

## SABBATICAL REPORT

# Listening

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*I wish to thank Ministry of Education for granting a sabbatical. I have deeply missed my school, staff and students but have also relished the opportunity to follow a personal interest area. I hope my musings and offerings are helpful to others as they have been for me and my staff and students.*

*I wish also to thank the schools and staff who gave generously of their time as a busy time of the school year....Grey Lynn, Drury, Papakura Central, St Johns Bosco, Sunhill and Mercedes College (SA).*

*I particularly want to thank my senior staff...Bruce Tilby (Acting Principal) Kay Lowe (Acting Deputy and Lesley Gardner (Acting Assistant Principal) in my absence.*

### **Purpose**

***To investigate listening programmes currently in use in primary schools and seek to ascertain which are effective in increasing listening skills so that we can implement these listening programmes at Devonport School.***

## **Background**

As part of understanding and developing key competency dispositions and skills our school has become aware of that whilst children are highly articulate their listening skills do not appear to be at the same level. This was noted in our recent focus on questioning skills, relatively poor scores in PAT Listening tests as well as in anecdotal comments by staff. We decided to seek to identify what approaches might help students to become better listeners and what barriers might exist to that improvement being realised.

In order to do this it seemed sensible to

1. Visit schools to talk to teachers about class planned approaches and small group programme approaches they have undertaken
2. Consider the successes and barriers they identified
3. Look for sets of listening skills teachers could use when planning for their students learning needs.
4. Finally sit down and read "Learning through Talk".
5. Look at commercially developed programmes that show promise in improving learning outcomes for students.

## **Three immediate issues arose.**

- a) Visits to schools in Term 1 were problematic because most schools were in start up mode for the year,
- b) Only a small number of schools I contacted were focusing on listening skills, and
- c) The introduction of National Standards appeared to be consuming the attention of most schools and advisers.

As a result I want to say a big thank you to those schools and teachers that welcomed me and shared their practice and their successes and challenges. Without you I wouldn't have a report to write!

I have framed my report by first reporting on my visits, then listing a number of more general observations based on both my visits and wider reading. Please note I am not advocating for any specific resource or programme but simply commenting on what I observed and the feedback I received from teachers and parents I spoke to and material I read during the course of my sabbatical. I found a lot of useful ideas and programmes to trial in the quest to improve learning outcomes for all students. I also discovered some useful ways to improve my own listening skills.

## **VISITS TO SCHOOLS**

### **1. Class/ syndicate programmes**

Some of the schools I visited were engaged in a cluster professional development project focused on “Learning through Talk” (2009) under the tutelage of Dr Alison Davis while others were using the First Steps (2003) programme as a resource. Both texts contain information designed to enable teachers to develop their oral language programmes.

Each school had identified a range of learning and/ or social needs. These included

- a need for improvements in positive social communication between their pupils ,
- a need to improve discussion and interaction skills between students
- to better manage student engagement and attention
- to improve the quality of speaking
- identification of sounds in words.

Some schools had a large group of ESOL students but recognised that oral language learning was for all students. The schools ranged from Decile 3 to 10 . However despite these differences in school populations, each school believed they could improve student learning outcomes by purposefully addressing oral language and that what they had started in Y1 and 2 classes they all intended to see their work flow through to the rest of the school.

### **Features that contributed to success in each case included**

- a) **Systematic planning:** in each school, the teachers agreed on the overall focus for each term. From this, specific WALTs were planned into the overall Literacy programme and these were also connected to other curriculum areas where relevant.
- b) **A focus on teacher learning:** school management was actively engaged in the learning process alongside their staff and in each case, had identified teacher understanding of the critical importance of teaching explicit oral language skills and strategies
- c) The awareness that “ **Learning through Talk**” is based on the same outline and DATS/ strategies as for “**Effective Literacy Practice**” and thus enabling a lot of cross over and connections between Literacy areas also meaning that the oral language component did not necessarily need to be a separate programme.
- d) Both resources, ( Learning through Talk and First Steps) contained a mine of information as to skills, strategies, assessment and approaches

### **Successes identified by teachers:**

#### **a) Students showed improvements in:**

- i) being able to initiate and maintain a conversation in pairs or groups of four
- ii) using social cues to start and maintain a conversation,

