

GOOD COMMUNICATION STARTS WITH LISTENING

*Afrin Bankalagi. G. P. Porwal Arts, Commerce, V. V. Salimath Science College, Sindagi.

Abstract

This paper attempts to study how **listening skills allow one to make sense and** especially concentrate on the messages being communicated preventing distractions and preconceptions. Language is an important aspect of our everyday lives often requiring inventiveness by its speakers. In other words, real language use may often appear untidy necessitating considerable effort and skill to reduce to simple grammar patterns. Students need to be aware of all language possibilities. Importantly, they have to be aware of how language is used, as well as its different variations and linguistic twist. Although active listening is considered an important communication skill in a variety of occupational and therapeutic fields, few experiments compare dyadic partners' perceptions of active listening with other types of listening responses. Conversational satisfaction and social attractiveness did not differ between participants receiving active listening responses and participants receiving advice, however.

There is a saying that, "It takes a great man to be a good listener." Every good communication starts with a good listening person. Those who can listen to others properly can understand another person in a better way. Good listening skills are the way to success. A good listener can be successful in every field of his life, may it be his personal life or professional. Good listener skills enable a person to listen to others patiently, understand the other person in a better way, solve many problems and improve his accuracy. There is a misconception that listening is just a simple ability to receive others' words; it has a deeper impact. Among the listening skills academics and practitioners identify as valuable, active listening (also called empathic listening, speaker-listener technique, reflected listening, dialogic listening, etc.) continues to garner the lion's share of attention. Active listening involves restating a paraphrased version of the speaker's message, asking questions when appropriate, and maintaining moderate to high nonverbal conversational involvement. Practitioners and researchers from fields such as social work (Rogers & Welch, 2009), nursing (Bryant, 2009), education (McNaughton, Hamlin, McCarthy, Head-Reeves, & Schreiner, 2007), physician-patient communication (Fassaert, van Dulmen, Schellevis, & Bensing, 2007), leadership (Hoppe, 2007), public administration (Stein, 2009), sales (Boe, 2008), and crisis negotiation (Royce, 2005), specifically identify active listening as an important communication skill during initial interactions.

Key words: Communication; Listening skills; language learners; listening practice

Introduction

In general, competent listening involves communicators' perceived ability to accomplish contextually driven listening goals and produce rewarding interactions (e.g., Bodie, Worthington, Imhof, & Cooper, 2008). Bodie et al.'s (2008) synthesis of listening literature identifies understanding, experiencing positive affect, and relationship building as essential products of the listening process. This approach squares with both theory and research strongly suggesting people prefer conversational partners and interactions that provide real or perceived rewards

(e.g., Berscheid, 1985; Burleson & Samter, 1996) and that these rewards guide peoples' interest in future interactions (Sunnafrank, 1986; Sunnafrank & Ramirez, 2004). Following Bodie et al. (2008) and others (e.g., Cahn, 1990) we suggest skilled listening produces rewarding interaction outcomes by expressing understanding of a partner's message, creating positive affect during the interaction, and by creating affiliation between partners. Several studies point to positive outcomes associated with active listening. Gearhart and Bodie (2011) found higher scores on the Active Empathic Listening scale (AEL) associate positively with Riggio's (2005) measures of social sensitivity, social expression, emotional sensitivity, and social control, all of which are related to a host of positive interaction and relationship outcomes (e.g., Riggio & Reichard, 2008).

In addition, scholarship from the training literature reports active listening training improves trainees' listening skill. For example, active listening training increased education students' confidence in their own listening skills (McNaughton et al., 2007). Federal law enforcement crisis negotiators received higher ratings on communication skill during mock hostage negotiation exercises after receiving active listening training than before training (Van Hasselt et al., 2006). Similarly, supervisors rated college student helpline volunteers more skillful six weeks following active listening training (Paukert et al., 2004). Likewise, mental health counseling students received higher scores in counseling effectiveness after learning active listening (Levitt, 2001). Miller, Hendrick, and Orlofsky (1991) also successfully improved crisis intervention counselors' empathic listening skill by training them to deliver active listening responses. Finally, D'Augelli and Levy (1978) report that crisis volunteers responding with advice and problem solving generated shorter, less effective, conversations than when employing empathic (active listening) responses. Overall, these studies suggest active listening training improves perceptions of trainees' listening skill.

