

Listen Up!: Measuring and Mitigating College Students' Most Commonly-Reported Listening Challenges

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Recommended Citation

Hunter, Karla; Lionberger, Erin; Phillips, Ashley; Luebbert, Kaitlyn; and Briggs, Andrea N. () "Listen Up!: Measuring and Mitigating College Students' Most Commonly-Reported Listening Challenges," *Discourse: The Journal of the SCASD*: Vol. 7, Article 2.

Available at: <https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/discoursejournal/vol7/iss1/2>

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**Listen Up!: Measuring and Mitigating College Students'
Most Commonly-Reported Listening Challenges**

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Abstract

This study updates the existing literature on listening education in two ways: 1) by providing an assessment of an effective listening education intervention and 2) by identifying what college students' self-assessment and reflection revealed as their most common barriers to listening and the actions that helped mitigate those challenges. Through content analysis, five graduate student coders analyzed six consecutive pre-Covid-19 semesters of student submissions to a Listening Log Self-Assessment assignment in an online interpersonal communication course (n = 186). This experiential activity was designed to motivate students' metacognitions to elicit accurate self-appraisals based on reflections of students' current listening encounters (meta-listening) and deepen their expressed need and desire for purposeful listening habits. The activity succeeded in stimulating critical reflections recognizing at least one listening challenge and/or committing to at least one evidence-based action to enhance listening (a listening solution) from 98.2% of sampled students. Their most commonly-reported problems included "Distractions/Multi-tasking" (86.60%) and "Lack of [giving] Positive Feedback" (33.33%), while commitment to "Attentive Listening" (90.8%) and "Knowing Conversation Goals" (30.11%) were the most commonly-reported solutions. Student reflections also broadly supported the activity's success in prompting metacommunication by demonstrating critical reflection, appreciation for the importance of listening skills, and intent to continue growing in their listening competence.

Listen Up!: Measuring and Mitigating College Students'

Most Commonly-Reported Listening Challenges

Both personally and professionally, poor listening is common and costly (Weger et al., 2014), yet college students often receive little instruction on effective listening skills and practices. Beyond harming relationships, ineffective listening can cost billions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of lives per year (Innolect, n.d.). Scholarship across time and culture has connected poor listening to negative outcomes, including a heightened risk for physician malpractice lawsuits in Japan and the US (Hagihara & Tarumi, 2007 and Levinson et al., 1997 respectively), significantly higher injuries on the job in Germany (Zierold 2016), increased sexual harassment in Israel (ShafranTikva et al., 2019), and employee turnover as well as increased divorce in the US (Lloyd et al., 2015 and Gottman & Levenson, 1992, respectively). One reason for these costs is that failure to listen not only hinders the listener's reception of the sender's message but can actually “constrain the materials the speaker will share” (Kluger & Itzchakov, in press, p. 18), diminishing subsequent communication of important information.

Conversely, listening well is a “communication superpower” (Colantonio, 2017, par. 1), capable of yielding effective decision-making, productivity, confidence, and respect. Strong listening skills can bolster perceptions of the listener as competent and supportive (Fedesco, 2015), empowering their achievement of personal and professional goals (Canary et al., 2008). According to Kluger and Zaidel (2013), listening literature demonstrates moderate to strong correlations between evaluations of listening effectiveness and conversational partners' perceptions of listener strength regarding several desirable qualities like efficacy, empathy, and transformative leadership.

Scholarship suggests that listening instruction can help students understand the active process required for effective listening and enhance their listening competence (Bond, 2012), especially when it includes experiential interventions along with theoretical instruction (Erkek & Batur, 2019). A 1996 study by Thompson and Rubin determined that participants who received strategic direction to improve listening improved their comprehension by 10% more than participants who did not. Yet in 2019, Erkek & Batur reported that scant scholarship had yet suggested, implemented, or tested such skill-based teaching activities.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is two-fold. First, the analysis updates the existing literature on listening education by assessing a Listening Self-Assessment Assignment, an experiential activity designed to motivate students' listening-related metacognitions. Janusik and Varner (2020) defined metacognition as “thinking about one's thinking” (p. 1). They added, “[b]y extension, metacognitive listening strategies are thinking about one's listening” (p. 1), reporting that “*metacognitive* strategies, not *cognitive* strategies, are significantly better at increasing student comprehension” (p. 2). The current study tests whether the assignment analyzed successfully elicits that process through accurate self-appraisals based on reflections of their own, current listening encounters (meta-listening), and through students’ critical reflection on their need for purposeful listening habits. A second, equally important goal of the study involved analyzing the content of student submissions of the assignment (n=186) to identify what students articulated as their most common barriers to listening and the actions that helped mitigate those challenges.

