



It's Time: Evidence-Based Strategies to Improve Student Listening in the College Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Active listening is a critical skill for college student success, yet digital distractions increasingly hinder students' ability to engage fully in classroom discourse. This article builds upon Funk and Funk (1989) foundational work on listening skills by adapting their framework specifically for higher education contexts. Drawing on recent scholarship in contemplative practices (Barbezat and Bush 2013), active empathetic listening (Bletscher and Lee 2021), and strategies for managing distraction (Lang 2020), this article presents evidence-based approaches for improving student listening in college classrooms. The three-part framework—building classroom community, managing digital distractions inclusively, and implementing purposeful listening practices—offers practical strategies that foster deeper engagement, critical thinking, and meaningful dialogue. Emphasis is placed on the research-supported practice of structured dyadic exchanges as a method to build listening stamina and skills transferable beyond academic settings.

KEYWORDS

Active listening; classroom engagement; digital distraction management; dyadic learning; higher education pedagogy

Introduction

Getting students to listen attentively in college classrooms has become increasingly difficult in the age of smartphones, social media, and ubiquitous digital distractions (Sana, Weston, and Cepeda 2013; Lang 2020). However, teaching students to build their listening skills is vital for meaningful engagement in instructional conversations and for developing the capacity to engage in civil discussions both within and beyond academia. The research-based strategies presented in this article focus on a three-part framework:

1. Building an inclusive classroom community that values active listening;
2. Managing digital distractions in ways that support diverse learning needs;
3. Implementing purposeful listening practices, with particular emphasis on dyadic exchanges.

As a preservice teacher educator, I work to model instructional strategies for and with students to help them in their future classrooms. I actively use the strategies outlined by Funk and Funk (1989) with

students as a foundational model for implementing specific expectations for listening instruction with their PreK-6th grade students. While doing this, I also had to adapt some instructional strategies for my own implementation of listening instruction because of the age of my students (both undergraduate and graduate level teaching candidates). This dual-layer approach created a unique pedagogical opportunity in teacher education contexts—we are simultaneously teaching preservice teachers how to listen effectively while modeling how they might teach listening skills to their future students. Bletscher and Lee (2021) refer to this as “nested modeling,” where instructional techniques serve both immediate and future pedagogical purposes.

This approach requires explicit metacognitive reflection, as college students must not only practice listening skills but also analyze the pedagogical moves that facilitate their own learning. By engaging preservice teachers in evidence-based listening practices adapted for higher education, we help them develop both the personal listening competencies needed for professional success and the instructional toolkit to cultivate these same skills in K-12 students. This process of adaptation and metacognitive reflection

enhances the transfer of listening practices across educational contexts (Schupak 2019).

Improving college students' listening skills is crucial because attentive listening is directly linked to better comprehension, retention, and overall academic achievement (Lahman 2020). When students listen actively, they engage more deeply with the content, participate more effectively in discussions, and process information more accurately (Edwards-Groves and Davidson 2020). This not only enhances their understanding but also allows them to ask better questions, collaborate with peers, and apply knowledge in meaningful ways. Recent research in higher education demonstrates that strong listening skills also contribute to improved focus and self-regulation, reducing the impact of distractions and helping students stay engaged in the learning process (Schupak 2019; Bletscher and Lee 2021).

While Funk and Funk (1989) established foundational guidelines for developing listening skills in K-12 settings, this article extends their work by examining how these practices can be effectively adapted for college classrooms. As Bletscher and Lee (2021) demonstrated in their study of active empathetic listening in introductory communication courses, college students who engage in structured listening practices show measurable improvements in both content comprehension and interpersonal skills development. The goal of these research-backed techniques is to equip students with the skills and stamina to be fully engaged listeners, facilitating their transition from "learning to listen" to "listening to learn" (Vandergrift 2004).

Part 1: building a listening-centered classroom community

Creating a classroom environment where students feel their words matter is the essential first step in developing strong listening practices. Unlike K-12 settings, college classrooms often lack established community norms, making intentional community-building even more critical (Barbezat and Bush 2013). Research on contemplative practices in higher education demonstrates that brief community-building activities at the beginning of class sessions—such as check-in circles or brief pair-share reflections—significantly increase student engagement and willingness to participate in subsequent discussions (Barbezat and Bush 2013).

Schupak's (2019) work on listening rhetoric in diverse classrooms emphasizes that instructors must explicitly model active listening behaviors and clearly articulate expectations for classroom discourse. This

modeling includes demonstrating attentive body language, asking clarifying questions, and providing substantive responses that build upon student contributions rather than merely evaluating them. When students observe that their voices are genuinely valued, they become more willing to engage in the sometimes-challenging work of active listening. Table 1 outlines evidence-based strategies for establishing a listening-centered classroom community in higher education settings, drawing on recent scholarship in contemplative pedagogy and inclusive teaching practices.