Unfortunately, not all of the research on active listening produces favorable results. Besides contradictory studies in the marital research (see below), two studies contradict D'Augelli and Levy's (1978) study comparing active listening and advice. In one study, volunteer telephone crisis counselors offering advice were rated more helpful and likeable than counselors responding with empathic (or active) listening (Libow & Doty, 1976). In a second study, Scholl (2002) reports college academic counseling clients preferred receiving advice rather than active listening responses early in counselor-client relationships. Additional research points to the possibility that people either prefer advice to active listening in initial interactions, or simply do not favor one over the other. For example, in Bodie et al. (2012, Study 2), giving advice was mentioned more often by participants than verbal paraphrasing when asked to identify preferred listening behaviors. Although participants' agreement about rank ordering of behaviors is highly variable, a study by Bodie et al. (2012, Study 3) reports participants ranked advice received higher (mean ranking 5th out of 19) than paraphrasing (15th) in their perceptions of behaviors characteristic of good listening. One of the limitations in our understanding of active listening in initial interactions is that few studies compare active listening to other response types directly. Most observational research compares judgments of listening skills by outsiders (often the trainers themselves) or compares partners' perceived interaction/relationship outcomes pre and post active listening training. The majority of the remaining studies report associations between self and/or other reports of using active listening and some criterion variable (e.g., Drollinger et al., 2006; Young & Cates, 2010). To date, only four studies directly compare participants' judgments of interaction outcomes following confederates deployment of active listening versus another type of listening

response. Three studies compare active listening to giving advice (i.e., D'Augelli & Levy, 1978; Libow & Doty, 1976; Scholl, 2002). One limitation of these studies is that participants were seeking out professional or volunteer counselors, so the reception of advice may have been a more goal-relevant outcome than validation communicated through active listening. The fourth study compares active listening to simple acknowledgements in informational interviews that also involved a situation in which the participant and confederate were not on an equal footing (Weger, Bell, & Emmett, 2010). Because none of these studies involve peer-to-peer initial interactions, and because advice seems to be an important and useful comparison point, we attempt to fill this gap by comparing active listening to both advice and simple acknowledgments in initial peer interactions.

Objective:

This paper intends to explore and analyze importance of listening skills allow people to understand what someone is being communicated about-the meaning behind the words. The ability to listen carefully allows workers to better understand assignments they are given

The Purpose & Benefits of Active Listening

Before you can learn about active listening skills and how to implement them, it's important to take a step back and understand the *why*. When a leader engages in active listening, it helps establish trust between both parties and fosters empathy for others. Unlike critical listening, an active listener is not trying to evaluate the message and offer their own opinion, but rather, to simply make the speaker feel heard and validated.

Once you begin to put the active listening skill set into practice, you'll notice the positive impact it has in a number of areas, including in personal and professional relationships, at work, and in various social situations. Being a thoughtful listener, asking questions, and seeking clarification will encourage others to talk longer and will reinforce your role as a friend, colleague, and coach.



The Big 6 Active Listening Skills

Enhancing your active listening skill set involves more than just hearing someone speak. When you're putting active listening skills to practice, you should be using these 6 techniques:

1. Paying attention.
2. Withholding judgment.
3. Reflecting.
4. Clarifying.
5. Summarizing.
6. Sharing.

1. Pay attention.

One goal of active listening and being an effective listener is to set a comfortable tone that gives your coachee an opportunity to think and speak. Allow "wait time" before responding. Don't cut coachees off, finish their sentences, or start formulating your answer before they've finished. Pay attention to your body language as well as your frame of mind when engaging in active listening. Be focused on the moment, make eye contact, and operate from a place of respect as the listener.

2. Withhold judgment.

Active listening requires an open mind. As a listener and a leader, be open to new ideas, new perspectives, and new possibilities when practicing active listening. Even when good listeners have strong views, they suspend judgment, hold any criticisms, and avoid interruptions like arguing or selling their point right away.

3. Reflect.

When you're the listener, don't assume that you understand your coachee correctly — or that they know you've heard them. Mirror your coachee's information and emotions by periodically paraphrasing key points. Reflecting is an active listening technique that indicates that you and your counterpart are on the same page.