Listening Education Research

Fifteen years ago, Beall et al. (2008) published a comprehensive report on “The State of the Context: Listening in Education,” which analyzed a broad scope of studies spanning 80 years

of listening research. Their report traced listening scholarship from 1929 to 2007. In it are findings such as those by Wacker and Hawkins (1995), whose survey of 500 US institutions, found that, historically, most US institutions of higher learning had failed to offer any listening instruction at all, while only 5% reported offering a specific class in listening. Another study discussed therein (Perkins, 1994) found that although most of the schools in their survey reported offering listening education ($n = 498$), an average of only 7% of class time in those courses was devoted to listening. Furthermore, a content analysis of foundational communication course textbooks found that an average of 4% or less of their pages covered the subject (Janusik & Wolvin, 2002).

More recent findings demonstrate that, despite the continued scholarly emphasis on the vital nature and positive impacts of listening education, its dearth has persisted, transcending both academic discipline and culture. For instance, listening elements were found lacking in analyses of curricula for a variety of scholarly fields and countries, including medical students in Ecuador (Abad & Velez, 2021), accounting students in the Philippines (Tenedero, 2017) as well as Australia and the United States (Reddrop & Mapunda, 2019), and EMT students in Ireland (Armstrong & Ferrari-Bridgers, 2019).

According to Erkek & Batur (2019), this lack may be due to the instructor's beliefs that other topics should take precedence or that listening is a skill humans possess innately. These scholars report that the development and habituation of effective listening skills require educational instruction and interventions that employ experiential learning and active learning strategies. Due to the lack of listener training, together with digital distractions, scholars such as Mercadal-Sabbagh and Purdy (2015) have dubbed listening as "The Lost Communication Skill" (par. 1).

Furthermore, a lack of curricular emphasis on listening appears to impact the importance students ascribe to it. A survey across 31 universities that included responses from faculty, alums, and students (n = 7,790) found communication skills reported as the primary attribute necessary for new college graduates (Crawford et al., 2011), with listening ranked second only to accuracy/conciseness among the seven communication skills listed in the survey instrument. However, when students alone (n = 302 senior accounting students in the Philippines) were asked to rank 5 communication skills in order of importance (interviewing, reading, writing, listening, and use of technology), they ranked listening lowest (Tenedero, 2019). The researcher attributed this low ranking to students' lack of specialized listening instruction, reasoning that, if instructors failed to demonstrate listening's importance by focusing on it in their instruction and assessments, students might naturally presume its unimportance.

Published classroom listening interventions have included instruction and assessments designed to enhance students' awareness of the difference between listening and hearing (Reyes, 2012) and the level of difficulty involved with listening (Peterson, 2012). They have also helped students understand the importance of different listening styles (Dailey, 2014) and led students to gauge their prowess at listening to instructions (Morris, 2012).

The Listening Log and Self-Assessment Assignment

The listening intervention assessed and analyzed in the current study was developed by the lead author of the current study in the fall of 2009, who has assigned it every semester since, receiving and evaluating papers from approximately 1300 students during that time. The assignment prompts students to keep a log of four samples of their own, real-world listening encounters and inventory their particular communication challenges. Students then log an additional four encounters in which they are assigned to test specific, evidence-based practices to

mitigate those challenges. Lastly, students are guided to reflect on their experiences. This assignment, known as the Listening Log Self-Assessment, was designed to motivate students to meta-listen—to listen to their own listening—so that they can identify ineffective listening habits, evaluate the connection between their behaviors and the outcomes in their relationships, attempt research-based listening changes, and reflect on their outcomes.

Almost invariably, students' work on this assignment is highly self-reflective, and they respond favorably to the exercise, despite the level of detail the assignment requires. One student's qualitative feedback stated, "My favorite assignment was the Listening assignment. I really enjoyed this one because it gave me the opportunity to really pay attention to how I interact with others while in a conversation."

While the vast majority of students have demonstrated success in meeting the objectives of the assignment and have reported overwhelmingly positive reactions to their learning, the current inductive and deductive content analytic study provides a more substantive basis for evaluating the assignment. This analysis assesses the metacognition elicited by the assignment and updates the extant literature on listening, and listening education, by providing specific information regarding the most commonly reported listening challenges and the most effective solutions students found for those challenges. This information can aid in other pedagogical decisions by providing evidence for other instructors seeking teaching activities to enhance listening education for their own students.

Theoretical Rationale

Although listening has been studied for over 50 years (Bodie & Worthington, 2010), scholarly definitions of listening continue to evolve as a result of the growing body of scholarship, and the introduction and adoption of new communication media and technology.

Listening was once defined as a linear construct that connected the message with the receiver (An ILA definition of listening, 1995; Wolvin, 2013). In 1982, however, Goss (1982) proposed that listening was similar to an information process. Today, listening is viewed as a context-driven action that engulfs a collection of skills (Cline, 2013). Listening is defined by Wolvin (2013) as occurring in four stages: receiving, attending, interpreting, and responding. In this model, the vital stage of attending differentiates between effective and ineffective listening (2013).

