

Listening Skill: The Kernel of Life Skills

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Abstract

This article develops a perspective on listening as a life skill. Globalization has redefined the teaching and learning of the English language over the past decades. It has profoundly transformed the skills set to be acquired by the professionals. In the present scenario, as the professionals get opportunity to work around the world they need to develop an array of skills to achieve their full potential and navigate smoothly through a wide range of professional situations. In an increasingly interdependent world, the qualities such as understanding of self and others, acknowledging the diversity of human race, empathy and communicative competence are highly relevant to perform everyday activities across a variety of settings. The “abilities for adaptive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life” is termed as life skills by the world health organization. The core set of skills that follow the above description are: Problem solving, Decision-making, Critical Thinking, Creative thinking, Communication, Intrapersonal skills, Interpersonal skills, Empathy, Coping with emotion and Coping with stress. Effective listening is an attribute that facilitates mastering these life skills. Though listening is not explicitly propounded as an independent life skill, it plays a crucial role in enhancing the life skills. By engaging the learners in meaningful activities and participative practical training methodologies, listening competency should be developed to cope with the increasing pace and change of modern personal and professional life and create harmonious environment in the organization and society at large.

1 Introduction

With the advent of globalization, the contacts between the people transcend the international boundaries at multiple levels for a variety of purposes. As a result, the teaching and learning of the English language has been redefined over the past decades. Globalization has profoundly transformed the skills set to be acquired by the professionals. In the present scenario, as the professionals get opportunity to work around the world, they need to develop an array of skills to achieve their full potential and navigate smoothly through a wide range of personal and professional situations. In an increasingly interdependent world, the qualities such as understanding of self and others, acknowledging the diversity of human race, empathy and communicative competence are highly relevant to perform everyday activities across a variety of settings. The “abilities for adaptive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life” is termed as life skills by the World Health Organization. The core set of skills that follow the above description are: problem solving, decision-making, critical thinking, creative thinking, communication, intrapersonal and

interpersonal skills, empathy, coping with emotion and coping with stress. Effective listening is an attribute that facilitates mastering these life skills. Though listening is not explicitly propounded as an independent life skill, it plays a crucial role in enhancing the life skills.

2 Communication

Communication is the process of sharing knowledge and information and the driving force of human development. In this age of information, a voluminous amount of messages are sent and received every day. Not all the information are meant for mechanical processing. Majority of the messages need to be received with the understanding of the underlying meanings and emotions, as communication helps to develop relationship with others and human race cannot exist without communication. The harmony of the individual human relationships, organizations and the global society at large depends on how well the people communicate. Also, effective communication has a key role in conflict resolution. Hence, the ability to communicate effectively is a significant life skill. Communication both verbal (oral and written) and non-verbal includes a series of process: context, sender/encoder, message, medium, receiver/decoder and feedback. Listening assumes an imperative role in the oral and non-verbal communication. Flynn et al (2008) state “listening is considered by some to be the single most important element in the communication process, even more highly valued than speaking as a communication skill necessary in the business world”.

3 Listening

Listening is the most used communication skill. It is the ability to accurately receive and interpret messages and understand and infer meanings. Humans spend most of the time either listening to someone or someone listening to them. Apart from being the most frequently used communication skill, listening is arguably the important of all forms of communication. Speaking will be meaningless if there is no one to listen. Messages in general have two components, the content and the underlying emotions or attitude. Listening is not just receiving, understanding and interpreting auditory inputs but extends far beyond which involves the ability to understand and interpret non-verbal cues or the paralinguistic signs such as the speaker’s tone, pitch, gestures, facial expressions, body postures etc., to have a precise understanding of the speaker’s message and intention.

