



A Simple Way To Improve Listening

It's a common complaint.

You give a direction and . . . nothing happens. Your students just sit there—like they didn't hear a word you said. A few begin moving, perhaps, but slowly, even grudgingly. Others look at each other like, *"Oh, are we supposed to do something?"*

It can feel like you're speaking a different language.

And once they do start inching and sighing their way toward doing what you asked, you have to cheer them on like a helicopter parent at a peewee soccer game.

You walk—or jog—alongside, cajoling, gesturing, clapping. You ramp up your energy and enthusiasm. You repeat yourself a half dozen times.

Troy! Troy! Get your head in the game! Troy! Troy! Hey Troy! Troy! Look over here! You can do it! You can do it, superstar! Just run up and kick . . . the . . . ball!

You get the picture.

Do this all day and you'll be ready for a sofa and a cool washcloth over your eyes. Indeed, giving directions to an unresponsive class can make teaching remarkably, exasperatingly stressful.

But the solution isn't so difficult. In fact, with just a few simple steps you can teach your students to listen and follow your directions the first – and only – time they're given.

Here's how:

Stand in one place.

Find a spot in your room where your students can see you without turning in their seats. Pause there a moment and ask for their attention. You'll not only give your directions from here, but you'll stay in this spot until they're finished following them.

Give your directions once.

After receiving their quiet attention, give the directions you want them to follow *one time* – which is the key to the strategy. Speak in a normal voice, **erring on the side of too softly than too loudly.**

Let them flounder.

The first time you use this strategy your students may struggle. How much they struggle will be an indicator of how bad things have gotten and how readily they disregard the sound of your voice. Go ahead and let them be confused and unsure of what to do.

Remain motionless.

Resist the urge to jump in and repeat yourself, cajole, or talk them through what you want them to do. Just stand in place and observe. Reveal nothing in terms of what you're doing or why you're doing it.

Let your leaders take over.

Slowly, leaders will emerge to either model for the others what to do or speak up and do the cajoling and repeating for you. This is good. Allow them to take on this responsibility.

Wait.

Don't move or say anything until they're finished following your directions and quiet. Pause for 30 seconds or so to let the lesson sink in.

Give the next direction.

When you're satisfied that all of the science folders are out on their desks, or whatever direction was given, give your next direction. The second time should be noticeably better – faster, sharper, and needing fewer leaders.

Continue giving directions once.

If the second direction went better than the first, then you're on the right track. Go ahead and give another. Eventually, and as long as you're giving directions only one time, you'll be able to increase the complexity.

Make it practice in the beginning.

You may want your first foray into this directions-only-once strategy to be practice. Start slow. Ask your students to do one simple thing – like clear

their desks. In time, your students will be able to follow multiple step directions with ease.

If the first time is a disaster . . .

If the first time you try this strategy your students are unable to get it completed (arguing, confusion, disharmony), that's okay. All hope isn't lost. Simply **ask for and wait for their attention**, then start over from the beginning. They'll get it.

Why It Works

Students become poor listeners when they know they don't *have* to listen.

You see, when they know you'll repeat yourself and hold their hand through every direction and every lesson, they have no *reason* to listen.

When they haven't been forced – or even allowed – to think for themselves, when they're unburdened by any responsibility to pay attention, they tune out. They daydream. They let life happen to them.

It's human nature.

But when you give directions only one time, and your students know that that's all their getting, then they learn quite naturally, automatically even, to tune in to the sound of your voice.

They learn to listen for what you want.

And each time you use this strategy, which isn't so much a strategy as the way things ought to be, more and more students will come on board. More

and more students will become less dependent on you and more dependent on themselves.

Habits will change.

Maturity and independence will grow.

And listening will become a matter of routine.