For example, your coachee might tell you, "*Emma is so loyal and supportive of her people — they'd walk through fire for her. But no matter how much I push, her team keeps missing deadlines.*"

To paraphrase, you could say, "*So Emma's people skills are great, but accountability is a problem.*"

If you hear, "*I don't know what else to do!*" or "*I'm tired of bailing the team out at the last minute,*" try helping your coachee label their feelings: "*Sounds like you're feeling pretty frustrated and stuck.*"

4. Clarify.

Don't be shy to ask questions about any issue that's ambiguous or unclear when engaging in active listening. As the listener, if you have doubt or confusion about what your coachee has said, say something like, "*Let me see if I'm clear. Are you talking about ...?*" or "*Wait a minute. I didn't follow you.*"

Open-ended, clarifying, and probing questions are important active listening tools that encourage the coachee to do the work of self-reflection and problem solving, rather than justifying or defending a position, or trying to guess the "right answer."

Examples include: "*What do you think about ...?*" or "*Tell me about ...?*" and "*Will you further explain/describe ...?*"

When engaging in active listening, the emphasis is on asking, rather than telling. It invites a thoughtful response and maintains a spirit of collaboration.

You might say: "*What are some of the specific things you've tried?*" or "*Have you asked the team what their main concerns are?*" or "*Does Emma agree that there are performance problems?*" and "*How certain are you that you have the full picture of what's going on?*"

5. Summarize.

Restating key themes as the conversation proceeds confirms and solidifies your grasp of the other person's point of view. It also helps both parties to be clear on mutual responsibilities and follow-up. Briefly summarize what you've understood while practicing active listening, and ask the other person to do the same.

Giving a brief restatement of core themes raised by the coachee might sound like: "*Let me summarize to check my understanding. Emma was promoted to manager, and her team loves her. But you don't believe she holds them accountable, so mistakes are accepted and keep happening. You've tried everything you can think of, and there's no apparent impact. Did I get that right?*"

Restating key themes helps increase accountability.

6. Share.

Active listening is first about understanding the other person, then about being understood as the listener. As you gain a clearer understanding of the other person's perspective, you can begin to introduce your own ideas, feelings, and suggestions. You might talk about a similar experience you had, or share an idea that was triggered by a comment made previously in the conversation.

Once the situation has been talked through in this way, both you and your coachee have a good picture of where things stand. From this point, the conversation can shift into problem-solving: "*What hasn't been tried? What don't we know? What new approaches could be taken?*"

As the coach, continue to query, guide, and offer, but don't dictate a solution.

ACTIVE LISTENING

The International Listening Association (ILA; 2012) defines listening as, “the process of receiving, constructing meaning from and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages”. In this study, we focus on the response component of listening. Active listening (see also, speaker-listener technique, Stanley, Bradbury, & Markman, 2000) was developed by Gordon (1975) and has roots in Rogers' (1951) conceptualization of empathic listening (Orlov, 1992). Rogers formulated empathic listening as a psycho-therapeutic technique, which demonstrates unconditional acceptance and unbiased reflection of a client's experience through message paraphrasing. Levitt (2001) identifies active listening as a therapeutic micro-skill involving listening attentively and responding empathically so a client feels heard.

With slight variations across scholars, most treatments of active listening include at least three elements. The first element involves expressing interest in the speaker's message by displaying nonverbal involvement in the form of back channeling (McNaughton et al., 2007). The second element includes refraining from judgment and paraphrasing the speaker's message (e.g., “what I'm hearing you say is ...”; Garland, 1981). For example, if the speaker expresses frustration, the active listener might respond, “I can understand how that situation could cause frustration.” Third, active listening may also include asking questions to encourage the speaker to elaborate on his or her beliefs or feelings (Paukert, Stagner, & Hope, 2004). An active listening response theoretically communicates empathy and builds trust by indicating unconditional regard and by confirming the other's experience (Lester, 2002; Orlov, 1992; Rogers, 1951). We conceptualize active listening as having three parts: 1) demonstrates moderate to high nonverbal involvement, 2) reflects the speaker's message using verbal paraphrasing, and 3) may include asking questions that encourage speakers to elaborate on his or her experiences.

