

## EVALUATION OF LISTENING AS TEACHERS COMMUNICATIVE ABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF MEDIATION

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### Abstract

In recent years, the interest in mediation has increased significantly in school environment. Study groups are organized for both teachers and students. Teachers and agemates can participate in resolving conflicts. To become a mediator, students and teachers need certain competencies, skills and knowledge. The core competence which helps in this process is the communicative competence. The communicative competence is also one of professional competences of a teacher. Listening skills, which ensure the receipt and processing of information and decision-making, plays an important role in the communicative competence. The aim of the article is to evaluate the level of teachers' listening ability and to improve the mediation training program based on the results of the research. Eighty nine respondents participated in the survey. The data were obtained using the methodology developed by Burley-Allen with 30 statements about listening as an element of the communication process, which was based on the respondents' self-assessment. The topicality of the article is determined by the fact that listening as a communicative ability is considered within the context of mediation rather than the acquisition of foreign languages. The empiric study analyses the replies given by the respondents, describing the way they listen to a conversation and skills they use to understand the conversation partner better. The study draws a conclusion that teachers must pay attention to listening, when they are not interested in the speaker's words, as well as to selectivity of attention.

**Key words:** communicative competence, mediation, listening, teacher.

### Introduction

The origins of mediation can be traced back to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but historically its roots go back to the Ancient World. In a broad sense, mediation can be described as a social institution promoting constructive development of society (Chupris, 2018). In a narrower sense, mediation, one form of alternative dispute resolution, is a process in which a third party helps other party manage their conflict (McCorkle & Reese, 2019). The interest in mediation in the school environment has increased significantly in recent years. Both teachers and students are gradually integrated into the mediation process, as this is a more democratic way of resolving conflicts. Communicative competence is one of the most important professional competences of a teacher. Listening skills can be called a core competence in communicative competence. Croatian researchers concluded that teachers do not associate burnout with communication, but they have insufficient skills in conflict solving, and communication barriers are influenced by stereotypes (Bakic-Tomic, Dvorski, & Kirinic, 2015). A number of authors (Humphreys, 2019; Doran & Winkeler, 2017; Leonov, 2019; Vikulina, 2014) emphasize the role of listening skills in personal development, interpersonal communication and mediation because, as one Eastern wisdom says, the truth is in the listener's ears and not in the speaker's words (Panfilova, 2006). Active listening involves several techniques – paraphrasing, summarizing, reflecting on feelings, etc. It plays the key role in mediation, as it is important for the mediator to listen and to hear both parties of a dispute in order to solve the conflict.

The aim of the article is to evaluate the level of teachers' listening skills to improve the training mediation program for teachers based on the results of the research.

### Materials and Methods

Eighty nine respondents – teachers from different regions of Latvia (Vidzeme, Latgale, Kurzeme and Zemgale) participated in the study. The questionnaire survey was held during the mediation course held in various regions of Latvia by the author of the article L.T. Nicmane. The research was made in 2021. The following methods were used in the study: analysis and synthesis of theoretical findings and methodology for determining listening characteristics. The author of the methodology is M. Burley-Allen (Burley-Allen, 1995; Cheliotis & Reilly, 2010). The methodology includes 30 statements on listening characteristics in the process of communication. All the characteristics are linked with the listening skills. The respondents evaluated the characteristics of the communication process as most of the time, frequently, occasionally, almost never. The methodology is based on the self-assessment of the respondents. The data were processed based on the key (Table 1).

The answers given for statements 1, 3, 8-10, 13, 22-23 were assessed from 1 to 4 points. In turn, the answers given for statements 2, 4-7, 11-12, 14-21, 24-30 were assessed from 4 to 1 point. The responses most of the time and frequently, as well as the responses occasionally and almost never are counted together.

Based on the data acquired, the level of the listening skills was defined for each teacher. The

Table 1

**Methodology key (data processing)**

Statement numbers	Points			
	Most of the time	Frequently	Occasionally	Almost never
1, 3, 8, 9, 10, 13, 22, 23	1	2	3	4
2, 4-7, 11, 12, 14-21, 24-30	4	3	2	1

levels of communication efficiency are evaluated as follows: superior – 110-120; 99-109 – above average; 88-98 – average; 77-87 – fair.

