



IIT Madras

BSc Degree

Copyright and terms of use

IIT Madras is the sole owner of the content available in this portal - onlinedegree.iitm.ac.in and the content is copyrighted to IIT Madras.

- Learners may download copyrighted material for their use for the purpose of the online program only.
- Except as otherwise expressly permitted under copyright law, no use other than for the purpose of the online program is permitted.
- No copying, redistribution, retransmission, publication or exploitation, commercial or otherwise of material will be permitted without the express permission of IIT Madras.
- Learner acknowledges that he/she does not acquire any ownership rights by downloading copyrighted material.
- Learners may not modify, publish, transmit, participate in the transfer or sale, create derivative works, or in any way exploit, any of the content, in whole or in part.

English – 1 (Basic English)
Ms. Deepa B Kiran
Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras
Active and Passive Listening

Welcome. Today, we are going to look at listening and see two aspects of listening. One, passive listening, and two, active listening. So, let me start with an example. Let us imagine it is Sunday morning, late morning, around 11AM. You are up and busy with your phone, catching up on Instagram with friends or watching some YouTube videos completely lost in your world.

And your mother comes by saying; “How many times do I tell you Harish, clean up your room? It is Sunday morning.” And you look up at your mother, all lost back to your phone. All those many times that she had said before, you probably never heard it at all. And even that one time, you are half hearing what she is saying? Maybe it is not you. It is a situation in a friend's house. But this would be a very good example of passive listening. Or, in fact, it is an example of pretty much minus listening.

Let us imagine another scenario where you are at your workplace, or your place of study, it is break time, coffee time, whatever, and you are catching up with your colleague or your friend, and your friend is sharing about his or her first date. How would you be listening then just imagine your body language, your eye contact, maybe will be asking questions in between, hmm and then, questions to prod the person to go on or for clarifications, whatever. That would certainly be a very good example of active listening.

Once again, I am not saying this is true for all of us, but these are situations that either we can personally relate to or we know of others who have been in similar situations. The reason I chose an example, which is out of the classroom context is because both these situations have emotions attached to them.

And that is what we are going to see and we are going to analyze with respect to passive listening and active listening, whether it is in the classroom, or whether it is at a training session at your workplace or anywhere else. Passive listening certainly has its space. We are never seen for once that passive listening implies dull, completely disinterested, unbothered. Some situations might actually require a little bit of passive listening.

Let us say for example, you are at a conference and there are about 600 people. And someone comes on to the dais and starts making an announcement that is specifically for the people from the state of Maharashtra, who have come to the conference. So, the rest of whatever is being spoken is mostly insignificant for you, you can afford to let it reach your ear and pass. In some situations, passive listening is fine.

In some situations, certain aspects of active listening are actually not supposed to be there in certain kinds of passive listening, for example, let us say that you are at a very official function. And there are government dignitaries and officials up there and somebody is giving a formal speech. That is not a point where you need to nod your head and say; oh, yes, oh, yes, I agree, oh, come on. Is that it? You are expected to receive and that is your task there. Be a passive recipient and listen.

So, passive listening does have its space does have its scope. However, when we come in the context of many situations, such as a learning environment of a classroom, or a training, or an interaction in sales or marketing between a client and a customer, between a leader and the team.

Active listening can play an extremely significant role in more ways than one. What do we mean then by active listening? If you go back to the example we started with, when a friend is telling you about the first date, you are not going to be half interested, lost in your own thoughts, sort of listening sort of not. You are going to be physically present here, and now. Isn't it? You are going to have eye contact, when you are listening to that person, oh, okay, and then what happened.

You are going to be conveying the fact that you are listening, that you are involved in different ways. By different ways, I mean, perhaps with a nod of your head, or some other expressions of your face, your body language is going to convey your listening, maybe you might go like this, if it is an informal sitting, in different ways you are conveying that you are listening.

Second, you are taking an active interest in whatever it is that you are listening to. And the way you show that is perhaps by saying words like 'hmm', 'really', 'ah', 'okay', 'and then', and 'then what happened'. Statements like these, which come with a question mark, are very beautiful indicators of active listening, because you really are telling the other person, not only am I listening to you, I want to know more of what you wish to say.

Similarly, in a formal context of let us say, a classroom, training, an interaction between the client and customer, if one carries a body language of being involved, a presence which shows that I am here to listen to you, what you say, matters, I value it, I want to know more. We can convey all of this, just by the way we sit. By the way, we make eye contact and look at the person by the honesty and integrity, with which we involve ourselves, in their story in their narration in whatever it is that they are sharing. They say that being a lifelong learner, is a quality that really takes leaders forward.

Being a lifelong learner is also connected with active listening. And how is that? Because if you are a lifelong learner, not only from books, not only from courses, not only from libraries, every situation, every person, every context that you are engaged with, and you are expected to be a part of, whether in your role as a student, or your role as a manager, whatever be it, you will be looking to learn from the people and from that situation. And a great way to learn is to be curious.

And a fantastic way to be curious is to close this and to open this. Well, I am sure you have heard it many times that we have been given one mouth and two ears. We are expected to have more of reception before we produce. So, as someone who is honing their leadership qualities and the qualities of communication that a leader has. An essential quality would be active listening.

