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Listening and Oral Communication

Active Listening (Barriers and Strategies)

Learning a new language is often both tough and intriguing. For English as Second Language (ESL) learners, the ability to actively listen is a cornerstone of successful language acquisition. Unlike native speakers, ESL learners must navigate a new linguistic landscape, encompassing unfamiliar sounds, structures, and vocabularies. By allowing students to fully interact with spoken English, active listening acts as a bridge between learners and fluency.

Active listening entails several key components: attention, understanding, engagement, and feedback. By actively listening, ESL learners focus on the nuances of spoken language, picking up on tone, inflection, and context. This deepens their comprehension and allows for better integration of new words and expressions. It's a more immersive experience, where learners not only hear but also process and internalize information.

Moreover, active listening plays a critical role in building confidence in English communication. It equips learners with the ability to respond appropriately, ask pertinent questions, and clarify doubts. This, in turn, can lead to more meaningful interactions and conversations with native speakers, teachers, or fellow learners. As such, active listening is not merely a passive experience but an engaging, dynamic process essential for mastering English as a second language. To fully appreciate the benefits of active listening, it is important to understand what this skill entails. Active listening is not just about hearing words; it is an active effort to process and respond to verbal communication. This begins with giving full attention to the speaker, which means minimizing distractions, maintaining eye contact, and being mentally present.

ESL students who practice active listening pay close attention to what the speaker is saying without interjecting. This discipline helps in accurately interpreting the speaker's message. Taking notes during listening sessions or summarizing what has been said can also aid in better retention. Additionally, identifying the main ideas, themes, and specific details from the conversation contributes to a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

ESL learners are also encouraged to paraphrase what the speaker has said, as this can confirm understanding and facilitate corrections if necessary. Responding with questions for clarification or additional information can further enhance comprehension and encourage interactive learning. All these elements form a holistic approach to listening that is active, engaged, and participatory – an ideal state for language learning. The integration of active listening into ESL classrooms can transform the learning environment. Teachers can incorporate a variety of exercises to enhance students' listening skills. Activities such as listening to stories, songs, or dialogues followed by discussion sessions are excellent for promoting active listening.

One effective method is the use of role-playing in which students take turns speaking and listening in various scenarios. This not only improves listening skills but also provides practical speaking experience. Incorporating multimedia resources such as videos, podcasts, or audio-books can also broaden the range of listening materials and expose students to different accents and idiomatic expressions.

Feedback is an essential aspect of active listening in ESL classrooms. Teachers can facilitate discussions about listening difficulties, enabling students to express challenges and discuss strategies to overcome them. Constructive feedback from peers and instructors can also guide learners to improve their listening skills incrementally. Ultimately, teachers may develop more capable and self-assured students who are prepared for real-world English communication by fostering a classroom culture that emphasizes listening just as much as speaking.

Challenges of Active Listening

ESL students often face significant challenges in mastering active listening. Language barriers such as unfamiliar vocabulary, idioms, and slang can impede comprehension. Additionally, non-native speakers may struggle with understanding fast-paced conversations or deciphering various accents. Moreover, internal psychological barriers like fear of making mistakes or apprehension about misunderstanding can hinder active listening. Often, ESL learners may be preoccupied with forming a response rather than absorbing the information being shared, which reduces the efficacy of their listening practice.

A learner's capacity to maintain focus during listening exercises might also be impacted by fatigue and cognitive stress. It may be difficult for ESL students to stay focused during prolonged listening sessions, particularly if they are attempting to translate and understand new material at the same time.

Identifying these challenges is the first step towards addressing them. With targeted interventions and supportive learning environments, ESL learners can overcome these hurdles and reap the full benefits of active listening.

