

LECTURE 6: LISTENING

Listening is just as important as speaking is on the basic level of communication. It is impossible for communication to occur without someone receiving a sender's message. Despite the importance of listening, experience shows that much of the listening we and others do is not at all effective. We misunderstand others and we are misunderstood in return.

Learning Outcomes

At the end of this class, you should be able to:

- i. Define listening and distinguish it from hearing;
- ii. Understand the Misconceptions about listening;
- iii. Explain the Five components of listening process;
- iv. Analyze the skills necessary to listen effectively in informational, critical and empathetic settings;
- v. Discuss the challenges that make effective listening difficult, and the most common types of ineffective listening.

Clarifying Misconceptions about listening

Listening and hearing is not the same thing. **Hearing** is the process wherein sound waves strike the eardrum and cause vibrations that are transmitted to the brain. **Listening** occurs when the brain reconstructs these electrochemical impulses into a representation of the original sound and then gives them meaning. A closer look at listening consists of:

- a. *Attending* is the act of paying attention to a signal. An individual's needs, desires, wants and interests determine what is attended to, or selected.
- b. *Understanding* is the process of making sense of a message. It requires a grasp of the syntax of the language being spoken, semantic decoding, and knowledge of the pragmatic rules that help one to figure out a speaker's meaning from the context. It also depends on the ability to organize the information we hear into recognizable form.
- c. *Responding* to a message consists of giving observable feedback to the speaker. Offering feedback serves two important functions: it helps you clarify your understanding of a speaker's message, and it shows that you care about what that speaker is saying.

- d. *Remembering.* Research has revealed that people remember only half of what they hear immediately after hearing it. Within two months half of the half is forgotten, that is 25% of the original message retained. This loss, however does not take two months: people start forgetting immediately (within 8 hours the 50% remembered drops to about 35%). Given the amount of information we process everyday- from instructors, friends, the media and other sources- the residual message (what we remember) is a small fraction of what we hear.

Listening is not a natural process the truth is that listening is a skill much like speaking: Virtually everyone listens, although few people do it well. Listening is not like breathing, it is a skill much like speaking. Listening can be improved through instruction and training. Despite this fact, the amount of time devoted to teaching listening is far less than that devoted to other types of communication.

Listening is not a passive activity it requires effort. Most people assume that listening is fundamentally a passive activity in which the receiver absorbs a speaker's ideas in rather the way a sponge absorbs water. Listening requires mental effort by the receiver especially in one-way communication. Sometimes the responsibility for incomplete and inaccurate decoding rests with the speaker, and sometimes with the listener. In either case, it takes hard work and a fair amount of back- and- forth interaction by both parties to clarify messages.

All listeners do not receive the same message. When two or more people are listening to a speaker, we tend to assume that they are all hearing and understanding the same message. Psychological factors, social roles, cultural backgrounds, personal interests, and needs (perceptions) all shape and distort the raw data we hear into uniquely different messages. Communication is proactive: Each person involved in a transaction of ideas or feelings responds uniquely.

Take Note



Listening and *hearing* is not the same thing. All listeners do not receive the same

message. Listening is not a passive activity it requires effort. Listening is not a natural process

The five components of listening

Hearing is physiological aspect of listening. It is the nonselective process of sound waves impinging on the ear and the ear responding to those waves that fall within a certain frequency range and are sufficiently loud. Background noise, auditory fatigue and temporary or permanent hearing loss caused by continuous exposure to the same tone or loudness affects hearing.

Attending, the sounds are converted into electrochemical impulses and transmitted to the brain; decision often unconscious is made to focus on what was heard. Attending is a psychological process.

Understanding involves interpreting a message and some recognition of the grammatical rules used to create a message. It depends generally on sharing common assumptions about the world and on the ability to organize the information we hear into recognizable form.

Responding to a message consists of giving observable feedback to the speaker. Offering feedback serves two important functions:

1. It helps you clarify your understanding of a speaker's message, and
2. It shows that you care about what that speaker is saying. Listeners should respond to the speaker visibly by nonverbal behaviours such as keeping eye contact and reacting with appropriate facial expressions.

Remembering, the ability to recall information is a function of several factors: the number of times the information is heard or repeated, how much information there is to store in the brain, and whether the information may be "rehearsed" or not.

Faulty listening behaviours

Pseudo listening is an imitation of the real thing or the 'uhh—huh' type of listeners their present physically but not attentively. They look you in the eye even smile at the right times they even give answers. But something totally different is happening, because they use a polite façade to mask thoughts that have nothing to do with what speaker is saying.

