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BSc Degree

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English – I (Basic English)
Ms. Deepa B Kiran
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology Madras, Chennai
Barriers to Listening

Welcome. Today we are looking at Barriers to Effective Listening. Each one of us would like to make an attempt to listen carefully, and to be listened to carefully as well, don't we? Let me start with a little anecdote. Once upon a time, there was an old man who went to the doctor and said, Doctor, I am really worried. I think my wife is losing her ability to listen, she is losing her hearing. So the doctor said, it is very simple to test and find out.

What you do is stand about 10 meters away from her and ask the question, then go a little closer, ask the same question again. Then a little closer, ask again, then a little closer, ask again, you will know for sure whether she has a hearing problem or not. And so the old man went home, and did just that. His wife was in the kitchen, making coffee, stirring it. He went far away and he asked, "How many spoons of sugar are you putting in the cup darling?" There was no response. He came a little closer, and asked again, "How many spoons of sugar are you putting in the coffee cup darling?" No answer again. He came a little closer, asked the question once again, and a little closer right behind his wife and asked her the question once again. By then he was quite sure that his wife has lost her hearing.

She turned around and said, "I have just answered the question three times did you not hear me." And that is when the old man realized that he was the one who had lost his ability to hear. That was a little light hearted anecdote on the idea of listening, on the idea of barriers to effective listening. I think it is a good example.

Because very often, we like to think of the barrier as being something outside of us, being someone else and something else, which can be true in some instances, I do not deny. However, more often than not, when we do this kind of checking and this kind of evaluation, we will realize that if not the problem, at least the solution lies within us. So let us look at some of the barriers to effective listening.

A very basic, simple, clear cut, straightforward one is the physical distractions. Let us say you are trying to listen to some information, to a piece of music, to a lecture and if there is traffic passing by, if there are dogs barking, if there are children playing loudly, if there is a set of people sitting and gossiping, guffawing, laughing.

Definitely, noise is straightaway, a distraction. So wherever possible the simple solution for that would be as far as we can preempt, or check how silent spaces or how noisy it is likely to become, and then choose where you settle down for the listening as much as possible. If you cannot, and something comes up in the context, try your best to resolve it then and there.

It could be requesting the set of people to go away or asking the children to play elsewhere. How much ever is doable? Shutting the windows, if there is noise of the traffic. Whatever is within our scope, we try and do our best to address the physical distractions. Of course, this is not something that I need to tell you, you already are aware of it.

Nevertheless, just bringing it up as a point that rather than sit and stay irritated and upset, we have a choice to try and act on this very simple aspect of barrier to effective listening, which is external noise, physical distractions of noise, or even have visuals of people coming going. Whatever can be done about it, let us do to ensure that speaking, listening activity and transaction is happening in an undistracted space one.

Second, we also hear about especially maybe a students, the idea of the speaker themselves being a distraction. It could be their specific mannerisms. The way they stand, the expressions or certain gestures, idiosyncrasies, which catch your attention instead of the content instead of the lecture itself. What do we do about that? Well, that is where a lot of teacher imitation comes from. Well, again, setting that apart.

When we wish to address that barrier in listening, and we wish to listen in an effective and engaging manner for our own experience to be more meaningful and fruitful, one straightaway, it helps to become self-aware, to become aware that we are getting distracted by these aspects of the speaker. Okay, Deepa, you are getting distracted with this aspect of the speaker, maybe how they look maybe how they are dressed, or specific gestures, mannerisms, words, style of speech, whatever.

And then to remind oneself that come back, come back, you here to listen to this topic, you are here for this purpose. So return to this, maybe we start making a few notes to be more physically here and now, to address that aspect of speaker distraction. Another barrier to effective listening, and most of these barriers now are more within us. It is ourselves.

One is assumption. There is a story of the man who went to the cinema theater for the second time in his life. And as he sat down, he saw the MGM lion roar there. And he said, "I have

seen this movie.” The moment we make assumptions like this, about whatever it is that the speaker is going to speak. You know, sometimes we do it when we just read the topic. “Oh, this is on biochemical reactions of the protein, I know this.

Yes. I had two semesters of this in my second year.” Yes, certainly, it is highly possible that we already know something about the topic. But it is equally possible that there is something about it, we do not know. And the speaker, who has been invited here, who is there, in that position for whatever purpose, will be able to bring us certain aspects of knowledge and learning about that very topic that we perhaps are not aware of.

