Listening Skills: Stages, Types, Barriers and Tips to Overcome the Barriers

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Abstract

It is evident that effective communication skills play a very important role in both private and public life. The effective communication skills help in forming and maintaining relationships; in negotiations; in resolving conflicts and in dealing with people of different mindsets. Good command over communication skills are highly required in the present global business scenario, thus it has become a mandate for the young graduates who seek jobs particularly in private sector to be effective communicators. Communication skills are much needed for the employees as they are very helpful in sustaining in the present jobs and in getting promoted to higher positions. It is an undeniable fact that listening plays a vital role in communication. Listening has the same importance as speaking in the process of oral communication. Since listening is an essential part of oral communication, it is a must to study and learn listening skills seriously as a special skill. It is not so easy to be a good listener since there are so many barriers to effective listening. In this paper the authors try to explain various stages of listening; discuss different types of listening; barriers to listening and suggest solutions to overcome the barriers.

Keywords: listening skills, stages of listening, types of listening, listening barriers, tips to overcome the barriers

I. INTRODUCTION

Listening is a term in which the listener listens to the one who produced the sound to be listened (Wikipedia). In the process of oral communication, listening is an activity in which the listener or receiver pays attention to and/or takes notice of what the speaker says so that the listener receives, understands information and provides response to the speaker. Listening is as important as speaking in the course of information transmission. The listening process begins with receiving the message; the listener understands it; tries to remember it; evaluates it after analyzing and finally he responds by sending feedback to the speaker or sender. ‘A person who receives and understands information or an instruction, and then chooses not to comply with it or to agree to it, has listened to the speaker, even though the result is not what the speaker wanted’ is a listener (Purdy, Michael and Deborah Borisoff, 1997).

Comparing to hearing, listening is a more serious affair. Hearing is a natural process and it takes without any intentional effort by the listener whereas listening is an intentional effort. Roland
Barthes explains it: ‘Hearing is a physiological phenomenon; listening is a psychological act.’ Listening is generally believed that the listening skill is a natural phenomenon and there is no need to acquire it specifically with some effort. In fact, listening is a natural process but it should be enhanced by hard work and repetition. If you want to be an effective communicator, you must be an effective listener. It is argued that listener holds more responsibility than the speaker for the successful completion of communication.

Listening is not mere hearing but by listening to someone or something, you get information, understand something, receive instructions, get entertainment, get solace etc. For getting all these activities done successfully, you need to pay special attention to what is said. You cannot do all these activities by merely hearing to someone or something. Now you can understand that listening is more sensitive and intensive than hearing. Hearing is a spontaneous and ever occurring process whereas listening is an intentional and interpretative activity. Listening requires more focus than hearing and it requires an attentive effort because the listener has to pay attention on how the information is conveyed, the sort of language and tone are used. The level of understand depends on the ability of listening.

II. STAGES OF LISTENING

Learning listening skills is a must because it plays a vital role in understanding other person and in conveying our empathy to others. Listening does not mean mere hearing something or somebody. It is a special practice of listening to understand; interpret; compare; analyze; assess; question; respond etc. All these activities come under the stages of listening. The stages of listening can broadly be divided into three stages namely Pre-listening, While-listening and Post-listening stages.

In the first stage, the listener prepares for listening both mentally and physically by considering the situation in which they are going to listen to, who will speak and their accent and what is going to be spoken. This is the primary step in the process of listening. The second stage is the heart of the whole process which involves in many sub stages or steps. The reader will learn them under the side-heading of sub-stages of listening. In the final stage- Post-listening stage, the listener may summarize, discuss, share information or reproduce the information of the spoken topic.

III. THE SUB STAGES OF LISTENING

The While-Listening stage involves in six stages namely hearing, attending, understanding, remembering, evaluating, and responding. The stages take place successively and quickly while the listener is listening to the speaker. the listener hears what the speaker speaks. They pay attention to the words of the speaker and this process is very important. The listener tries to understand what the speaker says and they try to comprehend the meanings of the words beyond the text spoken by the speaker. They store the information in their minds. They compare the information by the speaker with the knowledge they have in their minds and they come to realise
the quality and standard of the speech. The listener will respond in a positive or negative way in form of gestures or signs or sometimes raising their voices. This response can be verbal or nonverbal.

