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Challenge and efficacy of listening skills in the classroom

Communication plays a pivotal place in our daily life irrespective of social or economic class, as Paul J. Meyer rightly puts it as- “Communication—the human connection—is the key to personal and career success.” As socially attached with one another, those who hold communication at a high importance become successful in their lives. Of the four language skills, listening assumes an indispensable significance from an infant baby to a new language learner. In the corporate domain, two simple steps adopt key roles for mediation and success of the enterprise – testing people’s understanding and KISS ie keep it simple stupid which aim to yield the positive results. Listening enables us to duly respond in our own words with the essence and feeling of what you have just listened and you allow the speaker to feel the satisfaction of being listened and understood; which a major human need is today. The presentation attempts to examine a broad study of the importance of communication skills and with the thrust upon listening skills in our life with its inevitability in our success. So is the need in the teaching and learning.

Key words: communication process, feedback, effective dialogue, good and poor communicators, verbal and nonverbal, listening, types of listening, barriers: speakers and listeners.

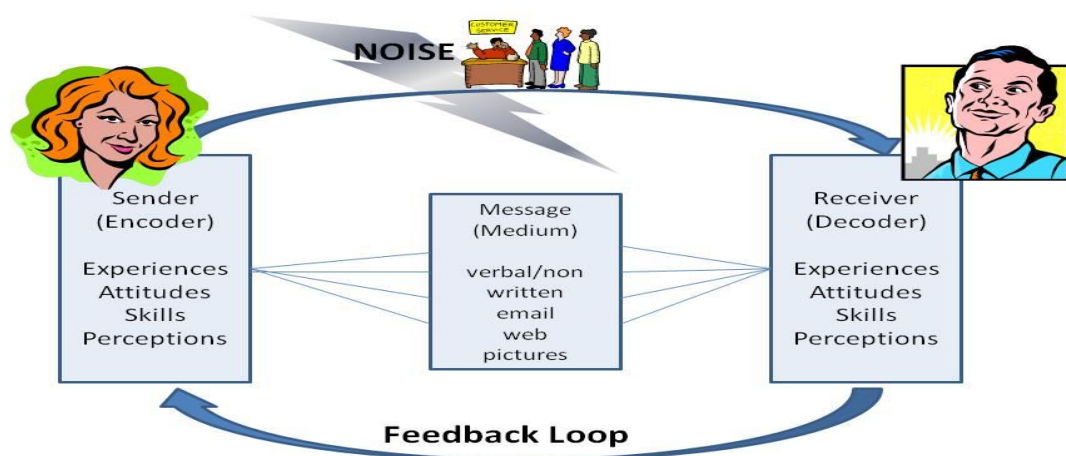
Definition of communication:

A renowned scholar GG Brown defines communication as- “Communication is a transfer of information from one person to another, whether or not it elicits confidence. But the information transferred must be understandable to the receiver.” While Fred G. Meyer terms it as- “Communication is the intercourse by words, letters or messages”. (Communication Theory, UKEssays)

In simple terms it is the process of sending and receiving messages that is a successful conveying or sharing of ideas and feelings through verbal and/or nonverbal means; oral and written communication along with signs, signals and behavior.. Success of a leader or a

teacher whether in sales, any personal relationships or teaching defined mostly on one's effective communication skills; which features on the top list of success and apparently it is observed that majority of conflicts arise due to a cause or an effect of bad communication skills.

Most people believe communication is a one way process and an opportunity to impose their views on others with or without its consent and success. If it is a one way process, feedback from the listeners or respondents should have been unsolicited in that case. The image below is palpable and how communication is effective only when it is sent, received, decoded and responded to:



The Communication Process

Poor communicators: Poor communicators are often found giving facts about a situation which they believe will be sufficient to influence people into following a particular course of action. They fail to understand if they are unable to express what they mean to, is sure should never expect others to understand them. The communicator happens to fail due to lack of preparation before expressing.

- **Emotional and erratic facet** tends to surface to act and react when communicating or responding and in a way bent upon evading opportunities for communication. Nervousness or the kind of unexpected responses of the respondents to be emotional or erratic in communication.
- **Low confidence:** People with low confidence will tend to ignore opportunities to pass through difficult messages with the result that the communication vacuum only serves to increase the size of the problem.