**Results and Discussion**

The process of mediation cannot be imagined without communication. Consequently, the mediator must have communicative competence, conflict identification competence and other competences. There is no single definition of the communicative competence. The following definitions can be mentioned: communicative competence is the ability to interact well with others (Spitzberg, 1988 in Communicative competence defined. Dr.Lane’s perspective, 2020); competence as a situational ability to set realistic and appropriate goals and to maximize their achievement by using knowledge of self, other, context and communication theory to generate adaptive communication performances (Friedrich, 1994 in Communicative competence defined. Dr.Lane’s perspective, 2020); communicative competence is the degree to which the communicator’s goals are achieved through effective and appropriate interaction (Communicative competence defined. Dr. Lane’s perspective, 2020); communicative competence is the ability to achieve communicative goals in a socially appropriate manner (Kiessling & Fabry, 2021). Therefore, communicative competence is the ability, which ensures constructive interaction with others and the achievement of communication goals. One of the characteristics of communicative competence is the ability to listen. Listening skills play significant role in mediation. S.Ater names five reasons why one must listen to mediation: 1) listen to unravel deep seated issues that may not be explicit; 2) listen to engage; 3) listen to reframe; 4) listen to empathize; 5) listen because it’s a dialogue (Ater, 2021). One of the main competences of a mediator is identification of conflict. In the process of conversation, it is necessary to listen to your partner attentively. If something remained unclear, ask a direct question: ‘What do you mean by...?’, or by rephrasing the phrase: ‘Have I got you right?’. The conversation involves the activity of both parties and represents a dialogue of equal participants (Doran & Winkeler, 2015; Leonov, 2019). Thus, listening is a basic ability that influences the quality of relationships in communication, successful interaction

and understanding (Panfilova, 2006; Vikulina, 2014). Other authors (Abramenko *et al.*, 2014; Gulam, 2010) also define listening as the ability to: 1) listening is the ability to accurately receive and interpret messages in the communication process; 2) listening is the key to all effective communication, without the ability to listen effectively messages are easily misunderstood.

The research concludes that listening to a conversation partner takes about 42-53% of time in communication. Therefore, the listening skills are required more than writing and reading. Listening efficiency is also evaluated in the research at a 25% level, while the respondents evaluate it even higher (up to 50-60%) (Panfilova, 2006). This reveals the necessity to develop this ability, as inefficient listening causes misunderstanding and inaccurate interpretation of what is heard. To prevent this, it is necessary to find out what is engaged, active listening. In communication, it must be understood what is hearing and what is listening. Hearing is a physical process that requires less intellectual effort, but listening is a process of perceiving, understanding, comprehending, structuring and memorizing information that involves many aspects of personality. The basis of the listening process is focusing on specific stimuli that reach our sensory organs (Leonov, 2019; Panfilova, 2006; Vikulina, 2014).

The authors define the following types of listening. The most frequent is non-reflexive and reflexive listening (Leonov, 2019; Vikulina 2014). Non-reflexive listening involves minimal interference in a partner’s speech and focusing on giving answers to his questions and understanding the aim of the conversation. It is necessary to show understanding, support and kindness while staying silent. There are also passive and active listening techniques – verbal (asking, paraphrasing, etc.) and non-verbal (posture, gestures, gaze). Passive listening is an attentive, quiet perception of the other person’s information, but the speaker can sometimes get the impression that he is not being listened to. Non-reflexive listening can be used: 1) the partner in conversation has negative emotions and wants to talk to someone about his concerns; 2) the partner in conversation feels confused, uncertain and has difficulties in the conversation; 3) it is difficult to express in words what he wants to say;

4) it is necessary to obtain more information about the partner in conversation (Panfilova, 2006; Vikulina, 2014). In the cases mentioned above, non-reflexive listening elements may be used in mediation.