Stage hogging, Stage hogs are only interested only in expressing their ideas and don't care about anyone else have to say. Sometimes called '*conversational narcissists*', they will try to turn the topic of conversation to themselves instead of showing any interest the speaker. Interruptions are a hallmark of stage hogging; besides preventing the listener from learning potential information stage hogging can damage relationship between the speaker and the interrupter.

Selective listening responds only to the parts of a speaker's remarks that interest them, rejecting everything else.

Filling in gaps because we remember half or less of what we hear, these people manufacture information so that they retell what they listened to. It is as dangerous as selective listening: the message that is left is only a distorted (not merely incomplete) version of the message that could have been received.

Assimilation to prior messages is a tendency to interpret current messages in terms of similar messages remembered from the past. This phenomenon is called *assimilation to prior input*. This unfortunate situation occurs when current message is in some way uniquely different from the past messages.

Insulated listening, these are almost the opposite of the selective-listeners. Instead of looking for something, these people avoid it. Whenever a topic arises they would rather not deal with, insulated listeners simply fail to hear it or, rather, to acknowledge it.

Defensive listening, they take innocent comments as personal attack. It is fair to assume that many defensive listeners are suffering from shaky public images and avoid admitting this by projecting their insecurities onto others.

Ambushing, they listen carefully, but only because they are collecting information to attack what you have to say.

Insensitive listening they are not able to look beyond the words and behaviour to understand their hidden meanings. Instead, they take a speaker's remarks at face value.

REASONS FOR POOR LISTENING

What causes people to listen poorly? There are several reasons some of which can be avoided and others that are sad inescapable facts of life.

1. **EFFORT** Listening is hard work. Physical changes that occur during careful listening show the effort it takes: heart rate quickens, respiration increases and body temperature increases listening carefully can be taxing as more obvious efforts. Preparing yourself for the task can solve this.
2. **MESSAGE OVERLOAD** The amount of speech most of us encounter daily makes careful listening of everything we hear impossible. Solution is that we should listen more carefully to what matters the most; what is worth your attention.
3. **RAPID THOUGHT** listening carefully is impossible for a physiological reason. Although we are capable of understanding speech rate at 600 words per minute the average person speaks between 100-140 words per minute therefore we have enough mental 'spare time' to spend when someone is talking. And we use this time in thoughts that are not related to what the speaker is saying. Trick is to use this time to understand speaker's ideas better rather than to drift of.
4. **PSYCHOLOGICAL NOISE** we are to 'caught up' in our own personal issues rather than to listen to what speakers has to say. It is taxing to pay attention to someone when you are anticipating an exam and so on. It usually takes a conscious effort to set aside your own personal concerns if you have to focus on the speaker's message.
5. **PHYSICAL NOISE** Involves traffic music and all, also involves fatigue or other discomfort can distract our attention. You can listen better by insulating yourself from outside distractions. In some cases you and speaker may have to find a more suitable place to speak in order to make listening work.
6. **HEARING PROBLEMS** Listener may have a hearing problem and speaker may not be aware this may cause frustrations between both parties. If you suspect one has hearing defect it's wise to have physician or audiologist perform examination.

7. **FAULTY ASSUMPTIONS** we often make assumptions that we are listening and we are not. Especially if the subject is familiar to us. We assume we have heard it all before we tend to think comments are too complex or simple so we block our minds you may come to realize comments you assumed to be quite valuable. Of course you will never know till you listen.
8. **TALKING HAS MORE APPARENT ADVANTAGES** It may often appear that we have more to gain when speaking rather than when listening. You gain admiration, respect when speaking than when listening people think your smart if you speak well. It is wise to speak at the right time
9. **CULTURAL DIFFERENCES** the way members of different cultures communicate can affect listening. We have various styles from different cultures. We therefore have to come to a common base of understanding each other.
10. **MEDIA INFLUENCES** Influence of contemporary mass media especially television and radio is a final challenge to serious listening. A growing amount of programming consists of short segments: news items, commercials, music and so on. In the same way news stories consist of brief stories with declining portion of text and growing amount of graphical image. These trends discourage kind of focused attention that is necessary for careful listening, especially to complicated ideas and feeling.
11. **LACK OF TRAINING** listening well is hampered by lack of skill, listening is a skill much like speaking: virtually everybody does it, although few people do it well.

Types of listening

Evaluative/critical listening

Critical listening is also called evaluative listening. The goal of evaluative listening is to judge the quality of the message in order to decide whether or not to accept or reject an idea. It is putting an idea to test based on its merit. Non critical listeners usually question and are gullible because they don't pay attention to the message being passed on to them. Evaluative listening is appropriate when someone is trying to persuade you to buy a product; to act in a certain way or accept a belief.

