LISTENING, A DYNAMIC PROCESS

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Abstract: *The paper is aimed at emphasizing the relevance of active listening skills nowadays, when listeners are surrounded by a plethora of potentially distracting devices. In the same vein, actively listen should amount to their commitment to understanding the topics in question. Furthermore, by acknowledging the fact that active listening covers a wide array of activities ranging from 'hearing' to 'responding', listeners may step up their efforts in order to always grasp the main points of any lecture.*

Keywords: active listeners, HURIER model, SIER model, speaker-listener partnership

1. Premises

How likely is it nowadays to question the listening skills, particularly from a professional standpoint? While acknowledging that there is a major difference between 'hearing' and 'listening', listeners fail, sometimes, to remain committed throughout the listening process. What exactly prevents them from mastering the listening skills in a constantly changing communication climate?

Research suggests that, nowadays, only 25% of our communication is represented by listening as opposed to a highly more significant percentage decades ago: 'Adults remember a small portion of what they hear. How much information we remember is affected by several conditions: 1) when we heard it […]; 2) its position in a list of items […]; 3) the importance we attach to the information […].'(Templeton, 2010:139)

If 'hearing' is an automatic physiological process, taking place to different degrees, 'listening' equals a choice of ours since it's a psychological process, which requires awareness, determination, critical abilities, and perseverance, too. As Deanna D. Sellnow (2005:78) points out, 'unfortunately, most people are poor listeners even though it can hurt them personally and professionally'. Both Deanna D. Sellnow (2005:79) and Melody Templeton (2010:138) agree on the dichotomy *hearing - listening*, suggesting each a range of steps to take in order to enhance our listening skills.

2. Speaker - Listener Partnership

How do we approach 'listening'? Are we genuinely aware of its critical role to the overall process of 'learning'? According to research[1], listeners are mainly divided into active, supportive 'trampoline' listeners and 'passive information sponges' listeners. The 'trampoline listeners' project themselves to the speaker as a source of 'height, acceleration, energy, and amplification' of his/her thoughts.

Furthermore, active listeners choose to go in the pursuit of a *speaker-listener partnership*, making manifest their commitment to ethically engage in a given communication context. Fully aware that only by blocking out distractions and clearing their mind of extraneous thoughts will they accomplish their listening goals, active listeners are likely to get

[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDMtx5ivKK0&t=37s, Amy Gallo. 'The Art of Active Listening' - The Harvard Business Review Guide (HBR), retrieved October 25th, 2023

immersed into the speaker's presentation, thus 'not steering the conversation away from him/her in a way that makes them feel dismissed or unheard.'

Effective listening, therefore, is customarily seen as a 'tool' successfully connecting speakers and listeners. However, failing to abide by the commonly agreed upon rules, and displaying instead a host of signs like 'lack of commitment, jumping to conclusions, becoming distracted, poor note-taking, and asking inappropriate questions', eventually translate into breaching the ethical code of listening. Along the same lines, effective listeners show the much needed determination to truly grasp speaker's ideas.

Active listening equals a sustained effort, mainly channelled towards decoding all information we have managed to capture based on a vast system of frames-of-reference. Thanks to a range of varied lenses, which act as a catalyst, the active listener is bound to assign meaning to new data or ideas. The ongoing speaker-listener dynamics, a two-way interaction governed by a set of rules, implies to 'a) set listening goals; b) listen for the speaker's main ideas and take note of the key points; c) watch for the speaker's nonverbal cues; d) try to detect the speaker's organizational pattern' (O'Hair *et al.*, 2010: 34). As highlighted by O'Hair *et al.*, the rules are intended to ensure that both participants will benefit from the same communication context.

No matter how seasoned the speaker, he will still be tested with his audience. Gaining and retaining their attention for longer than 5 to 10 minutes might prove a rather arduous task. The path to pursue, in this case, is *practise, practise, and practise*, alongside conducting some research into the targeted audience.

In a similar vein, Jacey Lamerton (2001:125) underlines possible steps to take in order to tailor our presentation the best we can: 'Know your audience. a) How much do they know?; b) Are they likely to be hostile?; c) Are they likely to be receptive and open to persuasion?; d) Are they likely to be supportive and keen to contribute?; e) Are they likely to be suspicious? f) Are they likely to be bored?; g) Are they likely to pick you up on every detail?'

3. Effective Listening Models: HURIER and SIER

A dynamic, well-structured listening process can be moulded as either a HURIER, or as a SIER model. Research suggests that the HURIER model comprises six components, all of them aimed at raising listeners' awareness of how best they can attain their listening goals.