- iii) self confidence observed through increased social interaction and increased participation in class
- iv) understanding that “our face wears our values and speaks”
- v) knowing and managing group roles
- vi) responding positively to class routines
- vii) knowing what a “ good listener does” “ what a good speaker does”
- viii) being able to give and receive specific feedback and assessment both self and peer
- ix) learning the language of school, how to participate in games, class discussions
- x) remembering rhymes for students to reinforce skills learned

**b) Classroom improvements noted by teachers included:**

- i) Making better use of class news times by having a deliberate focus for those activities
- ii) The ability to transfer skills to other curriculum areas e.g. conversation pairs and groups during topic time
- iii) The development of a range of games, activities support materials and programmes e.g. Mr Tongue to help children with articulation difficulties
- iv) Increasing mutual respect between students and improved relationships within the class. “Everyone to have a voice and be heard...”
- v) Better management of class noise levels....noise-o-meter
- vi) The inclusion of music as part of programme...one teacher commented that she was finding that music helped her students to learn the rhythms of language and learn new vocabulary
- vii) The use of modelling books with photos for students to refer to and/ or have been made into display charts for easy reference

**Barriers identified:**

- a) Some teachers thought, at first, that the deliberate planning and teaching of oral language would mean an extra lot of planning and work on top of everything else. While at times it might be a separate component but may also sit parallel to other literacy aspects currently under focus.
- b) It was felt that the diverse array of assessments and the particular focus of each meant they were of limited use as diagnostic tools especially for classroom listening learning. Some schools I visited used Jost but felt it was restricted as a planning tool.
- c) Teachers needing to accept that their classrooms may be ‘noisier’ at times with group chat and movement but appreciated being able to share strategies with their cluster groups for managing this.
- d) Increased awareness of classroom acoustics meaning each school were reconsidering property improvements.

- a) Cost of materials/ professional development time. Teachers felt that while the text they used were good at the “why, and what, there still needed to be professional development support and time to develop the “how”.

## **2. Specific small group programmes**

- a) One school discussed the teaching of active listening strategies to a Y6 class who were participating in a Peer mediator training programme based on the Cool Schools programme. The teacher found that students needed a lot of practice to listen and then repeat back what another person said and felt it was valuable to deliberately teach this listening skill. They considered that the children gained a lot from learning to be aware of their own responses to others and was interested in pursuing a more structured approach to listening skills for his class.
- b) The other small group programme I observed was a Listening Programme. This programme, now gaining in use in NZ, was developed in USA and Australia from the work of Tomatis (1991) who postulated that listening to selected frequencies found in the classical music of Mozart, Vivaldi and Haydn, over a period of time could exercise various functions in the auditory system, retrain sensory pathways and improve not only listening and auditory processing but also improve wider behaviours such as attention, balance, co-ordination and social interaction. It is thought that this music exercises the middle and inner ear and basically gives the listener a “tune up “perhaps overcoming developmental gaps and/or infant ear infections and so on. There is also speculation that the vibrations of music can impact on the vestibular system and positively affect the sensory system as a whole to calm anxiety levels and thus enable students to be better able to engage in learning.

While this programme was originally designed as an individual therapy by occupational and auditory specialists, schools have adapted the programme to provide an opportunity for students to improve their listening skills and therefore their learning outcomes. The programmes I observed, involved students listening to specific classical music tracks for 30 minutes a day ( 2/ 15 min sessions) over 1-2 terms. Some schools ran the sessions as a small group withdrawal with a teacher aide while others ran the sessions in classroom. For older students, programmes were run before and after school. Students were also assigned a range of fine motor tasks to experience and/ or complete during each listening session.

These schools also ran other small group/1-1 interventions such as Reading Recovery, Rainbow Reading, Brain Gym, fine motor, gross motor, and/ or Perceptual Motor Programmes. The schools assessed students across four areas of listening namely the ability to hear a range of frequencies clearly, the ability to cope with background noise, and the ability to process words and sentences. Progress was tracked for each student with each school recording pre and post-test data for each student with progress and outcomes reported to teachers and parents Teachers engaged parents in deciding which programme (if any) was likely to meet the particular leaning needs of their child.