Purdy (2003) emphasizes that “listening creates community”. Society is an intricate web of interrelationships where listening is a critical competence. Walker defines social skills as —a set of competencies that a) allow an individual to initiate and maintain positive social relationships, b) contribute to peer acceptance and to a satisfactory school adjustment, and c) allow an individual to cope effectively with the larger social environment (Walker, 1983). Apparently, poor listening results in interpersonal conflicts which in turn adversely affect the individual relationships in the personal, professional and social environment and also it will have a negative impact on the productivity of the individual, the team and the organization. Though listening is a complex process and requires extensive integration of hearing, mental processes and cognitive skills we hardly realize importance of effective listening. Effective listening also facilitates personality development of individuals. “Despite the popular notion that listening is a passive approach, clinical and research evidence clearly shows that sensitive listening is a most

effective agent for individual personality change and group development”. (Rogers and Farson, 1957)

3.1 Listening and Life Skills

In the international level, globalization has made the humans more interdependent and also demands human cooperation. Moreover, the breakthrough in the technology though has really shrunk the world it has made the business world more complex and competitive. The interaction between international communities and unrelated individuals has become very common feature in a variety of settings in the political and professional sphere. This undoubtedly necessitates developing the qualities such as understanding of self and others, acknowledging the diversity of human race and communicative competence. The World Health Organization has defined the life skills as “abilities for adaptive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life” and has listed a set of life skills: Problem solving, Decision-making, Critical Thinking, Creative thinking, Communication, Intrapersonal skills, Interpersonal skills, Empathy, Coping with emotion and Coping with stress. A common component of all these skills is effective listening. Though listening is not explicitly propounded as an independent life skill, it definitely has a critical role in enhancing the life skills.

3.1.1 Intrapersonal Skills

Listening not only involves listening to others. For better living one also need to listen to his/her inner voice. Listening to one’s own mind, being aware of one’s self or paying attention to inner thoughts and feelings facilitates controlling one’s own emotions and behaviour. Listening to signals of our body and mind is very crucial and it is the foundation for other life skills. Self reflection leads to self regulation which helps to recognize the actions required to behave competently in a variety of situations. This self awareness fosters the ability to understand and empathize with others and ensures better personal and professional relationships. Most of us fail to pay heed to our inner voice which leads to unpleasant consequences. And most importantly as stated by (Rogers & Farson, 1957) “as we listen more sensitively to people, they start to listen to themselves more carefully, paying attention to their thoughts and feelings”, listening skills hone both intrapersonal and interpersonal skills.

3.1.2 Coping with Emotions and Stress

Emotions influence our behaviours. What we think, speak and act entirely depends on our emotions. The stress induced by adverse or demanding situations may result in negative emotions. Listening and negative emotions are inversely related. Negative emotions result in ineffective listening. Having engrossed with anger, self pity or sadness the mind turns inwards and the listening will only be partial and may also be biased. Also the positive emotions such as excitement, happiness will result in losing the focus. Hence, being aware of the state of mind and not letting the emotional barriers affect the listening behaviour, will result in better understanding.

3.1.3 Interpersonal Skills

Interpersonal skill is the ability to interact or communicate well with others. Mastery of interpersonal skill ensures a positive and constructive approach in personal and professional life.

In real terms, listening is major attribute of interpersonal skills. It is a prerequisite to develop interpersonal skills. An individual's level of listening competence influences interpersonal skills. As emphasized by Solomon and Theiss "listening can be a rewarding, informative, and enlightening part of the interpersonal communication process". The powerful way to connect to other people is to listen attentively. The listeners' role is a significant one in communication. The communication is said to be successful only when the message conveyed is accurately received and interpreted. In addition to the auditory inputs, the listener should possess the ability to interpret the body language. The listener should also be competent enough to read beyond the words taking cues from the tone, gestures, facial expressions and other related circumstances. Floyd (1985) characterizes the effective listener who engages truly in the dialogue: (1) genuineness, (2) accurate empathic understanding, (3) unconditional positive regard, (4) presentness, (5) spirit of mutual equality and (6) supportive psychological climate.