When we are willing to change our assumption from ‘I know it all already’, to ‘I know about this topic. I am looking forward and curious to what this person may be bringing to it’. For all we know, sometimes the content can be just the same. They might be talking exactly about what we know. But they might be talking about it in a very interesting style.

The approach might be interesting, the examples and analogies and metaphors used might be very valuable to pick up. One never knows. So to go with the assumption that this is something I already know, is certainly a very big barrier to effective listening. So once again, to be self-aware, when the barrier comes up, and to make a choice to be willing to risk the next few minutes or the next couple of hours.

And being open to an unknown experience just might give us a much more effective listening experience. Another barrier to effective listening is also a slightly different kind of distraction, which is interruptions. We ourselves sometimes in our excitement, may be in wanting to be an extremely active listener might end up interrupting the speaker too many times. There may be too many people asking questions or making comments, which can also interrupt your flow zone, as you are trying to stay connected with the speaker and what they are delivering.

The speaker themselves might sometimes get distracted by a certain question and go away from the main topic and lose track. So all these kinds of interruptions can also come in the way and become barriers for effective listening. How do we address them? One, again, if it is us who is interrupting many times, to be more conscious in our questions and our comments, maybe save some of them for later.

You can meet them outside of the class or outside of the conference or outside of the training. And today being a world of social media, you can probably connect with them online, over email, LinkedIn, whatever and to reserve some of your questions so that you are not interrupting the flow. If too many others are, one is at a certain point to actually mention that.

“It would be nice if some of the questions can be reserved, and we could let our speaker complete what they want to say.” And same for the speaker getting distracted. We have seen situations where we can politely request, “Could you please address the questions later and complete your talk first, your presentation first.” Simple resolutions to explore, to address the barrier of interruptions.

Another barrier, which apparently does not appear like a barrier is when we are constantly judging and evaluating the speaker. Do not get me wrong, of course, it is important to use our discrimination. We have our knowledge of a certain subject, we have certain learning and we have come to listen to someone else. And we are definitely going to use our prior knowledge to be able to understand, to be able to make our own conclusions.

However, if we start concluding very soon, “This person knows nothing, this person is completely wrong in this topic, this person is an absolute idiot.” We are really closing our doors to the rest of the entire communication where there might be a lot of gains for us. There might be a lot of learning and knowledge for us. Nobody is the ultimate expert on everything under the sun. I am sure we all agree on that.

And that includes ourselves. So while a speaker might fall below your standards of a certain aspect of what they are speaking to us or trying to reach out to us, it may not be true of their entire communication, one. Second, we still are bringing our perspective, which of course, is essential. But we could save it and park it until that transaction of communication is over, is completed. For that period of time we can choose to be neutral listeners.

Particularly in situations where let us say we do not have a choice and we have to listen, we might as well not spend every minute in judging and evaluating and closing and shutting our doors and shutting our minds to the next and then to the next and then to the next communication that is coming to us from the speaker.

What this also leads to sometimes even without us realizing is another barrier to communication, which is defensive communication, self-protective communication, when

now that we have judged them so much anything that is pointed out is going to be wrong and there is a need to prove the rightness and therefore, defend oneself, defend one's point of view and perhaps even imagine that we are being pointed out at.

Again, it can become an unpleasant barrier to effective listening. Rather go down that road, one could consider stepping back each time using our discrimination saying that okay, this is what I am noticing this is what I am noticing nevertheless, for now, for this period of communication, 'I am going to hear out what the speaker has to say and how they have to say it.' This is only going to benefit us to become a more effective listener.

So, when we are looking at these various barriers of distraction, interruption, making assumptions, judging or evaluating, we realize that some of this can be addressed and resolved externally. Some of it requires us to be more self-aware, to be a little more conscious of our own speech, of all the speech and talk that goes on inside our own heads.

So that we could benefit from effective listening and not get trapped in any of the barriers that come from effective listening. This does not apply, 'Do not ask questions, do not have opinions. Do not discriminate and use your prior knowledge to understand what is happening.' No. It is just a suggestion to reconsider the appropriateness of the timing when we do any of this. Can we wait? Can we give the benefit of doubt to the speaker until they are done, until they are finished? These are some of the questions I leave you with. Thank you.