LISTENING IN INITIAL INTERACTIONS

Initial interactions constitute a significant context for the study of listening skill. Every relationship begins with a first encounter. Further, a great deal of our instrumental goals are accomplished in first-time conversations with sales people, customers, doctors, therapists, potential employers, yoga instructors, and the like. In first encounters, people attempt to solve a variety of information seeking, relationship, and impression management problems. For example, people are motivated to gather information to reduce uncertainty in novel situations (e.g., Afifi & Weiner, 2004; Berger & Calabrese, 1975). In first encounters people also work to create a favorable first impressions and form accurate impressions of others (e.g., Bodie, Cyr, Pence, Rold, & Honeycutt, 2012; Bachman & Zakahi, 2000). These first impressions are particularly important because they shape future interactions and can determine whether interactions will occur in the future (e.g., Ramirez, 2007). The rewards realized from early enjoyable conversations lay the foundation for predictions of rewards and costs in the future (e.g., Burleson & Denton, 1992; Sunnafrank & Ramirez, 2004).

Research points to the role of listening in producing positive interaction outcomes. For example, listening impacts uncertainty reduction and information management via comprehension and retention of a speaker's message (Janusik, 2007). Additionally, effective listeners generally project more positive impressions than ineffective listeners (e.g., Drollinger, Comer, & Warrington, 2006; Haas & Arnold, 1995) and are perceived to be more trustworthy (Ramsey & Sohi, 1997), friendly (Bodie et al., 2012), understanding (Cahn & Frey, 1989), and socially

attractive (Weger, Bell, & Emmett, 2010; Young & Cates, 2010). Finally, good listeners produce more satisfying (i.e., rewarding) interactions between patients and their physicians (Henry, Fuhrel-Forbis, Rogers, & Eggly, 2012), real estate clients and their agents (Amba-Rao, 1991), protégés and their mentors (Young & Cates, 2010), and between wives and husbands (e.g., Pasupathi, Carstensen, Levenson, & Gottman, 1999).

More specifically, Bodie et al. (2012) identify both attributes and behaviors related to perceptions of listening competence in initial interactions. People characterize competent listeners in initial interactions as attentive, friendly, understanding, responsive, and able to manage the flow of conversation (Bodie et al., 2012). Additionally, particular listening behaviors are linked to different attributes. For example, verbal paraphrases are associated with attentiveness and responsiveness while questions are linked to conversation management, attentiveness, and responsiveness. Nonverbal behaviors such as eye contact and composure appear related to attentiveness, friendliness, and conversation management skills.

The structure of active listening seems well suited to helping people accomplish initial interaction goals; verbal paraphrasing, asking appropriate questions, and nonverbal involvement all associated with good listening practice. One might assume a healthy amount of research examining this listening practice, however, little empirical evidence exists demonstrating active listening results in more positive interactions when compared to other types of listening responses. Moreover, only a portion of that research involves observations of actual behavior and research comparing active listening to other types of responses does not consistently demonstrate an advantage for active listening. Below, we identify and summarize essentially all of the extant research examining active listening in initial interactions and a small part of the research on active listening in marital interaction.

Conclusion

In the communication field, the value placed on active listening makes it de rigeur in the listening chapters of many popular communication textbooks (e.g., Adler & Proctor, 2011; Canary, Cody, & Manusov, 2008; Devito, 2007; Pearson, Nelson, Titsworth, & Harter, 2010; Verderber, Verderber, & Berryman-Fink, 2009; Wood, 2012). Yet few studies produce convincing evidence that active listening actually produces comparatively better outcomes than other response types in early interactions. The purpose of our investigation is to compare perceptions of interaction partners' who use active listening, unsolicited advice, or simple acknowledgements (back-channel cues) during an initial interaction. In addition, ratings of target others on the AEL associate positively with targets' communication skill and discriminate between people judged to be "good" or "bad" listeners (Bodie, 2011). Further, Drollinger et al. (2006) reported sales people's engagement in active listening responses were positively associated with customers' ratings of the sales professionals' listening skill. An organizational study in Japan indicates that employees' with lower levels of psychological job stress have supervisors who self-report regular use of active listening in discussions with employees (Mineyama, Tsutsumi, Takao, Nishiuchi, & Kawakami, 2007). Expert hostage negotiators at the Federal Bureau of Investigation use paraphrasing, reflecting, and other active listening behaviors more often than novice negotiators in role play exercises (Van Hasselt et al., 2005). Finally, Reznik, Roloff, and Miller's (2012) study of romantic couples' serial arguments report that active listening associates positively with problem solving, relationship stability and perceived resolvability of the problem, and associates negatively with intrusive thoughts during arguments.

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