

The Communicative Function of Listening : The Mother of all Speaking - An Insight

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Listening plays a pivotal role in the process of communication. Listening may conveniently be labelled as the mother of speaking. For communication to be successful there needs to be parity between speaking and listening. The ultimate respect and compliment that a person can pay to another is to give him / her an active and emphatic listening. In face-to-face communication it is extremely important to master the techniques of listening. Listening strategy involves the art of managing real time interactions by training the mind in the art of processing information. It helps in developing the ability and competence to comprehend information. It is often considered as the most difficult language skill. Nation and Jonathan state that “listening is a bridge to learn a language. Having good ability in listening, is one of the main skills that has to be mastered by language learners because it tightly relates to the communication process.” The success of communication depends to a large extent on how effectively a message is heard and retained by the listeners. The two key components required for

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effective listening are a deliberate effort and a keen mind. If listening is effective it is bound to inculcate a congenial environment, foster participation and encourage healthy relations between the persons involved in the communication process. It also helps in strengthening the bonds of intimacy and deepens the connections with others. The paper in hand is an attempt to gain deeper insights into the communication function played by listening as a key soft skill.

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1. Introduction

Listening comprehension is the process of one individual perceiving another via sense (specifically aural) organs, assigning a meaning to the message and comprehending it. It is the fundamental and indispensable prerequisite of individual communication in the social life (De Vito, 1995)..

It has rightly been interpreted as an efficient process that aids perception, improves comprehension, facilitates recognition and helps us to evaluate and react to a piece of information. It is not sufficient to hear - but we need to develop the ability to understand and analyze what we hear, if we are to be an effective listener. An interesting study by Myers reveals that “a good listener allocates 70% of his time to listening and only 30% of his time to speaking” (Myers and Myers, 1988; Beaverson, 1999). This justifies our proposition of listening being the mother of speaking.

In spite of playing an all-important role in communication- and the greater role listening plays in fostering interpersonal relationships, it is indeed sad that it is given least significance in teaching pedagogy. Teachers involved in teaching of language and communication believe that it requires no teaching and that it emerges spontaneously in time; and that it is as natural and unpractised as breathing. Little do they realize that it is a skill that requires sustained hard work and practice just as reading and writing skills. “Listening is a skill which involve receiving message in spoken form and therefore often referred to as receptive skill.” (Harmer, 1991 : 16). The aim of this research is to discuss innovative strategies and the barriers to effective listening with the intention to guide students towards effective communication. Management of positive and negative emotions that might interfere with efficient listening is extremely important as are social strategies while interacting with others.

On one hand negative emotions like anxiety and fear interfere with healthy listening, on the other, positive emotions of relaxation enjoyment and a sense of cohesiveness encourages co-operation and concentration. Both these strategies may be termed as socio-affective listening strategies which are generally ignored over the technical listening strategies.

2. Listening Strategies and Types : The Anatomy of Poor Listening and its Contributors

The online mode that was thrust upon us by the pandemic, no doubt, made communication overcome geographical and spatial barriers; but even today, people prefer to travel long distances to indulge in face-to-face communication because they realize that no other channel can match the depth, range and warmth of active listening. Attentive listening reflected through the listeners' eye contact, facial expression, posture, gestures and verbal responses have a positive impact on the speaker and signify that whatever is being spoken is received well by the listener. It goes without saying that to be a good conversationalist you must first be a good listener because it is listening which keeps a conversation going. It is important to note that in a conversation it is vital to pay special attention to the non-verbal cues dropped by the listener for it helps the speaker to determine what changes are to be made in the content. Speakers would be talking to the wall if they don't care enough about how well their content is being received. They may claim to be knowledgeable but definitely not effective communicators. Hence, the listeners job is an active one- he / she has the twin job to first process the speakers verbal and non-verbal symbols and then match his / her own verbal and non-verbal symbols to let the speaker know how the message has been reconstructed.

Peter Singe, in "The Dance of Change", says that we have to learn to listen between the words in order to get the deeper essence of people's speech. "Good listening makes communication effective because it indicates that what is spoken is taken seriously. In contrast, poor listening indicates that either the message or the speaker is not on the priority list of the listener." About half a century ago Carl. R. Rogers and F. J. Roethlisberger (1952) stated, "the biggest block to personal communication is man's inability to listen intelligently, understandingly and skilfully to another person. This

deficiency in the modern world is widespread and appalling.” In we analyze this today- even though knowledge is expanding and the world is shrinking in terms of distance, yet there is no change in the sensitivity and awareness about skills to develop this most important channel of communication. Good listening helps you to see the world through the eyes of others, thereby broadening your horizon of understanding and simultaneously it makes the listener empathetic towards the speaker. In a corporate set up, effective listening is a way of showing concern for subordinates and fosters cohesive bonds of commitment and trust. It helps to avoid and resolve a conflict situation at workplace by offering a win-win solution.

