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## Listening, an Art?

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### Abstract

The author, an ELT professional, attempts to establish how hearing is different from listening. He feels listening is a highly complex and an active process. It is also an art and hence needs to be mastered. According to him, there are so many types of listening which in actuality can be grouped into five major types:

- i) Discriminative,
- ii) Comprehension,
- iii) Critical,
- iv) Appreciative, and
- v) Dialogic listening.

All of them are equally important. The listener should, therefore, determine the needs and use the appropriate type of listening so that it becomes effective.

### Introduction

Listening is the first and one of the four most important skills required for effective learning to happen, the other three being Speaking, Reading and Writing, in that order. We listen to something or somebody in order to elicit as much information as possible.

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Listening, an Art?

It is, of course a highly complex, interactive process 'by which spoken language is converted to meaning in the mind'. As is clear from the definition, listening is more than just hearing, although these two terms are often used synonymously.

In fact, hearing is only an important component of listening which is a specialized form of hearing and is the primary function of the ear. The most crucial part of the listening process is thinking or converting to meaning what one hears. Hearing is a passive process. It is merely the detection of sounds around us. Generally, we come across 'hearing' in certain situations. Listening, on the contrary is an active process that involves the conscious desire to determine the meaning of what is heard. While listening, one is engaged in processing the data, reconstructing the data and also giving meaning to the data.

### **Five Types of Listening**

Depending on the need and various other factors, the level of listening also varies. In effect, there exist several types of listening: discriminative listening, comprehension listening, critical listening, biased listening, evaluative listening, appreciative listening, sympathetic listening, empathetic listening, therapeutic listening, dialogic listening, relationship listening, etc.

However, all these types can be put under five major types for the sake of convenience:

- i) Discriminative,
- ii) Comprehension,
- iii) Critical,
- iv) Appreciative, and
- v) Dialogic listening.

We will take up each of these types of listening in the subsequent paragraphs with illustrations.

i) **Discriminative listening** is perhaps the most common of all types of listening. As the name suggests, it ensures that the listener gets the differences between different sounds. In any language, each sound is distinct and unique. Therefore, if the listener fails to identify the differences, then he or she cannot make out the meaning. The result is a failed communication.

This kind of a situation arises mostly when the language in question is not one's mother tongue or at least one of the familiar languages. A person learns to

discriminate between sounds or phonemes within his or her own language at an early stage but fails to discriminate between the sounds or phonemes when it comes to other languages.

This, in fact is one major reason why a person generally finds it hard to speak another language perfectly. Similarly, a person finds it equally difficult to appreciate the subtleties of emotional variation in another person's voice. He or she will be less likely to be able to get the nuances in other person's communications. Listening, as we all know is as much a visual act as an auditory act. Since we communicate through body language in which muscular and skeletal movements are significant, we need to distinguish between these movements to understand the different meanings.

ii) **Comprehension listening**, also called content listening, informative listening or full listening refers to the full understanding of the communication. In other words, one has to get the content or the information contained in the piece of communication. Full listening takes much more effort than other types as it requires close concentrations for a protracted period. It also requires skills of understanding and summary. The listener seeks to carefully understand the full content that the speaker wishes to put across.

In order to comprehend, one has to have a lexicon of words at the fingertips in addition to having all the rules of grammar and syntax. Since we have already stated that listening is a visual act, an understanding of body language is also necessary to understand the other person's message. Therefore, the listener pauses for summaries. Moreover, at the end of the conversation, both the listener and the speaker agree that the listener has fully understood what was said. In any piece of communication, some words are more important than others. Comprehension listening thus helps extraction of key facts and items.

iii) **Critical listening**, also known as evaluative listening, judgmental listening or interpretative listening or biased listening is listening in order to evaluate and judge, and also forming opinion about what is being said. Judgment which is broad includes assessing both the strengths and weaknesses, as also agreement and disapproval. This form of listening requires significant real-time cognitive effort as the listener analyzes what is being said, relating it to existing knowledge and rules, while simultaneously listening to the ongoing words from the speaker.

In critical listening, we make judgments about what the other person is saying. We seek to assess the truth of what is being said. We also judge what they say against our values assessing them as good or bad, worthy or unworthy. Evaluative listening is particularly pertinent when the other person is trying to persuade us, perhaps to change our behavior and maybe even to change our beliefs. Within this, we also

discriminate between subtleties of language and comprehend 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. It happens when the person hears only what they want to hear, typically misinterpreting what the other person says based on the stereotypes and other biases that they have. This type of listening is particularly pertinent when the other person is trying to convince the listener, perhaps to change the behaviour or even beliefs.

iv) **Appreciative listening** or sympathetic or empathetic listening or therapeutic listening is the listening where we seek certain information which will appreciate, for example 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. 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 their ills and happiness at their joys.

When we listen empathetically, we go beyond sympathy to seek a truer understanding of how others feel. 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. In order to get others to reveal their thoughts and emotions to us, we also need to demonstrate our empathy in our demeanor towards them, asking sensitively in a way that encourages self-disclosure.

Here, the listener has a purpose of not only empathizing with the speaker but also to use this 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, where managers, HR people, trainers and coaches seek to help employees learn and develop.

v) **Dialogic listening** means 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. The word 'dialogue' stems from the Greek meaning 'through words'. Sometimes the most important factor in listening is in order to develop or sustain a relationship. This is why some people talk for hours and listen closely to what each other has to say when the same words from someone else would seem to be rather boring. Dialogic listening is also called *rational* listening.

## Conclusion

We are perhaps the only species on the planet to have been gifted with the ability to speak and interact which we do with our fellow beings in our everyday life. When we talk somebody listens and vice versa. That act of communication is, therefore, mutual. We do not, however, listen to everything with the same degree of seriousness and urgency.

Our listening to somebody depends on a number of factors which is why we filter out something but pay careful attention to something else. Some of the more important types of listening are: discriminative, comprehension, critical, appreciative, and dialogic. In fact, the act of listening can be put in this order, starting with the least attentive to the most attentive: passive hearing, active hearing, passive listening and active listening. It is an art one needs to master in order to listen effectively.

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