Techniques for Developing Better Active Listening

There are numbers of techniques that students can adopt to improve their active listening skills. One effective approach is regular practice with various listening materials, such as

podcasts, songs, or news reports. Listening to a diverse range of sources can enhance comprehension and adaptability to different speaking styles and accents. ESL students can benefit from setting specific listening goals, such as understanding the main idea, identifying key details, or picking up new vocabulary words. By focusing on particular aspects of listening, learners can steadily improve their skills over time.

Another useful technique is engaging in focused listening sessions, where learners immerse themselves in listening activities without any distractions. This can be complemented with activities like summarizing what has been heard or discussing it with a peer to ensure understanding. Encouragement from peers and instructors is critical. Participating in language exchange programs where learners converse with native speakers can provide real-world contexts to apply active listening. Furthermore, learners should be encouraged to embrace mistakes and view them as learning opportunities, fostering a positive attitude towards improvement.

The Effect of Active Listening

Active listening holds significant potential for personal and professional growth of ESL learners beyond the confines of language acquisition. In academic settings, active listening skills enable students to comprehend lectures more effectively and participate in discussions with confidence. In the workplace, they facilitate clearer communication and collaboration with colleagues and clients, which are vital for career advancement. Active listening also enhances interpersonal relationships. By effectively listening to others, individuals can build rapport, empathy, and trust. These skills can be transformative in multicultural environments where diverse perspectives and backgrounds must be navigated with sensitivity and understanding.

Furthermore, the benefits of active listening extend to public life. Active listening fosters an appreciation for the richness of other cultures and can enhance participation in civic and community engagements, promoting inclusivity and diversity. As such, the impact of mastering active listening skills transcends linguistic boundaries, influencing various facets of ESL learners' lives and contributing to their overall development and success.

Conclusion

With its significant advantages for language acquisition and beyond, active listening is a crucial part of ESL instruction. Engaging with spoken language in a way that improves communication skills and enhances comprehension calls for conscious effort. ESL students can overcome their obstacles and realize the full benefits of active listening with the help of organized practice and encouraging learning settings.

Improved listening skills put students in a better position for both career and personal development in addition to language success. Active listening empowers individuals to partake in richer and more meaningful interactions, fostering understanding and connection in an increasingly interconnected world. The integration of active listening into ESL curricula and individual learning practices is not only a beneficial approach, but a necessity, and as both students and teachers realize its importance, they are moving toward more successful language instruction and wider social integration.

Barriers to Effective Listening

According to Hargie (2011), barriers to effective listening are present at every stage of the listening process. Noise can obstruct or skew incoming impulses at the reception stage. It can be challenging to tie complex or abstract material to prior experiences during the interpreting stage, which makes comprehension challenging. Natural memory constraints and focus issues might cause memory problems during the recall stage. Personal biases and preconceptions can cause us to exclude people or believe we already know what they will say during the evaluation step. Ineffective paraphrase and questioning techniques can result in misunderstandings during the responding step.

Physical Barriers to Listening

Our ability to listen is impacted by environmental elements including furniture, lighting, and temperature. A room that is too warm or cool can make us more aware of our bodily discomfort to the point that it becomes distracting, and a place that is too dark can make us drowsy. While some seating configurations encourage listening, others keep individuals apart. In general, being physically close to a speaker and able to make direct eye contact with them facilitates listening. The ability to effectively see and hear a person increases people's confidence in their abilities to receive and process information. Eye contact and physical proximity can still be affected by noise. Environmental noises such as a whirring air conditioner, barking dogs, or a ringing fire alarm can obviously interfere with listening despite direct lines of sight and well-placed furniture.

