

LEND ME YOUR EARS: DEVELOPING LISTENING SKILLS

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Abstract

Listening occupies a central place in communication in everyday situations as well as business settings. We spend more time listening than we spend speaking, reading and writing. Most of our knowledge of the world derives from listening input. In spite of the centrality of listening, it has received an unfair treatment in second and foreign language classrooms. On the other hand, reading and writing have received a favorable treatment. The present paper discusses why it is imperative to develop listening skills in our learners. Elaborating on the ingredients of effective listening and causes and consequences of poor listening, the paper suggests some remedial measures and exercises to improve the listening skills of learners of English as a second and foreign language.

Introduction

For too long listening has been relegated to secondary position in the English language classroom. This stems, in part, from the fact that whereas a considerable amount of research has been conducted into reading, writing, and speaking, there has been a paucity of research into listening (LeLoup and Ponterio 2003, pp. 4-5). This has happened in spite of the fact that most people spend more time listening than they spend speaking, reading and writing put together. We know that listening is one of the fundamental language skills. It is a medium through which children, young people and adults gain a large portion of their education---information about and understanding of the world and of human affairs, their ideals, sense of values, and their appreciation. Listening is critical in almost all activities of our lives --- in attending meetings, conferences and lectures; giving and receiving instructions; and helping staff and customers.

It is a continuous process of meaning making. When we listen to a speaker, we accept, reject, connect, correct, question, filter, personalize, generalize, particularize, organize, reorganize, recollect, anticipate, and so on. Listening is a key to understanding meanings and messages clearly. Yet, most people know less about listening than they know about the other language skills. Further, most people take extensive instruction in reading and writing, but not in listening. In short, people get the least amount of training in this form of communication that they use the most. As a result, there are a lot of poor listeners. In fact, two days after listening to a brief presentation, most people remember only one-fourth of

what they heard. That is why listening is a skill which we all need to develop. Fortunately, listening skills can be improved through training (Ober 2001). The goal of the training is to become an affirmative listener (Krisco 1997). An affirmative listener listens for new information rather than only for confirmation of what he already knows.

Unlike hearing, which is a passive physiological activity, listening is an active cognitive process. The difference between hearing and listening can be as big as the contrast between night and day. Most people just hear and think that they are listening. Hearing happens automatically; it requires no deliberate effort; it happens because our ears are open. Listening is a deliberate activity and requires energy and effort. It demands willingness, interest, and desire to understand. Listening requires attention and concentration. Attention is the ability to listen well for a prolonged period of time; concentration is the ability to cut out parasitic information. Listening takes place when we lend our ears and open our minds. Listening is to hearing what looking is to seeing. Both listening and looking require a zoom, whether auditory or visual, which enables a person to take in relevant information and reject irrelevant information. For example, students listen to their teacher in the classroom, but hear the noise generated by vehicles running on the road not very far from their school. They accept what the teacher is saying and reject the vehicular noise. One trait that distinguishes good students from poor students is their ability to listen. Good listening is a prerequisite to good retention.

The ability to listen effectively is increasingly recognized as a critical skill among managers and leaders, salespeople and in work teams. Scholars across disciplines claim that communication competence is central to effective functioning in organizations. They seem to agree on the centrality of listening skills in management. Effective communication begins with listening, which is a potent force for building trust and capturing the attention of potential clients. Listening and listening related factors such as empathy are important criteria in the evaluation of communication competence. Listening is one important aspect of communication that precedes verbal and non-verbal aspects. This means that in order to attain effective communication verbally or non-verbally communicators must first learn to listen in order to assess carefully the issues at hand and the required action that must be taken.

Good Listening Skills: Prerequisites

People generally tend to regard listening as a passive, automatic process that just happens rather than as a skill that is essential for effective communication. Yet in reality effective listening is a skill that needs to be developed as a prerequisite for successful speaking and writing. Listening involves a simultaneous orchestration of phonological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic skills. Let me take up these points one by one.

