

The Active Listening in Communication and Its Importance As Well As Second Language Acquisition. Steps To Improve Active Listening Skills to Reach Effective and Successful Interpersonal Interactions

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Abstract: *Listening is one of the primary skills that is crucial for effective communication in our daily life, jobs and academic pursuits. Through understanding the importance of active listening skills in communication and second language acquisition, communicators and language learners can enjoy successful and effective interactions with other people. In this article, the author attempts a better understanding of active listening skills by defining and reviewing research done in the same field and shows the significance of the topic in question in an effective communication and second language acquisition. It also suggests methods, strategies and ways to enhance active listening skills that communicators and language learners can apply to their interest to overcome the challenges they face specifically, with active listening.*

Keywords: Active listening, communication, second language acquisition, steps, ways

1. INTRODUCTION

Although listening is widely acknowledged as the main receptive skill in linguistics, still, there is little known about different types of listening, specifically, active listening among speakers and language learners. When we are asked to define what listening actually is, we often think about the process of getting information through hearing. But the case is much more different than that. Hearing is the process that occurs naturally when sound waves hit the ears, that is, it comes by perceiving different sounds. Considering it, we can say that hearing is more passive activity as it involves no effort. However, listening is an active, goal-oriented and conscious process that requires more careful attention and effort from listeners. Until the late 1950s, many linguists perceived listening as a passive approach since listening is based on non-verbal cues. But in 1957, American psychologists Carl R. Rogers and Richard. E. Farson coined the term "active listening" in a paper of the same title. Later, in 1987 they included it in their "Communication in business today", a volume that deals mainly with communication matters in business world. An excerpt from the volume says that active listening is different from other types of listening skills in that the listener has a specific responsibility. Writers describe an active listener as "He actively tries to grasp the facts and the feelings in what he hears, and tries, by his listening, to help the speaker to work out his own problems" [2] (Rogers & Farson,1987). After that, linguists began to differentiate between passive listening and active listening. But let us go back to the distinction between hearing and listening. Both skills involve perceiving sounds, however, the main contrast lies in the degree intention and purpose. The similar distinction can be drawn to listening itself. After Rogers and Farsons's research, terms, such as active and passive listening began to appear in modern linguistics and business. It is very important that we know the difference between "hearing" and "listening" as well as the distinction between "active" and "passive" listening if we want to be an effective communicator and language learner. Business dictionary of English defines active listening as follows:" The act of mindfully hearing and attempting to comprehend the meaning of words spoken by another in a conversation or speech". The assumption that says that listening is totally passive would be misleading since the person who is listening to the other person speaking understands the content of the speech and recognizes the message that the speaker wants to deliver, he is not just hearing [2] (Lindsay & Clay). Here, we can see that unlike passive listening, which focuses on the "bigger picture" of what is being said. This type of listening can be seen when we are listening while driving to work, walking, doing housing chores, dancing and etc. Here we are not completely focused on what we are listening but rather, we are getting the overall message of what the listening content is all about. By contrast, active listening does not involve multitasking, it requires listeners to be more attentive to details and focus on what the other person exactly wants to convey. Emotions feelings and body language can also be expressed by the speaker and be understood by the listener, that is, active listening is closely related to emphatic listening. Rogers used emphatic listening method in his psycho-therapeutic treatments, which enabled him to make the therapy more effective as he reflected clients' experience into his techniques. Similarly, Levitt (2001) employed active listening technique as a paraphrased version of the patients' message, so that they would also feel their voices heard. Again, it is the type of listening that seeks meaning to get and obtain information through analyzing and understanding the speech. According to Dr Azize Ergeneli, [6] some of the key concepts of active listening are:

1.1. Displaying involvement in what the person is saying; paying attention;

- 1.2. Carefully observing the person speaking;
- 1.3. Resisting distractions;
- 1.4. Trying to stay focused on what is being said;
- 1.5. Asking for clarification of anything that we do not fully understand; sharing your views;
- 1.6. Delaying or withholding judgements.