Active listening is a very conscious attempt to understand whatever is being told or whatever is happening, to empathize with it, to learn what can be learned from it, to be curious enough to get involved and to give feedback to whoever is talking to us, conveying that we are involved, conveying that we are listening.

By the feedback like I mentioned earlier, the ways of giving the feedback would be by our body language, our gestures, eye contact, nodding the head maybe. Saying words like ‘hmm’, ‘okay’, ‘right’, which convey that we are understanding, we are with the person who is communicating to us.

A part of active listening is also asking for clarification, asking questions, asking doubts, which a lot of the times we might hesitate and pull back from thinking, oh, what am I going to be thought of, if I ask those questions. However, when you do ask the question, what you are conveying is also that you are an active listener, you are involved in the listening, you are curious about what is being spoken to you, and you wish to understand it better.

Not only are you conveying that even for yourself, if there is any miscommunication that has happened, let us say somebody has said something, when you ask a question back, you know whether you have understood it right, or you have not understood it right. So, active listening actually becomes a feedback for the person who is communicating and speaking with you.

Passive listening, on the other hand would mean perhaps disconnected from what is happening. Totally not curious at all. Curiosity also comes from doing a little preparation prior. Or trying to connect the dots with what is happening at the moment, when none of that happens, it is completely passive.

Just sitting there like a statue, that is absolutely passive listening, where the person who is speaking to you has no idea whether he or she has been able to reach you or not. Passive listening is pretty much close to just hearing. You can hear the sound of the AC, you can hear the traffic passing by. But you do not do anything with it. You do not respond to it, it does not add value to you in any way whatsoever. Nor are you contributing back to it. All of those make anything passive listening, more often than not. Like we said, there are contexts where it is important to be a passive listener, we cannot always speak back.

When the flight announcement is being made regarding the processes during emergency. Well, that is something you have to listen passively. And that is expected of us in that situation. We are not going to say hmm, ah, oh, right, yeah. Jokes apart, active listening is a wonderful opportunity to be engaged learners to be far more present in the here and now in the moment that we are in. And it has very many benefits in the long run.

We have spoken about how we could be active listeners. By our body language, by actually facing the person who is talking to us, who is communicating with us, but actually trying to look into their eyes and as much as possible make eye contact by showing through our nods and gestures. And ‘hmms’ and ‘ahs’, that yes, we are with them. By asking the few questions. These would go a long way in offering many ripple benefits.

Benefits of active listening range from one you get to be seen as a far more trustworthy person. You build trust, by listening actively. Do not you think that is valuable for you at whatever stage and space in life you might be in. Another benefit of active listening would be in resolution of conflicts. The one who is listening actively can play a critical part in being able to understand the entire situation, empathize, ask for the right questions, and bring about the right understanding between people.

Which brings us to the next point that active listening is also an important tool to ensure that miscommunication does not happen, and important information is actually getting conveyed in the manner in which it should be conveyed. This is a role that active listening can critically play. The more we practice being active listeners, not just with our ears, but also with our eyes. With our heart, we are likely to be able to anticipate problems, perhaps even before they actually happen. This will come from regular practice of active listening.

Because we are so observant of the person, or the people or the entire situation. With all our attention, we watch it, we give it our entire attention. We try our best to learn and to understand and to empathize with it. So, as we keep doing that regularly, we certainly likely to be able to anticipate problems even before they happen. This is another benefit of practicing active listening skill.

It goes without saying, of course that for learners, especially active listening reinforces this whole process of building our knowledge base. Because when we go to a learning space, with the intention to be active listeners, we go with our preparation with our curiosity, with wanting to understand what is happening, to wanting to ask questions, to clarify, to involve to get feedback, to give feedback. Definitely, the scope for building our knowledge base, through active listening is much higher visa vie, just continuing to remain a passive listener.

And lastly, for any leader who wish to be far more empowered, as a leader, and to empower her or his team and go forward. Active listening is a very valuable communication skill. Most of us are taught to train in public speaking, to train and debate, to train in auditory, to train in different aspects of speech and intonation and voice and words. Of course, that is important. That is a very important aspect of communication. Having said all of that, it is equally or perhaps even more significant aspect of communication, to be able to listen well to listen actively. Thank you.

(Refer Slide Time: 18:14)



- Both serve different purposes and have a different outcome consequently
- Active listening is a far more demanding and concentration-requiring activity

Passive Listening

- Passive listening can occur in situations such as :
 - Disinterest in the topic
 - Speaker style of presentation is not engaging
 - Information being given by the speaker is not of any significance to the listener
 - Listener is preoccupied
 - Listener is distracted

Active Listening

- To listen actively it helps to learn to :
 - Cut off/ remove distractions from the environment
 - Set aside distractions from speaker behaviour/personal style
 - Listen without assumptions coming in the way of reception
 - Listen with intent to openly receive and comprehend the speaker's content
 - Ask questions when doubts arise and wherever it is possible to ask. For example: difficult words, new terminologies etc.