One, the listener has to *understand the speaker's accent* or pronunciation. It takes some time for the hearer to get used to a new speaker's speech habits and accent. For example, when I first landed in Vietnam, it took me some time to get accustomed to Vietnamese accent, which is characterized, among other features, by the deletion of word-final consonants. One day I asked one of my students where he was going; he said he was going to *die* with his girl friend. I was panicked and was about to dissuade him from the suicidal act but then he asked me whether I would like to *die* with them. When I understood what he meant, I heaved a sigh of relief. What he wanted to say was that he and his girl friend were going to *dine* and asked me if I would like to have dinner with them. Thus my understanding of the speaker's intent depended

on my familiarity with his accent.

Two, the listener has to *understand the syntax* used by the speaker. One case in point is syntactic ambiguity. For example, in the following case the listener has to understand whether the speaker is talking about guests as a nuisance or visits as a nuisance when he says, "*Visiting* guests can be a nuisance." The sentence is ambiguous if and when stripped of its context. The listener has to interpret it in the context of the preceding discourse. Literature abounds in examples of ambiguity of different types. Just as the reader has to exploit the conventions of literary creation, the listener has to exploit grammatical, syntactic and pragmatic resources to interpret what the speaker is saying.

Three, the ability to *understand connotations of words*, not just their denotations, is a vital quality of a good listener. Words have significances and values. The value of a word depends on the context in which it is embedded. Thus when Robert Frost says, "The woods are lovely, dark and deep, but I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep!" he is talking about the literal woods, miles and sleep; but more importantly, he is also talking about his obligations, about the journey of life and about death. It is a two-tier communication. Such multi-level communication occurs in everyday situations too. An intelligent listener understands the complexity of the whole process and interprets utterances using knowledge of the world, the language, and logic.

Four, the listener has to *understand the pragmatic force* of the speaker's utterances. Let me illustrate this point. Once my neighbour, who was a diabetic, asked his daughter about his box of chocolate?" The daughter replied, "Show me your diet sheet, please!" Now, the daughter could have said that she had eaten his chocolate or that she had hidden the box. The question is: what did the girl mean when she said that? What did the old man understand? Evidently, what the daughter meant was that being a diabetic he was not supposed to eat chocolate. Human beings seem to possess this innate ability to connect words and events to a larger scheme of things or *the context*. In the absence of this schema it would be difficult to understand what the speaker is

talking about. Let me give an example to clarify the idea of schema. Let us imagine a situation where two people are talking about something. When a third person arrives, this is what he hears:

A: How was it?

B: Not so bad. But I'm glad it's over.

A: Was it the last one?

B: Yes, for the time being.

Now what do we figure out? What are these conversational partners talking about? Are they talking about extraction of a tooth, a test or examination, a delivery of a child, etc? An intruder has no clue what they are talking about because he does not share the background knowledge. Thus effective listening needs background knowledge: knowledge of events, people involved, their motives, and knowledge of the world at large.

Five, when we listen to someone, we do not listen to their words alone; we '*listen*' to their *body language*--- their gestures, facial expressions, posture, etc. Wordy language and body language are two sides of the coin. If we lend our ears to the former and turn a blind eye to the latter, we will miss a lot of messages. Body language serves several communicative functions. For example, it can reinforce or contradict, overstate or understate, highlight or downplay the verbal message. All of us know how silence and body language can be communicative. Perhaps, one of the best examples of the communicative value of gestures, postures and facial expressions is any Charlie Chaplin movie.

Poor Listening Skills: Causes and Consequences

The person who initiates communication is the "talker" and the one who receives it is the "listener". Often, we hear the term "lack of communication" when some misunderstanding occurs between these two parties. Most of the time the term implies that the sender of the message, the speaker did not do an effective job. This may not always be true. Unfortunately, few people know to be good listeners. Recently, some instances of poor listening in Japanese civil aviation sector were reported (Japan Times, 29 March

