without learning any strategies (Xu, 2011).

Purdy (1997) points out that making the distinction between listening and hearing is the first step in understanding the “power of Listening” even though they are often used interchangeably. According to Purdy, “Listening is the active and dynamic process of attending, perceiving, interpreting, remembering, and responding to the expressed (verbal and nonverbal) needs, concerns, and information offered by other human beings.” In contrast to listening, hearing is simply a physical activity of receiving and processing sound.

In a study on the review of listening in a decade of research, Lynch (2011) notes that while the one-way listening to take notes in a “monologue lecture” may be principally significant in academic settings, the reciprocal (two-way) listening format is ubiquitous among students, especially in English medium universities where classes are taught in English. He further claims that students, especially “in small-group discussions and team projects, tutorials, seminars, meetings with their supervisor/advisor,” must exercise the reciprocal (two-way) listening skill to “process and respond to spoken language.” Since ELA students also engage in a great number of small-group discussions in class, as well as having regular tutorials that are often one-on-one with the instructor, practicing and understanding reciprocal (two-way) listening is of paramount importance to their successful academic performance.

Teaching *Active Listening* skills as a conceptual framework may help students enhance such learning experiences. *Active Listening* is a technique commonly used in psychology. The American Psychology Association (2022) defines *Active Listening* as a “psychotherapeutic technique in which the therapist listens to a client closely, asking questions as needed, in order to fully understand the content of the message and the depth of the client’s emotion.” While the focus of applying *Active Listening* in counseling is to address conflict, the concept is also used in education to emphasize learning. In the academic context, *Active Listening* involves techniques and approaches that assist students and scholars in grasping, retaining, and critically interacting with spoken information. *Active Listening* is different from “being animated when you listen.” (Rost &

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Wilson, 2013). Indeed, it is a type of listening that evokes the listeners' conscious minds to think deeper about the topic being discussed. Sharing a similar perspective from a field of psychology, Viezzer (2023) explains, "Active listening is more than "hearing" someone's words. It means fully attuning to the feelings and views of the speaker, demonstrating unbiased acceptance and validation of their experience."

The key to acquiring *Active Listening* skills may lie in the learners' mindset. Psychologists Rogers and Farson (1957) explain that in *Active Listening*, the listener must be open-minded and have the willingness to listen without making any judgment. This observation aligns with Rost and Wilson (2013), who also state that "Active Listening starts with a mindset: an open-mindedness and curiosity and "positive regard" for the speaker and his or her ideas - a supportive intention to try to understand without judging." In order to understand the speakers' meanings more deeply, they recommend teaching *Active Listening* to the students as a reliable learning strategy.

Their *Active listening* skills diagram includes ten components: Hearing content, Listening for feelings, Observing body language, Neutral technique, Paraphrasing, Self-awareness, Reflection, Questioning, Clarifying technique, and Summarising (Rost & Wilson, 2013). As such, each component could be interpreted as indicated below:

Hearing content: This is the basic rule of listening. Here, the listener is not just hearing what the speaker is saying but is giving full attention to the speaker to receive the main message being delivered.

Listening for feelings: Using all our senses to tune in to what emotions are being presented. How does the speaker make us feel? Picking up the emotional cues from the speaker is an essential part of effective communication.

Observing body language: Similar to listening for feelings, paying attention to observing the behavior of the speaker can navigate the listener for a better understanding of the main ideas. Interpret the message the speaker is sending by the way they carry themselves.

Neutral technique: Instead of judging the speaker, the listener tries to remain neutral and be open to diverse perspectives (different ways of thinking). When having an open mindset, the neutral perspective, the listener is encouraged to pause and critically assess the message rather than reacting immediately. This promotes a more intentional and reflective listening process, enabling a deeper understanding.

Paraphrasing: Paraphrasing is a powerful way to show the speaker that the listener is listening carefully. By restating in their own words, the listener's comprehension of what they have heard becomes elevated. As for the speaker, it also helps the speaker to declutter their mind, which leads to a deeper understanding of their ideas.

Self-awareness: Being self-aware means to be mindful of their own biases.