Most children benefitted and those that did not either did not attend regularly or had issues that were not amenable to this programme and were referred on to auditory processing specialists for specialised diagnosis and interventions outside the scope of the school. However the programme appears to be a useful tool to add to other small group programme options. As one parent remarked “ if clapping earphone on my child so he can listen to music for a short time each day is going to help my child learn, then go for it”

Overall the programme has an impressive track record in demonstrated improvements in discrimination of sound. The ability to attend to foreground and screen out background noise distraction as well as give internal auditory organisational processes a “tune up” so that operated more effectively. There are a number of university research projects in progress to assess the veracity of findings from a growing body of research and case study evidence that support its efficacy. Access

to these can be found on a range of websites but the one I used as a guide was [www.thelisteningprogram.com](http://www.thelisteningprogram.com)

## **General observations to share with my staff to help us plan our approach to the teaching and learning of listening at my school**

1. **Some general ideas about listening**
2. **Best practice for teaching listening**
3. **Issues**
4. **A few suggestions**

### **1. General Ideas**

- a) **“oral language underpins all learning and all social communication” p7 Learning through Talk (2009)**

Listening is an integral part of the English learning area of the NZCurriculum. It is also specifically mentioned in the Relating to others Key Competency in the New Zealand Curriculum (2008). “This competency includes the ability to listen actively, recognise different points of view, negotiate and share ideas” “They are aware of how their words and actions affect others” p14, New Zealand Curriculum (2008) Listening then is both a cognitive and a social process with direct instruction and attention to the associated skills, positively affecting both. While ESOL learners often need direct instruction and extra support, so do all other students albeit for different reasons.

Bolton (1986 ) considers that not many people are good listeners and suggested in many cases that in conversations the first person to draw breath would be declared the listener. An exploration of supporting materials in English on Line, ESOL Literacy progressions, Exploring Language, Effective Literacy Practice and NEMP contain a range of ideas and strategies to teach listening. All of these sources emphasise language underpins all curriculum learning and acts as the base on which children build their understanding and exploration of ideas but distilling the specific skills children might need to learn is more difficult.

NEMP (2006) p12 discusses a number of understandings about listening as a highly demanding cognitive and social process” including

- Active listening requires the listener to organise, analyse and relate content to previous experience
- Comprehension of spoken messages is affected by the interest and purposes and background of the listener
- Listeners are expected to follow social conventions
- Different cultures have different conventions
- Listening involves comprehension of non verbal cues...body language, face expressions, tone, intonation etc

- b) **Hearing and listening are not the same.**

Bolton (1986) notes that there is a huge difference between hearing and listening. The word listening is derived from two Anglo Saxon words *hlystan* ( hearing) and *hlosnian* ( waiting in suspense). The act of listening then means something more than just a physical act: it is a psychological engagement with another person or persons. A deaf person told me that they also listen: that they process the incoming messages they receive from signing, lip reading and/ or body language so while they do not hear sound, they also engage in the active cognitive process of listening in order to search for meaning and communicate. Hearing is the ear's passive ability to detect sound i.e. the vibrations that travels through the ear to hair cells in the cochlea tubes. These hairs, attached to nerve pathways to the brain and other parts of the nervous system receive the vibrations which set off electro-chemical messages that are transmitted along the nerve pathways to the brain. Ears have no lids to block vibrations but can lose the ability to hear some or all sounds.

Hearing thus is a data entry process, listening the software processing that data in order to make sense of what we hear. It takes time, integration of experience and the development of specific skills for this cognitive processing of sounds heard to promote effective learning and the growth of key competencies. While hearing impaired children can still learn using visual and kinaesthetic pathways, for students with the ability to hear, hearing and listening are major learning pathways.

## **2. Best practice thoughts to consider**

- a) **“Oral language needs to be deliberately and specifically taught.” P7 so that “teachers ensure that all students have the oral language to participate fully in classroom learning and across the curriculum” p8.**

Oral language is the basis of all thought and communication. However this fundamental foundation is often the least likely curriculum area to be specifically taught. In “Is Anyone Listening?” a SET, (1974) N Reid considered that “listening was the Cinderella of communication skills” because “listening programmes are rare in NZ schools possibly because it (listening) is something we take for granted”. Conversely teachers he interviewed acknowledged the importance of listening for learning but when asked what they actively did to foster and develop skills, the answer was “not much”.