2005). The Japanese transport ministry began to check (i) how operators at airports communicate with pilots on planes before departure, and (ii) how they communicate with air traffic controllers and with cabin crew. In January 2005, a Japan Airlines jetliner began its takeoff roll without clearance at New Chitose airport in Hokkaido. In March 2005, a Japan Airlines plane entered the wrong runway at South Korea's Incheon airport after misinterpreting the controller's instructions. In the same month, flight attendants neglected to make emergency slides automatically operable on a flight from Tokyo's Haneda airport to New Chitose airport in Hokkaido. Pilots, cabin crew and air traffic controllers are trained listeners and miscomprehension is very rare. But, if and when it occurs, it is most likely to be fatal and disastrous. In November 2000, miscommunication between the pilot of a Russian cargo plane and the air traffic controllers at New Delhi's Indira Gandhi International airport caused a mid-air collision between the descending Russian cargo plane and an ascending Saudi passenger plane resulting in a catastrophic loss of lives. Miscomprehension is a rare phenomenon in such sectors as aviation. However, miscomprehension abounds in everyday life. Statistics indicate that the normal, untrained listener is likely to understand and retain only about fifty percent of a conversation.

There are *numerous listener-related barriers* to effective listening. One of the most fundamental barriers is the misassumption that hearing is listening. However, as we have noted earlier, hearing is the physical act of receiving and processing sound waves that strike the eardrums, and thereby is a passive process. Listening, on the other hand, is an active process that interprets and assigns meaning to sound waves (Ober 2001). In addition, there are barriers created by the fact that the listener can think much more quickly than the other person can talk. As a result, listeners experience *impatience* and *boredom* quickly. This results in another barrier which is that the listener not only has the speaker's voice with which to contend, but also has an internal voice that simultaneously critiques, analyzes, and judges the speaker's performance (Krisco 1997).

Generally, people do not pay attention because of the fact that they automatically assume what an individual has to say will mean exactly what they are thinking about. Incidentally, the word “assume” is significant. Quite often we realize that when we “ass-u-me” we make “ass” of “u” and “me”. Often a sentence that one begins could have a very different meaning by the time it is completed. This is one reason why communication failures result. And this can be detrimental, especially for those organizations that deal in operations related to life safety. This is because of the fact that even a minor miscommunication can result in untold disasters. Civil aviation disasters are some examples. It is therefore of high importance that people realize the value of developing listening skills in corporate environment. In these days of mass communication, it is of vital importance that our learners should be taught to listen effectively and critically.

Let me explain the consequences of poor listening skills now. But before I do that let me briefly illustrate the three very common meanings of the word “listen”. One, when a speaker says, “Now please listen carefully to what I have to say”, what he wants us to do is listen and understand his meaning and/or message. He may not be asking us to sympathize or empathize with him. He may not be asking us to take an action either. Two, when someone says, “When I’m unhappy I always phone Paul---he’s such a good listener”, what he means is that Paul is sympathetic, understanding and considerate.

Listening and empathizing are important skills while relating to others. We all want someone to listen to us. When someone does not listen to us, we feel we are ignored, neglected and insulted. We all know what it means to listen, to really listen. It is more than hearing the words; it is truly understanding and accepting the other person’s message and also his/her situation and feelings. Three, when your friend says, “You should listen to your parents’ advice”, what he means is that you should change your behavior accordingly, act upon your parents’ advice. So, listening involves not just hearing carefully and understanding, but also sympathizing, and acting.

Now let us talk about the causes and consequences of poor listening. A person could be poor listener due to their *physical inability* to hear. For example, there is such a character in the one act play titled Post Early for Christmas. The old gentleman is hard of hearing and so cannot listen because hearing is prerequisite to listening. The old man goes to the post office to collect his old age pension. The post office clerk asks for his ‘book’. She says, “Excuse me, sir. May I have your *book*?” The old man replies, “*Cook*? Why should I bring my cook here?” The woman continues, “I’m sorry, sir. You didn’t hear what I *said*.” The gentleman adds, “*Bed*? This is not the time to be in bed.”

We talked about the physiological aspect of listening ability. However, there is much more to listening skills than the ability to hear. A person may have perfect hearing ability, yet he may not be a good listener. Sometimes, the person is a good hearer, but his *linguistic incompetence* makes him a poor listener. So he hears and listens, but listens without understanding. Let me illustrate the point with a cartoon by Laxman, a leading cartoonist who had drawn hundreds and thousands of cartoons for *The Times of India*, a leading daily English newspaper in India. The cartoon portrays a job interview scene. The scene takes place in an interview hall. A candidate enters the hall and one of the interviewers says, “Please *draw* a chair and take a seat.” The applicant knows just one meaning of the word “draw”, that is, “to draw a picture”. Consequently, he draws a picture of a chair on the floor of the hall and sits on the picture! Obviously, he misses the opportunity. This is one more aspect of listening skills.