Similar to external noise, physiological noise can impede our capacity to digest information that enters our system. Since it comes from our physical bodies, this is regarded as a physical impediment to successful listening. The noise produced by a physical disease, trauma, or stress on the body is known as physiological noise. The severity of illnesses like a cold, a broken leg, a headache, or a poison ivy breakout can affect our listening and range from bothersome to excruciating. Another type of noise, psychological noise, bridges physical and cognitive barriers to effective listening. Psychological noise, or noise stemming from our psychological states including moods, can facilitate or impede listening. Any mood or state of positive or negative, that is too far above or below our regular baseline creates a barrier to message reception and processing. The generally positive emotional state of being in love can be just as much of a barrier as feeling hatred. Excited mood can also distract as much as anxious state. Stress about an upcoming events ranging from losing a job, to having surgery, to wondering about what to eat for lunch can overshadow incoming messages. Psychological noise is relevant here given that the body and mind are not completely separate. In fact, they can interact in ways that further interfere with listening. Fatigue, for example, is usually a combination of psychological and physiological stresses that manifests as stress (psychological noise) and weakness, sleepiness, and tiredness (physiological noise). Furthermore, shaking, perspiration, blushing, or even the onset of rashes (physiological noise) are all physical manifestations of mental anxiousness (psychological noise).

Cognitive and Individual Listening Barriers

In addition to any physical or environmental barriers, cognitive limits, a lack of listening preparation, complex or unorganized messages, and prejudices can all be hurdles to effective hearing. Whether you call it multitasking, daydreaming, glazing eyes, or falling asleep, we all cognitively process other things while we are receiving messages. You are using around half of your cognitive processing power on a single message if that one channel is a lecture that your lecturer is giving. In another situation, all ten televisions may be on different channels. The fact that we have the capability to process more than one thing at a time offers some advantages and disadvantages. But unless we can better understand how our cognitive capacities and personal preferences affect our listening, we are likely to experience more barriers than benefits.

Faster Thought Rate than Speech as a Barrier

Hargie (2011) claims that our ability to process more information than what comes from one speaker or source creates a barrier to effective listening. While people speak at a rate of 125 to 175 words per minute, we can process between 400 and 800 words per minute. This gap between speech rate and thought rate gives us an opportunity to side-process any number of thoughts that can be distracting from a more important message. Because of this gap, it is impossible to give one message our “undivided attention,” but we can occupy other channels in our minds with thoughts related to the central message. For example, using some of your extra cognitive processing abilities to repeat, rephrase, or reorganize messages coming from one source allows you to use that extra capacity in a way that reinforces the primary message.

Personal barriers to listening are related to the difference between speech and thinking rate because conflicting thoughts about personal matters can divert our attention from listening and make it difficult to focus on what other people are saying.

Two common barriers to concentration are self-centeredness and lack of motivation (Brownell, 1993). For example, when our self-consciousness is raised, we may be too busy thinking about how we look, how we're sitting, or what others think of us to be attentive to an incoming message. Additionally, we are often challenged when presented with messages that we do not find personally relevant. In general, we employ selective attention, which refers to our tendency to pay attention to the messages that benefit us in some way and filter others out. So the student who is checking his or her Twitter feed during class may suddenly switch his or her attention back to the previously ignored professor when the following words are spoken: “This will be important for the exam.”

Another common barrier to effective listening that stems from the speech and thought rate divide is response preparation. Response preparation refers to our tendency to rehearse what we are going to say next while a speaker is still talking. Rehearsal of what we will say once a speaker's turn is over is an important part of the listening process that takes place between the recalling and evaluation and/or the evaluation and responding stage. Rehearsal becomes problematic when response preparation begins as someone is receiving a message and hasn't had time to engage in interpretation or recall. In this sense, we are listening with the goal of responding instead of with the goal of understanding, which can lead us to miss important information that could influence our response.

Insufficient Listening Practice

Lack of listening preparation is another barrier to effective listening. Unfortunately, most people have never received any formal training or instruction related to listening. Although some people think listening skills just develop over time, competent listening is difficult, and enhancing listening skills takes concerted effort. Even when listening education is available, people do not embrace it as readily as they do opportunities to enhance their speaking skills. Students and teachers approach the listening part of the course less enthusiastically than some of the other parts. Listening is often viewed as an annoyance or a chore, or just ignored or minimized as part of the communication process. In addition, our individualistic society values speaking more than listening, as it's the speakers who are sometimes literally in the spotlight. Although listening competence is a crucial part of social interaction and many of us value others we perceive to be "good listeners," listening just doesn't get the same kind of praise, attention, instruction, or credibility as speaking. Teachers, parents, and relational partners explicitly convey the importance of listening through statements like "You better listen to me," "Listen closely," and "Listen up," but these demands are rarely paired with concrete instruction.

