

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Listen well to speak well: strategies and solutions to overcome hindrances to listening

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### ABSTRACT

Listening is defined as a process of receiving, interpreting and reacting to a message from the speaker. When in a conversation with someone, do we ask to repeat what has just been said? This often happens when our mind is not on what is being said. Though we hear the sound of the words being spoken, we fail to remember or understand what was said. We remember and understand words we hear only when we are actually listening, that is, we are attentive to what we have heard. Thus there is a difference between hearing and listening. Hearing is a physical act that happens automatically. Though we are not conscious of it most of the time, we get to hear many types of sounds or noise all round us all day. Hearing does not require any effort on our part. Listening, however, is an active skill and a conscious activity that demands involvement and concentration. When we listen, we receive information, interpret it and analyse it and construct a message out of what we hear. The present paper highlights how in the language laboratory students are given training with the use of authentic materials to develop their listening abilities to overcome the hindrances they face in their everyday life.

*Key Words:* Conversation, Listening, Hindrances.

### INTRODUCTION

Effective listening is a valuable skill as it helps to achieve goals effectively and improves productivity. Listening skill is necessary to stay competitive in the current global scenario. New born babies are keen listeners in their environments. They particularly like to listen to the voice of their mother and they quickly differentiate it from other voices. They also learn to recognize the sounds of her language from a foreign one.

Listening is also important because it occupies a big chunk of the time we spend communicating in the language. For example, the time we spend to listen to others speaking or listening to songs, news, lectures etc. Recent advances in technologies have served to raise the profile of listening skill in language teaching. As language teachers we need to think of how we can incorporate listening into our teaching and provide opportunities both inside and outside the classroom for our students to be exposed to significant listening input.

In *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen R. Covey describes listening as a process that can be done at any of the following five levels:

**Ignoring:** when one hears what is being said, but has no intension of giving it any consideration.

**Pretending:** when one responds with words like 'Yeah!', 'Oh!', 'Okay' etc., giving the impression that they are listening, but actually they are not.

**Selective listening:** when one hears certain part of the conversation

**Alternative listening:** when one pays attention to every word being said and makes an effort to understand what is being said

**Empathetic listening:** when one listens with the intention to understand what the speaker wants to say.

While practicing listening many hindrances come in the way of the students. The barriers and the remedies are suggested below, which if followed can help in development of effective listening skill.

#### Barriers& Remedies to Effective Listening

##### Excessive Talking

##### Remedies

- Think before you speak, and donot speak if you have nothing important to contribute
- Practice self-control. Allow other person to speak
- Avoid interrupting when other person is speaking
- Be aware of indulging in useless talk for the sake of talking
- Be brief while conveying your thoughts
- Observe your listener's reactions while speaking

##### Prejudice

##### Remedies

- Respect other person for his or her knowledge and skills, irrespective of the person's background

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- Make conscious efforts to take charge of your thoughts
- Consciously avoid taking an “I know what he or she is going to say” attitude while the other person is speaking

### **Distractions**

#### **Remedies**

- Face the person who is speaking
- Maintain eye contact while the other person is speaking
- Ensure that you are comfortable
- Switch off the cell phone

### **Expecting others to share your personal beliefs and values**

- Misunderstanding
- Interrupting

#### **Remedies**

- Listen without interrupting while the other person is speaking
- If you seek to clarify something, use appropriate body language such as raising your hand or ask politely for more details

### **Faking attention**

#### **Remedies**

- The person who is faking attention is just “hearing” but not “listening”. There may be some eye contact and the person may even be nodding, but the mind is elsewhere. The person may be thinking about what to have for lunch or what to wear for the party that evening. Faking attention is a habit for some people, but it conveys lack of respect and dishonest.
- Make it a habit to listen attentively. It is advisable to assume that the other person knows something that you may not know.
- Avoid thinking about how to reply when the other person is speaking
- This habit can be overcome by taking notes while the other person is speaking

### **Bringing in emotions to effective communication**

#### **Remedies**

- Emotion erects barriers to effective communication. A listener’s senses are not likely to be function at the optimum level when he or she is angry. Likewise it is not possible to understand or appreciate what the speaker is saying if the listener is excessively sad.
- It is better to avoid conversations when you are angry or excessively sad.

### **Noise**

#### **Remedies**

- Avoid both physical and psychological noise

### **Fear**

#### **Remedies**

- It is a great barrier to listening. People who are afraid during a conversation are likely to listen. They become defensive and tend to argue.
- Be aware that fear can only worsen the situation. Listen to what the other person is about to say without fear.
- Keeping calm will give you mental strength to face any situation.
- Taking a deep breath helps in overcoming fear.

### **Challenges in Teaching Listening**

Despite its obvious importance to language learning, listening was for a long time relegated to marginal place in foreign language curricula. With the advent of communicative language teaching and the focus on proficiency, the learning and teaching of listening started to receive more attention. However, listening is not yet fully integrated into the curriculum and needs to be given more prime time in class and as homework.

For learners, listening presents a challenge for a variety of reasons. These reasons are as follows:

#### **Listening involves multiple modes**

Listening involves interpersonal and interpretive modes of communication. It requires the listener to assume either a participative role in face-to-face conversation, or non-participative roles in listening to other people speak or present.