This finding is echoed in 1994 by H Depree and Iverson who say p89 “listening seems to have become lost in an overcrowded curriculum”. In 2005, Learn to Listen to Learn ( White and Evans) in a report on recent reviews in the UK states that schools had focused on the curriculum rather than on how it was being received and understood by children. As a result speaking, writing, spelling and reading were explicitly taught, but listening was not. When one considers that listening is one of the main pathways for sensory input and learning e.g. the task of learning to read requires the incorporation of hearing and listening as part of any fluent reading system, it seems that any effective programme of learning must consider how it is promoting listening and assessing listening.

While children usually develop sounds of speech from interaction with those around them, it cannot be assumed this will continue at school simply by supplying a rich environment. Children still need to learn the finer rules of oral communication and this can be difficult at school without explicit instruction.

- b) **all oral language processes are interdependent and complementary**

For those with the ability to hear, listening requires speaking and so it is closely integrated with other Literacy learning. It is however still useful to tease out the particular learning needs of students to ensure needed areas of skill development receive instructional focus and are not over looked.

In addition to considering specific foci and deliberate teaching of oral language, it is useful to know that the “Comprehension strategies are essentially the same for oral and written language” p 19. In effect, Learning through Talk (2009) uses the same DATs and comprehension strategies for oral

language as Effective Literacy Practice (2007) and that in doing so they are providing extra connections to prior knowledge and links across the curriculum

The good news, then, is that oral language does not always need to be an extra on top of everything else. For example, teachers might use the same or similar intentions in reading and in oral language but use oral language sessions such as class news to intentionally instruct, reinforce and connect this intention to other Literacy and curriculum learning where relevant. For example, teachers I met found that they could link learning about and practising group or paired conversation rules, to other curriculum activities e.g. theme study sessions, PE, maths problem solving. This lines up with the view expressed in Learning through Talk (2009) that “oral language and specifically listening can also be taught through a wide range of other curriculum areas and activities. p19 . This reinforces the observation that there is a high level of interaction and synergy between different aspects of Literacy even though we separate components for teaching purposes but in fact they are different aspects of sending and receiving messages and one reinforces the other. This synergy is enhanced when teachers help students to make these connections. The idea that aspects of Literacy are interrelated is not new but it is worth reminding ourselves of the power of these learning links. Warwick Elley, for example, reported back in 1984 that listening to stories a proven and enjoyable way to increase student vocabulary.

Music also has a listening component and can be utilised as another avenue to develop listening skills in classrooms as well as expand vocabulary and enable children to hear the rhythms of words. The NEMP Music report (2004) p9 states that “Music is central to human experience, expression and engagement” with listening to music enabling students to develop skills of “appreciation, attending, recognising, comparing, and evaluating sound” i.e. the same skills required for oral language listening. The study also found that students at both Y4 and 8 nominated listening to music as their most common and most enjoyed musical activity.

The critical factors for success are no surprise. Good teaching pedagogy applies to all curriculum areas. Teachers in schools I visited expressed the view that one of the strengths of First Steps (2005) and/ or their professional development programme in Oral Language was that they were able to discuss and identify the specific listening skills and strategies they considered most pertinent to their pupils such as summarising, encourage connections, use graphic organisers to scaffold learning, connecting these to other areas of learning and providing feedback.

**c) Learning through talk p. 7 states that “enables us to learn, apply our learning and to address the challenges of social and technological change”**

We do need to consider how the changes in society are shaping the experiences and skills children bring to school. Is the early experience for 21<sup>st</sup> Century students different to that of earlier generations and if so, does this mean they will present at school with a different range of learning needs? If so what changes in teaching practice might be required to accommodate these early and diverse experiences?

For example many children live in small families with a high level of informal, 1-1 listening, but also with an increase in the time spent by children focused on 2D screens. It also seems to be reasonably well established that we are becoming an increasingly visual society, more parents are working away from home and our schools are reflecting changes in ethnic diversity and the many different ways in which parents and children interact in these diverse families.

In contrast the school environment consists of large groups, formal language, social rules, extra noise and distraction, less opportunity for individual impromptu discussion and feedback, more instructions,

more noise and requirements to sit and listen for a large part of their school day and often without the visual cues children have become accustomed to from TV and computers. Postman (1985) postulates that children who watch a lot of TV as pre-schoolers develop short attention spans commensurate with the length of any single camera angle shot (which is about 5-10 seconds). These and other changes in how information is attended to and processed have implications for student learning and the responses schools undertake in order to address them. It is possible that the learning the skills of listening (both as an academic skill and as a social competency) will be one area that needs more focus than in previous generations if we are to ensure children have the experience and awareness of what good listeners and speakers do.