Good listening skills require concentration. In order to listen to others, one has to gather one's energies and focus one's attention on what the speaker is saying. *Inattention* results in miscommunication. Let me explain this aspect with an anecdote. One morning, three friends were travelling from Edinburgh to London. As the train was approaching some station, the following conversation took place between the three of them:

Mr. A: Is it Wembley?

Mr. B: No, it's Thursday.

Mr. C: So am I!

Let us examine what has happened here. You would have noticed that the crucial words here are "Wembley" and "Thursday". The first passenger wanted to know if the train was approaching the station called "Wembley". The second passenger thought that it was a question about the day of the week. He heard the word *Wembley* as *Wednesday* and so replied that it was "Thursday". One could conclude that the second passenger was not attentive. The third passenger heard the word *Thursday* as *thirsty* and so said that he was thirsty too.

Poor listening may result from an apparent *inability to discover the hidden agenda*, to understand the implied meaning of words, and the attitude of the speaker. We can call this inability *sociolinguistic and discourse incompetence*. In communication, what is explicitly stated is important, but many times what is left unsaid is more significant. An intelligent listener's job is to grasp the suggested meaning, the deeper meaning or the hidden message. Communication is like an iceberg; only a small part is visible, and a large part is submerged and invisible under the ocean of knowledge of the world, of people and their behavior, and of how language operates. Inability to visualize the hidden portion may lead to a collision and the Titanic of communication may sink. Let me exemplify this point with a folktale. Once upon a time there was a young man. He was born in a poor family and got married to a girl from a poor family. One fine day he decided to visit his mother-in-law's place. He voiced his plan to his mother. On hearing that, his mother said, "Listen, my son. Listen to what say. When you're at your mother-in-law's house, *don't lower your position*, and *weigh your*

words before you use them." The man left with the words of wise advice ringing in his mind. As soon as he reached his in-law's place, the mother-in-law received him warmly and spread a mat on the floor of her ascetic house and asked him to take a seat. The man remembered the first part of his mother's advice: "Don't lower your position!" he looked at the mat and said to himself, "This is a low place. My mother has advised me not to lower my position. I should not sit on the mat." He refused to sit on the mat. Looking outside the house, he saw a haystack and thought, "That is a high place. If I sit on top of it I'll not be lowering my position; I'll be elevating myself! Let me go and sit there!" Immediately, he went outside and sat on top of the haystack. He thought he had elevated his position. The mother-in-law rushed outside the house and requested him to climb down and be comfortable inside the house. He refused to oblige and said, "Axe-head!" The mother-in-law got confused and repeated her appeal. He added, "Hammer!" The mother-in-law made another attempt to persuade him, but in vain! At last the man said, "Grinding stone!" Now you will ask me, what is the relevance of the story for listening skills? As is evident, the man interpreted his mother's words literally. She had asked him *not to lower his position* and *to weigh his words before he spoke*. What she meant was not what he understood. She just wanted him to mind his behavior and his language. In effect, she had advised him not to lower his behavior; but he missed the point. Secondly, she had advised him to weigh or choose his words carefully before he said anything; but he weighed the words literally. He thought that an axe-head was a weighty object, a hammer was weightier, and a grinding stone was the weightiest of the three! So, he weighed his words and used them accordingly! Obviously, he was a poor listener. As we noted earlier, a good listener has to go beyond the words and understand the connotations of words. He has to delve deep into the ocean of language and human experience and search for the pearls of messages. Just as a good reader reads between and beyond the lines, a good listener listens between and beyond the utterances. John Keats has very aptly said: heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter! So the problem with the young man in the above

folk story is that he did not go beyond the words, beyond the surface meaning of the words of his mother.