Poor Messaging or Speakers

Effective listening is also hampered by poor speakers or poor messaging. Sometimes the sender is the cause of listening difficulties. In terms of message construction, poorly structured messages or messages that are too vague, too jargon filled, or too simple can present listening difficulties. In terms of speakers' delivery, verbal fillers, monotone voices, distracting movements, or a disheveled appearance can inhibit our ability to cognitively process a message (Hargie, 2011). Speakers can employ particular strategies to create listenable messages that take some of the burden off the listener by tailoring a message to be heard and processed easily. Listening also becomes difficult when a speaker tries to present too much information. Information overload is a common barrier to effective listening that good speakers can help mitigate by building redundancy into their speeches and providing concrete examples of new information to help audience interpret and understand the key ideas.

Biasness

Prejudiced hearing is typically an attempt to maintain our current beliefs and prevent ourselves from being persuaded of a different viewpoint. Effective hearing is hampered by this kind of prejudice because we typically cease listening actively and/or morally when we make assumptions about someone based on their identity or beliefs.

There are a number of ways that we display bias in our listening, some of which are more overt than others. For instance, we pretend to be hurried and only discuss the portions of a message that we find acceptable or uncontroversial. In order to prevent our opinions from being contested, we can also act in a state of denial in which we completely shun a topic or somebody. We may believe we know what someone will say because of prejudices based on their identification, such as color, age, occupation, or appearance. This effectively stops us from listening. We can detect biased listening and, ideally, transition to more skillful listening techniques by maintaining an open mind and practicing perception testing.

Wrong Listening Practices

Since the aforementioned obstacles are at least somewhat out of our control, they could be challenging to remove. We all have physical restrictions, cognitive limits, and perceptual biases, and it is more rational to think that we can diminish and increase our awareness of them than to think that we can completely eradicate them. Although some "wrong listening" behaviors may be ingrained, they can be addressed more easily with some deliberate effort. Interrupting, distorted listening, eavesdropping, aggressive listening, narcissistic listening, and pseudo-listening are examples of these poor listening techniques.

Interruption

Turn-taking is negotiated through a complicated system of verbal and nonverbal cues that are both consciously and unconsciously accepted. Conversations develop as a sequence of turns. Turn-taking in conversation has been compared to a dance in which participants attempt to avoid stepping on each other's toes. Not all interruptions are regarded as "bad listening," although they are among the most common errors in the turn-taking procedure. Unintentional interruptions might occur when we misinterpret indications and believe someone has finished speaking, only to have them resume at the same moment as us. Interruptions can occasionally take the form of overlapping statements that express enthusiasm for the topic (e.g., "That's so cool!") or support (e.g., "I think so too."). Back-channel indications like "uh-huh" also overlap with the speaker's message. If we're working on a task with someone else and need to give instructions (like "Turn left here"), instructions (like "Will you whisk the eggs?"), or warnings (like "Look out behind you!"), we might also interrupt out of need.

Unintentional interruptions can still be considered bad listening if they result from mindless communication. As we've already learned, intended meaning is not as important as the meaning that is generated in the interaction itself. So if you interrupt unintentionally, but because you were only half-listening, then the interruption is still evidence of bad listening. The speaker may form a negative impression of you that can't just be erased by you noting that you didn't "mean to interrupt." Interruptions can also be used as an attempt to dominate a conversation. A person engaging in this type of interruption may lead the other communicator to try to assert dominance, too, resulting in a competition to see who can hold the floor the longest or the most often. More than likely, though, the speaker will form a negative impression of the interrupter and may withdraw from the conversation.

