# The Idea of Two Types of Responses in Active Listening: An Introduction to Confirmative Response and Reactive Response

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*Abstract*

The words "listening" and "empathy" have several definitions. This paper aims to introduce simple and concrete concepts instead of these words. Asano established the "dialogue method" and classified all responses in verbal communication into "confirmative" and "reactive" responses. A confirmative response is effective in preventing misunderstandings and establishing a better rapport. A reactive response is necessary to sustain a normal conversation. Some studies to prove the effectiveness of these concepts were conducted. Overall, the feelings aroused by confirmative responses were more positive than those by reactive responses. Training for confirmation skills proved to be effective among high-school students.

*Key Words :* listening, empathy, dialogue method, confirmative response, reactive response

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to introduce the rule known as the "dialogue method" and the idea of two types of responses proposed by Asano. This paper also deals with verbal response.

Human communication is very complex, giving way to many communication theories and skills. For example, the word "listening" has several definitions. The definition differs according to various authors and scholars. One definition of listening includes responses from a listener while another does not (Glenn, 1989). On the other hand, in Japanese, there are two different meanings of "empathy." Empathy is translated as "Kyokan" in Japanese. However, Kyokan also has another meaning—"sympathy." In addition, empathy is a psychological and hence a covert phenomenon. This characteristic makes it difficult to teach and learn empathy.

Owing to these reasons, for simplicity, listening and empathy are often taught in the form of refrains, parroting, reflection, and repetition by some instructors. However, these substitute skills are sometimes not preferred because they engender forced or unnatural feelings.

The author felt that another simple skill might be necessary instead of listening and empathy, because simplicity is important for beginners learning communication theories and skills.

## DIALOGUE METHOD

In 1994, Asano (1997) established his own dialogue rule: Before revealing your thoughts and/or feelings, confirm, in your own words, the intent of the message that the speaker wishes to convey. For convenience, he named this rule the "dialogue method." This rule is effective when we talk about important topics or during a conflict of opinion or feelings, or even in the event of a perceived misunderstanding. Putting this rule into practice as and when a situation demands during our day-to-day conversations is instrumental in preventing any misunderstandings and establishing a better rapport.

Asano began applying this rule to training in communication skills. Subsequently, during the review of literatures on these topics, Asano (2008a) discovered an idea proposed by Dr. C. Rogers that was almost similar to the rule of the "dialogue method."

This was what Dr. Rogers (1961, p. 332) proposed:

Fortunately, I can suggest a little laboratory experiment which you can try to test the quality of your understanding. The next time you get into an argument with your wife, or your friend, or with

a small group of friends, just stop the discussion for a moment and for an experiment, institute this rule: "Each person can speak up for himself only after he has first restated the ideas and feelings of the previous speaker accurately and to that person's satisfaction."

Dr. Rogers stated the importance of restatement for an experiment on communication. Asano went a step ahead and made it an ongoing and essential rule of communication.


## THE IDEA OF TWO TYPES OF RESPONSES

Next, Asano (2004) began to classify all responses in verbal communication into "confirmative responses" and "reactive responses" and began to investigate the evidence for this idea.

A confirmative response is a response in which the listener confirms, in his own words, the intent of the message conveyed by the speaker. Confirmative responses consist of confirmation of the feelings and thoughts behind, and the content of the message. Therefore, the concept of confirmative responses integrates "empathy" and "confirmation of a fact" into one word.

Examples of confirmative responses are as follows: active listening, non-directive responses, restatements, paraphrases, summarization, reflections on a feeling, and understanding responses.

A confirmative response is effective in preventing misunderstandings and establishing better rapport. When a confirmative response is used as a communication skill, it is sometimes called a "confirmation skill." A confirmative response largely consists of a conjecture or guess. However, the accuracy of this conjecture or guess is not mandatory, because the "type" of response is essential for determining its psychological effects. In particular, a confirmative response can help improve weak "mechanical repeating" or parroting of statements. Parroting can be considered as a special kind of confirmative response.

A reactive response, on the other hand, is a response to the speaker's statement in which the listener expresses his own thoughts and/or feelings.
Examples of reactive responses are as follows: agreeing, disagreeing, advising, encouraging, ordering, directing, commanding, warning, judging, praising, sympathizing, and questioning.

A reactive response is necessary to sustain a conversation. Most daily conversations are sustained by reactive responses.


## INVESTIGATION

1. Psychological effect of confirmative responses (Asano, 2006)

The participants consisted of ten adults. The investigation made use of a questionnaire. The following instructions were given.

Imagine that you say the following sentence to a person : "I couldn't carry out the job that you ordered me to do because I have been very busy recently." After your statement, that person responds to you in various ways.

Imagine your own feelings upon listening to each response. Enter the grade indicating the intensity of your feeling in the appropriate blank for each response: good feeling (grade 3), neutral (grade 2), bad feeling (grade 1). The other conditions are optional.

This questionnaire comprised 7 confirmative responses and 13 reactive responses. Some of these responses are as follows.

Confirmative responses
No.3   "You are worrying about the job because of an unexpected situation."
No.5   "You are not capable of carrying out the job I ordered you to undertake."
No.13   "You were busier than you expected, weren't you?"
No.15   "You want my help, don't you?"

Reactive responses
No.1   "Don't give me that excuse.   I am busy too."
No.2   "Let's consider it together."
No.4   "You will be able to go through with it.   Please do your best."
No.20   "Why didn't you inform me earlier?"