As we have already noted, a good listener is one who sympathizes and empathizes with the speaker. *Lack of empathy* may lead to misunderstanding and disaster. The example that readily comes to my mind is that of the famous "handkerchief scene" in Shakespeare's Othello. Othello, the protagonist in the play, has come to believe that there is an illicit relationship between his wife, Desdemona and Cassio, one of his subordinates. As a result, he dismisses the latter from his job. Desdemona, knowing her husband has done injustice to Cassio, advocates the latter's case. Because he has no sympathy for either Cassio or Desdemona, he misinterprets his wife's innocent pleas and confirms his opinion that there is an illegitimate relationship between his wife and his subordinate. Desdemona makes repeated appeals for Cassio, but Othello can think of nothing else but the handkerchief that he thinks she has given Cassio as a token of her love. In a short span of a few minutes, Othello demands the handkerchief for more than a dozen and half times! Finally, his inability and unwillingness to empathize with Desdemona initiates him into committing a fatal and suicidal blunder. He smothers Desdemona, and later when he realizes his mammoth error, he commits suicide. I cannot think of another revealing situation where the hearer's lack of understanding and sympathy has such disastrous dimensions.

Assumptions, prejudices and reminiscences can be big hurdles for effective listening. People have opinions of others and in everyday communication opinions are often more important than facts. We have stereotypical images of people around us and we listen to them through the prism of those predetermined images. We form our opinions of people on the basis of reports and bits and pieces of fractured and fragmented experiences. Quite often our opinions are half-truths or quarter-truths, if we may say so. For example, we think that a communist speaker will always speak from the communist point of view. Thus when we listen to them we interpret all their utterances from a biased perspective. So we hear what we want to hear. Sometimes, as we listen to a speaker we may remember our earlier experi-

ences; we may compare the present speaker with another speaker we heard sometime in the past. We may remember what and how the earlier speaker had said about the same or similar topic. Such reminiscences and comparisons distract us from listening carefully and critically.

Overconfidence and psychological filter can also hinder listening. Some of us may think that we are perfect listeners and so do not have to listen carefully. We may believe that we are always right and so do not need to listen. Moreover, we constantly filter a speech so that we hear only certain utterances or do not hear critical remarks. The untrained listener's automatic response is to be a reactive listener. A reactive listener uses a variety of filters that focus on what the listener already knows. S/he latches onto the familiar information and misses much of the incoming new information. Such a listener uses reactive filters to screen the speaker's information. S/he listens to the speaker and says to himself that there is nothing new in the speech, that he has heard this earlier, that something is missing or wrong, that the present speech is similar to another speech that he has heard earlier. These filters create mental barriers and do not let the listener receive the incoming information in the form it is intended and therefore interferes with the listener gaining new information. As a result, a lot of listening time is wasted.

How to Overcome the Barriers?

Now, the question is how to overcome these barriers? To combat the barrier of impatience and boredom, we can remind ourselves why we are listening in the first place. When we have a selfish interest in listening, we tend to listen more attentively. The barrier of reactive filters can be attacked once the listener is conscious of these filters. Then s/he can move from the reactive stage to the affirmative stage (Krisco 1997, p.80). In other words, s/he can progress from the stage of 'listening to' the speaker to the stage of "listening for" new information and ideas. As far as physical inability concerns, we cannot do much about it except prescribing the use of an auditory device.

Extensive reading and a better understanding of how language works in social, interpersonal and other domains can help us get rid of the barriers of linguistic inadequacy and inability and pragmatic deficiency. Meditation can help us improve our attention span and concentration. The rest of the barriers can be tackled by developing a positive attitude.

Exercises for Developing Listening Skills

Listeners quite often tend to think they have heard things they in fact did not hear. This is a very common experience in a foreign/second language classroom. The one game that readily yields results of this tendency is the tell-retell game. One student listens to a story and then narrates it from memory to a second student. The second student then narrates it to a third student. Thus the story is told and heard several times. By the time the last student has narrated the story, it is almost a new story. This is proof of how we distort narratives, how we add, delete, alter, and rearrange items in the narrative we have heard.