If we try to analyze why listening is not as good as it ought to be, the studies reveal that our brain is capable of processing only 500-750 words per minute while people speak only 120-150 words per minute. This indicates that the listener makes only partial use of the brain to listen, resulting in dissipation of attention - hence the poor listening. In a poor listening condition, we tend to get distracted and focus shifts or wavers from the main topic. As our mind gets engaged in thinking about other things our brain begins to use its spare capacity in gauging other affairs thereby making listening complex and messy. It is worthy to note that words constitute only 15 to 25% of total communication in the face-to-face mode. The rest is deciphered by non-verbal components that helps to reconstruct the message accurately and reasonably. The listener puts all the spare energy in reconstructing meaning of the non-verbal components. So, the reason for poor listening is that one doesn't invest one's processing power adequately to cope with the job.

Listening strategies may broadly be studied as cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social. “Cognitive listening strategies refer to all mental abilities and processes related to knowledge such as applying linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge to resolve the problems.” (Von Eckardt, 1995). To give a few examples of cognitive performance - inferring, elaborating, predicting, resourcing and drawing images. The importance accorded to cognitive strategies is owed to the importance it has in comprehension. They help learners control and monitor their mental processing, identifying comprehension breakdowns and to create a bridge between the knowledge of the world and the listening content. “Metacognitive strategies refer to the ability to understand one's own method for

learning and assimilating information, that is thinking about one's own mental processes in the learning context" (Goh and Taib, 2006). Metacognitive skills help to manage and supervise the strategy used for evaluating mental processes and handling difficulties in the learning process. To use the metacognitive strategy, one has to plan, monitor and evaluate the listening text. Under planning, the listener develops awareness of what needs to be done with the listening task in hand, monitoring helps them verify their comprehension and evaluation enables them to check the results of comprehension for completeness and accuracy. The acts of planning, monitoring and evaluation are performed through the pre-listening, while listening and post listening stages. Social and affective strategies are closely related and hence usually discussed together as socio-affective strategies. As discussed earlier, "these strategies help the listeners to stay motivated and focussed; as well as have control over emotions." (Mc Combs, A82, 1988).

3. Linguistic, Physical and Psychological Barriers that Contribute to Poor Listening

If the listener has weak language proficiency and is deficient in vocabulary, it may result in poor listening. Heavily accented language, technical jargon and unfamiliar vocabulary may baffle the listener. In-house acronyms, abbreviated or unfamiliar short forms may not go down well with the listener even though the speaker may have taken them for granted. Out of fear of looking ignorant the listener may not even seek clarification for words that fall beyond his / her range of comprehension. With this fear that his/ her image may be dented or out of mere shyness, information gets distorted. For example, an employer may quote the compensation assuming that it would be the gross salary and the job seeker may assume it would be his / her takeaway without realizing there would be mandatory cuts. It is equally important to listen between words - i.e. understand non-verbal symbols that fall within the ambit of listening. Poor listening may also stem from unfamiliarity with regional culture and conventions that may hamper active listening.

At times, listeners are distracted and non-serious about listening and do not take it seriously. So, they do not accord the necessary attention and seriousness to listening. Parallel activities like flipping the pages of a book, arranging things at hand, and

signing documents are examples of disinterested listening. This tendency is mostly tempting when one is not listening face to face- as in a telephonic conversation. In such cases the listener does not do justice to the speaker and to the process of listening. Trying to invest your energy in two tasks simultaneously, is bound to cause filtration of information; so it is advised not to indulge in partial listening because it can really demoralize the speaker and he/she may justifiably feel snubbed. Children of working parents specially face this issue of partial and non-serious listening. At other times, the physical condition may not be favourable for listening. Public places, shops, manufacturing units may offer too much unwarranted sound and serve as a potential barrier to listening even though the listener may be serious and even strain one's ears- there are chances of filtration and miscommunication. If the speaker is of an intimidatingly high status, the listener may actually be reluctant to ask him/her to be louder or slower, even though he/she may not be audible, leading the listener incapable of processing what is heard. Listening also suffers due to disinterest. If the topic of conversation or the person is not of interest to the listener one is bound to miss on the non-verbal cues leading to partial or poor understanding. Listening may also be selective- you may remember a cricket score on the TV screen and miss out on the newsreader's data on national economy depending on what interests or disinterests us- politics, economics, education, sports.

Psychological barriers play a treacherous role in listening too. If we dislike the speaker or disapprove of what they say, we are likely to misconstrue or distort what we hear. The dislike may be attributed to physical, regional, status or caste-based factors. It may be perpetuated by socio-economic background, profession of the speakers, his/her religion or professional affiliation. If we begin listening with this mind-set, we will listen to find faults and be ready to tear his/her argument apart at the slightest provocation because bias is deep-seated at the pre-listening stage. It is like reading black letters against a black or a white background which can totally transform the reading experience for the reader. Conversely, if you are over enthusiastic about the speakers, it can again lead to poor listening because you tend to listen uncritically. You may have such a favourable image of the speaker that you overlook the a lot of errors in the content and are excessively charitable in the analysis. If

prejudiced negatively, the same argument by the speaker may be dubbed as petty minded and unreasonable and if fondness is attached to the speaker or content the result is different.