How to be a critical listener**1. Listen for information before evaluating**

All of us are guilty of judging a speaker's idea before we completely understand it. There is a strong tendency to make judgments especially if the idea you're hearing conflicts with your own beliefs. You can avoid this through paraphrasing a speaker's idea before responding to it. The effort of translating or paraphrasing the other person's ideas into your own words will keep you from arguing and if your interpretation is mistaken you will know immediately.

2. Evaluate the speaker's credibility

Acceptability of an idea depends on its source:

For example:

If your longtime family friend, the self-made millionaire, invited you to invest your life savings in his or her investment ventures, you will be grateful for the tip. But if your poor brother-in-law made the same offer you would probably laugh at the suggestion.

The two questions you should ask yourself on deciding on whether or not to accept a speaker as authority

- a. Is the speaker competent? Does he/she have the experience or expertise to qualify as an authority on this subject? Note that someone who is knowledgeable in one area may not be as well off in the other.
- b. Is the speaker impartial? Knowledge alone isn't enough to certify a speaker's credibility, as acceptable. People who have a personal stake in the outcome of a topic are most likely to be biased.

3. Examine the speaker's evidence and reasoning

Speakers usually offer some kind of support to back up their statements. Several supporting materials may be used to prove a point such as definitions, descriptions, analogies, and statistics and so on. For whatever form the support takes, you should ask whether the evidence is true. Most people won't tell deliberate lies but will distort or misquote the information they give. The other question is whether the evidence given is enough.

Questions that determine the quality of a speaker's evidence and reasoning

- a. Is enough evidence presented?
- b. Is the evidence from a reliable source?
- c. Can it be interpreted?
- d. Is the evidence recent and updated?

4. Examine emotional appeals.

Sometimes emotion alone may be enough reason to persuade you. It is a mistake to let yourself to be swayed by emotion when the logic of a point is not sound.

Empathic Listening

Empathic listening is listening to understand another person's feelings; experiences etc and hence build a relationship or help the speaker solve a problem.

Styles of responding empathically

1. **Advising response:** to help by offering a solution, be sure of three conditions
 - Be confident that the advice is correct.
 - Ask yourself whether the person is willing to accept it.
 - Be certain that the receiver won't blame you if the advice won't work.
2. **Judging Response:** evaluates the sender's thoughts / behavior in some way. They can be received best when;
 - The person with the problem has requested an evaluation from you.
 - The Judgment is genuinely construction and not designed as a put down.
3. **Analyzing Response:** a listener offers an interpretation of speaker's message. To offer a helpful analysis;
 - Offer your interpretation in a tentative way rather than as absolute fact.
 - Your analysis ought to have a reasonable chance of being corrected especially one that sounds plausible.
 - Be sure the person will be receptive to your analysis.
 - Be sure of your motive for offering an analysis is truly to help another person.

4. **Questioning response:** helps others think about their problems and understand them more clearly. The best questioning follows this principles;
 - Don't ask questions to satisfy your own curiosity.
 - Let not your questions confuse or distract the person you are trying to help.
 - Don't use questions to disguise your suggestions or criticism.
5. **Supporting response:** can take several forms; agreement, offers to help, praise, reassurance, diversion and acknowledgement. When support is appropriate follow these:
 - Make sure your expression of support is sincere.
 - Be sure the other person can accept your support.
6. **Prompting response:** involves using sentence and brief statements of encouragement to draw others out and in so doing to help them solve problem. It works well when you can't help others make a decision.
7. **Paraphrasing response:** it is used to understand others and be sure to reflect both the thoughts and the feelings you hear being expressed. The factors to consider before you decide to paraphrase;
 - Is the problem complex enough?
 - Do you have the necessary time and concern?
 - Are you genuinely interested in helping the other person?
 - Can you withhold judgment?
 - Is your paraphrasing in proportion to other responses?

Further Reading



Informational listening (read the scanned copy and reflect on the notes)

From page 9 to 15 extracted from Adler, R.B. & Rodman, G. 2006. *Understanding human communication*. 9th edition. London: Oxford University Press. Pages 124-130

INFORMATIONAL LISTENING

Informational listening is the approach to take when you want to understand another person. When you are an informational listener, your goal is to make sure you are receiving the same thoughts the other person is trying to convey—not always an easy feat. The situations that call for informational listening are endless and varied: following an instructor's comments in class, listening to a friend's account of a night on the town,

hearing a description of a new piece of equipment that you're thinking about buying, learning about your family history from a relative's tales, swapping ideas in a discussion about religion or politics—the list goes on and on.

