

Characteristics of Listening and Ethical Listening Practices

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Listening as an Active Communication Process

Listening is quite different from what is usually perceived by most people. Many people think that listening is simply the opposite of speaking, but this understanding is incomplete. Listening is not only about hearing words; it is also about paying attention, observing, understanding, interpreting, and responding appropriately. A person may hear sounds without truly listening to them. True listening requires mental focus and emotional awareness. It involves understanding the speaker's message through both verbal and non-verbal cues. Therefore, listening is an active process, not a passive one.

The first important characteristic of listening is attention. A good listener gives full attention to the person who is speaking. This means avoiding distractions, maintaining eye contact when appropriate, and focusing on the message rather than thinking about unrelated matters. In daily conversations, many people pretend to listen while their minds are busy with other thoughts. This weakens communication because the listener may miss important details. Attentive listening shows respect for the speaker and helps the listener understand the message more accurately.

Another key characteristic of listening is understanding. Listening is not complete if a person only hears the words but fails to understand their meaning. Understanding requires the listener to think about the speaker's ideas, emotions, tone, and purpose. Sometimes people do not directly say everything they feel. Their facial expressions, body movements, pauses, and tone of voice may reveal additional meaning. For this reason, listening includes both verbal and non-verbal communication. A person who listens carefully observes the speaker's expressions and behavior in order to interpret the message more fully.

Hearing, Attention, and the Construction of Meaning

It is also important to differentiate listening from hearing. Hearing is a physical ability that allows a person to receive sounds through the ears. Listening, however, is a mental and emotional process that requires concentration and interpretation. For example, when someone says, "Do you hear me?" they may actually mean, "Are you listening to me?" This shows that hearing and listening are not the same. A person may hear words clearly but still fail to understand or respond meaningfully. Listening requires effort, while hearing can happen automatically.

Another example that explains this difference is the way deaf people communicate. Although they may not hear sounds, many deaf individuals can understand others through facial expressions, gestures, body language, and sign language. This proves that listening is not limited to sound only. It is connected with attention, observation, and interpretation. In this sense, listening can happen through different senses and communication methods. A person who is attentive and focused can understand meaning even when spoken words are absent.

Listening also involves interpretation. After receiving a message, the listener must process the information and decide what it means. This includes linguistic, neurological, pragmatic, and semantic processing. Brunfaut and Révész (2014) explain that listening is an interactive process involving different types of mental and language-related processing. Linguistic processing helps the listener understand words and grammar. Semantic processing helps interpret meaning. Pragmatic processing helps the listener understand the context and intention behind the message. Neurological processing shows that listening also involves the brain's ability to receive, organize, and respond to information.

Feedback, Response, and the Responsibilities of the Listener

Another characteristic of listening is response. Listening does not end when the speaker stops talking. A good listener responds in a way that shows understanding and respect. This response may be verbal, such as asking a question, summarizing the speaker's point, or giving feedback. It may also be non-verbal, such as nodding, maintaining a calm facial expression, or showing concern. A thoughtful response proves that the listener has not only heard the message but has also understood it.

Ethical listening is another important part of communication. Listening ethically means listening with respect, fairness, patience, and responsibility. It requires the listener to value the speaker's thoughts even when they disagree with them. Ethical listening avoids interrupting, mocking, judging too quickly, or ignoring the speaker's perspective. According to Lumenlearning (2021), ethical listening is important because it allows listeners to show respect toward speakers and their messages. In public speaking, classroom discussions, workplaces, and personal conversations, ethical listening helps create trust and mutual understanding.

One ethical way to listen is to give the speaker full attention. When someone is speaking, it is disrespectful to look at a phone, talk to others, or show boredom. Even if the topic is not personally interesting, the listener should still show basic respect. Paying attention does not mean agreeing with everything the speaker says. It simply means giving the speaker a fair chance to express their ideas.

Prejudice, Respect, and the Ethics of Listening

Another ethical way of listening is to avoid prejudice. Sometimes people judge a speaker before fully listening because of their appearance, accent, background, gender, age, or beliefs. This is unfair and can prevent real understanding. Ethical listening requires an open mind. The listener should focus on the message rather than personal bias. Even when the listener disagrees, they should allow the speaker to complete their point before forming a final judgment.

Listening with empathy is also an important ethical practice. Empathy means trying to understand the speaker's feelings and perspective. It does not always mean accepting or approving everything, but it means recognizing the speaker as a human being with thoughts and emotions. For example, if someone is sharing a painful experience, an ethical listener should respond with patience and sensitivity rather than criticism or indifference. Empathetic listening can strengthen relationships and make communication more meaningful.

Critical listening is also necessary, especially when evaluating speeches, arguments, or information. Listening critically means analyzing the speaker's message carefully and thoughtfully. However, critical listening should not become rude listening. A person can evaluate ideas without disrespecting the speaker. Ethical critical listening involves asking whether the argument is clear, whether the evidence is strong, and whether the message is logical. This helps listeners provide useful feedback while still maintaining respect.

Creative listening is another important approach. Listening creatively means thinking beyond the surface of the message and considering new ideas, possibilities, and solutions. In discussions, classrooms, and professional settings, creative listening can help people build on each other's ideas. It encourages collaboration and problem-solving. When listeners are creative, they do not only receive information; they also contribute to meaningful conversation.

Personal Practice and the Development of Whole-Body Listening

Personally, I always try to listen by using my whole body and full attention. This means I try to look at the speaker, observe facial expressions, notice tone, understand emotions, and interpret the message carefully. I also try to avoid interrupting because interruption can make the speaker feel disrespected. When I do not understand something, I prefer to ask questions politely rather than make assumptions. This helps prevent misunderstanding and shows that I am genuinely interested in the message.

Moreover, I believe that listening with both a creative and critical mindset is ethically important. A creative mindset helps me understand ideas in a broader way, while a critical mindset helps me evaluate the message carefully. Together, these approaches allow me to provide effective feedback

to the speaker. Good listening is not only about receiving information but also about responding in a way that supports meaningful communication.

In conclusion, listening is a complex and active process that includes attention, observation, understanding, interpretation, and response. It is different from hearing because hearing is only the physical reception of sound, while listening requires mental and emotional engagement. Ethical listening is equally important because it shows respect toward the speaker and improves the quality of communication. By listening attentively, avoiding prejudice, showing empathy, and giving thoughtful feedback, people can become better communicators. Therefore, listening is not just a communication skill; it is also a sign of respect, responsibility, and human understanding.

References

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