The good communicators place great emphasis on listening than talking. If you take the time and trouble to listen to the views and thoughts of others, you learn more and tend to find

them listening to you when the time comes to share your thoughts – what in fact is our human tendency and weakness of shirking off opportunities to spare and to respond. Richard Nixon said, “People are persuaded by reason, but moved by emotion; the leader must both persuade and move them.” For example a leader who wants to introduce change needs to back up the logic for change with reasons for others to have the desire to help drive the change coupled with emotional appeal – this is regarded as one of the efficacies of communication skills of a great communicator rather than a poor communicator. Even the **effective language teachers** as aware of the importance of language and listening, provides a role and a platform to listen and to express because listening as the basis of any language acquisition that enables learners to interact. Effective language instructors show students how they can adjust their listening behavior to deal with a variety of situations, types of input and listening purposes.

Modes of communication:

Face-to-face communication is the most common, the cheapest and a very easy mode of communication we experience in our daily life. This includes casual conversation between two or more people. One needs less time for decoding and response from the listener as the visual cues additionally help understand the communicator or speaker.

Textual communication includes written, printed and internet communication such as email, instant messaging and text messaging. It is much easier to share information from a small to a large group of people and that can be recorded for future use.

Video communication is both verbal and nonverbal mode of communication. It is achieved by using web cameras to connect the speaker and the listener. This can also be called mass communication or mass media. However this may get hampered due to bad connections or other technical issues resulting in failure of communication, examples like internet, TV, videoconferencing, video call etc.

Audio is a voice form of communication on a telephone and an instant communication mode but it has a disadvantage of viewing the other person’s nonverbal response.

Definitions of listening as per Merriam-Webster:

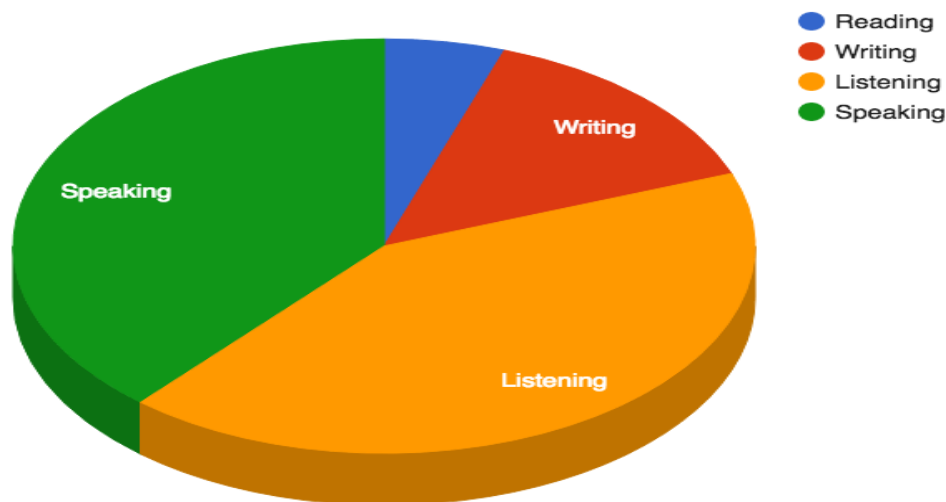
1. to pay attention to sound like *listen to music*
2. to hear something with thoughtful attention: give consideration *listen to a plea*
3. to be alert to catch an expected sound, *listen for his step*

Language learning depends on listening. It provides the aural and visual inputs that serve as the basis for language acquisition and enables learners to interact in spoken communication.

We communicate much through body language. We need to be able to discriminate between verbal and nonverbal movements that signify different meanings.

Of the four language skills, why listening skill is difficult-

Biggest Language Learning Struggles



Types of listening in communication-

Discriminative listening: It is the most basic type of listening that helps us to differentiate and identify different sounds. Failure to differentiate and identify is a failure of decoding the expressed message. This process, we learn from the early stage of our life as an infant and to till we learn a new language. This is why a person from one country finds it difficult to speak another language perfectly, as he/she is unable to distinguish the subtlety of sounds of that language. Even personal emotional sharing can be decoded by a very close person rather than a usual acquaintance.

Comprehension listening: As we differentiate and identify sounds, we can make out sense of them with the help of a lexicon of words and the rules of grammar and syntax by which we can understand what others are saying. This enables listener to comprehend only when he is good in the language plus the nonverbal modes of communication through too which a communicator expresses. The listener needs to decode even the language twists because of the variety of words and their variable importance. Comprehension listening is also known as content listening, informative listening and full listening.

