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## The gift of listening

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### Introduction

The art of listening is generally misunderstood and underrated as a skill in language teaching (Flowerdew, 1994; McCarthy, 1998), therefore the potential benefits of listening for both listener and speaker are not often acknowledged or valued. However, in business, as well as in everyday life, good listeners make fewer mistakes, upset fewer people, obtain better understanding of people and situations, and generally operate using better quality information (Barbara, Celani, Collins and Scott (1996). A simple instance could be taking down telephone messages, an everyday occurrence that challenges our ability to listen.

Good listeners also make a contribution to the person speaking by being encouraged to share their thoughts and ideas, viewed as someone who has valid opinions. When we experience this kind of listening, we are able to open up, as we feel valued and acknowledged. It is almost as though we grow larger in the conversation, simply because of the quality of the other person's listening. Consequently, I firmly believe that we should teach this skill in schools!

### 1. Listening in order to influence

Obviously, people trying to influence or 'sell' to others, often do more talking than listening. At the same time, when we do most of the talking, we diminish our ability to draw information from other people. People in sales professions, for example, can sometimes miss crucial signals that the person will now buy from them, simply because they are in a 'talking' mode not a 'listening' one!

All too often people pursue a line of debate or argument that has no impact on the other person. If they switched instead to a mode of listening more, reflecting more on what the other person was saying, or doing, they might easily gain information that would help. For example, imagine yourself as a travel agent wanting to get a businessman to book a holiday. You might spend a long time describing the location, the facilities, and weather conditions before realizing your own reasons for wanting the holiday might not be his! By spending more time listening to what his objections to the holiday really are, and what he really wants, you are in a much better position to influence his thinking. Or quite simply, to accept that there is no way he will ever book the holiday and you are wasting your energy trying to persuade him!

As a result of your listening, you are able to pass beyond what is actually said, and begin to notice what is 'unsaid'. A similar situation occurs when, for example, somebody is explaining how they are very excited about a forthcoming job move, describing how it is good for them right now to be moving in a certain direction, and how it feels 'right'. In their listening, you might actually hear something else that is not spoken that completely contradicts what the other party is saying. Perhaps changes in the person's tone of voice or something about their words will not quite 'ring true'. This might be something very subtle that would be easily missed by poor listening.

### 2. The levels of listening

There are actually several different forms of listening (Starr, 2003) depending on the amount of focused effort we direct towards what (or who) we are listening to. When we ask, 'Are you

listening?', we expect the answer to be 'Yes' or 'No', as if there is a listening switch that we can turn on or off. Perhaps a more accurate response would be 'Sort of . . .' or 'Just to the words' or 'All the way to behind what you were actually saying!'

Figure 1. below shows the different forms of listening starting from the 'pretending to listen' to 'telepathic' listening.

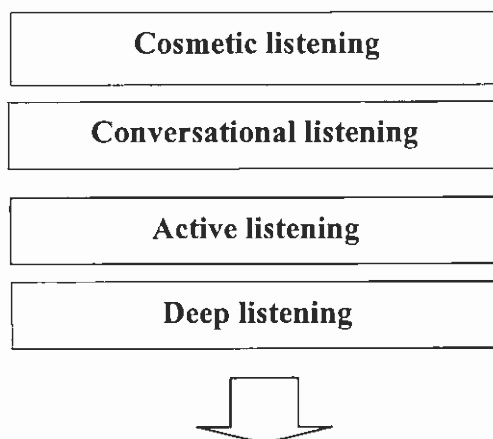


Figure 1: The forms of listening

In the next sections we have a look in more detail at some of the ways that we listen to people.

### ***2.1. Cosmetic listening***

Cosmetic listening is used when you are looking at someone but your thoughts are actually elsewhere. You might be nodding, and adding 'listening noises' such as 'Hmmm' or 'Yes' or 'That's interesting'. The person speaking may or may not be aware of the way you are listening to them, and may well be continuing to speak regardless. Occasionally, you might 'miss' something that the person has said, and realize you are losing track of the conversation, saying something like 'Sorry, I drifted off just then –what did you just say?'

At the same time, cosmetic listening may be appropriate when you sense that the other person is not actually talking to you – they are just enjoying talking, letting off steam perhaps, and require little input from you.

### ***2.3. Conversational listening***

This is the kind of listening that we do most of the time. It requires little effort, and is present in most of our daily conversations, and it can be a lot of fun and really energizing.

The balance between talking, listening and internally processing information varies from person to person. This balance relates to several factors, including our basic personality type, the nature of the conversation, how we are feeling etc. Some people talk much more than they listen, some people prefer to speak less, listen more, and some appear to have a pretty even balance of both. A person teaching a specialized subject in a classroom situation is more likely to be doing more of the talking, and much less listening, or processing of information from the class. However, we must develop a deeper form of listening.

### ***2.4. Active listening***

In the process of active listening, the listener is using more effort to listen and process information than speaking. He/she has the intention of staying focused on what the other person is saying, in order to fully understand him. Also, by using clarifying questions, repeating information back to him/her and making appropriate sounds, gestures or expressions, the listener continually confirms that he/she is still listening.

A conversation where the listener listens attentively might sound like this:

SPEAKER: 'So the whole interview turned into a bit of a nightmare?'

LISTENER: 'Really – why, what happened?'

The listener is focusing very much on understanding what has happened by gathering facts in a fairly logical sequence, filling in gaps, working to get a fuller picture of events. The listener is not giving his own thoughts and views, not telling stories of interviews that they have had, and not offering advice and ideas. These behaviours would fit more into the scope of 'conversational listening' described earlier.

### **2.5. Deep listening**

This last category of listening goes beyond what it is logically possible to achieve by listening to someone. People using deep listening are described as 'almost telepathic' because of their ability to listen to and understand another person, form insights into what they have said, or even understand what they have not said. When somebody is able to generate this quality of listening, they are able to experience the other person with a sense of who they are, as well as what they are saying.

This state of listening can be described as a slightly altered mental state when the mind of the listener is mostly quiet and calm, when they are entirely focused on the other person and can only be disturbed by the speaker asking the listener a question, or seeking acknowledgement of some sort.

For the listener, it almost feels as though you are experiencing 'being' the other person— although of course you are not. In terms of your ability to relate to the other person, what they are thinking and feeling about a situation, the quality of the information you are receiving is significant. For the person being listened to, the feeling of being understood will mean a deeper sense of relatedness to the listener.

I should add at this point that to stay in continual deep listening for extended periods of time is neither desirable nor possible. It is not possible because the listener cannot only listen; they must also make observations, question, use physical gestures and generally stay in the conversation.

### **Conclusion**

I would recommend that anyone seriously committed to the field of teaching actively develop their own deep listening ability, which can challenge them in many ways. For instance, it can make them become aware of how much they are programmed to want to put 'something of themselves' into a conversation with another person. The listener's only motive is to really understand and relate to the other person, nothing else.

### **References**

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