In 1980, Barker et al. (1980) found that interpersonal (non-media) listening accounted for 31.9% of the average college student's listening activity on a given day. More recently, Emanuel et al. (2008) found that students' media listening continued to grow in its displacement of interpersonal listening. This conclusion was evidenced even prior to the broad use of technological innovations like smartphones, DM apps, texting technology, and Zoom; not to mention the yet-emerging impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and resultant shutdowns. College students reported spending over half of their "total average communication day" (55.4%) listening (p. 13), but only 27.5% of their listening time was devoted to the category of interpersonal (non-media) listening, which included not only face-to-face interactions, classroom, and telephone conversations, but also instant messages.

Barriers to Effective Listening

Effective listening entails gathering sufficient information and asking questions as appropriate; therefore, actively participating in the new development of a given story (Bavelas et al., 2000). However, scholarship has revealed multiple barriers that hinder this process. Some barriers to effective listening involve listener attitudes. Such barriers include disinterest in the topic, internal distraction, and inattentiveness (Golen, 1990). Another attitude-based barrier can

occur when listeners believe the information being presented is too difficult. In such cases, they may simply stop trying to pay attention (Adler & Proctor, 2015). Additional barriers include listener behaviors such as fake listening and stage-hogging. In fake listening, the listener pretends to pay attention while actually thinking about various other subjects (Hunter, 2021). This can occur in tandem with behaviors like the purposeful use of vocal fillers to project the appearance of listening intently (Adler & Proctor, 2015). The concept known as stage-hogging also affects listening when the listener focuses on finding ways to turn the conversation back to themselves (Canary et al., 2008). Additional challenges, such as discounting the speaker's claims, listening solely to advise the speaker, and listening only for facts, also present negative implications for effective listening (Canary et al., 2008). Finally, a grave challenge to effective listening can exist as a result of distractions due to multitasking (Hunter, 2021).

Overcoming Listening Barriers

Utilizing listening skills and teaching students to improve their poor habits can help them overcome listening barriers. Working to overcome listening barriers has been shown to increase listener effectiveness (Caspersz, & Stasinska, 2015). Two main ways scholars recommend solving listening challenges are active listening and empathic listening. Engaging in active listening confirms to the speaker that the listener is understanding and processing the information. "Active listening involves restating a paraphrased version of the speaker's message, asking questions when appropriate, and maintaining moderate to high nonverbal conversational involvement" (Weger et al., 2014, p. 13). The listener must refrain from interrupting and give feedback beyond mere short, automated responses such as "mmmmm" or "yup" (Robertson, 2005). Empathic listening (listening for emotional content in hopes the speaker will feel heard) is also vital in relational contexts, both personally and professionally (Canary et al., 2008),

especially in careers that involve a heavy persuasive component such as careers in health and helping professions (Bodie et al., 2015) and sales (Aggarwal et al., 2005).

Research Questions

Analysis of students' articulations of listening barriers and solutions allows for assessment of the activity's effectiveness and knowledge generation. Therefore, in light of the research discussed above, the following research questions were posed to assess the effectiveness of the Listening Self-Assessment Assignment:

RQ1: After engaging in a listening unit in a communication course and a listening self-assessment assignment, what are the most commonly-reported barriers these students identified in their own listening?

RQ2: After engaging in a listening unit in a communication course and a listening self-assessment assignment, what are the most commonly-reported solutions these students applied to their listening challenges?

RQ3: After engaging in a listening unit in a communication course and a listening self-assessment assignment, did student reflections demonstrate metacognitions regarding their listening?

Methods

To extend our knowledge and understanding of students' self-reported listening challenges and the solutions they attempted to overcome those challenges, we began by examining the above research questions inductively to create content analytic tools to analyze the students' reflections. Then, the resultant coding instrument and process were employed deductively to explore general trends among students.

Procedure

To assess these hypotheses, we gathered assignments from all students enrolled during six semesters of the same online Interpersonal Communication course after securing approval for human subjects research from the university Institutional Review Board. This assignment occurred during the second unit of each semester, about 5 weeks into the fall and spring semesters, and about 3 weeks into the summer terms. All semesters assessed occurred prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the detailed assignment description, students were assigned to record specific information about each of four real-time, face-to-face (F2F) or voice-to-voice interpersonal or professional encounters during which their communication role was to include listening. This information included a) the person with whom the encounter occurred, b) the channel of communication (e.g., F2F, telephone, Skype), c) the date and time, d) a 5-7 sentence description of the encounter, including goals and outcomes of the encounter, and e) any barriers to listening that may have occurred. This information comprised section one of a five-section paper. Then students were assigned to read chapter 4, “Fundamentals of Listening” from Canary, Cody, & Manusov’s (2008) textbook, *Interpersonal Communication: A Goals-Based Approach*. After performing the reading, students were assigned to apply concepts from the reading to assist them in an initial reflection on their listening challenges (e.g., stage-hogging, resisting new ideas, and becoming distracted). The assignment description stated that this section of the paper was to discuss at least two of the problems the student found in his or her own listening experiences and the solutions for those problems discussed in the reading. In the third section of the paper, students were to set listening goals based on these findings and then apply the techniques given in the reading as they monitored and logged their listening for an additional four encounters. In the fourth section of the paper, students were assigned to write about what they learned about the

strengths and weaknesses of their listening and the areas they hoped to continue working to improve. It should be noted that, while the students' listening strengths are not assessed in this paper, an important pedagogical aspect of the assignment involves encouraging students to take a balanced view of their listening habits. In this way, the exercise might avoid discouraging students by offering an overly pessimistic view that might raise their defenses against honest self-appraisal and motivation to improve.