You can become more effective as an informational listener by approaching others with a constructive attitude and by using some simple but effective skills.

Don't Argue or Judge Prematurely

Ever since ancient Greece and later Rome, Western civilization has admired the ability to persuade others. This tradition has led us to measure the success of much communication in terms of whether it changes the way others think and act. Recall, for example, what often happens when people encounter someone with differing opinions? Rather than try to understand one another, their conversation often turns into an argument or debate (sometimes friendly, and sometimes not) in which the participants try to change one another's minds.

Persuasion is certainly one important goal of communication, but it isn't the only one. Most people would agree with the principle that it's essential to understand a speaker's ideas before judging them. Despite this commonsense fact, all of us are guilty of forming snap judgments, evaluating others before hearing them out. This tendency is greatest when the speaker's ideas conflict with our own.

Separate the Message from the Speaker

The first recorded cases of blaming the messenger for an unpleasant message occurred in ancient Greece. When messengers would arrive reporting losses in battles, their generals were known to respond to the bad news by having the messengers put to death. This sort of irrational reaction is still common (though fortunately less violent) today. Consider a few situations in which there is a tendency to get angry with a communicator bearing unpleasant news: An instructor tries to explain why you did poorly on a major paper; a friend explains what you did to make a fool of yourself at the party last Saturday night; the boss points out how you could do your job better.

Be Opportunistic

Even if you listen with an open mind, sooner or later you will end up hearing information that is either so unimportant or so badly delivered that you're tempted to tune out.

Although making a quick escape from such tedious situations is often the best thing to do, there are times when you can profit from paying close attention to apparently worthless communication. This is especially true when you're trapped in a situation where the only alternatives to attentiveness are pseudo listening or downright rudeness. As an opportunistic listener you can find some value in even the worst situations, if you are willing to invest the effort.

Look for Key Ideas

It's easy to lose patience with long-winded speakers who never seem to get to the point—or have a point, for that matter. Nonetheless, most people do have a central idea, or what

we will call a “thesis” in Chapter 1. By using your ability to think more quickly than the speaker can talk, you may be able to extract the thesis from the surrounding mass of words you’re hearing. If you can’t figure out what the speaker is driving at, you can always ask in a tactful way by using the skills of questioning and paraphrasing, which we’ll examine next.

Ask Questions

Questioning involves asking for additional information to clarify your idea of the sender’s message. Despite their apparent benefits, not all questions are equally helpful. Whereas **sincere questions** are aimed at understanding others, **counterfeit questions** are really disguised attempts to send a message, not receive one.

At times like this it’s a good idea to recall a quote attributed to Confucius: “He who asks a question is a fool for five minutes. He who does not ask is a fool for life.”

Paraphrase

Questioning is often a valuable tool for increasing understanding. Sometimes, however, questions won’t help you understand a speaker’s ideas any more clearly.

The term **paraphrasing**, involves restating in your own words the message you thought the speaker had just sent, without adding anything new. For example: “You said ‘Forget it,’ but it sounds like you’re mad. Are you?”

Whether your paraphrasing reflects a speaker’s thoughts or feelings, and whether it focuses on a specific comment or a general theme, the key to success is to restate the other person’s comments in your own words as a way of cross-checking the information. If you simply repeat the speaker’s comments verbatim, you will sound foolish—and you still might well be misunderstanding what has been said. Notice the difference between simply parroting a statement and really paraphrasing:

Speaker: “I’d like to go, but I can’t afford it.”

Parroting: “You’d like to go, but you can’t afford it.”

Paraphrasing: “So if we could find a way to pay for you, you’d be willing to come. Is that right?”

Take Notes

Understanding others is crucial, of course, but comprehending their ideas doesn’t guarantee that you will remember them. As you read earlier in this chapter, listeners usually forget almost two-thirds of what they hear. Sometimes recall isn’t especially important. You don’t need to retain many details of the vacation adventures recounted by a neighbor or the childhood stories told by a relative. At other times, though, remembering a message—even minute details—is important. The lectures you hear in class are an obvious example. At times like these it’s smart to take notes instead of relying on your memory.