Such discriminatory listening takes away the sheen from objective listening. Probably it was this thought process that led Blaise Pascal to say “We are usually convinced more easily by reasons we have found ourselves than those which have occurred to others.” At times, our lack of confidence serves as a roadblock to good and effective listening. If we begin on the pretext that the speaker or the content of speech is going to be out of our level of comprehension, we tend to give up on the conversation without a fight. In such cases, we are only hearing not listening i.e. not processing the information. In such cases the listener is being unfair to self because he/she has started on the prophecy that there's nothing in it for them. Just as low confidence is a deterrent, over confidence is also a barrier. Over confidence leads to impatience because then listeners tend to assume they know everything before it is said. They fill in the blanks to their convenience and tend to jump to conclusions and this may cause serious mismatch between two sets of assumptions which might be exasperating for the speaker. Another hurdle to effective listening is strong conviction- because at times the listeners may be so rigid about an issue that they may not see the need to reconsider it. This happens because, at times, the beliefs and convictions of an individual can shield and prevent new ideas from reaching his/her mind. Such faking, or as some call it -diplomatic listening, may be greatly detrimental to effective listening. Preconceived notions can serve as a potential barrier to inter and intra organizational listening too. In the words of Stephen Covey, “We are reading our autobiography into other people’s lives rather than listening to them from their own framework, through their own paradigm. As a result, we fail to understand them although we believe we do.”

4. The Good Listener : Traits, Mental Framework and Ability to avoid Logical Traps

If you wish to be a good listener, be an active and empathetic listener, and have an open mind. You should have the ability to and framework to place the ideas you receive from the speaker. If there is a framework in place it is easier to anticipate the chain of thoughts the speaker is likely to project. Even though it may not be a rigid mould, there is always a scope for change, growth and flexibility to

filter irrelevant material and thoughts. So, avoid a rigid framework which obstructs effective communication and weakens listening. Retention is found to be better for listeners who start with a tentative framework as a guide. A good listener is also a critical listener who weighs the validity of what is being spoken. He/she listens objectively and filters rationally- no ideas are accepted or rejected without reason. There is active engagement at all times and there are minimal distractions. A good listener also finds time to review and summarize from time to time in order to reduce the burden on memory. It also helps to string thoughts together and prevents them from disintegrating into disparate pieces. Another quality of a good speaker is that he/she shows engagement and interest by asking questions. Doing so, helps to clear doubts and elaborate underdeveloped ideas. It also clarifies misconceptions and helps the listener confirm, reject or revise the conclusion arrived at. Irrelevant questions can, on the other hand, have a contrary effect and the speaker may feel heckled and pulled down. Silence can also prove to be a great listening tool because it helps the speaker to complete his/her chain of thought without any interruption. Silence as a tool for listening is especially helpful for sensitive speakers. A skilled listener knows exactly when words are silver and silence gold. In negotiations, especially silence can be a game changer.

A good listener resists from passing sweeping judgements till the facts have been verified and there is enough evidence to take a stand. "Poor listeners tend to finish statements for the slow deliberate speakers in the interest of saving time. This is risking and annoying to the speaker", opines Kevinn J. Murphy. James A. Morris refers to this as "second guessing and those who interrupt the speaker and complete the thought for him insult him... sought after conversationalists listen attentively, only amateurish play the second-guessing game." A good listener is one who goes beyond the message and looks at the profile of the speaker in its entirety before reconstructing meaning. Good listening is not a matter of technique it is rather a way of life. Shuffling feet, rotating eyes, restless fingers are indications that listening is getting diluted. As Stephen Covey says in "The Seven Habits of highly effective people" that "Empathic listening gets inside another person's frame of reference- you look through it you see the world, the way they see the world, you understand their paradigm and you understand how they feel... first seek to understand, then be understood."

What are logical traps in listening is a question that every aspiring efficient listener must ask oneself. There is multi faculty processing required to demystify the complex process of listening, if we want to avoid falling in a trap. For example, A persuasive speaker may base his/her assumptions on generalizations- for example a banker may argue against advancing loans to small traders on the pretext “They never pay back” or “It is unpatriotic to buy products from foreign companies if they are domestically produced and will make India a dirty dumping ground for world’s rubbish”. The conclusion presented can be logically derived based on facts rather than being illogically drawn or religiously instigated.

5. Conclusion

Listening encompasses multi faculty processing. An active listener is an empathic listener who lends a patient ear of attention to the speaker. One of the pre-requisites of a good speaker is attentive listening ability. We need to master different types of listening in order to be effective at communication. As the circumstance demands we have to indulge in selective listening, diplomatic listening, active listening, critical listening or empathic listening. We need to see the world through a framework that’s not entirely self-centred but adjusts to the sensitivity for others. Listening skill may be difficult to master but it is the road to success in inter and intrapersonal organizational relationships. It is indeed a key life-skill.

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