The paper was then posted to a graded, online, small group discussion in which students had been assigned certain rules and a discussion rubric to enhance interaction. Although this aspect of the students' communication about their listening was also not assessed in this study, the pedagogical reasoning behind it is to provide the additional insights and motivation that can occur through public communication of one's goals. Finally, a reflection exercise was completed to synthesize student learning through the lens of concepts in other chapters of the textbook and online readings.

Participants

The Listening Self-Assessment assignments of the 186 students enrolled within six pre-Covid-19 semesters of the online sections of the online interpersonal communication course at a Midwestern university were analyzed [72 males (38.71%); 114 females (61.29%)]. The interpersonal communication course, during the timeframe these participants were enrolled, was an option to fulfill a communication course requirement for several majors at the university, including speech communication, wildlife and fisheries, and human development and family studies. Therefore, even though it is a 200-level course, it was often full by the time freshmen, and sophomores could register. This resulted in a participant pool comprised almost entirely of college juniors and seniors.

Analysis

Deductive content analysis ensures validity and replicability through objective and systematic methods including testing hypotheses or research questions based on specified categories outlined in a code sheet, defined in a codebook, and analyzed by trained coders whose judgments proved reliable in comparison with one another. This study employed inductive category development (Mayring, 2000) by performing qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis to draw categories from a sub-sample of one semester's assignment submissions within the raw dataset. Then Kaid and Wadsworth's (1989) steps of content analysis were employed in a deductive content analysis applying those categories to the entire dataset.

Category Construction. Phase one, the inductive phase of this study, defined categories for coding listening challenges and solutions. To begin creating categories, one section of the online Interpersonal Communication course was initially assessed. Five communication graduate students were trained to analyze and label the listening challenges and solutions students reported in their Listening Self-Assessment papers from that section. The principal investigator then analyzed the themes employing Owen's (1984) three criteria of thematic analysis: recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. Recurrence and repetition can occur either within a particular subject's answer or between subjects. Recurrence occurs when two or more descriptions "have the same thread of meaning, even though different wording indicated such a meaning" (Owen, 1984, p. 275), while repetition is the "explicit repeated use of the same wording" (p. 275). Forcefulness is often measured based on nonverbal communication cues such as strong "vocal inflection, volume, or dramatic pauses which serve to stress and subordinate some utterances from other locations in the oral reports" (p. 275). In the case of these written assignments, however, forcefulness was determined based upon wording including introductory

or explanatory phrases such as “the main thing is...” or “...is what I really think.” According to Owen's method, underlines, capitalization or bolded letters also provide forcefulness cues.

The saturation of themes is observable when the same themes continue to occur, and new themes no longer appear (Holton, 2008). Themes were assessed until a point of saturation was reached. Resultant themes were then compared with relevant scholarship regarding listening challenges and solutions to derive labels consistent with the extant body of literature.

Coding and Coder Training Procedures. Definitions and examples of each category were drawn from phase one to inductively create a combined code sheet and codebook as a pilot instrument (See Appendix A for themes). These materials were tested by the five communication graduate student coders who performed a pilot-study reliability check of five papers. This coding instrument was refined through approximately three additional hours of coder training and repeated reliability testing of the codebook and code sheet until acceptable reliability in each category was achieved. These initial reliability checks informed improvements in the coding and training procedures that included the need to collapse several categories to align them more closely with those offered in the readings assigned to the students. This was especially true for the distinction between distractions and multitasking, which were merged; for various terms that were categorized under the term in the textbook reading labeled as “Stage-hogging” (which was often explicitly mentioned by students); and for the listening solutions which were collapsed directly into the four headings discussed in the reading. The students’ learning objectives had required them to be able to apply concepts from the reading, but not required them to understand the finer distinctions among concepts within categories. For this reason, coders, despite having been trained with precise definitions for highlighting the fine distinctions among these

categories, were too often conflicted between coding based on the definitions given versus the precise wording given by the students. The pilot test allowed for refinements in the code sheet/codebook. Each updated category and definition information was then entered into a Questionpro© survey. These refined categories and descriptions as contained in the refined instrument can be found in Appendix B.

Intercoder Reliability. Before splitting the remainder of the sample to complete the coding of the entire dataset, all five coders used the refined coding instrument to complete reliability checks on the papers of 10 additional students, resulting in a reliability sample of 8.1% of the 186 students studied. Using simple percentage agreement to assess intercoder reliability, reliabilities across all categories was 93.43%. This included self-reported gender identification: 100%; Listening Problems: 91.79%; and Listening Solutions: 88.5%. The initial instrument contained a matrix pairing specific problems with specific solutions, but that portion of the instrument was cut due to low reliability.