IV. TYPES OF LISTENING

The process of listening can be divided into various types based on the purposes of listening. The purpose decides the kind of listening. Various purposes require various kinds of listening. Every type of listening has its own purpose.

V. PRIMARY TYPES OF LISTENING

Primarily listening can be divided into two types: discriminative and comprehensive listening. These two types of listening are basic and fundamental to all sorts of listening. The rest of listening types fall under these two primary types of listening.

Discriminative Listening

Discriminative listening is the origin of human listening process and it begins when man is an infant. During his infancy, man starts distinguishing the difference between sounds: from human sounds to animal sounds and distinguishes the difference between voices of people by listening to the sounds. In this process man cannot understand the meanings of the sounds properly. By listening to the sounds and distinguishing them, man can understand the human emotions.

Comprehensive Listening

Comprehensive listening comes next to discriminative listening for man starts understanding the meanings of the words and messages. Competence of the spoken words or messages may differ from one person to another. Postures and gestures play vital role in understanding the words and/or messages. So, by this time man has learnt not only the meanings of words and language skills but also the meanings of non-verbal clues. Comprehension listening can also be called content listening, informative listening and full listening.

VI. SUB-TYPES OF LISTENING

Critical listening

In the process of critical listening, the listener evaluate, judge, form opinions about what is being said. For this, the listener must be capable of analyzing, comparing and/or relating the message to the existing rules, norms, principles, system, knowledge and other considerable things as to come to a conclusion. The listener may understand the inner meaning of the message. He determines to find truth of the speech by weighing the pros and cons and declares it good or bad, worthy or unworthy. It is also called evaluative or interpretative or judgmental listening. The listener must do two things in this process: listening and comprehending which should go simultaneously and successfully.
Informational listening

Informational listening is a very common practice by people of every human walk. Every day every one listens for information: members of a family, employees in an organisation, students in educational institutions. The main purpose of this type of listening is to learn, get instructions, etc. Informational listening plays a major role in the communication at workplaces.

Appreciative listening

In this type of listening, the listener listens to certain information as to appreciate it. The information may be a piece of music, parts of speech, a piece of poem, dialogues in a play, radio programme, show or episode on TV etc. In this process, listener’s response is important rather than the value of the message. The quality of listener’s appreciation purely depends more on the listener’s tastes, likes and dislikes rather than the quality of the message. The quality of appreciation also depends on the listener’s perception of things, previous exposure to such things and presentation which includes the medium, the setting and the style, personality of a presenter and environment.

Biased listening

In this type of listening, the listener comes with a fixed perspective and hears and understands how he thinks rather than what the speaker says. The listener comes expecting what the speaker is going to say and he does not heed what the speaker actually says but ironically the listener understands something (what he has expected) from the words of the speaker rather than what the speaker really says. This is the result of the listener’s preoccupied mind or prejudices. The listener never pays attention to the words spoken, he understands them what he expects to listen or what the speaker will say. In this type, the listeners seem stereotypes.

Pseudo Listening

Pseudo means false or pretended. Pseudo listening means you pretend to listen to the speaker. In this process, you nod your head or smile while message is being sent, in fact, you are thinking of something else and you are not listening to anything from the speaker. Sometimes it is done by you only to give an impression that you are very concerned to the speaker. Pseudo listening is also called false listening and non-listening.

Sympathetic listening

In sympathetic listening, the listener cares about the speaker or sender and expresses his concern for the speaker’s sorrows and/or joys.

Empathetic listening

Empathetic listening goes beyond sympathetic listening and the listener treats the speaker’s emotions as his own. The listener replaces the speaker with himself in terms of experiencing the
feelings and emotions of the speaker. The listener feels the feelings and emotions of the speaker rather than simply listens. Empathetic listening is something more sensitive than sympathetic listening.

Therapeutic listening

Therapeutic listening is more intensive and sensitive than empathetic listening. In this process of listening, the listener is more concerned to help the speaker in not only understanding the speaker’s feelings but also reducing the sorrow or sadness and increasing the happy mood. Thus the listener helps the speaker get relieved from grief mood or get comfort or become more elated.