The results suggested that, on the whole, feelings aroused by confirmative responses were better than those aroused by reactive responses (Figs. 1 and 2).
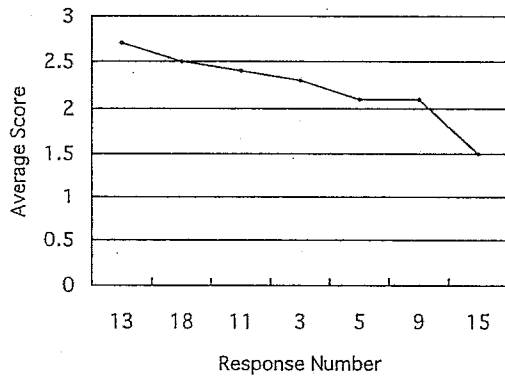


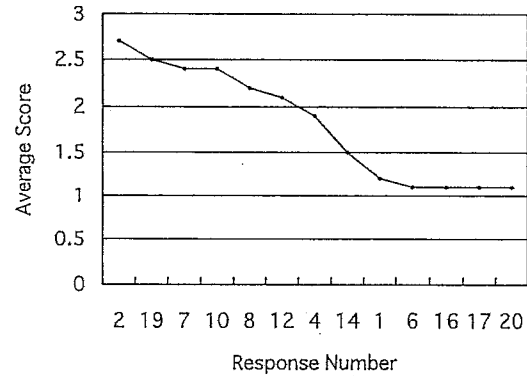Fig. 1　Confirmative responses (n = 10)　　　　Fig. 2　Reactive responses (n = 10)

After this study, Asano (2008b) investigated the effects of the two types of responses given by 33 participants under four different conditions.　The speakers' statements and listeners' responses were the same.　The four conditions were as follows.

(1) When the speaker shared an amicable relationship with the listener
(2) When the speaker did not share an amicable relationship with the listener
(3) When the speaker experienced positive feelings
(4) When the speaker experienced negative feelings

The results suggested that on the whole, the feelings aroused by confirmative responses were more positive than those aroused by reactive responses.

According to the results of this study, Asano supposes that the effect of confirmative responses is relatively constant regardless of the conditions.　In contrast, the effect of reactive responses is dependent on certain conditions, for example, the relationship between two persons, nature of the feeling experienced, facial expressions, person's attitude, experiences, and beliefs.　Furthermore, the differences between the two types of responses will be more evident if the speaker's feelings after a real response are measured by some biological reaction to the response.

2.　The effects of "confirmation skills" training (Asano, 2007, 2008c)

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of classroom-based confirmation skills training on the communication skills and loneliness experienced by high school students.　The participants consisted of students from 3 experimental and 3 control classes.　The students were selected from among 431 high school students (243 male and 188 female students) on the basis of the pretest results.　The "communication skills with classmates scale" (Yamaguchi, Iida & Ishikuma, 2004) and "the revised UCLA loneliness scale" (Moroi, 1991) were used in this investigation.

Some of the statements in the "communication skills with classmates scale" were as follows.
(1) You have no inhibitions when sharing your thoughts with friends.
(2) You can consult with someone about your worries.
(3) You can be frank in expressing your feelings.

The experimental classes participated in the confirmation skill training, which was facilitated by each homeroom teacher for about 20 minutes.　The training was conducted about 4–8 times.　The control classes participated in the normal homeroom sessions.　The results are indicated in Figs. 3 and 4.　Following the training, the average scores of the low communication ability group increased and that of the high loneliness group decreased.　The results suggested that confirmation skill training proved to be effective for the students.
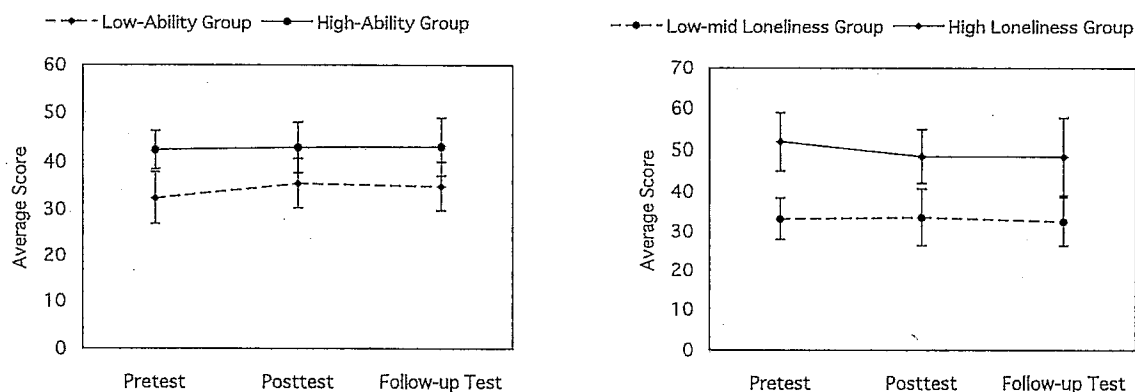
Fig. 3 Communication skills with classmates (n = 74, p < .05)  Fig. 4 Loneliness (n = 70, p < .05)

## CONCLUSION

The new concepts and skills related to communication make the definition of listening and empathy more concrete and easier to comprehend.  Therefore, it will be possible to facilitate the teaching and understanding of the theory and skills related to listening and empathy (Asano, 2010). Applying the new concepts helps shorten the dialogue method.  Before giving a reactive response, it is necessary to offer a confirmative response when required.  In addition, it is important to take the time taken to change the response from a reactive type to confirmative type into account.  The author intends to investigate the conditions related to the time taken for response changes.

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