As it can be seen from above, in this type of listening, one is fully engaged with the other person talking in a positive way by paying close attention, paraphrasing, reflecting, delaying judgements, and clarifying. Therefore, implementing it in our daily conversations and foreign language teaching and learning can facilitate more intensive and effective atmosphere.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF ACTIVE LISTENING IN COMMUNICATION.

Learning to actively listen to other people is the most crucial skill one can have. How well one can listen has a great influence on his job, career, and the quality of his relationships with others. In that, communication is an integral part of our everyday lives and is at the heart of everything we do each day, active listening encircles the most of communication: feeling and perceiving the other person and make them feel heard and valued can make the best of an effective communication. It has the potential to resolve or create conflicts; cementing or ruining relationships; or create misunderstandings if not used accordingly. Without actually having a listen to what is being said, it is difficult to logically give relevant or appropriate responses or make sense in our reactions. As a communication technique, in many professional areas listening is of utmost importance. A one-to-one tutor, manager, therapist, entrepreneur, social worker, and many more need to know how to actively listen as a part of their job. Not only does listening help them to set their work properly, but also, it brings many benefits in their personal interactions with others. As young couples or parents, men and women can prevent misunderstandings and conflicts that may arise between them through listening one another carefully. It has been suggested that active listening helps to overcome conversational narcissism, the act of putting ourselves first in a conversation. American author Tom Shachtman [2] describes conversational narcissism as a part of individualism in which the word 'I' is used more often. It is natural that during conversation, individuals shift responses to themselves instead of listening to what the other person has to say. Such communicational barriers can be dealt with using active listening. Good communication skills often go far beyond speaking and listening. These skills also require understand and feel the emotions, body language, thoughts and other non-verbal behavioral acts, so that communicators have mutual understanding and feeling. Active listening means more than just listening, it also means our ability to wait and withhold judgments and not jumping to conclusions or solutions, or more often, being defensive.

In the excerpt from 1957 article, Carl Rogers and Richard Farson say that, "like other behavior, listening behavior is contagious. This has implications for all communication problems, whether between two people or within a large organization. To ensure good communication between associates up and down the line, one must first take the responsibility for setting a pattern of listening". Here, authors are referring to the fact that AL can affect the mood and behavior of people interacting with each other. Another crucial aspect of active listening is avoiding conversational biases or shortcuts. The more we actively listen, the better we understand and get the important details, in that, when doing active listening, the risk of missing out the important pieces of information will reduce. Many studies show that AL is the valuable asset for the company and relationships between people. Many professional settings require active listening, such as management, counseling, hospitality, social sphere, education, health care, law and so forth. A study conducted by a group of hospital managers in Iran, Kerman, during July and August, 2014 among hospital managers indicate that, those managers who listen actively are generally more efficient and open in their interactions with the staff and clients. Results show that AL score was 2.34 out of 3. That meant that hospital managers work largely depended on actively listening as it is also the main factor for patients to get better and get proper diagnosis and treatment. Similarly, in teacher-student and parents-children relationships are mainly based on listening attentively to what the other person. It has been suggested that, when the kids know that they are being listened to, they are encouraged to speak up and express their ideas clearly and properly. It is because, children know that their parents or teachers are with them, they understand and they value their ideas. This helps children to feel free to convey their thoughts and ideas freely without the fear of being judged or misunderstood. To summarize, the art of active listening should be mastered if we want quality time in conversing with others to make it more effective, professional and intensive in any field, organization, family, friends and relationships between people.