Sometimes these notes may be simple and brief: a phone number jotted on a scrap of paper or a list of things to pick up at the market. In other cases—a lecture, for example—your notes need to be much longer. When detailed notes are necessary, a few simple points will help make them effective:

1. *Don't wait too long before beginning to jot down ideas.* If you don't realize that you need to take notes until five minutes into a conversation, you're likely to forget much of what has been said and miss out on other information as you scramble to catch up.
2. *Record only key ideas.* Don't try to capture every word of long messages. If you can pin down the most important points, your notes will be easier to follow and much more useful.
3. *Develop a note-taking format.* The exact form you choose isn't important. Some people use a formal outlining scheme with headings designated by Roman numerals, letters, and numbers, whereas others use simple lists. You might come up with useful symbols: boxes around key names and numbers or asterisks next to especially important information. After you develop a consistent format, your notes will not only help you remember information, but also help you whip others' ideas into a shape that's useful to you.

References:

Adler, Ronald B. and Rodman, George. 2006. *Understanding Human Communication*. New York. Oxford University Press.

Tips on How to Become a Better Listener

1. **Take listening seriously.** Being a good listener is just as important as being an effective speaker. Accord listening the seriousness it deserves. Good listening takes practice and self discipline.
2. **Be an active listener.** Non-verbal skills such as positive facial expressions, smiling, and eye contact with the speaker will help you pay attention (and also make the speaker feel more comfortable). Active listeners should also resist distractions, not allow to be diverted by a speaker's appearance or delivery, suspending judgment until you have heard the speaker out, focusing your listening, and developing note-taking skills.
3. **Resist Distractions.** Don't be diverted by the speaker's appearance or delivery.
4. **Try not to be judgmental.** If the speaker has an opinion that differs from yours, don't automatically dismiss the speaker's information. You might acquire more information that will broaden the horizons of your opinion.
5. **Don't be diverted by Appearance or Delivery.** If the speaker is wearing distracting clothing or has an accent that is hard to understand, try to stay focused on the material, not the distractions.
6. **Focus your listening.** Listen for main points and supporting evidence. Don't focus too much on the specific details.

7. **Listen for technique.** Study the methods other people use to speak effectively. Try to identify the techniques the speaker is using to get their message across, such as persuasion, group activities, visual aids, etc.
8. **Develop note-taking skills.** Try to create an outline of the main ideas of the speech.

From: Lucas, Stephen E. *The Art of Public Speaking*. 9th Edition. McGraw Hill, 2004.

Summary



Even the best message is useless if it goes unreceived or if it is misunderstood. For this reason, listening—the process of giving meaning to an oral message—is a vitally important part of the communication process.

We began our look at the subject by identifying and refuting several myths about listening. Our conclusion here was that effective listening is a skill that needs to be developed in order for us to be truly effective in understanding others.

We next took a close look at five steps in the process of listening: hearing, attending, understanding, responding, and remembering. We described some of the challenges that make effective listening so difficult.

We described seven faulty listening behaviors and ten more reasons why people often listen poorly. You can become a better listener by recognizing which of these faulty behaviors and reasons characterize your communication.

This chapter also discussed several personal listening styles: content-oriented, people-oriented, action-oriented, and time-oriented. The chapter pointed out that most people favor one of these styles, and that problems arise when different types of listeners interact.

All of these styles have both advantages and drawbacks, and effective listeners will use each one when it is most appropriate for the circumstances.

The chapter continued by examining three types of listening. Informational listening is the proper approach to take when the goal is to understand another person's ideas.

Information can be best gained with an active approach to listening. This active approach can involve either questioning or paraphrasing—restating the speaker's message in your own words.

Critical listening is appropriate when the goal is to judge the quality of an idea. A critical analysis will be most successful when the listener ensures correct understanding of a message before passing judgment, when the speaker's credibility is taken into account, when the quality of supporting evidence is examined, and when the logic of the speaker's arguments is examined carefully.

The aim of empathic listening is to help the speaker, not the receiver. Various helping responses include advising, judging, analyzing, questioning, supporting, prompting, and paraphrasing the speaker's thoughts and feelings. Listeners can be most helpful when they use a variety of styles, focus on the emotional dimensions of a message, and avoid being too judgmental.

Question



- Q1. Describe in your own words how we distinguish listening from hearing.
- Q2. Think about some different situations in which you are involved in listening. Identify and explain the types of listening you are engaged in.

Reference

Adler, R.B. & Rodmann, G. (2006). *Understanding human communication*. 9th edition. London: Oxford University Press. Page 72-109

Adler, R.B., Rodmann, G. and Hutchinson, C.C. (2011) global.uop.com *Understanding human communication*. 11th edition. London: Oxford University Press.

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Lucas, Stephen E. (2004) *The Art of Public Speaking*. 9th Edition. McGraw Hill.