Part 2: managing digital distractions inclusively

Research on student learning consistently shows that multitasking with digital devices significantly impairs comprehension and retention (Sana, Weston, and Cepeda 2013). However, as Lang (2020) argues, simply banning devices outright fails to address the underlying attention challenges students face and may create barriers for students with diverse learning needs. Instead, this article advocates for a more nuanced, research-based approach to managing digital distractions. Schupak (2019) suggests creating "technology transitions" that help students shift their attention from digital environments to focused classroom

Table 1. Establishing a listening-centered classroom community.

Strategy	Implementation	Research
Begin with brief community-building activities	Dedicate 5–7 min at the start of class for check-in circles, pair-share reflections, or small group discussions on course-related topics	Barbezat and Bush (2013); Schupak (2019)
Explicitly model active listening	Demonstrate attentive body language, paraphrasing, and substantive response to student contributions	Bletscher and Lee (2021)
Collaboratively establish discussion norms	Involve students in creating shared expectations for classroom discourse, including listening practices	Lang (2020)
Use inclusive participation structures	Implement techniques like think-pair-share and round-robin to ensure all voices are heard	Schupak (2019)
Provide regular feedback on listening behaviors	Offer specific, constructive feedback on students' listening practices during discussions	Edwards-Groves and Davidson (2020)

engagement. These might include brief mindfulness exercises or explicit discussion of how technology will be used in that day's learning activities.

It's essential to recognize that some students may require laptops or other digital tools for notetaking or accessibility accommodations. Rather than implementing a one-size-fits-all policy, research suggests creating differentiated expectations that maintain inclusive access while minimizing unnecessary distractions (Lang 2020). For instance, instructors might designate certain high-engagement activities as "screens down" times while allowing technology use during lecture portions or individual work. Table 2 outlines evidence-based approaches to managing digital distractions while maintaining inclusive access.

Part 3: implementing purposeful listening practices through dyadic exchanges

While Parts 1 and 2 establish the foundation for active listening, Part 3 focuses on specific, evidence-based practices for developing students' listening skills. This article places particular emphasis on dyadic exchanges (paired student interactions) as a research-supported method for building listening skills stamina and improving comprehension. Bletscher and Lee (2021) study on active empathetic listening in college classrooms found that structured dyadic exchanges produced significant improvements in students' listening comprehension and interpersonal communication skills. These improvements extended beyond the

specific dyadic activities to enhance overall classroom discussion quality.

Dyadic exchange structure

Dyadic exchanges involve pairing students and assigning each a specific role—speaker or listener—for a set period before switching roles. The structure builds on Funk and Funk (1989) foundational listening guidelines but incorporates recent research on effective implementation in higher education contexts (Table 3).

Research by Schupak (2019) demonstrates that the effectiveness of dyadic exchanges increases when instructors gradually extend the listening time as the semester progresses, building students' listening stamina incrementally. Beginning with 1–2-min exchanges and extending to 3–5 min by mid-semester creates a scaffolded approach to developing sustained attention. To ensure inclusivity, Bletscher and Lee (2021) recommend offering alternative participation structures for students who may face challenges with verbal expression or interpersonal communication. These might include written reflections or small-group variations of the dyadic structure.

Conclusion

Improving listening skills in the college classroom requires consistency, evidence-based practice, and

Table 2. Inclusive digital distraction management.

Strategy	Implementation	Research
Technology transitions	Begin high-engagement activities with a brief mindfulness exercise or "screens down" signal	Lang (2020); Barbezat and Bush (2013)
Establish differentiated technology policies	Designate certain activities as "screens down" while permitting technology use when needed for accessibility or specific learning tasks	Schupak (2019)
Discuss technology use explicitly	Engage students in evidence-based discussions about how multitasking affects learning	Sana, Weston, and Cepeda (2013)
Provide alternative note-taking strategies	Offer structured note-taking guides or collaborative notes to reduce dependence on devices	Lang (2020)
Create designated technology breaks	Build brief "tech check" moments into longer class sessions to reduce anxiety about missing notifications	Lang (2020)

Table 3. Dyadic exchange implementation.

Phase	Actions	Purpose
Preparation Phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide clear, thought-provoking prompt to content • Assign partners and initial speaker/listener roles • Establish specific timeframes 	Sets clear expectations and purpose for the activity
Listening Phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain attentive body language without interrupting • Speaker addresses prompt fully • Instructor monitors interactions 	Builds concentrated listening skills and speaking confidence
Processing Phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listener summarizes speaker's key points • Speaker provides feedback on accuracy of summary • Partners switch roles and repeat process 	Develops paraphrasing skills/comprehension verification
Integration Phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pairs share insights with the larger group • Instructor facilitates connections for all perspectives • Students reflect on listening process 	Connects dyadic practice to wider classroom discourse

opportunities for explicit, structured practice. By building inclusive classroom communities, managing digital distractions thoughtfully, and implementing purposeful listening activities, particularly dyadic exchanges—instructors can create more focused and participatory learning environments. Like any skill, listening requires practice and endurance (Author 2023). Current models of human interaction often include interrupting and formulating responses rather than fully attending to others' perspectives. Implementing research-based listening practices requires establishing new norms in the classroom that prioritize active, empathetic listening.

