

TEACHING LISTENING SKILLS

Ringers are frequently told to listen to their bell. To some it comes more naturally than others. But what does listening to your bell actually mean? I believe that we need to teach this as a skill at an early stage in ringing. These are the steps I follow using a set of exercises to teach the listening processes that experienced ringers do subconsciously.

Appreciating Your Position in the Change

The first step is based on clapping rhythms. Clapping is a physical activity like ringing a bell and it emphasises the strong physical rhythm felt by good strikers. Children are fine at doing these exercises but adults can feel a little bit silly. I usually explain why I am doing this and take a light hearted approach so that no-one feels embarrassed. Often when things get out of sync the "touch" collapses with great hilarity!

I recommend this series of exercises be introduced as ringers are beginning to ring rounds and at any stage further on when striking needs to be reviewed.

Like change ringing it can be helpful to have some strong ringers in the band for stability. However, this is not essential and it can be done with a complete band of beginners. The teacher can be part of the group or an extra depending on numbers.

- Get 6 or 8 ringers to stand in a circle with the teacher
- Explain that we need to listen to the whole change as well as your own position within the change
- Explain the 6 (or 8) bell rhythm and the hand stroke gap (1 2 3 4 5 6 1 2 3 4 5 6 gap 1 2 3 etc)
- Exercise 1 - Clap this rhythm together saying the numbers out loud. When the hand stroke gap comes move the hands outwards palms upwards but don't say "gap". This gives a physical feeling to the gap although it remains silent (as in ringing). The physical movement takes the same amount of time as a clap so it gives the correct length of gap.
- Exercise 2 – Repeat the first exercise but say the bell positions in your head. Emphasise the importance of always saying the positions in your head.
- Exercise 3 – Keep clapping the whole change but each person says their own position. Everyone should hear the numbers progress round the circle but at the same time they are clapping the rhythm of the whole change.
- Exercise 4 – Keep clapping the whole change but *quietly*. Say nothing out loud but clap your own position *loudly*. You should hear the loud clap progress round the circle.

These 4 exercises are designed to build up the appreciation of the whole change and then your own position within that. They sound easy but it is often quite difficult for beginners (and some more experienced ringers) to get the hang of this. You may need to repeat the exercises several times to get a good result. It is worth persevering as good listening skills are vital.

Hearing the Errors in Ringing

The next step is to listen to some ringing together as a group. There is an excellent CD produced by the Central Council called Listen to Ringing. The ringing is computer generated so the errors are consistent which is very helpful to learners.

- Explain the process before beginning
 - Listen to the whole change
 - Work out which bell is uneven

- Is it too fast or too slow?
- Is the fault at hand, back or both strokes?
- The tracks vary in difficulty – start with the easiest ones!
- Play one of the tracks
- Ask for opinions rather than single out people to answer
- If views differ, discuss why (was 4 late or 5 early?)
- Unless everyone was in agreement play the track again – it is much easier once you know the answer!
- Confidence grows after a few tracks
- Don't do too many in one session – it can get tedious

Putting It Into Practice

The final step is to translate the listening skills into practice. Before you start to practice discuss the following:

- If you can now hear whether you are ringing too fast or too slow, how do you correct it?
- If you need to be quicker
 - Catch sally higher (hand stroke)
 - Take in some tail end (back stroke)
- If you need to be slower
 - Catch sally lower (hand stroke)
 - Let out some tail end (back stroke)
- Whenever you start to ring listen to the rounds and check if you're in the right place
- Adjust your tail end and sally until you can hear it is right
- When you start ringing changes keep listening to your position and adjust you bell whenever you need to

Even when learners progress to method ringing keep returning to rounds or plain hunt specifically to concentrate on striking. Eventually good striking will become a habit.