#### **Listening involves all varieties of language**

In addition to listening to lectures and presentations in academic and formal settings, learners have also to partake or listen to exchanges that involve various levels of colloquialism.

#### **Listening involves “altered” and “reduced” language forms**

In addition to dealing with vocabulary and structures of language, learners have to learn to comprehend reduced forms of the language (example, I wanna go, Just a sec).

#### **Listening involves variables rate of delivery**

Unlike a reading text that is at the learner’s control, a listening text is constantly moving and at variable speeds that often cannot be controlled by the listener. Because of all these factors, listening activities often create high levels of anxiety and stress among learners that can interface with comprehension.

As a language teacher, one of our tasks is to develop a vision where listening fits within our teaching.

### Steps to teach listening text in the language laboratory

#### Pre-listening sessions

A well- designed listening activity is broken down into carefully sequenced “phrases”. The initial pre-listening phrase prepares students by helping them activate their background knowledge and clarify their expectations and assumptions about the text. An ideal pre -listening task is one in which the teacher, through carefully constructed questions, helps the students to activate their background information and language components needed to comprehend the text without giving this information on to students.

The activities chosen for pre-listening activities serve as preparation for listening in several ways. The mentor has to

- Check students background knowledge of the topic and linguistic context of the text.
- Provide students with the background knowledge necessary for their comprehension of the listening passage or activate the existing knowledge that the students possess
- Should make learners understand any cultural information which may be necessary to comprehend the passage
- Make students aware of the type of the text they will be listening to, the role they will play, and the purpose for which they will be listening.
- Provide opportunities for group or collaborative work and for background reading or class discussion activities

Examples of pre-listening activities:

- Looking at pictures, maps, diagrams or graphs
- Reviewing vocabulary or grammatical structures
- Reading something relevant
- Predicting the content of the listening text
- Going over the direction or instructions for the activity
- Doing guided practice

#### While listening

Global comprehension refers to understanding the general ideas or gist of the listening text after the first and second listen. While the student might pick up some details after the first listen. Our aim is to help them focus on the general meaning first, so that they can establish a preliminary frame work that will enable them to get more details in the subsequent listens.

‘Holistic listening’ means listening to the ‘whole text’ while ‘segmental listening’ involves listening to specific ‘segments’ of the text. Holistic listening should precede segmental listening and its aim is to allow students develop strategies and build stamina in processing listening texts. Segmental listening is very beneficial while doing intensive listening.

The steps that are followed during while listening are as follows:

- Students are allowed to listen to the text two or three times as a whole before going to intensive listening.
- They are encouraged to focus on global meaning first and don’t pose questions that ask them for details after the first listen.
- Students are asked to make assumptions after the first listen and verify them after the second listen.
- The questioned are focused at this stage on the segments of the texts that are accessible to the students in terms of vocabulary and structures.
- It is always remembered that students do not need to get everything in the text.

#### Examples of while -listening activities

- Filling in gaps and charts
- Checking off items in the list
- Listening with visuals
- Listening for the gist
- Searching for specific clues to meaning
- Completing fill-in exercises
- Distinguishing between formal and informal registers

#### Intensive listening

When designing listening activities, it is kept in mind that, in addition to global comprehension we need to focus our attention on intensive listening. This is crucial to help students develop effective listening strategies and build bottom-up listening skills, in addition to the top down skills that are emphasized in global listening activities. Intensive listening involves zeroing in on particular segments of the text, and this should come only after the students have developed global comprehension of the text.

#### Intensive listening may target different goals such as:

- Getting more detailed understanding of some segments of the text.
- Transcribing certain segments in the text.
- Guessing the meaning of a word or phrase from context.
- Looking at certain grammatical structures in the text to see how they can aid comprehension etc.

Intensive listening activities are done in classrooms, in laboratory and are given as homework. At lower levels of instruction, global comprehension activities are done in class to work on strategies and utilize group work, and are assigned the intensive listening part of homework.

#### Post listening

A post listening activity represents a follow up to the listening activity and aims to utilize the knowledge gained from listening for the development of the other skills such as speaking or writing. Like pre-listening activities, post listening activities allow for recycling and further activation of vocabulary and structures as long as they are interesting and engaging and are carefully thought out. In order to do an authentic assessment of students listening proficiency, a post listening activity must reflect the real life uses to which students might put information they have gained through listening.

It is through post-listening activities and assessment that our students gain proficiency in developing their listening skills.

### **Conclusion**

For our students to become proficient listener they need to be exposed to tremendous listening input and they need training (especially at the lower level of proficiency) on how to develop effective listening strategies. It is necessary to:

- Allocate ample time for listening activities the same way we do for developing speaking skills
- Engage students to use different strategies they want to use with their friends in developing listening skills and allow them to learn from each other
- Give students home tasks at regular basis for development of their skills of listening

Focusing on listening is one of the best investments one can make as a language teacher, as it has helped students to develop confidence in language ability. Listening is a challenge skill, yet with constant practice, support and encouragement, students will develop both strategies and confidence.

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