In addition to deliberate teaching and identifying a focus for learning, teachers also need to know how to identify which skills to focus on, how to scaffold these learning experiences and how to maximise student engagement, provide opportunities for practice and manage an optimum learning environment. This might include the management of distractions, giving attention to teacher voice quality and clarity, and managing the quality of the listening environment.

### 3. Issues

#### a) **The acoustics of classrooms can act as a barrier to the teaching and learning of listening skills.**

The sound quality of a classroom can be affected by both external noise and distractions such as loud noises, lawn mowing, road noise, outdoor class activity, staff interruptions, phone calls, emails, office intrusions, and/ or by internal ambient, reverberation and generated noise that can arise from room design and furnishing, activities and movement, pupil/ teacher interactions, organisation of class programme, and layout of room. Each or all of these sources of sound can make listening harder for students and/ or lead teachers to avoid oral language activities.

As student hearing is likely to be more sensitive than adults and they will have had less practice at screening out background sound and ignoring distracting events. An assessment and review of classroom noise is therefore a useful step in seeking to control the acoustic quality of the classroom environment if we expect to improve learning outcomes. Ministry of Education (2007) "good acoustics in teaching spaces make for quality learning environments" p 5

Both anecdotally and in research, classrooms are cited as noisy by teachers Ministry of Education, (2007) reported that "71% of teachers felt that internal classroom noise was a problem" p5. OSH guidelines for adult workplaces is for no more than a maximum average of 85dB over an 8 hour day for adults with an optimum level of a 65dB average across a day.

Stuart McLaren Massey (2008)...study of 32 early childhood centres found average decibel level across a day to be 74-79dB (this included sleep, non contact and mat times) and that three quarters of the students and half of the teachers who took part in his research, **were regularly** exposed to dangerous levels of noise above the maximum recommended by with peak spikes at 140dB (or equivalent to a jet plane taking off). As such times, stress in children was observed by a lack of attention, overstimulation, covering of ears, crying, irritability, withdrawal, aggravated behaviours such as hand flapping, anger, aggression, and shouting. Interestingly music time was on average 93dB. Maybe this may explain why some teachers avoid music curriculum activities!

I could not find much in the way of similar research on noise levels in primary classrooms nor of effects on teachers apart from the more global and long established effects of permanent damage to hearing from ongoing exposure to loud noise and growing evidence of other adverse health effects e.g. exposure to loud noise over time is associated with an increased risk of heart attack (Roisen and Mehmet, 2007)

Ministry of Education (2007) suggest ambient sound levels in unoccupied classrooms should be 35db - 45db, with a range of other recommended upper levels for a range of factors such as reverberation and wall material sound absorption quality. However these recommendations are not mandatory and difficult to achieve as many schools classrooms were built 40-50 years ago and would need major improvements to reach these levels.

Fortunately there are some things that can be done. One suggestion is that schools review both external and internal noise sources and/ or consider a noise policy. For example, could planning outside activity times for a school perhaps timetabling outside PE, games, planting a hedge, erecting a baffle fence, consider muffling electrical devices, new carpet, wall linings, ceiling tiles, or a sound system help?. What about bookcase barriers between activities, the use of earphones, scheduling of programme for times to chat, times for quiet, or the use of noise meters?

#### **b) Listening as a Special learning need**

Some students face extra challenges in developing their ability to listen. This may become evident in a range of ways including difficulties in expressing themselves, difficulties hearing sounds in words, difficulty sorting a message from background noise, difficulties managing impulsive behaviours, physical issues such as fatigue, illness, hunger, sleep, or auditory processing issues.

Apart from attention to good teaching and management of the learning environment, teachers may need to consider specialised programmes to meet the particular extra needs that arise. My sabbatical did not extend to looking at the particular requirements of special needs or ESOL students and I am not an expert in these areas. However in the course of investigating listening programmes, reading and visits to schools, I found that listening issues were often cited as part of the problem for children exhibiting ADHD, dyslexic and autistic spectrum symptoms, not just for academic. This problem was not seen only as interfering with their ability to make academic progress but also a factor in behaviours and states of anxiety that interfered with their ability to focus and learn.