Dialogic listening

In the process of dialogic listening, the listener and the speaker form some kind of relationship by exchanging feelings, opinions, ideas and other information which may be personal or professional. It is also known as relational listening.

Relationship listening

Relationship listening is a special kind of listening which intends to form relationship with a specific purpose or motto this purpose or motto may be purely commercial or personal. It helps in forming and retaining relationships with others. It helps be in tough with others.

Full listening

Full listening happens when you want to understand what the speaker says. It requires close and careful attention to what is being said as you do not want to miss any point of the message. Probably you get your doubts clarified by repeating what has been said or by asking questions or by sharing your views or knowledge at the end or during the conversation. Generally, this type of listening is used in all official communications and important personal conversations.

Deep Listening

Deep listening helps you understand the genuineness of the speaker. You pay careful attention to not only the words or message but also every clue given by the speaker –be it body language or voice modulation. You go beyond words or message: you try to understand the total personality of the speaker. In this kind of listening, the listening process exceeds the limit of mere receiving and understanding and goes far to understand the whole personality of the speaker with his strengths and weaknesses, prejudices and partialities. That is why it is called whole person listening. If full listening helps understanding the total message, deep listening helps understanding the total message and personality of the speaker.
Workplace listening:

Workplace listening is another kind of active listening which is very essential to those who work in an organisation. Since an employee who works in an organisation deals with his colleagues, superiors, people outside the organisation belonging to different ages, genders, cultures etc., needs special kind of listening skills and has to pay careful attention to the speaker. He has to pay attention to the non-verbal communication and know the cultural aspects also. Workplace listening skills are very essence for career success, organizational effectiveness, and worker satisfaction. A listener in workplace listening, is to receive, perceive, interpret, evaluate and finally act accordingly.

VII. OTHER TYPES OF LISTENING

Initial listening: In it you just listen to the first few words of the speaker, and start to analyze and/or give reply without listening to the rest.

Selective listening: It involves in listening to a few selective things which you want to listen to or you think important and neglect the rest of speech or message.

Partial listening: In it you are simply distracted from the process of listening by influence of your previous knowledge related to the message or same kind of thoughts said by other person etc.

Rapport Listening: This type of listening is done by journalists, stenographers, personal assistants etc. whose duty is to make notes or prepare reports of the speeches or conversations. In this type of listening, the listener makes notes while listening to the speech or conversation.

Reflective listening: Reflective listening is a reciprocal process. The listener generally sends back an idea of his own drawn from the message. In this process both the speaker and the listener understand that the message is understood as intended by the speaker.

VIII. BARRIERS TO LISTENING AND TIPS TO OVERCOME THEM

Now you are going to learn about the listening barriers: how and why they occur and how to overcome them. Anything that creates any inconvenience in giving or receiving information is called a barrier. There are certain obstacles in the process of listening namely physical barriers, psychological barriers, cultural barriers, organizational barriers etc. The barriers to listening discussed hereunder are not related to any specific context and/or situation but are dealt with an overall view. Anyway, this unit touches the listening barriers pertaining to all sorts of contexts and situations as a whole. There are so many barriers to listening which become great obstacle to the process of communication. The barriers that distract the listener from listening to the speaker can be divided broadly into two types: external and internal factors.
External Barriers

Physical or environmental barriers, semantic barriers, organizational barriers, cross-cultural barriers, technological barriers can be considered to be external factors that are responsible for distracting the listener from listening to the speaker.

Internal Barriers

Internal barriers can be subdivided into two types: psychological barriers and physical disabilities.

1. Psychological Barriers: The various emotions and/or moods that obstruct you from listening to the speaker are when you get angry; when you shout; when you grieve over something; when you are overjoyed to listen to it. Sometimes you stop listening when you start evaluating the situation; when you let your mind wander thinking about your knowledge belonging to the speech or something else; when you don’t want to listen because of your prejudice; when you don't want to listen because you are tired or disinterested; when you are not prepared for the conversation; when you get bored; when the speaker uses incomprehensible vocabulary or unknown subject; when the topic purely unnecessary to you. All these are considered as psychological barriers which can cause for your poor listening.

