



How Exceptional Teachers Improve Listening

If you were to break down what makes exceptional teachers so effective, you would find their ability to teach students to listen one of several key common traits.

You would also discover that this one area of classroom management in particular is a near obsession with them, preoccupying much of their thinking about teaching. Despite the constant flow of what's new and next in education, it is listening upon which they build their scaffold of learning.

It is listening, they will reveal to you in quiet-corner conversation, where the secrets of great teaching can be found. Because without locked-in, active, and accurate student listening, *nothing* will go as planned or as hoped or as could be.

And yet, it doesn't take long to notice that for the better part of the teaching force, listening isn't such a great priority. Sure, teachers harp on it again and again and stew over its weakness among their students, but few recognize it as the pinnacle of importance that it is.

A Skill Like Any Other

Teaching students to be good listeners is a skill with its own strategies and techniques that anyone can learn and put into practice.

You can find two dozen or so articles on the topic already published and ready to implement in the [attentiveness category of our archive](#), and we'll be sure to visit more in the coming months, but today we're going to focus on a particularly unique listening strategy, one employed *after* providing a direction.

It's called *the post-direction strategy*. It's simple. It takes no particular practice or preparation. And you don't need any special skill outside of your powers of observation.

But the best thing about the strategy is that you can use it all the time. For every time you give a direction, you can, and should, begin looking for opportunities to apply it. In time, the strategy will become so much a part of your teaching that you won't give it a second thought. It will be just the way you do business.

How It Works

When most teachers notice a direction being followed poorly, or not at all, either by an individual student or an entire class, they'll immediately call out above the common noise and offer a reminder, a hint, or a rephrasing of the direction. And although this approach may indeed guide students to their target, it does nothing to improve listening going forward.

In fact, it causes students to become *less* attentive.

The way the post-direction strategy works is that instead of **jumping in to help** at the first sign of trouble, you will *allow them to struggle*. That's right. You're going to allow your students a few precious moments to flounder,

sit stupefied, and wander about uncertain, best-guessing what you asked of them.

You're going to allow them time to stop and ponder and survey their memory for the words you used and the movements you modeled. You're going to allow them to move forward tentatively, groping to jog their recollections and mental captures.

As long as they're in this mode of searching for answers, which you'll recognize in their body language and facial expressions, you're going to let them work their way through it. You're going to let them come to the sheepish realization that they didn't listen to your directions very well.

You're going to let them face adversity and overcome it.

The only time you'll intervene is if they're out of options – at which point you won't simply intervene and offer a reminder. No, you need a stronger message. So instead of simply letting them off the hook, you'll stop them in their tracks, send them back to their seats, and provide the *exact same direction* again.

What you want and hope for, though, is for your students to soldier their way through it, to proceed unsure, searching the dark, fumbling for the light switch – before finding it all on their own.

Now it's important to note that if your students are in any way misbehaving or are otherwise not earnestly trying to follow your directions, you **should stop them immediately**. For this is a behavior problem – and a topic for another day – not a listening problem.

Why It Works

Listening deteriorates in an environment of incessant reminding and hint-giving.

The post-direction strategy reverses this slide and restores listening to its full power by sending the unmistakable message that for every time you give a direction, it is expected your students can and will listen and follow it.

You see, when they *know* you won't be quick to fill them in, hold their hand, and repeat yourself over and over again, they'll naturally, automatically, have an open, active, and homing ear toward the sound of your voice.

The post-direction strategy gives them tangible proof that they need only listen to your directions once, that they are capable and self-reliant and don't require the steady diet of reminders they've grown so accustomed to.

By making the strategy an everyday part of your teaching, you'll be able to provide complex, multi-step directions matter-of-factly. You'll be able to continually challenge your students and build upon greater learning. You'll be able to express what you want, recede into the background, and watch . . . just watch . . .

As your students tenaciously check off the tasks and objectives you've given them without so much as a glance in your direction.