

Building a Listening Culture as a Foundation for Learning

The first thing to consider before any instruction (literacy or other) is the context for the learning. Creating a purposeful and socially responsible learning community is always my top priority in the fall and remains a maintenance goal for the rest of the year. The first and most important aspect of this community building and indeed of all learning (both social and academic) in my classroom is the explicit systematic instruction of respectful listening skills.

While it is impossible to isolate all the contributing factors in an environment as dynamic and fluid as a public school classroom, upon careful reflection of the children's significant academic and social development these past 2 years, I believe that we cannot underestimate or undervalue the power of simple listening skill instruction.

The children in my classroom are not only polite and respectful when someone -- ANYONE-- is sharing an idea or information, they are constantly listening with specific purpose/s in mind. These purposes are to make connections, get new ideas and/or to become curious and form questions of their own from what they are hearing. We teach learners to show kinesthetic actions when they make a connection, receive a new idea, or wonder about something.

Coaching point: When learners kinaesthetically show they are **making connections** (to their own lives, to other books or movies they have seen, or to things happening in the world), they wiggle their fingers above their heads. For **questioning**, they put palms up over their shoulders, and for showing they have a **new idea** they touch elbows. This work stimulates metacognitive thinking.



Making Connections



Asking Questions



Generating New Ideas

For the older grades, we interlock thumbs and first fingers to show we are making a connection; touch alternate elbows to show we received a new idea, and raise a right hand if they wonder about something or have a question.

Kinesthetic Actions in Grades 3-6



Making a connection



Receiving a new idea



Wondering- a question



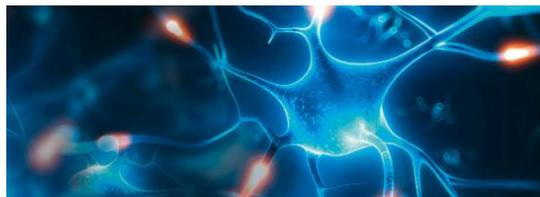
Two hands up: connecting to others' ideas



Touch-points: full-focus to others' ideas

Patrica Pain, a middle school facilitator discusses the importance of using kinesthetic actions with Gr.6-8 learners. She talks about metacognition and how listening to notice new ideas, connections and questions coming into your thinking, and hearing others' thinking stimulates pathways in the brain.

Kinesthetic hand signals introduce a layer of communication for active listening, as well as an acknowledgement of metacognitive awareness and skill.



Hand signals are a way of letting others know what is happening for you as a listener. Signalling is also a way to show you have something you would like to speak to. As a middle years' educator, it is important for me to give students agency in which signals they are willing to commit to without embarrassment. So, we decide as a community, which hand signals we will use for:

- I have a connection to something someone has said.
- Something someone has said is a new idea for me.
- I am wondering about something... I have a question.
- I would like to add to something someone has said (this could be a question or statement).

Because we decide on these hand signals as a community each new school year, there are slight variations to what my students decide. Below are examples of what students have chosen in the past. As well, you can click on the video link here for an example of what the conversation might look in the classroom: [video link](#)

Kinesthetic Actions... generated with learners in Grades 6-8



As we share and respond to ideas in the class, we use any opportunity that comes up to model the kinesthetic actions.

Teaching children to listen and share with these purposes in mind is at the heart of all instruction in my classroom. I can teach children the language of social and academic learning 6 hours a day, but if the children are not able to listen and really hear the message coming from any speaker (this means to actively listen with an open mind that is looking for commonalities (connections), and respectfully making note of differences (new ideas) and formulating questions for further learning) then the point/purpose of these lessons seems moot.

Developing a Respectful Listening Culture

1. The teacher is always a model of respectful listening. Exaggerating the body language of listening and being authentic in your observations is critical. I participate in the goal-setting and reflection process and regularly share the connections, new ideas and questions I notice as I listen to the children.

2. Co-create criteria for respectful listening.

I like to ask the children what they think respectful listening looks like, sounds like, feels like. As we work, I like to stop to invite learners to notice listening behaviours. I like to use their language and build the criteria from their experiences. They will be using the criteria to set personal *s-t-r-e-t-c-h* goals for listening. I check the **Oral Language Continuum** for descriptors of listening, and over time our criteria becomes something like:

- quiet mouth
- quiet body
- listening posture (in lieu of 'eyes on the speaker')¹
- thinking brain: making connections, noticing new ideas, wondering... creating questions

3. Explicitly teach and regularly practice each respectful listening behaviour.

4. Set goals to be respectful listeners EVERY DAY!

- The goal is respectful listening and the criteria are the strategies to achieve the goal.
- Use picture and kinesthetic symbols to reinforce listening behaviours.
- Keep it simple, repetitive and START SLOWLY. Begin with the observable behaviours; practice and set goals with these at first, then introduce the thinking behaviours and teach the kinesthetic demonstration of each, one at-a-time.
- Be consistent and persistent about the behaviours when the children are listening to each other.
- Practice listening and speaking skills with the A/B-partner structure.
- After a listening activity (story, A/B- partners, etc...) reflect on listening behaviours: Were you a respectful listener? How do you know? What do you need to goal-set for, and practice next time?

¹ I used to ask the children to put their eyes on the speaker (or "knee to knee, eye to eye") but this is not a necessarily authentic listening behaviour. I don't always look someone in the eye when they are speaking to me and 'eye-to-eye' could be a cultural issue for some students. I am in the process of replacing 'eyes on the speaker' with 'listening posture'. This means the children practice receiving a speaker: tilting their heads, nodding in acknowledgement, showing appreciation to someone speaking, listening to the idea or looking at the book, artifact or demonstration being presented to them, etc...

When learners are ready, we practice summarizing what the person said, and asking a question. Julian Treasure (2009) gave a TED-Talk describing **R•A•S•A**, a Sanskrit word for 'essence'. He said when we apply **R•A•S•A**, we show we are receiving what the speaker has to say, we show appreciation for the person offering ideas or information, we summarize to clarify understanding, and we ask a question to show we are curious and interested. **R•A•S•A**, is a well-used talk structure for A/B Partner interactions.

Please see, *Guidelines for Structured A/B Partner-talk* to learn more about the power of talk for building confidence and competencies for deeper learning.