Results

The first research question asked, “After engaging in a listening unit in a communication course and a listening self-assessment assignment, what are the most commonly-reported barriers these students identified in their own listening?” Of all answers listed by the 186 students in the sample, each of whom was assigned to list two listening problems, the top-listed barrier was “Distractions/Multi-tasking” (n = 161; 86.6%). It should be noted here that students' self-reported gender identification is listed in identifying each of the examples reported throughout the results and discussion section, merely to demonstrate that the assignment outcomes and students’ resultant meta-cognitions occurred irrespective of this variable. In reflecting on listening barriers, one student identifying as female reported, “Becoming distracted is more

evident when I am at work and a co-worker is talking to me when customers come in. I immediately switch into 'work mode' and either forget about the previous conversation entirely or pay more attention to the conversation and ignore the customer." Open-ended coding recorded specific distraction and multitasking-related challenges mentioned by each student, and the principal investigator performed frequency counts of those challenges. Since the original data (students' answers) were in essay form, often listing multiple specific challenges, and coders were asked to record all challenges reported by each student, the following numbers indicate specific barrier mentions, as opposed to students, so they add up to more than 186: Phones were specifically cited as a barrier by 113 of these students, of whom texting was specifically mentioned by 7. A student identifying as female stated, "Just like when you try to text and drive, texting and communicating with someone can have damaging effects. I want to stop looking at my phone while people are trying to talk to me just for the fact that it is a sign of respect and they deserve at least that."

Items that fit into a broad category of technology and electronics that may or may not be accessed via smartphones were discussed by 76 students. Of those 76, students reported watching TV while attempting to listen ($n = 30$), computer/laptop/internet ($n = 25$), social media, ($n = 16$, three of whom specifically mentioned Snapchat, two Facebook, and one Twitter), and video games ($n = 5$). One student identifying as male explained, "An example of this is when I was working in a group and I started to play around on my laptop. I know for a fact that I had missed some important points, because I had too many questions on what was just said. I want to make this change, because it will make everything easier in the long run."

Additional distractions students reported included doing their homework ($n = 14$ students), having two conversations at once ($n = 4$), cleaning ($n = 3$), cooking ($n = 3$), people-

watching (n = 3), listening to music (n = 3), driving (n = 3), grooming (e.g., “getting ready,” “doing my nails”) (n = 2), doodling (n = 1), playing with a dog (n = 1), or drinking alcohol (n = 3). Thirty-seven students discussed the barrier of distraction by passively attending to stimuli such as surroundings/background noise (n = 22) or internal thoughts/daydreaming (n = 17).

The second most common among students’ reported barriers was “Lack of Giving Positive Feedback.” Students whose barriers expressed this challenge reported that they through failure to give verbal and/or nonverbal support to the speaker like recapping what the speaker said, asking appropriate questions, giving eye contact, or smiling (n = 62 students; 33.33%). A student identifying as female whose answer demonstrated this barrier as well as multitasking reported, “It is important and scientifically proven that not maintaining eye contact and looking at your phone means that you are not paying attention.”

The third most reported challenge was “Stage-hogging” (self-focused responses and/or Interrupting or Pre-planning responses) (n = 59 students; 31.72%). A student identifying as female explained, “Stage-hogging is also another bad habit, mainly at work as well. I listen to a co-worker’s story and I immediately think of a similar story and run with it. And I mean, run with it. I could go on for hours about a certain topic, especially sports, and I am pretty sure that my co-workers are getting tired of it. ” A student identifying as male asserted, “I have had conversations with people who are stage hogs and I find it very annoying. I try as hard as I can to not be this way but it still manages to slip out at times.”

The remaining challenges recorded were as follows: “Lack of focus or interest” (n = 38 students; 20.43%); “Lack of self-awareness/Lack of communication skill” (n = 11 students; 5.91%); “Failure to understand the speaker” (n = 9 students; 4.84%); and “Other” (n = 7

students; 3.76%, which included four students discussing lack of empathy or emotional understanding, one who said they avoid conversations, and two who failed to list a barrier).

The second research question asked, “After engaging in a listening unit in a communication course and a listening self-assessment assignment, what are the most commonly-reported solutions these students applied to their listening challenges?” Of the four broad categories offered in the coding instrument, students’ responses were most commonly reported as fitting under the broad heading of “Attentive Listening” (169; 90.8% of students). As reflected in the online reading the students had performed before this portion of the assignment, this category encompassed numerous precise behaviors including things like “Stop interrupting--give them a solo,” “Speak more briefly,” and “Stop multitasking” as well as offering supportive nonverbal feedback such as head nodding and eye contact. Second most commonly, responses were coded as “Knowing Conversation Goals” (56; 30.11%), including “learning more about good listening, raising awareness of own behaviors, decision to listen, make time to listen, and pay full attention.” In this regard, one student identifying as female reported, “A solution to this problem I read on the webpage reading is to think about whether [I] can risk appearing disinterested and the negative impression that is likely to make on them. By thinking about how my listening will affect our conversation or even relationship, I can improve my listening skills.” “Asking Questions Effectively” (including asking non-leading questions) was recorded 31 times (16.67%), “Emotionally Savvy Listening” (Listening empathetically/for emotions) was recorded 23 times (12.37%), and “Other” was recorded 8 times (4.30%), including more general answers such as “respect the person more” and a handful of students who failed to propose solutions.