In turn, active listening includes certain signs that illustrate listening (nodding, asking, repeating of what has been told, etc.). Reflexive listening provides for active feedback in the conversation. The focus is on the logic in the dialogue. It is important to make sure that the partner in the conversation has understood the question. To hear the response and to make sure that we have understood the partner right. The techniques of reflexive listening include clarification, reflection, summarizing, paraphrasing of feelings (Figure 1). If necessary, the words, logics of the partner is used when the partners in the conversation have different level of communication skills or vocabulary. There can also be empathic listening – communication focused on emotions and the inner state of a person, the aim of which is to understand the inner state, to form a dialogue on the level of feelings (Humphreys, 2019; Leonov, 2019; Panfilova, 2006; Vikulina, 2014). The concept of empathic listening was introduced by K. Rogers (Lyutova-Roberts, 2007). The level of empathic listening is also mentioned by M. Burley-Allen (1995) and R. Salem (2003). M. Burley-Allen distinguishes three levels of listening (Burley-Allen, 1995): empathetic listening; 2) hearing words, but not really listening; 3) listening in spurts. Reflexive and empathic listening is the most important in the process of mediation.

The efficiency of listening depends on several factors: 1) switching from speaker's to listener's role – if instead of listening, the partner in conversation plans a response and waits for the opportunity to say something, the efficiency of listening decreases rapidly; changing roles requires effort and attention; 2) listening before reacting – the listener stops listening before the speaker finishes, as everyone thinks that he knows what the partner will be talking about; experience shows that this is our assumption, so it is important to allow the speaker express himself and to form a habit of active listening;

3) objective listening – the words of the partner in the conversation and his behaviour patterns deviate from careful listening, many of which may create a 'semantic noise' that makes people react emotionally or negatively and disturbs the emotional balance; therefore, it is important to understand the meaning of the response before answering (Panfilova, 2006). The factors mentioned influence the understanding in communication, determine accurate deciphering of a statement, thus conferring the correct meaning to it. Understanding in communication is limited by: a) differences in life and professional experience; b) differences in the vocabulary. Understanding is affected by unknown words and fast talking, a large amount of facts and figures or vaguely worded ideas (Panfilova, 2006).

The study conducted by the authors also focused on teachers' reactions being in the role of a listener. As it has been already mentioned, people's behaviour while listening may be very different. The empiric study analyses the replies given by the respondents, describing the way they listen to a conversation partner if his opinion differs, if he is thinking of preparing a reply during listening, if he simulates listening, hovers around his mind or hears only what he wants to hear (Figure 2). When answering to the statement 'I switch off when I listen to people with whom I disagree or whom I do not want to hear', 36% of respondents answered by affirmation, while 64% do it rarely or almost never. Thus, the quality of listening is affected by the coincidence or disagreement of the conversation partners. The listener stops listening to the speaker if he knows what he wants to say, to be more exact, he thinks he knows. It disturbs 21% of teachers, while 79% of respondents continue listening to the conversation partner. Another factor affecting the process of listening is preparing of objections during listening, which is typical for 48 % of respondents. Listening to another person involves simulating of listening, even if the person is not listening (29% of teachers). Another significant barrier to listening is selective listening (39% of respondents). Listening is also influenced by the so-called hovering around in mind. Respondents used to

Ask open-ended questions	Request clarification	Be attentive	Summarise
Paraphrase	Ask probing questions	Be attuned to feelings	Reflect feelings

Figure 1. The techniques of active listening  
(drawn by the authors according to Doyle, 2021; Panfilova, 2006).

