
**AN UNDERSTANDING OF ACTIVE LISTENING AS A SIGNIFICANT
SOFT SKILL: A STUDY**

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Abstract:

Active listening is a fundamental soft skill that is essential for effective communication in personal, professional, and academic environments. It encompasses more than simply hearing spoken words; it necessitates complete involvement, understanding, and suitable responses that indicate comprehension and empathy. This paper examines the idea of active listening, the various types and obstacles associated with it, as well as key techniques to enhance active listening skills. Utilizing foundational and current research, the study emphasises how active listening strengthens relationships, enhances workplace dynamics, nurtures emotional intelligence, and supports both personal and professional development. By integrating significant academic contributions, this research offers a thorough understanding of active listening as an important soft skill. It acts as a beneficial resource for researchers, educators, and professionals who seek to enhance communication effectiveness through strategies grounded in evidence. Active listening comprises several essential components: attentiveness, nonverbal signals, reflection, clarification, and feedback. Attentiveness includes maintaining eye contact, nodding, and employing affirmative gestures to indicate engagement. Nonverbal communication, like body language and facial expressions, is crucial in expressing interest and empathy. Reflecting on what has been communicated, paraphrasing important points, and posing follow-up questions aid in reinforcing comprehension and promoting open dialogue. Clarification guarantees that there are no misunderstandings, while suitable feedback, whether verbal or nonverbal, indicates that the listener is fully engaged. The advantages of active listening are numerous. In professional settings, leaders who practice active listening are more successful in making decisions, resolving conflicts, and managing teams. Nonetheless, active listening encounters several obstacles. Typical barriers include environmental distractions, cognitive overload, preconceived biases, and emotional reactions that hinder complete engagement. In conclusion, active listening is a transformative ability that enhances communication efficiency across various fields. By honing attentiveness, empathy, and responsiveness, individuals can establish stronger connections, resolve conflicts proficiently, and create

meaningful interactions. Considering its importance, active listening should be intentionally developed through training, practice, and awareness in both personal and professional contexts.

Keywords: Active listening, soft skills, Interpersonal communication, Empathy, listening barriers, Techniques

Introduction

“Listening: the process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and non-verbal messages.” – International Listening Association.

Communication is a vital soft skill, which is considered profound only when the entire process of communication is completed. It should be noted that communication involves three important elements, viz, Source, Message, and Receiver. The absence of any one of the three elements may lead to the complete failure of the process of communication. The receiver is one of the most important elements in the process of communication. The primary role of the receiver is to decode the message delivered by the source. The receiver, to decode the message, first makes use of his receptive abilities and listens to the message with attention. Therefore, to make communication fruitful, it is imperative on the part of the listener to listen effectively. Listening is considered one of the most important of all interpersonal skills. Effective listening is often the foundation of strong relationships with others, at home, socially, in education and the workplace.

It is important to note the difference between hearing and listening. The Cambridge Dictionary defines the word hear as the ability ‘to receive or become conscious of a sound using your ears, and Oxford Learner's Dictionaries as ‘the ability to hear’. Hearing and listening are two distinct terms, and they are not the same. One can hear music, the sound of rainfall, or the sound of food being prepared in the kitchen. Listening, on the other hand, requires attention, comprehension of the message that’s being relayed, and recollection of what has been said. The Cambridge Dictionary defines the word listen as the ability ‘to give attention to someone or something to hear him, her, or it’, and Oxford Learner's Dictionaries as the ability ‘to give attention to something you can hear or to a person who is speaking’. Effective listeners not only show interest but also acknowledge what has been said. Listening is a valuable skill on both a personal and professional level. Listening can be of various types depending on the mode, style and purpose of listening. (Covey, S. R. (1989)) The two most important types of listening include Discriminative Listening and Comprehensive Listening.

Discriminative Listening

This is the most basic form of listening. Discriminative Listening does not involve the understanding of the meaning of words or phrases but merely the different sounds that are produced. Differences include many subtleties, recognizing foreign languages, distinguishing between regional accents, and clues to the emotions and feelings of the

speaker. When discriminative listening skills are combined with visual stimuli, the resulting ability to 'listen' to body language enables us to begin to understand the speaker more fully. (Rogers, C., & Farson, R. (1957)).

