

2001

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### Recommended Citation

Iwankovitsch, Ron (2001) "The Importance of Listening," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 17: Iss. 2, Article 2.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1314>

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# The Importance of Listening

Ron Iwankovitsch

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An excited pig-tailed girl on her first camping trip runs up to her mother and proudly shows her a small bug-eyed frog. "Look, Mom, I have a frog."

The mother, rather than acknowledge the message sent, allows her own feelings and habits to interfere and responds, "Put that thing back and go clean up."

This all too familiar scene illustrates the poor listening skills that we all have. A mother ignores the message of how happy her daughter is and that she wants to share it with her mother, and changes the communication to a new message, "Go clean up." If the mother had only said, "What a nice frog, Dear. Now, let it go back to its home, and you go clean up," the original message would have been acknowledged, the daughter would have received positive feedback to her message, and she would go happily about complying to the new message.

The skills of listening are very important. Paul T. Rankin, former Supervising Director of Research and Adjustment for the Detroit Public Schools, conducted a survey on the four communication processes. He found that the average person spends 9% of his time writing, 16% reading, 30% speaking, and almost half, 45%, listening.

The importance of listening is easier to understand when we realize that we are poor listeners. Ralph Nichols and Leonard Stevens, authors of *Are You Listening?*, tested the listening ability of the incoming freshman at the University of Minnesota and found out that the average freshman remembered only about half of what was said. Af-

ter two weeks, the students were tested again, and it was found that they remembered only 25% of the ideas. These tests were repeated at Michigan State University with similar results.

The importance of listening goes beyond our ability to recall information. The University of Minnesota reports that in the business world 60% of misunderstandings can be traced to poor listening and only 1% to poor reading.

In the home, poor listening is the leading cause of marital conflict. A survey by Family Service Association of America reports:

- \* 87% of the conflicts can be traced to poor communication or no communication.

- \* 44% of the conflicts were attributed to sex; however, in explaining the problem, respondents frequently used the word "communication."

And good listening does pay off, not only in relationships but also in business. Robert Montgomery, businessman, motivational speaker, and author of *Listening Made Easy*, said, "The top ten percent of the sales people of any company will tell you that listening put them on top. And in most companies, 20% of the sales force makes 80% of the sales."

A study by Loyola University researchers on determining the qualities of a good manager found that "listening to the individual employee is the most important. The stereotypical reply, 'I like my boss. He listens to me. I can talk to him,' sums up their findings."

Further evidence that efficient listening is of critical importance to industry can be seen in the story about a Chicago firm that was in trouble.

It was losing money for several months. They tried a number of techniques to improve production. Top management left their offices and became visible to the employees in the plant, talked to them and put up suggestion boxes, but these strategies did not work.

Finally, a psychologist was hired to teach their foremen to listen. He told them, "When your men come up to you and complain about not having enough bathrooms or about all the other grievances they have, I want you to be sympathetic. Say 'hmm' and nod affirmatively. Don't talk back. Ask questions if you want, like, 'What did you do then?' or 'Do all the men feel this way?'"

After the training, the foremen went back out among the men, and as usual the men came up to complain. This time they found a sympathetic listener. The results were remarkable. Not only did the plant start making money again, but also 90% of the grievances disappeared after three months.

The benefits of good listening go beyond helping business. They also help the individual. One important benefit of listening is gaining information. Listening is the quickest and easiest way of obtaining information. If you have a report to do or you want to find out about how to build a deck, finding someone who knows about it can allow you to get the information in a few hours that would take you a week of reading and researching to acquire.

Another benefit of good listening is establishing better relationships with people and family members. Everyone wants to be understood and accepted. If one can find listeners who are understanding and accepting, he can experience pleasure from their company and feel closer to them. Dominic Barbara, in his book *The Art of Listening*, points out that poor listening provokes displeasure and frustration.

How many times has a parent picked up a crying child and just given the child reassurance that everything was all right and sent the child back to play? All the child needed was someone to show understanding and acceptance. He is not really much different than the workers at the Chicago

plant.

A third benefit to good listening is the maturing value. This is being able to understand another's thoughts and feelings whether you agree with them or not. This is difficult for the poor listener to do. He has his own ideas of the way the world should be and stops listening whenever another's ideas challenge his.

As Dominick Barbara said:

To listen with a purpose requires an inner strength and the courage to open our minds to other people's ideas, while at the same time we must face up to the fact that some of our ideas may be wrong.

In summary, effective listening benefits the individual, his family and friends, business, and the bearers of bug-eyed frogs.

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#### About the Author

Ron Iwankovitsch, a Blue Water Writing Project Participant, teaches 7th and 10th grade language arts and Reading Recovery.