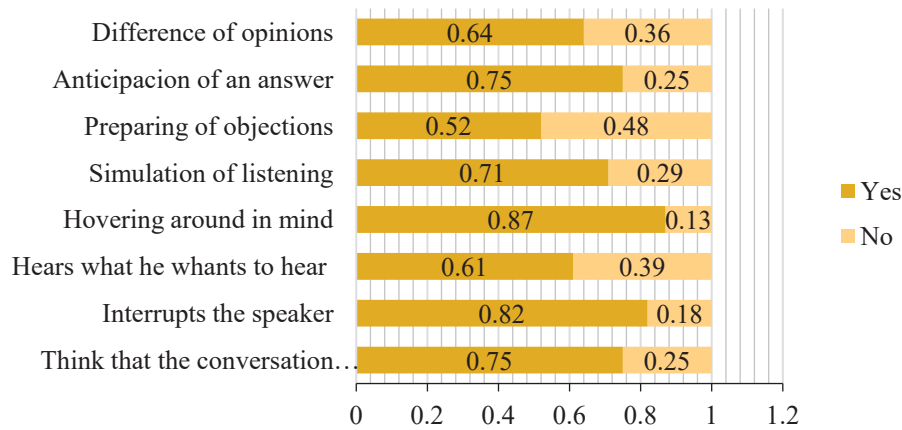


Figure 2. Listener's behaviour in different situations, %.

Table 2

**Listen to the speaker even if it is not interesting**

Perception	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Most of the time	19	21
Frequently	29	32
Occasionally	32	37
Almost never	9	10
Total	89	100

hover around in mind when someone is speaking to them (13%). Experience plays an important role in mutual communication, as the level of communication ability of various people is different. A situation arises where one of the conversation partners thinks that the other partner knows it (22% of respondents), but in reality it is not true. This creates confusion and misunderstanding during the conversation. Therefore, it is important to ask if you have understood the idea correctly (Figure 2).

Active listening occurs, when a person is focusing on what the speaker is saying even when it is not interesting (53% of respondents), but 47% of respondents need to learn doing it (Table 2).

In order to better hear and understand the speaker, it is important to repeat in your own words what you think the speaker feels (Figure 3) (35% of respondents reflect the partner's feelings, 65% of teachers do not). There are many details to follow in a conversation, that is why 56% of teachers capture the key ideas during the conversation. However, 44% of respondents do not consider it necessary. Teachers take into account who they are talking to (anxious, aggressive, disinterested, hurried, shy, stubborn, impatient person, etc.) – 95% of respondents. When speaking, respondents also think about how the partner will react to what they say (76%). Problems in communication are affected

by word comprehension; consequently, it is necessary to ask the speaker, what a particular word means. Teachers – 56% of respondents – ask to repeat foreign words that they do not understand and to explain their meaning. Communication is productive when we listen to a different opinion of our partner (93% of respondents) and listen when it is not interesting for them (53% of teachers). Twenty seven percent of teachers use paraphrasing in communication. The most common listening errors are: a) deviation from the topic of conversation; b) focus only on the facts (research shows that a person can remember 5 facts); c) painful moments (certain words causing the listener's reaction) (Burley-Allen, 1995; Panfilova, 2006). Teachers believe that when communicating with others, they take something from each conversation partner, even though sometimes it can be something insignificant (67%). When listening, respondents perceive what is being said in general: verbally and non-verbally – 89% and understand that the same words mean different things to different people – 80%. Visual contact is important almost for all respondents, as 95% look at the speaker. Respondents focus more on what is said than on the appearance of the speaker – 83%. In the communication process, teachers understand which words or statements cause more emotional reaction of the communication partner – 77%. Respondents

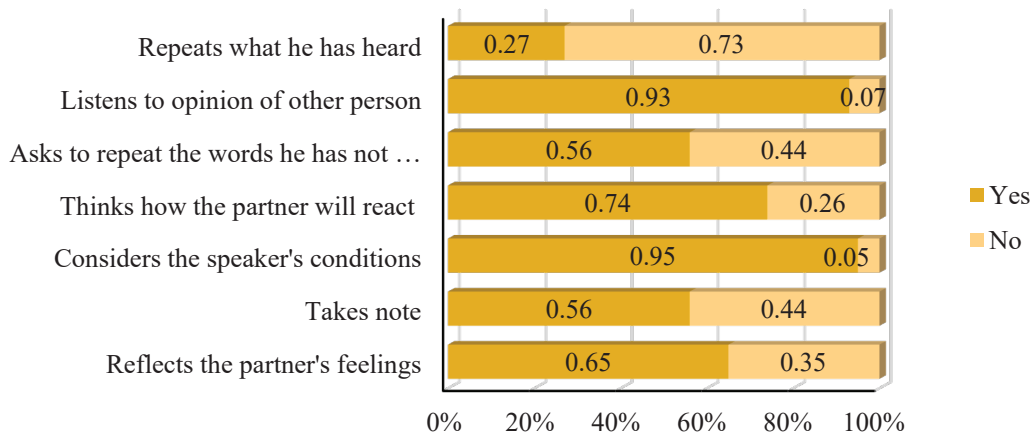


Figure 3. Listener's behaviour in communication for better understanding of a partner, %.