Given the importance of listening in language learning and teaching, it is essential for language teachers to help their students become effective listeners. In the communicative approach to language teaching, this means modeling listening strategies and providing practice in authentic situations: those that learners are likely to encounter when they use the language outside the classroom. However, as we design listening tasks, we keep in mind that complete recall of all the information in an aural text is an unrealistic expectation. The teacher can administer various exercises in the class to develop listening skills in the learners. Here are some exercises:

1. The teacher reads lists of associated words to the students and asks them if a word similar in meaning but not read was heard. For example, once I told my students in Vietnam James Thurber's *The Unicorn in the Garden* in an abridged form. In my narration I used all of the following words except the italicized ones. I made a list of the following fifteen words: husband, wife, *friend*, roses, tulips, lily, *lotus*, police, psychiatrist, unicorn, breakfast, *lunch*, bedroom, *kitchen* and garden. This list contained eleven words that I had used and

four words I had not used. I read this list to the whole class and asked them to identify the words I had not used in my narration of the story.

The exercise, built along the lines of the experiment conducted by Roediger and McDermott (1995), illustrates for students the natural human tendency to fill in words and make assumptions when we listen. The teacher can make the learners aware of this tendency and increase their attentiveness to exactly what the speaker is saying.

2. In my Japanese class I narrated the same story (with a couple of minor changes) in ten sentences but in the reverse order and asked the students to recollect and write it in the normal chronological order. Then I wrote all the ten sentences on the board:

- A man saw a unicorn in his garden.
- He broke the news to his wife.
- She did not believe.
- He went back to the garden.
- The wife told a psychiatrist and the police that her husband had gone mad and asked them to come to her house immediately.
- They arrived.
- They questioned the husband about the unicorn.
- He said he had not seen any unicorn.
- The police and the psychiatrist thought the woman was crazy and so took her to a mental hospital.
- The man lived happily after that.

I asked the students to check their versions against the standard version. I was surprised to see the various changes the students had made in the original story. They had added, deleted, altered, and rearranged the main parts of the story.

3. In another Japanese class I used a variation of the above exercise. I narrated the above story in its ten parts in chronological order and asked the students to remember the different parts and put them together. This time the task was easier because I had told

the story in chronological order itself. Nevertheless, their versions exhibited pitfalls in their listening skills.

4. I sometimes narrate short jokes and anecdotes to check students' listening proficiency. The following is a joke/ anecdote about an absent-minded professor:

Once upon a time, there was a professor. He was rather forgetful. One day he wrote a note on his door and left home at 9 o'clock in the morning. The note read: "Professor gone out. Will return at 4."

He could finish his work early and so returned home at 3 o'clock. He read what he himself had written on the door. He said, " If I had known that the Professor was not at home, I would have come after 4 o'clock." Then he went away.

I told the students this anecdote and asked them to recollect and narrate it to the whole class.

5. Later, I administered a variation of this activity in another Japanese class. I asked the students to listen to the following joke carefully and later narrate it in Japanese:

Victor returned to Moscow after a month's vacation.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" asked his friend.

"Oh yes, I enjoyed it thoroughly. I used to regularly defeat the city tennis champion and the district chess champion." Victor replied.

"Really? I never knew that you could play both tennis and chess so well!"

"It was easy," explained Victor. "I used to defeat the tennis champion while playing chess with him, and the chess champion while playing tennis with him."

Conclusion

Thus listening plays a very crucial role in our everyday, academic and professional life. That is why it is imperative to develop listening skills. In order to improve our listening skills, we need to overcome the barriers to effective listening such as linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic insensitivity, inattention, assumptions, prejudices and psychological filters. Poor listening skills may result in mis-

communication and at times in fatal disasters. As Carl Rogers quoted at the beginning of the paper says, "Man's inability to communicate is a result of his failure to listen effectively, skillfully and with understanding to another person." Active, effective listening is a key to academic, professional, and social success. That is why we need to possess the qualities of active listening like phonological, syntactic and pragmatic competence, a keen eye for the speaker's body language and sympathy for the speaker. Fortunately, listening skills can be trained. However, there are no foolproof ways of developing listening skills. The old saying that practice makes perfect applies to listening skills as well. Different teachers may try different strategies and techniques to help their students get rid of the various listening problems and inculcate good listening habits in them. The teacher can administer various exercises, like the ones discussed above, to make his learners better listeners.

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