Distorted Listening

There are numerous ways that listening might be distorted. Sometimes, we simply misremember the order of information. This can have minor consequences if we are reciting a story casually, cause annoyance if we forget the turns (left, right, left or right, left, right?) in our driving directions, or have serious consequences if we recount a crime out of chronological order, which can result in false testimony during a criminal trial. Another type of distorted listening is rationalization, in which we modify, skew, or alter incoming information to match our preexisting schemata. We may, for example, reattribute the cause of something to better suit our own beliefs. If a professor is explaining to a student why he

earned a “D” on his final paper, the student could reattribute the cause from “I didn’t follow the paper guidelines” to “this professor is an unfair grader.” Sometimes we actually change the words we hear to make them better fit what we are thinking. This can easily happen if we join a conversation late, overhear part of a conversation, or are being a lazy listener and miss important setup and context. Passing along distorted information can lead to negative consequences ranging from starting a false rumor about someone to passing along incorrect medical instructions from one health-care provider to the next (Hargie, 2011).

The addition of material to a message is a type of distorted listening that actually goes against our normal pattern of listening, which involves reducing the amount of information and losing some meaning as we take it in. The metaphor of “weaving a tall tale” is related to distorting through addition, as inaccurate or fabricated information is added to what was heard. The addition of material is also a common feature of gossip.

Aggressive Listening

Aggressive listening is a bad listening practice in which people pay attention in order to attack something that a speaker says (McCornack, 2007). Aggressive listeners like to ambush speakers in order to critique their ideas, personality, or other characteristics. Such behavior often results from built-up frustration within an interpersonal relationship.

Self-centered Listening

Self-centered listening is a form of self-absorbed listening in which listeners try to make the interaction about them (McCornack, 2007). Such listeners redirect the focus of the conversation to them by interrupting or changing the topic. When the focus is taken off them, these listeners may give negative feedback of the speaker or topic, ignoring the speaker. In this kind of narcissistic listening, the listeners shift the focus of attention back to themselves.

Pseudo-listening

Pseudo-listening refers to ignoring or partially listening to a speaker. Pseudo-listening is behaving as if you’re paying attention to a speaker when you’re actually not (McCornack, 2007). Outwardly visible signals of attentiveness are an important part of the listening process, but when they are just an “act,” the pseudo-listener is engaging in bad listening behaviors. She or he is not actually going through the stages of the listening process and will likely not be able to recall the speaker’s message or offer a competent and relevant response. Although it is a bad listening practice, we all understandably engage in pseudo-listening from time to time.

Main Points to Remember

- Physical and environmental obstacles to effective listening include things like furniture arrangement, background noise like traffic or conversation, physiological noise like hunger or headaches, and psychological noise like tension or rage.
- Cognitive barriers to effective listening include the difference between speech and thought rate that allows us “extra room” to think about other things while someone is talking and limitations in our ability or willingness to concentrate or pay attention. Personal barriers to effective listening include a lack of listening preparation, poorly structured and/or poorly delivered messages, and prejudice.

- There are several bad listening practices that we should avoid, as they do not facilitate effective listening:
- Interruptions that are unintentional or serve an important or useful purpose are not considered bad listening. When interrupting becomes a habit or is used in an attempt to dominate a conversation, then it is a barrier to effective listening.
- Distorted listening occurs when we incorrectly recall information, skew information to fit our expectations or existing schemata, or add material to embellish or change information.
- Aggressive listening is a bad listening practice in which people pay attention to a speaker in order to attack something they say.
- Self-absorbed listening is self-centered and self-absorbed listening in which listeners try to make the interaction about them by interrupting, changing the subject, or drawing attention away from others.
- Pseudo-listening is “fake listening,” in that people multitasking and behave like they are paying attention and listening to the speakers when they actually are not.