Research question three asked, “After engaging in a listening unit in a communication course and a listening self-assessment assignment, did student reflections demonstrate

metacognitions regarding their listening?” Content analysis showed that the vast majority of these assignments (98.92%; 184 of the 186 assignments sampled) were successful in eliciting metacognition in the form of meta-listening. Students’ answers contained the information sought, clearly reporting at least one listening problem and/or committing to test at least one solution. In addition, students’ reflections provided evidence that the assignment prompted students to self-reflect in ways they would not have done without the motivation given by a graded assignment which directed them to search out and practice remedies to the flaws they uncovered in their listening competence. As one student identifying as female stated, “Now I know that I could have done this at any time without this course, but having certain guidelines to follow really helped me become aware of how I communicated and listened to others.” This metacognition was echoed by other students. A student identifying as male reported, “The reason I want to fix these behaviors are because I sometimes get sick of hearing my own voice and I need to become more attentive about my surroundings and the people I am conversing with. It will be an uphill battle, but I hope I can keep myself in check.” Another student identifying as female stated, “the listening assignment provided insight into an aspect of communication I had ignored. It was quite interesting to see and understand how I listen and the disconfirming that I do. The assignment made me more aware of how well I listen so that now I can recognize when I’m using poor listening skills and try and correct them.” Therefore, metacognitions were found in the students’ reflections, both in the form of meta-listening and in terms of the need for purposeful listening habits.

Discussion

This content analysis of college students’ self-reported listening challenges and solutions found that distraction and multitasking were the most reported challenges, followed, at a

distant second, by a lack of their giving the speaker positive feedback, and third by stage-hogging. Each of these top listening challenges impedes the participative, narrative process between speaker and listener, lauded by Bavelas et al. (2000). The pervasive nature of technology and its impact on listening were apparent in the results of open-ended data regarding the sheer number of students who reported that their phones, texting, laptops, the internet, and video gaming were barriers to listening. While this finding may come as no surprise, the potential impact of allowing students to discover it for themselves is its true value. Additionally, showing students that they are not alone and that their peers in such high numbers share the same listening challenges can bolster their motivation to undertake solutions that overcome their listening barriers.

Active listening and knowing conversational goals topped the list of student-reported solutions to overcome their listening barriers. This is an important observation because these categories contain a wealth of positive steps individuals can take to enhance their listening competence. Over 90% of students reported that they found merit in the reading's advice about active listening, enhancing the impact and credibility of those solutions.

A Case for Experiential Pedagogy in Listening Education

Caspersz and Stasinska (2015) conducted a study looking at the broader sense of listening as a learning ability and found that classrooms, where conversations were an expectation created higher listening comprehension as opposed to those in which conversations in class were an exception. This finding could be partially due to the interactive nature of these classrooms, which created a clearer understanding of the listening task. It could be further explained by Thompson and Rubin's (1996) study showing the effectiveness of providing students with strategic direction for overcoming their barriers to listening. The current findings resonate with that study,

indicating that students who are made aware of their own listening barriers and led to choose evidence-based strategies tailored to those challenges may be more motivated and more strongly equipped to overcome them.

Students' reflections nearly always report how surprised they feel when they learn that most of their peers have the same listening challenges they have—namely multitasking, especially with regard to focusing on texting, television, or other technology while trying to carry on a conversation. One student identifying as male reported, “After doing this assignment and reading what my other group mates had to say, it is evident that we all have similar issues. Multitasking while listening seems to be something that we all struggle with.” They also report awe at their improvements in their relational and professional outcomes when they make conscious efforts to change their listening behaviors for the better. As one student identifying as male observed, “I really enjoyed learning that the more I would pay attention to someone, the more they would pay attention to me.”

The foundational rationale for the assignment can be traced back to the work of educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom (1956), now famous for his Taxonomy of Learning Outcomes. Bloom once lamented that 95% of exam questions required students to think only at the lowest possible level—information recall. While current best practices in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) have aided instructors in enhanced testing practices, the challenge remains to balance the installation of a foundational communication “vocabulary” with motivation for higher levels of learning regarding the key concepts of the discipline. This challenges the student to strengthen and confirm multiple levels of learning from knowledge and understanding through application and analysis, all the way to synthesis and critique. In their reflections on this assignment, students reported motivation to continue applying what they

learned as a result of engaging in the higher order thinking it elicited. In critiquing her listening habits and synthesizing the outcomes of her assignment, one student identifying as female reported, “I feel like out of all the major assignments, that this one will help me the most in my future endeavors.” A student identifying as male summed his experience in the assignment as follows: “After doing this assignment, and pointing out my strengths and weaknesses, it is safe to say that I have become a better listener because of it. Being conscientious of my weaknesses while not getting lazy with my strengths will be a key for me personally moving forward.”