Comprehensive Listening

This is an advanced form of listening that is usually done to understand something. Comprehensive listening involves understanding the message or messages that are being communicated by the source. Comprehensive listening requires appropriate vocabulary and language skills to understand and decipher the messages better. Comprehensive Listening is often hindered by the usage of complicated language or technical jargon, which can act as a possible barrier. The presence of complicated language, technical jargon, and advanced vocabulary may make the message difficult to understand. Different people listening to the same message may understand the message in different ways. Comprehensive listening is complemented by sub-messages from non-verbal communication, but it can also confuse and potentially lead to misunderstanding. (Steil, L. K., Barker, L. L., & Watson, K. W. (1983)).

Specific Listening Types:

Discriminative and comprehensive listening are prerequisites for specific listening types. Listening types can be defined by the goal of the listening. The three main types of listening most common in interpersonal communication are:

- Informational Listening (Listening to Learn)
- Critical Listening (Listening to Evaluate and Analyse)
- Therapeutic or Empathetic Listening (Listening to Understand Feelings and Emotions)

Informational Listening

Informational Listening is primarily done to learn something. The purpose of this kind of listening is to enhance the capabilities of the listener to learn and grasp something. This kind of listening is true in many day-to-day situations. People listen to others mostly to gain some information from them. In education and 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 – there are many other examples of informational listening too. Although all types of listening are 'active', they require concentration and a conscious effort to understand. When compared to other forms of listening, informational listening needs less attention and is less active. When we are listening to learn or be instructed, we are taking in new information and facts, we are not criticising or analysing. Informational listening, especially in formal settings like work meetings or while in education, is often accompanied by note-taking, a way of recording key information so that it can be reviewed later. (Wolvin, A. D., & Coakley, C. G., 1996).

Critical Listening

Critical Listening is a peculiar form of listening that evaluates or scrutinises what is being said. Critical listening is active, unlike Informational Listening, and involves key soft skills, including problem-solving and decision-making. Critical Listening involves the analysis of the information being received and alignment with what we already know or believe. While Informational Listening is concerned with receiving facts and/or new information, Critical Listening is about analysing opinions and making a judgement. Critical

Listening means engaging in what you are listening to by asking yourself questions such as, 'What is the speaker trying to say?' or 'What is the main argument being presented?' Critical listening is, therefore, fundamental to true learning. Decisions are based on 'critical' analysis, whether it be critical listening, reading or thought. The opinions, values and beliefs are based on our ability to process information and formulate feelings about the world around us, as well as weigh up the pros and cons to make an informed decision. It is often important, when listening critically, to have an open mind and not be biased by stereotypes or preconceived ideas. By doing this, one can become a better listener, broaden one's knowledge and perception of other people and have a clear idea about one's relationships. (Bodie, G. D. (2011)).

Therapeutic or Empathic Listening

Therapeutic or Empathic listening involves attempting to understand the feelings and emotions of the speaker by putting oneself into the speaker's shoes and sharing the thoughts of the speaker. Therapeutic or Empathic listening is a way of deeply connecting with another person and can be challenging. Empathy is not the same as sympathy, it involves more than being compassionate or feeling sorry for somebody else. Empathy involves a deeper connection, a realisation and understanding of another person's point of view.

Counsellors, therapists and some other professionals deploy therapeutic or empathic listening to understand and ultimately help their clients. This type of listening does not involve making judgments or offering advice based on the messages shared to the listeners by the source. It encourages the speaker to explain and elaborate on the feelings and emotions. Skills such as clarification and reflection are often used to help avoid misunderstandings. Everybody is capable of empathic listening and may practise it with friends, family and colleagues. Having an empathetic attitude towards everyone is the most desirable trait in many interpersonal relationships. One may generally feel more comfortable talking about one's feelings and emotions with a particular person. They are likely to be better at listening empathetically to you than others, this is often based on similar perspectives, experiences, beliefs and values: a good friend, your spouse, a parent or sibling, for example. (Bruneau, T. (1989)).