Reflection: Reflection through *Active Listening* allows the listener to enhance their listening comprehension during the interaction and encourages deeper processing of the information afterward. For instance, students reflect on the main ideas after actively listening to a lecture or group discussion. Such reflections provide students with a more accurate understanding of what they have heard and encourage them to be open to new ideas or perspectives and connect their old ideas with new ideas.

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Questioning: Asking questions is similar to using a clarifying technique. What is essential in questioning while applying *Active Listening* is that the listeners' questions originate from their curiosity. Listeners understand the message more accurately by asking questions on the specific topic.

Clarifying technique: Asking clarifying questions not only helps the listener for better understanding of what they have heard but also enables the listener to “further reflection and redefinition of ideas that have been shared, helping people to see things from an alternative angle.”

Summarising: The listener summarizes to show their understanding of the speaker's main message. This process helps the listener to clarify any misunderstandings and lets the speaker know their message was clear and understood.

The rationale for teaching *Active Listening* skills as a conceptual framework is as follows. Currently, listening is not offered as an exclusive AS course in ELA. Teaching *Active Listening* skills as a conceptual framework to first-year students is of tremendous importance because it provides a clear and reliable structure to understand what listening skills entail. It makes them aware of a new approach to listening that is different from what they may be used to in junior or high schools. *Active Listening*, when taught as a conceptual framework, prompts a reassessment of its importance in language acquisition and encourages students to become proactive participants in meaningful academic dialogues. Building this awareness invites students to *unlearn* the former listening skills, heavily based on rote learning, to pass the university entrance exam (Otaka, 2011) and *relearn* a new skill - *Active Listening* skills. This transition of a steep learning curve can be effectively taught by the instructors using the framework, as each component encourages students to actively listen to the speaker, be curious, have questions, and prepare them to engage in deeper discussions with their peers in small group work.

In the same vein, providing opportunities for students to develop paraphrasing and asking questions for clarification skills is an integral part of liberal arts education that fosters effective communication skills. In real-life classroom situations, students face difficulties not knowing what to say when stuck or conversing with their peers. If students are unsure about what the speaker says in a small discussion group, asking questions to clarify the content of a talk is critical. By the same token, the speaker feels more appreciated when they receive discussion questions from the listener because asking questions signifies the listener is paying close attention to the speaker.

In the Reading and Content Analysis (RCA) course at ICU, Stream 3 and 4 students learn to develop the skills to read and analyze academic texts. The Course-Wide-Assignment (CWA) on paraphrasing and summarizing are taught so that students can apply such strategies to deepen their understanding of the text accurately and write academic writing. Although such skills are introduced as skills for understanding accuracy in academic writing, having the knowledge of paraphrasing and summarizing the text relates to the skills in the *Active Listening* framework. Thus, it can be assumed that having a clearer understanding of *Active Listening* skills enables students to make connections within different courses to achieve deeper understanding. In other words, if students are conscious of applying such listening skills in a class such as RCA, their accurate and deeper understanding through listening would be reflected in their reading and writing assignments.

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Another valuable aspect of *Active Listening* can be seen in job hunting post-graduation. Studies on leadership highlight that listening skills are not only beneficial in academic studies but also in developing students' employability in future careers. Eggenberger (2021) claims that honing *Active Listening* skills is an essential part of higher education that employers seek among new graduates. Similarly, Hoppe (2018) states that when a listener understands all the elements of *Active Listening* skills with the right approach, they excel in leadership. Indeed, listening is a transferable skill students can rely on as a foundation for effective communication skills.

Implications

Academic Listening Course

Writing and reading skills are indispensable for academic success. Thus, ample courses emphasizing such skills in writing and reading academic texts are offered to students in the current ELA program. Yet, speaking and listening skills are critical to one's personal growth and academic success in communicating with peers or instructors both in and out of the classroom. Xu (2011) urges the importance of prioritizing listening comprehension over speaking because the speaker can manipulate words they know to speak while the listener has no control over the vocabulary the speaker uses in a dialogue. In other words, the process of listening is more demanding than speaking since the listener must keep up the speaker's rate of speech and quickly adapt to the words that the speaker actively uses.

