

ACTIVE LISTENING

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1- Introduction

Listening is one of the most important skills you can have. How well you listen has a major impact on your learning, the quality of your relationships with others, and on job effectiveness.

In lectures, students are expected to work harder than teachers because they are supposed to know what they talk about, and students are less knowledgeable about topics.

“I attend lectures, but I can’t catch what the teacher says,” a student complains. This means that the frequency of class attendance does not match the quality of classroom learning (useless notes).

We spend 45% of our communication time in listening; 30 % in speaking; 16 % in reading; and 9 % in writing. We remember only 25 % of what we hear after two days.

Are you a good listener? How many times you should listen to answer some silly questions? Is there any difference between hearing and listening?

2- Basic Definitions

A- Hearing: It involves receiving sound waves through our ears, which transmit them through the hearing mechanism. These sound waves (vibrations) are sent to the brain for interpretation. It is in this stage that hearing and listening differ.

B- Listening: It is the process of receiving, attending, understanding, responding and remembering (Fujishin, 2009)

So, while hearing can be a passive process, listening involves considerable brain activity. Listening requires the presence of the brain which must be actively working upon the words being heard. That is, carrying out cognitive functions like analysing, classifying, interpreting, etc.

All in all, we can say that active listening means listening actively, concentrating on what is being said rather than passively hearing the message of the speaker (passive listening).

3- Active listening vs. hearing (passive listening)

Features	Active listening	Hearing
Nature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skill (can be developed) • Attentional process (purposeful) • Conscious • Active 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense • Physiological process • Subconscious • Passive
Communication	a two-way mode	a one-way mode
Reaction	verbal / nonverbal	none
Effort	Effortful	effortless
Cognitive processes	Analyse, evaluate, summarise ...	none

4- Why we want to know more about Listening

There are many reasons that can explain why we want to understand listening. These include:

- a. Understand the factors that affect listening abilities
- b. Use effective strategies to improve our performance
- c. Develop skills for note taking / communication

So, good (active) listening maximizes understanding, a good listener becomes a good note taker

5- Signs of Active Listening

Active listening involves as well showing interest in listening to the speaker through verbal/non-verbal messages (behaviours)

- a- Nonverbal signs: smile, eye contact, head nodding, facial expression, mirroring (automatic reflection of the speaker's facial expressions), body language, posture, gesture, etc.
- b- Verbal signs: positive reinforcement (words of encouragement; yes, indeed, good...), questions, reflection, clarification (to ensure correct understanding), summarisation (repeating main elements to the speaker to correct if necessary), comments, etc.

6- Types of listening

- a- **Appreciative listening**: to listen for enjoyment and pleasure. A good example is listening to music, especially as a way to relax. Other examples may include a joke, a story, an actor in a play...
- b- **Empathetic** (therapeutic) listening: to listen to understand and relate to the speaker's feelings, emotions, desires and wishes without interruption (stops or questions). Its goal is to comfort the speaker and relieve his or her psychological pain.
- c- **Critical listening**: to listen to understand, interpret, examine, and analyse the speaker's message. Its goal is to evaluate what is being said (needs some previous knowledge).
- d- **Active listening**: to listen with full attention and focus in order to understand and learn new knowledge, especially, in educational settings such as lectures, labs, conferences, conversations, small group discussions, etc.
- e- **Rapport listening**: when trying to build rapport with others we can engage in a type of listening that encourages the other person to trust and like us. For example, a salesman may try to listen carefully to what you are saying to promote trust and potentially make a sale. This type of listening is common in situations of negotiation
- f- **Informational listening**: Whenever you listen to gain novel information. This is true in many day-to-day situations, at work, when you listen to the news, watch a documentary, when a friend tells you a recipe or when you are talked through a technical problem with a computer.

7- Strategies for active listening

- a. Create a clear listening goal: intention to listen to learn, show a positive attitude towards the module, the subject, the speaker ...
- b. Familiarise yourself with the topic before class: consult the syllabus, previous lectures, concepts, terminology...
- c. Use concentration strategies: eliminate as many external and internal distractors as possible to free up the working memory space
- d. Keep an open mind: avoid prejudging information or speaker; set personal opinions aside
- e. Express an interest in the topics through verbal and nonverbal messages
- f. Participate in the learning process: ask questions, respond to questions, do an activity ...

8- Barriers to active listening

- a. Physical: noise, location (from the speaker) light, temperature, furniture, etc.
- b. Physiological: sickness, fatigue, sleeplessness, hearing problems, hunger, etc.
- c. Psychological: stress, anger, anxiety, fear, daydreaming, assumption about speaker or subject, having a problem, etc.
- d. Cognitive: the difference between speech and thought rate, lack of preparation, poorly structured message, etc.

9- Listening styles to avoid

- Refusing to listen (deliberately)
- Pseudo-listening (pretending to listen): despite the existence of nonverbal behaviours (posture, eye contact, nodding, appropriate facial expressions), there is no attempt or desire to receive, attend to or understand the speaker's message. Sometimes, it is used as a politeness strategy with people who repeat stories.
- Listening to evaluate: the focus is on judging the speaker's message (positively or negatively) rather than listening and trying to understand his opinions, feelings, and thoughts. Judging does not encourage understanding; it hinders communication.
- Selective listening: this negative type of listening implies that the listener is somehow biased toward what they are hearing. Bias can be based on preconceived ideas or emotionally difficult

communications. Selective listening is a sign of failing communication as we listen and respond to subjects we are interested in and skip the rest.

- ❑ Narcissistic listening: self-centred listening (focus on the self).
- ❑ Aggressive listening: a type of listening used to attack the speaker.

10-Conclusion

Active listening involves listening with all senses and giving full attention to the speaker. It is beneficial for the speaker and the listener alike. So, being an 'active listener' is one of the prerequisites for any successful student as it is an indispensable means for maximising learning.