Critical listening: It is a listening to evaluate and to form opinion about an expressed message. Judgment assesses strengths and weaknesses, agreement and approval. This form of listening applies to one's existing knowledge and rules whilst simultaneously listening to the on-going words from the speaker. We seek to assess the truth of what is being said and

also to judge what they say against our values, assessing them as good or bad, worthy or unworthy.

Biased listening: Biased listening happens when the person listens to only what he wants to, typically in order to misinterpret what the other person is saying based on the stereotypes and other biases that he possesses.

Evaluative listening: This listening is particularly and pertinently discernible when a speaker tries to persuade the listeners or the audience, perhaps to change our behavior and maybe even to change our beliefs. It heavily relies on the listeners to discriminate between subtleties of language and to decode the inner meaning of what is said. Typically also we weigh up the pros and cons of an argument, determining whether it makes sense logically as well as whether it is helpful to us. Evaluative listening is also called critical, judgmental or interpretive listening.

Appreciative listening: In appreciative listening, we seek certain information to appreciate, that which helps meet our needs and goals. We use appreciative listening when we are listening to good music, poetry or maybe even the stirring words of a great leader/speaker. For instance: Wow! Bravo! Kudos! Waah! Kya baat hai!

Sympathetic listening: In sympathetic listening we care about the other person and show this concern in the way we pay close attention and express our sorrow for his ills and happiness at his joys.

Empathetic listening: When we listen empathetically, we go beyond sympathy to seek a truer understanding of how others are feeling. This requires excellent discrimination and close attention to the nuances of emotional signals. When we are being truly empathetic, we actually feel what they are feeling.

Therapeutic listening: In therapeutic listening, the listener has a purpose of not only empathizing with the speaker but also to use his deep connection in order to help the speaker understand, change or develop in some way. This not only happens when you go to see a therapist but also in many social situations, where friends and family seek to both diagnose problems from listening and also to help the speaker cure themselves, perhaps by some cathartic process. This also happens in work situations too, where managers, HR people, trainers and coaches seek to help employees learn and develop.

Dialogic listening: The dialogic listening is a style of learning through conversation and an engaged interchange of ideas and information, in which we actively seek to learn more about the person and how they think. Dialogic listening is sometimes known as relational listening.

Relationship listening: Sometimes listening becomes the most important factor in order to develop or sustain a relationship. In situation like love relationship, lovers talk for hours and attend closely to what each other has to say, when the same words for or from someone else would seem to be rather boring. This listening is also important in areas such as negotiation and sales, where the other person likes you and trusts you.

Steps for effective listening:

The first step is to open yourself to the 'incoming message' by letting down your defences as far as possible. Undisturbed eye contact with the other person shows a real commitment to them and their specific message. **The second step** is to begin to interpret or reconstruct what is being said, remembering always that words have different meanings to different people. Keep asking one-self whether as the listener really understands the message. Allow the other person to finish his message before attempting to respond to it. One needs to listen with full attention and withhold judgment, assumption and criticism at this stage restraining from reaching to conclusions before the story is complete. **The third step** is to evaluate what is being said, this is only after you have made a reasonably objective interpretation of the message. At this point you should reflect on the information and options being presented, and sift through the evidence. Unfortunately, judging often starts far too early in the listening process, especially when the topic has emotional implications or when there has been a long history of painful conflict. It is a fact that many people will judge according to their own personal life experiences and this may have a negative implication on the message. In case of the unskilled listeners, they close their ears to words they do not want to hear and only hear the words they want to hear. **The fourth stage** is a response or feedback which is usually given by asking for clarification or for more information or at least giving some visible acknowledgment by smiling, nodding or frowning.

Barriers to listening – speaker

Superiority: The bosses may assume impression that others should not let talk but interrupt as you possess the high position as he or she believes that what the person saying you know. People will become frustrated if you are constantly interrupting them and one outcome will be that they will no longer be willing to share their views and feelings with you. This will lead to a one sided communication. Even the redundant texts or notices or the mode of communication tend to reduce the efficacy of communication made by a speaker, a teacher or a boss.

Dishonesty: Lack of honesty and not sharing how you really feel can lead to a lack of trust in the relationship. People respond positively when they know that they will receive clear and

unambiguous communication from the respondents. Being dishonest in the relationship can cause to loosen the strong and trusting bond amongst one another and further result not only in diminishing the frequency of communication but people tend to be more guarded in their communication on the faltering trust in the relationship. Even boasting or exaggeration of the speaker hampers listening.