3. THE IMPORTANCE OF ACTIVE LISTENING IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Learning a language is a complex process in which both teachers and students need to put a lot of work in. Traditionally, when teaching a language, teachers focus more on developing learners' verbal skills, specifically, speaking skills. But, non-verbal communication skills such as listening, is also an important part of a learning process and serve as a bridge to other skills and sub-skills that stem from it. Unlike hearing, active listening includes understanding, involvement and thinking. Here, both teachers and learners have the purpose of what listening content would include. As a receptive skill, listening directly enhances other productive skills such as speaking and writing. In order to be able to effectively speak in another language, learners should start from listening. Take for example, babies learning to talk. It has been found that the babies build their foundation of listening when they are still in their mother's womb. At that period, babies learn to differentiate sounds and later, they develop the ability to respond to utterances and spoken words. As a result, newborns start to learn a language: in this case, it is a spoken language and all the elements that spoken language would include. Pronunciation, accent, intonation, stress and pitch are acquired easily from the very young age as the studies suggest. Introducing listening, specifically active listening prior to language learning, helps to form the idea of what the language may sound or heard. In other words, prior listening precedes recognition of the language: vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, sentence structure and other characteristics before they are able to speak. The situation is the same with language learners. If they are introduced with audio content of a language, the chances of developing an understanding of a language is higher. Here, understanding and comprehension play an important role in manifesting speaking response. Without proper understanding, learners would find themselves lost during conversations. Since listening comprehension includes understanding and giving response to the statement, active listening should be seen as a top priority in developing language skills and sub skills. Moreover, a good listener is also a good speaker. In order to be able to fluently speak, learners should first have a good grasp of understanding the spoken content. However, problem arises when the learners have difficulty in making out different sounds, accents, pronunciation characteristics, dialects or other aspects of spoken interaction. It may sound challenging for language learners to actively listen something when compared to native speakers. However, with proper practice of active listening, these communication barriers can be overcome. Through active listening process, most cultural barriers within one's mother tongue and learning language are lost and thus, many costly errors and nuances are avoided. Also, the contribution of AL in language learning is the process of information in the brain that is obtained through spoken communication. There, synthesis and analysis of processed information takes place and the brain processes the data, forms notions and makes responses. Therefore, it is commonly acknowledged that when we are learning a language, we gain 45% of language competence from listening, 30% from speaking, 15% from reading and 10% from writing. This means that, listening is the first skill that we gain most information about the language from. Teachers are now using more listening exercises during the class to help students get more involved in spoken language. As a matter of fact, the importance of active listening in language competency is now widely being understood. Teachers are also teaching to differentiate between passive hearing and active listening in their classes as many students who have achieved a certain level of language competence have a good ground in understanding the spoken context.

4. THE STEPS TO IMPROVE ACTIVE LISTENING

Active listening can be challenging for most people to develop. There are some reasons as to why both native and non-native speakers find listening difficult. There are some obvious reasons for this. First, we may have our own notions or responses about how things should be going. Second, we may have hard time in separating our feelings from others. Third, we may be waiting for the speaker to finish his response for any reason or so forth. However, applying some suggested methods and ways in our communication with others can actually make us an effective active listener. According to the article published in "Forbes" by Dianne Schilling, [8] a few guidelines can make difference in our AL for better.

Give focused attention but be relaxed. Here we should block outer and inner distraction and pay undivided attention to listening content. Also, inner thinking and dialogue should be switched off so that we completely focus on what we are hearing.

Maintain an eye contact and face the speaker. Direct eye contact shows our intention to listening. Keeping an eye contact also means that we are willing to be open minded and interested in talk what the other person is talking about. It does not win and instant or intense eye contact but a reasonable one.

Watch body language. Being aware of our body posture, the non-verbal cues such as nodding, leaning slightly forward can create a warm atmosphere to welcome spoken interaction. Besides, it lets the speaker feel valued and heard.

Allow silence. It is very essential that we learn to keep calm when necessary and not to disturb them with our own statement. A pause allows the speaker to gather his thoughts, and interruption would make the speech conveyed with a lot of errors

Reflect. Here, we are not asked to exactly repeat what we may have heard but it is about paraphrasing and reflecting back. We repeatedly ask ourselves questions and repeat what have been just said in order not to forget the statement

Ask clarifying questions. The aim here is to make sure that we understand what we are listening. We can ask confirming questions that require short answers such as, yes or no answers. Or else, we can also ask the following questions: "what you are saying is...", "If I get you right...", "what I understand is..." and so forth.

Defer judgments and keep an open-mind. That involves delaying judgments, assumptions or inferences until the speaker is done speaking. It is important to wait for what he or she has to say before formulating ideas because these prior judgments may distort valuable information.