Creating an Academic Listening (AL) course in Spring could benefit the current ELA program because it offers a foundation for learning the meaning of *Active Listening* skills and how to apply them appropriately. While S&L4 introduces *Active Listening* skills in the second week of the Spring term, the brief introduction is ineffective because there is not enough time for the concept to sink in for students to understand the concept thoroughly and apply such skills conceptually. Spataro and Bloch (2018) describe the intricacy of teaching *Active Listening*. According to the authors, simply understanding the concept is insufficient, but listeners need "to be able to transfer *Active Listening* to their work and personal lives, students must internalize it-through understanding what it is, why it is important, and also by practicing it themselves." (Spataro & Bloch, 2018). To mitigate the current fast-paced pedagogy, a course focusing on listening with a clear framework of *Active Listening* could provide more extensive opportunities for students to be familiar with the process of listening and utilize the skills transferable to other classes. As for speaking skills, academic presentation (AP), pronunciation (PR), academic debate (AD), and other courses could include the critical elements of speaking skills.

Explicit Instructions with a Framework

A straightforward and thorough explanation is necessary to convey to students that listening is an acquired skill. While the opinions may vary, having a clear table with specific components can not only guide students on how to approach listening skills step by step but also provide some mental space to understand the process involved while listening. At the start of the Spring term, it

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is important to remember that most students are likely to have a high level of anxiety, especially Stream 4 students (lower-intermediate) with less confidence in their English ability. Goh (2008) states that incorporating metacognition instruction helps language learners raise awareness of their listening and learning processes. Based on her study findings, she further reports that such metacognitive awareness enhances learners' confidence, increases motivation and reduces learners' anxiety because learners feel more in control of their listening skills. (Goh 2008). In fact, I often witness such phenomena where students' anxiety slowly disappears when they feel comfortable and seem to have control over their tasks in S&L4. Therefore, using a framework with clear instructions may be ideal for language learners.

Technological Applications

Much of the recent research has advocated the positive effects of applying Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) in EFL classrooms. In advocating for MALL, a study by Li (2023) emphasizes the significant importance of integrating technology into teaching listening because of the pedagogical potential it provides for teachers. For example, fast-paced teaching for instructors and "crammed" learning for students in a 10-week term can be overwhelming. To mitigate such time constraints, digital tools may be incorporated into teaching. Listening exercises through such tools not only enable students to listen to authentic listening independently but also offer opportunities to get involved in collaborative listening exercises with their peers. As ICU prepares to implement a new timetable for the academic year 2025, changing from a 10-week term to a 9-week term, it is vital that the instructors have an open mind to teach with technology, evaluate and select the appropriate Education Technology (EdTech) tools that enhance students' learning ability to achieve their course objectives. In addition, using collaborative annotation tools through mobile devices, Google Docs, or Perusall supports students in enhancing both their reading and writing abilities while also giving them the opportunity to reflect on their listening skills in group discussions in class. Students frequently request more time to analyze and engage with texts in the RCA class. Providing an "outside the classroom" space with additional time and a comfortable environment for reflection fosters more meaningful engagement, particularly on sensitive topics like racism and euthanasia.

Conclusion

Teaching *Active Listening* as a conceptual framework provides an opportunity to reevaluate its significant value in language learning and encourages students to become active participants to engage in more meaningful academic dialogues. Numerous studies illuminate the benefits of metacognition awareness in developing listening skills and teaching specific listening strategies (Goh, 2008; Shihite et al., 2024; Vandergrift, 2005). The metacognitive approach of this framework can not only guide the learners on how to approach the listening process to grasp the speaker's message but also enable the listeners to be aware of their thinking process and help them gain more control over their language learning experience. Additionally, building awareness of their own

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biases allows the listeners to adapt to new perspectives and become more mindful thinkers. Today, listening is still a frequently disregarded skill within academia. However, I believe there is noteworthy potential in emphasizing *Active Listening* skills, which enable students to have an open mind, be more attuned to their feelings, and develop transferable skills for effective and meaningful communication in academic environments and beyond.

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