Active listening

Active listening is an important soft skill that can be acquired and developed, like other skills, over time with practice. Active listening can be difficult to master and will, therefore, take time and patience to develop. '*Active listening*' means, as its name suggests, actively listening. It involves fully concentrating on what is being said rather than just passively 'hearing' the message of the speaker. Active listening encompasses listening with all senses and paying full attention to the speaker. It is important that the 'active listener' is also 'seen' to be listening, otherwise, the speaker may conclude that what they are talking about is uninteresting to the listener. Listeners' interest can be conveyed to the speaker by using both verbal and non-verbal messages. Non-verbal messages such as maintaining eye contact, nodding your head, smiling, and agreeing by saying 'Yes' to encourage them to continue. By providing this 'feedback', the speaker will usually feel more at ease and, therefore, communicate more easily, openly and honestly.

Listening is the most fundamental component of interpersonal communication skills. Listening is not something that just happens (that is, hearing); it requires attention. Listening is an active process in which a conscious decision is made to listen to and understand the messages of the speaker. Listeners should remain neutral and non-judgmental; this means trying not to take sides or form opinions, especially early in the conversation. Active listening is also about patience, pauses, and short periods of silence should be accepted. Listeners should not be tempted to jump in with questions or comments every time there are a few seconds of silence. Active listening not only means focusing fully on the speaker but also actively showing verbal and non-verbal signs of listening. Generally, speakers want listeners to demonstrate 'active listening' by responding appropriately to what they are saying. Appropriate responses to listening can be both verbal and non-verbal. (Wolvin, A. D., & Coakley, C. G., 1996).

Differences Between Active Listening and Passive Listening

Active Listening could be defined as the process of transforming a thought or statement into a clear message, with full-fledged involvement from the listener's side, while passive listening is a process of simply consuming the message, however, there is no involvement from the listener's side. This type of listening is highly interactive and demands the attention of the listener. Passive listening is simply mechanical and does not involve much engagement with the speaker. The role of the listener in active listening is to stimulate and provide the required impetus to the speaker, to enable him/her to speak up ideas willingly, by displaying interest, in the conversation. In passive listening, the listener is not involved and also dispirits the speaker by showing boredom and disinterest on their face. The presence of feedback and questioning in active listening makes the communication two-way, whereas the absence of feedback and questioning in passive listening makes it speaker-centric and the communication one-way. The listener usually does not react to the speaker while listening, but active listening encourages the listener to react to the speaker while listening. In active listening, the listener concentrates on the message of the speaker and understands it, and then the speaker responds and remembers the message given by the speaker, while a passive listener simply thinks about some redundant topics by not showing proper engagement with the speaker. Active listening also involves non-verbal cues like a change in facial expression, rolling of eyes, showing interest by questioning or smiling, etc., whereas yawning, looking here and there, showing boredom, being silent, etc., are the non-verbal cues exhibited by a passive listener. An active listener's important non-verbal signs include a smile, eye contact, posture, mirroring, and distraction; verbal signs include positive reinforcement, remembering, questioning, reflection, clarification, and summarisation. (Adler, R. B., Rosenfeld, L. B., & Proctor, R. F. (2018)).

Barriers to Active Listening

There are several types of barriers to active listening. These barriers will hinder the listener from listening to things actively. These barriers can be broadly categorized under two heads: External Barriers and Internal Barriers.

External Barriers:

External listening barriers can be more easily managed than internal barriers. These types of barriers include a variety of environmental distractions that contribute to poor listening

but that can generally be avoided or minimized with simple corrections, like removing yourself from the interfering barrier or removing the issue from the area that you are in. External barriers include:

- **Noise:** Any external noise can be a barrier, like the sound of equipment running, phones ringing, or other people having conversations.
- **Visual Distractions:** Visual distractions can be as simple as the scene outside a window or the goings-on just beyond the glass walls of a nearby office.
- **Physical Setting:** An uncomfortable temperature, poor or non-existent seating, bad odours, or distance between the listener and speaker can be an issue.
- **Objects:** Items like pocket change, pens, and jewellery are often fidgeted with while listening.
- **The Person Speaking:** The person listening may become distracted by the other person's personal appearance, mannerisms, voice, or gestures.