The Listening programme outlined above came to my attention through a teacher who asked a parent what they had done to their child as they were behaving so differently in class. There does appear to be a growing body of evidence that this programme does lead to student improvements in behaviour and learning and to me seems a useful tool to add to other small group programmes we offer.

#### **4. Finally a couple of suggestions**

- a) Learning through Talk (2009) contains a lot of good information but is written in text genre and tends to focus on the why and what rather than the how. While schools are so distracted by National Standards, many teachers/ schools will not have the energy or funds to undergo lengthy professional development to become familiar with the contents of Learning to Talk (2009) or develop implementation plans. I would respectfully suggest that the writers consider approaches such as adding a study guide, outlining key messages, developing appendices of assessments, DATs, comprehension strategies, skills and including planning suggestions/ contexts/activities. These developments would make what is an otherwise excellent publication more "user-friendly".
- b) Apart from First Steps programme (2005) I could not find many texts on teaching listening to support classroom programmes and activities at teacher resource centres. There was some on web sites such as English on line but in general information and support was hard to find outside sources already mentioned elsewhere in this report.
- c) There is a wide array of tools for oral language overall but few for listening and their variation in focus makes assessment problematic and time consuming. Most assessments of

listening are qualitative lists that rely on subjective observation, spoken response, self report or social body language. It would be good to see these edited and organised so teachers had more effective means to diagnose learning needs and thus plan programmes.

## **Conclusions**

1. Work through Learning through Talk (2009) with my staff and identify the key messages for teaching Oral Language at our school and then plan our programmes accordingly.
2. Measure dB level in classroom ,review acoustic issues and develop actions to improve the acoustic quality of classrooms if necessary
3. Offer the listening programme to identified students with pre and post test data
4. Purchase and use earphones for computer and CD activities in class
5. Purchase more sound systems for classroom use

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# APPENDIX

## 1. Key Competency Listening Skills

I gathered from a variety of sources and offer it as a possible starting point for generating a school menu of possible areas of focus. If you find it useful and wish to add/ amend do send me a copy.

### Relating to Others/ Participating and contributing

1. Participates in conversations...one to one, in a group, whole class....listening for a pause, managing social dynamics, turn taking, giving feedback
2. Knowing how to establish and maintain a conversation e.g. knows not to talk over someone else, pauses before giving feedback, can make encouraging noises “uh huh. Go on”, knows how to get others talking by using “door openers”, tell me, let’s discuss...knows how to give non verbal acknowledgements, leans forward to show interest.....
3. Shows emotional engagement and enjoyment in the conversation by managing appropriate body language...e.g. makes a conscious effort to reduce fidgeting, showing impatience, be aware of closed/ open body positions, awareness of facial expression, looking away from speaker
4. Awareness of social rules of conversation ...e.g. Listen with your face.awareness of cultural differences, knowing what to do if didn’t hear all of message, shows ability to gauge mood and occasion
5. Wait time .....able to suspend a mental judgement, seeks to obtain information by asking questions and clarifying responses
6. Confidence to speak and listen...show and feel respect and value for each contribution
7. Engages in Dialogic talk (Mercer 2003) clarify, summarise and share thinking, respects speakers right to own point of view,
8. Be able to give and receive peer feedback

### Self management

Knowing what good listeners and speakers do e.g. attend, anticipate, check and confirm, paraphrase and respond reflectively

1. Attending and concentrating.....e.g. Work to reduce bad habits such as thinking of what to say while speaker is talking, creating an illusion of listening when actually not, thinking of ways to re-direct conversation, daydreaming , listening on to other conversations while speaker is talking
2. Resist distractions through awareness of inappropriate actions while speaker is talking..... interrupt/ interject/groan/ correct speaker, finish the speakers sentence, allow other conversations and interruptions (phone calls, texts)/ move around
3. Focus to follow the thread of a conversation and listen for relevance to us and to remember what was said
4. Filter out background noise
5. Hold questions until speaker finished, pay attention to ideas
6. Ask questions to clarify and check the speakers message

#### **We are learning to be good listeners**

We look at the speaker  
We turn our ears on  
We sit still  
We do not talk  
We thinking in our heads  
We give feedback