The exercise analyzed in this study allows for a diverse body of students to assess their varying listening strengths and challenges since not every individual listens the same way (Bostrom, 1997; Watson & Barker, 1988) and people vary in listening abilities. “It may be that listeners vary considerably in their cognitive functioning while engaging as listening communicators” (Wolvin, 2013, p. 105). Thompson and Rubin (1996) explain that some learners “may need an initially higher threshold of listening comprehension in order to benefit from listening strategy instruction...” (p.337).

An additional aspect of the case for experiential listening interventions in communication education relates to this study's self-assessment methods. Hodis and Hodis (2012) argued that “self-perceptions of communication competence are very salient and should not be regarded merely as ways to assess actual communication competence” (p. 42). This means that students are unlikely to be aware of their own listening challenges without being faced with the momentum to dig for evidence that shows such challenges exist.

Even after the assignment, a very small number of students report that they are very good listeners. While this may be an accurate self-appraisal for some students, such self-assessments are not always well-matched with instructor observations of the same students. This finding is

important because efficacy beliefs, rather than actual skills, determine behaviors (Hodis & Hodis, 2012). Without evidence of such listening barriers in him or herself, a given student is unlikely to be motivated to work toward listening optimally. In fact, in testing a psychological phenomenon known as the Dunning-Kruger Effect, studies in various areas of competency show that those strong in a particular skill tend to underestimate their competence, while unskilled individuals tend to overestimate theirs (Krueger & Dunning, 1999). According to Dunning et al. (2003) whose research found that “the skills needed to produce correct responses are virtually identical to those needed to evaluate the accuracy of one's responses” (p. 85). Poor listeners lack the listening savvy to know that they are poor listeners, while stronger listeners can recognize opportunities for growth and, hence, may evaluate themselves poorly.

This information echoes the findings of a study by Ford et al. (2000), who found that when students were taught listening competence, those who had considered themselves highly competent listeners at the beginning of the course could see their listening challenges upon receiving detailed listening instruction. In the current study, students were given information to enhance listener self-assessments, and the assignment provided the impetus for students to expose their own prior, true incompetence. Once students participated in the small group discussion portion of the assignment (results of which were not assessed in this content analysis), their exposure to others' evaluations of the students' performances may have boosted the self-assessments of competent individuals. The same process may have helped less competent listeners to see a more realistic picture and consider new behaviors.

Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations of this study include the self-report nature of the original data, and the potential for coding and categorization of the data to alter its original meaning or intent. Studies

suggest that, while training effectively changes listeners' behaviors, their conversational partners' evaluations did not indicate having noticed these changes (Kluger & Zaidel, in press). Additionally, the rural, Midwestern sample may have created a sampling bias of individuals who judge their listening and the communication of others against cultural and regional norms which may have a westernized bias. Future research should examine the protocol suggested by Joussemet et al. (2018) to measure perceptions of improved listening among interactants with those trained in listening, a protocol Kluger & Zaidel (in press) hail as a potential "gold standard for studying listening experimentally in organizations" (p. 9).

The current study is also limited by the potential for a primacy effect. Students may have read only a portion of the reading assigned and merely chosen the answers closest to the top of the list. Therefore, any wide dissemination of the assignment and coding instrument should be accompanied by randomized order of listening problems and solutions. An additional safeguard against such priming could occur if future assessments assigned students to complete a portion of the self-assessment via a QuestionPro© Assessment after writing their initial four listening logs. Using this more deductive approach from the outset could allow students to assess their listening challenges and solutions using pre-specified categories similar to the ones drawn from the initial inductive category development. This tool, especially in an online course like the one assessed, could yield results more directly representative of the challenges and solutions found in the extant literature. It could also allow the assessment to occur more quickly and easily. A refined Listening Self-Assessment assignment and QuestionPro© instrument based upon the findings of this study could allow for a large, multi-regional/multi-cultural comparison of listening challenges and solutions.

Future research should update statistics regarding listening education and expand their scope to include multiple disciplines and countries. By updating the findings provided by earlier researchers, such as those discussed in the comprehensive report on “The State of the Context: Listening in Education,” Beall et al. (2008) which analyzed a broad scope of studies spanning 80 years of listening research, current scholars can determine whether progress has been made in enhancing listening education, what needs remain to be addressed, and how to address them. A vital tenet of the communication discipline states that “one cannot not communicate [in the presence of another human being]” (Watzlawick, Beavin Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967). This means that everything we say or do and, sometimes equally as important, what we do not say or do, sends a message, whether intended or not. Resonant with concerns reported by Tenedero (2017), if listening education remains lacking, students may lack the motivation to attend to, much less improve, their listening.