Internal Barriers:

Internal listening barriers are more difficult to manage as they reside inside the mind of the listener. Removing these internal barriers requires a high level of self-awareness and discipline on the part of the listener, like catching oneself before the mind starts to wander and bringing full attention back to the speaker. Internal barriers include

- **Anxiety:** Anxiety can take place from competing personal worries and concerns.
- **Self-centeredness:** This causes the listener to focus on one's thoughts rather than the speaker's words.
- **Mental Laziness:** Laziness creates an unwillingness to listen to complex or detailed information.
- **Boredom:** Boredom stems from a lack of interest in the speaker's subject matter.
- **Sense of Superiority:** A sense of superiority leads the listener to believe they have nothing to learn from the speaker.
- **Cognitive Dissonance:** The listener hears only what he or she expects or moulds the speaker's message to conform to their own beliefs.
- **Impatience:** A listener can become impatient with a speaker who talks slowly or draws out the message.

Strategies to overcome the barriers to Active Listening

Listening isn't a passive activity, but a process that you actively undertake. The barriers to active listening are indispensable, but there are a few techniques through which these disturbances could be minimised. The following are the possible techniques that could be deployed to listen actively:

1. Minimize distractions

This involves putting away one's phone, closing unnecessary tabs, and avoiding multitasking could help minimise distractions. Giving the speaker full attention and showing that their words matter by maintaining eye contact and using open body language to stay engaged.

2. Prioritize listening over speaking

Resisting the urge to interrupt or prepare your response while the other person is talking. Focus on understanding rather than formulating your reply. It should be remembered that listening is about the other person, not about waiting for your turn.

3. Reduce outside noise

Choose a quiet environment, when possible, to eliminate unnecessary background noise. If distractions are unavoidable, acknowledge them and ask to continue the conversation in a better setting.

4. Practice reflecting instead of deflecting

Instead of shifting the conversation to yourself, reflect on what the speaker has said.

5. Ask follow-up questions

Show genuine curiosity by asking open-ended questions helps the speaker feel heard and encourages deeper conversation.

6. Listen fully before giving advice.

Avoid jumping to solutions unless explicitly asked for advice. Sometimes, people just need to be heard, not “fixed”. If advice is needed, ask: *"Would you like my thoughts on this?"*

By practising these steps, you can foster deeper connections, build trust, and create more meaningful conversations.

Conclusion

The active audience is an essential communication competence that contributes to understanding, empathy and important interactions in various personal and professional contexts. This goes beyond the passive audience, requiring concentrated attention, non-verbal interaction and thoughtful answers. By actively listening, individuals can build stronger relationships, enhance workplace collaboration, and improve overall communication effectiveness. The different types of active listening, such as informative, critical, and empathetic listening, serve distinct purposes in different scenarios. Each type of listening plays a decisive role in interpersonal and organizational communication, strengthening trust and cooperation. However, several obstacles can interfere with effective active hearing. Environmental distractions, cognitive biases, emotional reactions and preconceived concepts often prevent individuals from fully engaging in conversations. Psychological factors such as stress, impatience and selective attention contribute more to poor communication and misunderstandings. These disorders emphasize the need for conscious effort and self-consciousness in the development of strong listening habits. To overcome these problems, various strategies can be used to improve your active listening skills.

Techniques such as maintaining visual contact, practising mindfulness, the possibility of clarifying questions, and supplying constructive comments can help improve commitment and understanding. Furthermore, promoting open, non-judgmental attitudes and minimizing distractions and emotional intelligence development contribute to more effective listening. Learning programs and ongoing practices can further clarify these skills and achieve positive hearing with important capabilities in the fields of leadership, education, and everyday interaction.

In conclusion, the development of active listening requires dedication, practice and preparation to fully communicate with others. By understanding these types, recognizing barriers and introducing effective strategies, people can significantly improve their

air communication skills. As a fundamental component of strong relations and professional success, active listening remains an invaluable skill that should be developed in all aspects of life.

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