Barriers to listening – listener

Multitasking: It is easy to miss the intended message if you as a listener are busy trying to multi-task when listening. It means to undervalue the person trying to present before you something that he/she deems important but for a multi-tasker it may not be. Important or unimportant we must give time and full attention to the people; who knows, they may surprise you.

Anxiety and Distraction: Listening like learning is a difficult phenomenon; it may become more difficult in an atmosphere of anxiety, tension or boredom. In case of a student, it may be social anxiety caused by fear of other students or of the teacher or by a fear of academic failure. In case of the introvert students, it's the duty of the teacher to identify the cause/s of the anxiety and help the students to relax, listen and participate.

Boredom and distraction: They are also typical impediments affecting good listening. Classroom environment, size of the group, cultural mix of the participants, age of the students, life experiences of individuals, and goals of each person may fail the natural listening.

Bias: Our own life stories and experiences and other basic convictions like; attitudes and beliefs are prejudiced in various ways which can cause the listening process to break down. As a teacher, you may also need to evaluate your own prejudice towards students from certain cultural groups and the way you accept and work with these students.

Linguistic problems: Students from non-English speaking backgrounds and some with English as a second language may find it difficult to comprehend aspects of learning. In such situation, teacher needs to be a good liaison and achieve a better understanding of students' particular individual needs.

Attitude, tone and words: Students may be tired, hungry, thirsty, uncomfortable, disturbed by noise, cold or heat, or simply distracted by some personal reason. Under these circumstances, teachers may need to re-examine their learning program and include relaxation exercises, group games or other transition activities designed keep students' motivation level at an acceptable level and re-energised and help them to keep focussed and in tune with the learning.

Empathy: It is an ability of a person to understand the emotions and feelings of another person. Another way of looking at it is by ‘putting yourself in another person’s shoes’. Personality clashes, character differences, the status gap between a teacher and students, and age/sex/cultural differences are some of the obstacles to empathic listening. Genuine communication between a teacher and students can occur by showing willingness to understand the students’ feelings.

Empathic/empathetic listening:

- Reduces tension and hostility between teacher and students
- Promotes honest communication and builds trust and confidence
- Gives teacher time to clarify his/her thinking
- Enhances the students’ self-respect and natural friendliness towards the teacher
- Keeps communication alive and active

Some of the ways teachers can convey the genuine desire to understand:

- Be attentive, alert and not easily distracted. Create a positive atmosphere with your nonverbal behaviour.
- Be interested in the students’ needs.
- Listen in a friendly way: be non-judgmental and do not criticise
- Respect privacy: do not ask intrusive or complicated questions
- Act like a mirror: reflect what you think is being felt and said
- Show that you are in no hurry.

Verbal acknowledgements like ‘yes’ or ‘I see’ or ‘ah ha’ or by nonverbal acknowledgements like relaxed body posture, eye contact, facial expression will be more pleasing and encouraging for the speaker. In fact such solitary verbal or nonverbal expressions can express a positive demeanor as a listener and respondent.

Some more don’ts for effective listening:

- Don’t interrupt – very important
- Don’t change the subject
- Don’t rehearse in your head instead of listening
- Don’t interrogate
- Don’t teach or preach
- Don’t give advice – very important
- Don’t talk down to students. They can sense when the teacher is not on their level and may not respond appropriately
- Don’t brush aside the student’s feeling with phrases

- Never belittle or negate any aspect of a problem even if it seems unimportant to you.

GOOD TEACHER:

- A good teacher is a good communicator
- A good communicator gives and receives messages and needs to be not only a good writer or speaker but also a good listener

Conclusion: Try to belittle the communication skills in our life and realise what consequences we will have to encounter! It can never be. So is the listening utmost important when it comes to effective communication. Listening responsively is always worthwhile as a way of letting people know that you care about them that would yield an important place for you. A rich person approaches a reputed lawyer with his personal problem, directed to his secretary to listen to his story while he insists on the lawyer to listen, and approaches another lawyer who finds no time to listen to his entire story. Finally approaches another lawyer and asks for his ears to listen to what he wants to say and says ready to pay his fees for listening to his story. People want both: to be understood and acknowledged on the one hand, and to be approved and agreed with, on the other.

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