3.1.4 Problem Solving and Decision Making

Problems simple or complex, personal or official is a common phenomenon across the globe. Unattended problems will have adverse effects on interpersonal relationships and functioning of organizations. Though several reasons can be attributed for of a problem, ineffective listening is major factor that creates crisis. Listening abilities influence the way the problem is approached. Listening with preconceived notions, pseudo listening and not attending to paralinguistic cues results in misunderstandings and misconceptions. People often don't express their feeling directly, especially those who are under stress express their state of mind subtly. In few instances, people may even present an entirely wrong version deliberately to mislead or distract. Explicit human intention can be heard, but the implicit intent can be inferred only by listening actively for the meaning embedded behind the words. Hence, it is imperative to develop the trait of listening not only to the uttered words but also the emotions, attitudes, motives behind the words. Further, one of the traits of effective listening is understanding the perspective of others and being open to diverse opinions. This facilitates new way of thinking to make appropriate decisions and resolve conflicts.

3.1.5 Critical Thinking

Critical thinking refers to higher order thinking that questions assumptions (Brookfield, 2000). Generally thinking is a part of listening. Listening is not just hearing. While the information is received, the mind simultaneously thinks critically and objectively. An effective listener always assesses the details, distinguish facts and opinions, employ sound reasoning, evaluate the evidence, arguments and claims effectively and reflect critically on the message as a whole.

3.1.6 Empathy

Empathy is the experience of understanding other person's feelings, emotions and thoughts from their point of view. To listen with empathy is an approach to create confidence, trust and respect on the listener and in turn the speaker would open his mind and convey the real feelings. Empathic listener can understand the feelings and emotions attached to the words and even the hidden meanings.

3.2 Effects of Poor Listening

Listening is the foundation on which other communication skills are built and it is imperative for harmony in the personal relationship, career progress and organizational development. Generally, people want only to be heard and expect others to understand and accept their ideologies and not willing to listen to others. Listening needs efforts, it is not a natural ability. Without conscious effort, messages cannot be decoded accurately and in the right perspective. In most cases, the listeners receive and understand the messages in their own perspective which results in misunderstanding and misconceptions. This would cost heavily on interpersonal relationship, generate complete chaos in the business and other organizations and create disharmony in the society,

3.3 Learning Listening

Listening plays a crucial role in performance of the individuals as learners, professionals and in the larger perspective members of the society. Though, listening plays a key role in the communication process in language learning, the boundaries of listening skills are often limited to acquiring pronunciation, word stress, vocabulary and comprehension of main ideas. But listening has multifaceted functions. Bennett (2007) stated that, the key to develop students' pronunciation is listening, but listening in a context, that is both comprehensible to the learners and relates to their lives beyond the classroom. Brownell (1994) and Fracaro (2001), in Flynn et al (2008) state "listening is considered by some to be the single most important element in the communication process, even more highly valued than speaking as a communication skill necessary in the business world". We consider reading as the primary medium of learning in spite of the fact that a considerable amount of learning takes place by listening to classroom instructions and lectures. Also, in the process of language learning, the achievement level is often measured in terms of speaking and writing skills. But proficiency in any language is best achieved when the learners get opportunity to listen. Michael Rost, in *Introducing Listening* says that "for emotional impact, persuasion, accentuation of salient points, attitude shifts, a sense of sharing of communication events and long-term memory formation, listening may be a superior learning mode".

4. Conclusion

With technological advancement and cross border business we live in a complex environment than it was a few decades ago. To navigate smoothly through a wide range of personal and professional situations, it is imperative to acquire life skills to make the most out of life. Life skills facilitate us to transform knowledge, attitude and values into actual abilities. In general life skills refers to the process of learning, knowledge acquisition, the behavioural attitudes and values, which enhances the specific competencies such as creative and critical thinking, interpersonal, communication, problem solving and conflict resolving. To profit from the opportunities of global economy the individuals are in need of such competencies. Undoubtedly, listening is a powerful learning technique which needs to be incorporated in the curriculum. By engaging the learners in meaningful activities and participative practical training methodologies, listening competency should be developed to cope with the increasing pace and change of modern personal and professional life and create harmonious environment in the organization and society at large.

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