2. Physical Disabilities: Human physical disabilities such as ill health, fatigue, sleeplessness, hearing problem, dumbness, eye-sight problems are examples for internal factors that hinder the listener from paying attention to the speaker and to his speech. These are considered as internal factors which can cause for your poor listening.

IX. OTHER BARRIERS TO LISTENING SKILLS

There are other significant barriers to the effective listening. The listener comes to listen to the speaker with a lot of or a specific expectation. One of the biggest drawbacks with human listening is that the listeners usually come to listen to somebody with expecting or assuming or hoping or with preoccupied mind. When the receiver comes with assumptions to listen to the speaker, he frequently listens to what expects to listen to rather than what the speaker actually says. This process leads the receiver to jump into false conclusions of the communication.

Tips: You should go with open mind without any preoccupations or expectations when you are going to listen to somebody. You must be with a willing mind to listen to the speaker.

Sometimes the listener comes to a one conclusion without listening to the speaker completely. Sometimes the listener interrupts the speaker to say his story or experience which obstruct the flow of communication and the listening process.

Tips: Pay attention to conversation and learn to listen for the whole message; you should not jump to your own (wrong) conclusions without listening completely. Listen to the complete
message before evaluating the speaker or conversation. Don’t get ready to tell your storey before the speaker finishes his words.

The listener may shut his ears to the speaker when the speaker speaks of ideals and values which are quite contrary to the listener’s opinions. The listener may get confused or distracted when the speaker changes the topics very often without completing the previous one.

Tips: The speaker should not change the topics abruptly and he has to change the topic only after finishing the current one.

Noise is one of the most important barriers of oral communication; it is impossible for both speaker and listener to go on their conversation when there is noise. Noise makes listening impossible.

Tips: Try to reduce the noise or avoid noisy places for conversations. If the two attempts are not successful, stop conversation in any noisy atmosphere.

There are certain no-verbal factors which can act as barriers to the effective listening. Poor eye contact maintained by either speaker or listener or both of them causes for poor listening. Inappropriate posture and gestures by both or any one of the speaker or listener can lead to a poor listening.

Tips: Listening is not purely auditory but it is also visual: the research tell us in face to face conversation majority of information transmitted through the body language of the speaker rather than words. So, body language plays a significant role in transmitting information.

Maintaining proper body language such as postures and gestures while communication is going on is must. When the body language of the speaker goes contrary to his speech, listener may not believe the speaker. At the same time, if the listener does not use proper body language in accordance with the conversation, the speaker may doubt the sincerity of listening. Being a listener, you should maintain proper eye contact. In this context both speaker and listener should maintain proper eye contact.

X. GENERAL TIPS TO OVERCOME BARRIERS TO LISTENING SKILLS

Remember, communication is a reciprocal process. Without the receiver’s consent, you cannot convey any message to him. Listening has the same significance as speaking in conversation therefore receiver has equal position as speaker in conversation. So, give importance to listening. You must be an attentive and careful listener. You should not hear but listen.

Reflecting is another way of repeating what the speaker has said; this helps both the speaker and the listener understand that their conversation is going on a right track. Another advantage of reflection is that through the reflection of the listener, the speaker comes to know that the listener perfectly understands what he is saying.
Getting clarification is a way in which both the speaker and the listener come to know that both of them are on the right track of both speaking and listening. The listener gets his doubts clarified by asking questions; this shows that the listener is active. In the similar way, the speaker asks questions the listener; this helps the speaker know whether to elaborate his topic or not.

Proper context and time are also very important for speaking and listening.

Pay attention to only one conversation at a time and don’t try to listen to many conversations at a time.

You should not think or worry about any other thing while listening to the speaker.

By asking questions as to get clarifications or as to ask to expand the topic, the listener becomes active listener. This shows that the listener has interest in the topic and he is actively listening to the speaker.

XI. CONCLUSION

There is no doubt in saying that effective communication skills play major role in the successful functioning of an organisation, be it a commercial or noncommercial organisation. Either oral or written communication helps the organisation not only in its internal functions such as decision making, planning, organizing, motivating and controlling but also in its external functions viz. dealing with customers, business negotiations. One of the two major aspects of communication, listening skills has its own share in the successful functioning of an organisation.

REFERENCES