Future research might also follow suit with the Emanuel et al. (2008) study, exploring barriers and solutions to listening challenges in multiple, varied listening environments. A future assignment could ask for listener self-assessments of various situations in which students were to listen in face-to-face, telephone or Skype, IMs, texting, or other settings. Additionally, the current assignment risks the potential for inducing the Hawthorne effect (Taylor, 1911) in which subjects change as a result of being observed, as opposed to a result of the stimulus intended as the independent variable. Therefore, future research should examine whether changes in listening competence continue after completion of the course or with individuals outside of graded classroom assignments.

In addition, because of the research suggesting the success of educational interventions, especially active learning strategies, to enhance listening skills, Erkek & Batur (2019) call for an

increase in research to offer and test such teaching activities. This study has provided one such offering, but the dearth of listening education, as discussed by scholars like Abad and Velez (2021), suggests that instructors across academic disciplines and cultures should continue to develop, test, and disseminate further effective strategies to help enhance listening. Finally, per recommendations from British Theatre scholar Oram (2019), interventions should be developed and tested to decolonize listening, teaching students to move beyond culturally embedded speech norms that may impede their capacity for listening to speakers whose communication patterns demonstrate patterns that diverge from those in the dominant culture.

Conclusion

The purpose of this inductive and deductive content analytic study was to update the existing literature on listening education in two ways: 1) by providing assessment of an effective listening education intervention and 2) by identifying what college students' self-assessment and reflection revealed as their most common barriers to listening and the actions that helped mitigate those challenges. The current research investigated the results of a teaching activity designed to elicit students' reflections on their own actual listening encounters through the use of a listening log and reflection assignment. Student reflections also broadly supported the success of the activity demonstrating critical reflection, expressing appreciation for the importance of listening skills and intent to continue growing in their listening competence. These findings provide evidence that communication instructors can create motivation for students' enhanced listening competence by employing and analyzing experiential pedagogy that assigns listening self-assessments.

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Appendix A

Coding Categories drawn from Phase One Content Analysis and Thematic Analysis

Listening problems

Distractions (non-active like passersby, distracted thoughts, looking at phone, TV on)

Multitasking (active engagement like texting, talking on the phone, multiple conversations, grooming, gaming, actually watching TV)

Lack of focus or interest

Lack of positive verbal feedback (recap, good questions, short answers like yup)

Lack of positive nonverbal feedback (frowning, looking away, lacking eye contact)

Stage-hogging (self-focused responses)

Interrupting

Pre-planning responses

Failure to understand the speaker

Lack of self-awareness

Lack of communication skill (includes don't know how to keep conversation going)

Other

Solutions to listening problems:

Learning more about good listening

Raising awareness of one's own behaviors (decision to listen, make time to listen, pay full attention)

Stop interrupting (give them a solo)

Speak more briefly

Stop multitasking (focus on one conversation)

Recap regularly

Use supportive words (positive feedback, judgment-free advice)

Use supportive nonverbals (head nod, eye contact, face squarely, avoid critical facials)

Eliminate distractions (go to a quiet place, put away phone, turn off TV)

Ask non-leading questions

Listen empathetically/for emotions

Other

Appendix B

Coding Categories and Descriptions in Refined Coding Instrument for Phase Two:

Deductive Content Analysis

Listening Barriers:

- **Distractions and/or Multi-tasking** (distractions are non-active like passersby, distracted thoughts, looking at phone, TV on but not being watched; Multi-tasking includes active engagement like texting, talking on the phone, multiple conversations, grooming, gaming, actually watching TV)
- **Lack of focus or interest** (includes lack of positive feedback such as verbal recap or good questions, giving only short answers like “yup”; Also includes lack of nonverbal positive feedback, which can mean the receiver is frowning, looking away, lacking eye contact)
- **Stage-hogging** (self-focused responses and/or Interrupting or Pre-planning responses)
- **Lack of self-awareness/Lack of communication skill** (e.g., don't know how to keep conversation going)
- **Failure to understand the speaker**
- **Other.**

In addition, to aid in obtaining more detailed findings, coders were asked the open-ended question: “If you chose distraction/multitasking, what form did the distraction and/ or multitasking take? (e.g, phone, tv, laptop, outside conversation, etc.)”

Listening Solutions:

- **Knowing conversation goals** (this includes learning more about good listening, raising awareness of own behaviors, decision to listen, making time to listen, pay full attention)

- **Attentive listening** [includes Stop interrupting--give them a solo; Speak more briefly; Stop multitasking--(focus on one conversation); Recap regularly; Use supportive words (positive feedback, judgment-free advice; Use supportive nonverbals (head nod, eye contact, face squarely, avoid critical facials)]
- **Eliminate distractions** (go to a quiet place, put away phone, turn off TV)
- **Asking questions effectively** (e.g., Ask non-leading questions)
- **Emotionally savvy listening** (Listen empathetically/for emotions)
- **Other.**

Additionally, coders were asked, “If you chose knowing conversation goals or attentive listening, what aspect of those listening solutions did the student identify?”