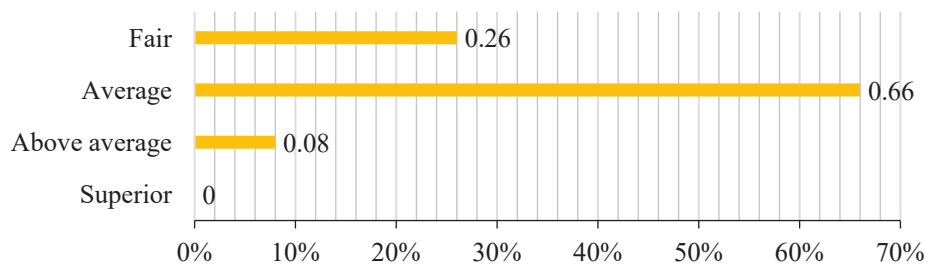


Figure 4. Teachers listening level, %.

thinking previously of the goal they desire to achieve in a particular communication – 78%. Respondents who plan at which moment it would be better to express their thoughts – 66%. Teachers also evaluate how to communicate better: in writing, verbally, by phone, on a notice-board, with a note – 81%.

Respondents allow the speaker to express their negative attitude without taking a position of defence – 25% and 62% of teachers listen to speakers without judging or criticizing them. Respondents are disturbed by ambient noise in communication – 40%. Therefore, the environment in which the conversation takes place must be considered. Respondents repeat the instructions received and statements made to make sure they understand them – 57%.

When evaluating the respondents' answers to the methodological statements, the levels of listening ability of teachers were determined (Figure 4). It should be noted that no respondents have a superior level. In turn, 8% of respondents have above average level, 66% of respondents have average level and 26% of teachers has fair level. This shows that all respondents still have something to strive for as a listener in order to fully participate in the mediation process, in which listening plays an important part. Of course, for teachers, the ability to listen is useful not only in mediation, but also in their everyday pedagogical activities.

Thus, the ability to listen plays an important role in the communicative competence of teachers in general and in the role of mediator in particular. Therefore, changes need to be made in the mediation study curriculum (program A – 36 hours) based on the findings of the study (overcoming selectivity of attention; how to focus on listening when it is not interesting; how to listen without judging the conversation partner and reflect the feelings).

### Conclusions

1. Listening is an essential skill in the communication process, and it is a part of teachers' communicative competence. The ability to listen is used in mediation, which is a promoting, non-confrontational process of dispute resolution, which focuses directly on the priorities and needs of the parties of a dispute. To reach an agreement in the mediation process, the parties of a dispute must be able to listen to the parties involved in the dispute. Listening is affected by concentration, emotional culture of a person and by the motivation to listen in general.
2. In the process of communication, mutual beneficiation of partners takes place. This is the opinion of 67% of respondents. Respondents think that they can gain experience from each conversation partner to a greater or lesser extent.



3. The following strong points in the communication process (listening) can be underlined for teachers: creating visual contact (95%); continues to listen to the partner even if he thinks he knows what the partner will say (79%); focuses on what is said (83%); 77% of respondents are aware of their emotional reaction to certain words; in spite of different situations, 88% of teachers try to maintain their listening focus in communication.
4. It is necessary to improve the ability to listen in relation to the selectivity of information perception in cases of disagreement, to allow the speaker to complete his thoughts in any listening situation. Only 28% of respondents contribute their time to improving their listening ability. Consequently, the mediation program for teachers will include exercises and theory on these aspects of listening.

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