Envisaged as a six-step listening process, the HURIER model covers activities ranging from 'hearing-understanding-remembering-interpreting-evaluating' to 'responding'. Throughout the process, active listeners will most certainly ensure that all distractions have been put away so that they can engage with the complex tasks of focusing on the speaker's flow of ideas to try and retain as much information as possible. Additionally, effective listeners will also commit to their working memory all information in question, thus attempting to decipher it to the best of their abilities.

While scrutinizing the paradigm of effective listening, the SIER model will definitely draw our attention. Its four components, 'sensing the message- interpreting it - evaluating - reacting to it', are aimed at reinforcing critical listening skills.

The SIER model maps out a series of four distinctive steps for the listener to take, in order to gain a wider perspective on the information he's presented with. We may, therefore, consider the SIER model an appropriate method, designed to gauge listeners' awareness.

Upon hearing the message, the active, fully engaged listener will remain focused during the entire process in order to equally understand the message, determine its strong points, while also exposing potential flaws, and to eventually generate a reaction to all information taken in as well as to nonverbal cues picked up from the speaker.

With a reference to the relevance of critical listening, Deanna Sellnow (2005: 82) maintains that it 'is the process of hearing, understanding, evaluating, and assigning worth to

a message. It is appropriate when your goal is to think deeply and react analytically to a message.'

Furthermore, the SIER model (Sellnow, 2005: 84) is designed as a four-step process to enhance critical listening skills: a) 'sense - hear message'; b) 'interpret - understand message'; c) 'evaluate - judge message's strengths and weaknesses'; d) 'react - assign worth to message'. It is acknowledged how beneficial the SIER model can be by providing 'several important insights: it shows how hearing is only the first step in the process of listening, and how we can listen to different extents, as well as where and why our efforts to listen critically may break down.' (Sellnow, 2005: 85)

Coupled with Sellnow's view on honing critical listening, there is also Hamilton's list of stages for a proper listening process. By way of exemplification, we learn that '[…] listeners receive-they hear what is important to them; comprehend-they listen to understand; interpret-they assign meaning to what they see, hear, and feel; evaluate-they determine speaker credibility and message importance; respond-they react to the speech, usually through nonverbal cues; remember-they retain parts of the message from each stage in memory.' (Hamilton, 2012: 52)

4. Strategies Designed to Improve Listening Skills

As far as *the types of listening* are concerned, there are several slightly different classifications. Sellnow (2005:80) highlights five types, ranging from discriminative to critical listening: 'There are five types of listening based on different purposes: discriminative, comprehensive, appreciative, empathic, and critical.' (*cf.* Wolvin &Coakley, 1992)

Stephanie J. Coopman & James Lull (2010: 54), however, narrow the list down to just four types: 'There are different reasons for listening and different ways of listening. In *empathic* listening, you want to know the feeling and emotions the speaker is conveying […] In *appreciative* listening, you listen for enjoyment, as when listening to a stand-up comedy routine or an after-dinner speech. When you listen for *content*, you gather information, focusing on the speaker's main ideas, as when an instructor lectures. Finally, *critical* listening requires that you evaluate the speaker's credibility, ideas, and supporting evidence. Most public speaking situations call for critical listening.'

Additionally, Amy Gallo[2] also mentions the existence of four types: 'a) task-oriented (efficiency); b) analytical (a neutral perspective); c) relational (building connections and responding emotionally); d) critical (judging both the speaker and the content)'.

When exactly do we engage in one particular type of listening, or another? What prompts us to exercise one type of listening as opposed to another? Gaining a deeper understanding of each type will undoubtedly enable us to be better equipped to navigate through different listening patterns, thus becoming increasingly aware which one fits in with the event at hand.

When listeners pretend that they are listening, they nod, agree with 'hmm-hmm', or parrot back what they hear the person say. Active listening skills, on the other hand, include speaking up and asking good questions.

Consequently, learning more on each type of listening will surely raise our chances to grow into *active listeners.*

5. Conclusion

Needless to reinforce that *active listening* embodies both the discipline to remain focused throughout the speaker's presentation, and a vested interest in the topic addressed. In a nutshell, we could say that *active listening* is primarily about marrying the speaker's enthusiasm with the listener's expectations.

[2]https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDMtx5ivKK0&t=37s, Amy Gallo. 'The Art of Active Listening' - The Harvard Business Review Guide (HBR), retrieved October 25th, 2023

If listeners show that they are intent on keeping pace with the speaker's flow of ideas, they will most certainly strive to stay in the moment of the presentation, thus clearing their 'mind of extraneous thoughts'.

If *speaking* is about winning the audience over thanks to the speaker's stamina and sustained research endeavours, *active listening* makes manifest the degree to which the listener's undivided attention and commitment to understanding really pay off.

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