Also, inner dialog and inner thinking can lead to inattentiveness while in communication. This affective state of mind and attitude can be the result of lack of motivation in listeners. It has been proven that learners do not normally learn effectively if they find learning processes or content boring. The same can relate with active listening. In order to spark an interest and get learners interested, teachers can use "**pre listening**" activities, such as asking question about the topic the listening content is going to be. Or, they may ask students what topic would be interesting for them to hear and learn. Pre listening activities act as "warm-up" exercises when used in classroom contexts and help both teachers and learners to get into the listening content. Another important thing is that listening content or listening process should be taught in a way that it is acquired naturally, that is, teaching listening skills should shift its focus from being directed to only academic content that can help learners pass their listening exams but to a wide range of topics that are based on real-life situations to help learners to reach fluency and to avoid communication barriers. Brown [] suggests that "make sure you do not overlook the importance of techniques that are particularly designed to improve listening competence, use techniques that are intrinsically motivating, develop listening in various contexts, facilitate the development of different listening strategies and include both bottom-up and top-down listening techniques. Here, like grammar, teaching listening should be based on **inductive** and **deductive reasoning** so that AL can be developed and communication would be more effective. In deductive approach (top-down), in our case, teaching listening, starts by giving rules, and then examples and then exercise or practice (goes from general to specific). By contrast, with an inductive approach (bottom-up), teachers start with examples and ask learners to find rules (goes from specific to general) and thus, allowing learners to listen actively (Selin & Özgür Yildirim) [3]

Additionally, we can suggest that **echoing** or **shadowing**, in other words, repeating what the speaker said inside or outside help us not to forget the important piece of information. For example, repeating telephone numbers after they have just been provided by the person we are talking to, assists us not to get that numbers wrong, not to make mistakes with other numbers or not to forget what has just been said. Similarly, trying to "**picture**" what the speaker is describing aids us to get the proper idea of exactly what the topic is revolving around. If the speaker is giving directions on how to get to the city center, or talking about the process of making, for example, bread, the listener's attempts to picture those directions to the city center and steps to make a bread would help him to understand better as he is drawing ways to get somewhere or making guidelines how to do something. Moreover, the act of **putting ourselves in the speaker's shoes** and try to feel what he is feeling and wants to convey, would make us an effective and active listener. As we mentioned above, in doctor-patient relationship, feeling the emotions of clients and approach them accordingly can really make difference in curing and treating process. Carl Rogers and Richard Farson suggest that "being an active listener makes us better person". Here, they emphasize the benefits of AL in our relationships with others and in our lives and careers. In the field of education and second language acquisition, many educators suggest exercises to practice AL for gaining improvement. One of such methods is called "**micro listening**", that is, listening to short excerpt from a particular listening content and developing comprehension related to it. The term "micro listening" is new in linguistics but gained much popularity among teachers and students in second language acquisition. Micro listening has been found more effective since unlike "**macro listening**", the content here is short, easy to grab, interesting and does not require long attention span from the listener. Apart from that, micro listening develops listener's focus as the content is short and probably, fast, listener tries to get as much as possible from what he is hearing and therefore, gives undivided attention to it. Here, the role of application and implementation of different listening exercises would help listeners to become active listeners.

5. CONCLUSION

As it stated above, AL in communication was mainly worked out by Rogers and Farson and has been a benchmark for effective communication. Similarly, its role in second language acquisition has developed linguistics to a great extent in terms of comprehension and making response. Again, listening is closely interconnected with other skills and sub skills that are needed to develop language comprehension and fluency. Specifically, AL, or active listening has a great part in language cognition, that is, being able to comprehend, understand, analyze, make inferences, compare and contrast, generalise or specify, classify or make associations, formulize, reason what they have learned in the target language. Therefore, it is essential for every communicator and language learner need to develop active listening strategies to reach smooth and meaningful conversations or gain fluency and understanding.

To conclude, the purpose of the paper was to review some of the basic concepts related to the definition of active listening, its importance in communication and second language acquisition and give suggestions from the studies of authors and writer's own observations to break through some of the challenges in developing AL in our interactions with others and in education. In the final lines, it is good to take a look at the following quote by Laurie Buchanan [6] "when we invest in active listening, the dividend is an expended capacity for compassion " to finish all the aforementioned views about the steps to strengthen our active listening skills.

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