The strategies presented in this article extend Funk and Funk (1989) foundational work by specifically addressing the unique challenges and opportunities of college teaching. By drawing on recent scholarship in contemplative pedagogy (Barbezat and Bush 2013), active empathetic listening (Bletscher and Lee 2021), and distraction management (Lang 2020), this framework offers practical, evidence-based approaches to improving student listening in higher education contexts. As institutions increasingly emphasize the development of communication skills as essential learning outcomes, intentional focusing on listening—not just speaking and writing—deserves greater attention in college pedagogy. The research-supported practices outlined in this article provide a starting point for instructors seeking to foster deeper engagement, critical thinking, and meaningful dialogue through enhanced listening.

Additionally, Appendix A offers college instructors alternative evidenced based activities for providing structured listening exercises and experiences for students from the various researchers cited in this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix A. Additional evidence-based listening activities for college classrooms

	Critical Listening Journals
Description	Structured listening journals
Implementation	Prompts students to identify main arguments, supporting evidence, and potential biases from course materials/content.
Research Support	Blotscher and Lee (2021), metacognitive reflection on listening experiences improved listening comprehension scores by 23% in communication courses.
	Structured Academic Controversies
Description	Students research multiple perspectives, present arguments, swap positions, and synthesize viewpoints.
Implementation	Teams of four students, with pairs researching opposing positions. After their presentation, pairs switch sides and present the other side of the perspective before collaboratively developing a synthesis.
Research Support	Schupak (2019) demonstrated that this approach significantly improved students' ability to accurately represent opposing viewpoints and increased nuance in position papers.
	Mindful Listening Practices
Description:	Brief contemplative exercises that prepare students for focused listening during key classroom activities. (Fortune & Barksdale, 2023).
Implementation	Students focus on themselves rather than environmental sounds, then prepare to direct full attention to the upcoming listening task.
Research Support	Barbezat and Bush (2013) documented improved comprehension and retention when mindful listening practices preceded complex lectures.
	Progressive Summarization Chains
Description.	An iterative listening activity where content is progressively distilled through multiple listeners
Implementation	First a short presentation, then first student summarizes, Second student summarizes, and so on, with iterations. Discuss -info preserved vs lost.
Research Support	Lang (2020) found this activity particularly effective for helping students distinguish between essential concepts and supporting details in content
	Perspective Taking – When Listening
Description	Students listen to content while adopting stakeholder perspectives.
Implementation	Assign students different perspectives, They must listen specifically to content relevant to their assigned perspective and share insights afterward.
Research Support	Blotscher and Lee (2021) shared how this approach strengthens both listening comprehension and cognitive flexibility in analyzing complex issues.
	Enhanced Dyadic Exchanges
Description	An extended version of the basic dyadic structure that incorporates multiple listening modes.
Implementation	Listeners rotate through three distinct listening modes: (1) empathetic listening (focusing on emotional content) (2) critical listening (analyzing evidence and reasoning) (3) dialogic listening (identifying connections to other concepts)
Research Support	Schupak (2019) found that multi-modal listening practices led to more sophisticated student responses on subsequent writing tasks.
	Recorded Dialogue Analysis
Description	Students record, transcribe, and analyze their own discussion contributions and listening behaviors.
Implementation	Small group discussions are recorded (with permission), and students transcribe 5-min segments, coding for listening behaviors such as interruptions, backchanneling, and types of responses.
Research Support	Edwards-Groves and Davidson (2020) documented significant improvements in student discussion quality after implementing dialogue analysis activities.
	Listening for Synthesis Across Texts
Description	A structured approach to helping students integrate ideas across multiple course readings or lectures.
Implementation	Provide students with a synthesis matrix that guides listening for connections, contradictions, and evolutions of ideas across different sources. Use this as scaffolding for class discussions/writing activities.
Research Support	Lang's (2020) research on attention management shows that structured frameworks significantly improve students' ability to make connections across related content.
	Precision Questioning Technique
Description	A structured listening and questioning approach that focuses on clarity, accuracy, and precision.
Implementation	After presentations or initial discussion contributions, students are assigned specific types of clarifying questions (e.g., questions about evidence, definitions, implications, or alternatives).
Research Support	Blotscher and Lee (2021) found that training in precision questioning improved both listening comprehension and discussion quality in upper-division undergraduate courses.
	Audio-Only Analysis Sessions
Description	Structured activities where visual information is deliberately removed to heighten auditory attention.
Implementation	For certain discussions or content presentations, arrange seating so students cannot see speakers or remove visual presentation elements, requiring full auditory attention.
Research Support	Research by Prasongnern and Soontornwipast (2023) demonstrates that intensive listening practice without visual cues strengthens overall listening comprehension skills.