

Are you getting the most from your listening?
Looking at listening as a strategy
for effective communication

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Dr. Ralph Nichols (1957), who pioneered the study of how to improve listening reported, "Seven out of every ten minutes that you and I are conscious, alive, and awake we are communicating verbally in one of its forms; and our communication time is devoted 9 percent to writing, 16 percent to reading, 30 percent to speaking and 45 percent to listening." (Taylor, Rosegrant, Mayer & Samples, 1977, p. 211) Seventy percent of our day we spend communicating with each other. Forty-five percent of that figure is spend in actually listening.

It is not unusual to come across protest like, "Who me, not listening? I've been listening for years. To my parents, to my teachers, to my boss, to my wife and sometimes to my kids." But on the other hand, comments such as, "He never listen!", "I wish someone would teach her to listen", are common enough. Maybe, one major answer to it that we can think about is that we do not listen properly.

What is actually listening? At least, four definitions has been compiled by Isabella H. Toussaint in her classified summary of listening (Duker, 1966, p. 155). Barbe and Mayer defines listening as the process of relating the spoken language in terms of past experiences and future courses of study. Johnson says listening is the ability to understand and respond effectively to oral communication. Hampleman defines it as, the act of giving attention to the spoken word, not only in hearing symbols, but in the reacting with understanding. Don Brown, who pointed the word auding as a substitute for listening, defines the new term as, "the process of hearing, listening to, recognizing, and interpreting the spoken language."

Perhaps, a more applicable definition for the purpose of this paper is that listening is, "an active process of receiving aural stimuli." (DeVito, 1986, p. 183) The framework of this definition is that listening does not just happen. We must make it happen. It takes energy to listen and a commitment to engage in, is often a difficult labor. Thus, listening is active rather than a passive process. The word receiving implies that stimuli are taken in by the listener and are in some way, processed or utilized. The signals received are retained for at least some amount of time. Aural stimuli involved the signals received by the ear. Therefore, listening is not limited to verbal signals but encompasses all signals - noises as well as words, music as well as prose etc. To add in to this definition, listening also encompasses the non-verbal behaviors of man. This includes gestures, facial expressions and all what is termed as the "body language".

The Importance Of Listening:

Listening is one of the most demanding aspects of the communication process, yet unfortunately least emphasized. We should constantly aware that listening is vital to communication.

As philosopher Mortimer J. Adler puts it, in criticizing the American educational system the same goes with our educational system:

"How utterly amazing is the general assumption that the ability to listen well is a natural gift for which no training is required. How extraordinary is the fact that no effort is made anywhere in the whole educational process to help individuals learn to listen well - at least well enough to close the circuit and make speech effective as a means of communication."

(DeVito, 1986, p. 183)

Listening is a special sort of communication activity. Listening is more than hearing. According to Knapp (1954, p. 184), successful listening presupposes hearing and precedes understanding. The parent who screams, "You are not listening to me!" shows the point. When a child do not obey, probably the problem is not one of hearing. As an example, my wife who constantly yelled at my child. My child could obviously hear her, but was not listening. It seemed to me that the more she yelled the less my daughter listened.

Hearing and listening are thus two different things. The hearing process primarily involved reception, but listening involved the processes of reception, interpretation and perhaps choice. As we hear we receive stimuli, but as we listen, we attached meaning to the stimuli and maybe, make some sort of choice. Back to the example of my daughter, she continued to misbehave, probably has received my wife's voice as a stimulus. She has not attached any significance to the words or has attached some undesired meaning to it, or probably has decided not to obey.

Listening is also important to us in order to speak, regardless of whether we want to speak or giving in the form of feedback. A message is 50 percent sending and 50 percent receiving in the case of a dyadic interaction. If more than two people are present, the ratio of listening increases. Therefore when a group of five people around a table discussing a problem, each does his or her share of the talking and each will be listening 80 percent of his or her time. Thus, if people stop listening it is useless to talk (Chase, 1954, p. 185)

Problems Of Listening:

According to Larry L. Barker, sensitivity to listening problems is probably the most effective means of improving listening behavior (Civikly, 1974, p. 375). Some of the most feared barriers in the listening process occur during the perceptual stage,

the facet of listening where meanings are assigned (Huseman, Lahiff & Hatfield, 1976, p. 111 - 112).

The first barrier is that we tend to perceive stimuli according to our own frame of reference. In other words, it is like saying, "meanings are in people." Despite the fact that we might intend to convey certain meanings in a particular message, meaning is actually assigned to the message depends upon the listener total life experiences up to that moment. For example, two vegetarians are speaking about brussel sprouts which they share similar meanings but does not mean it is identical. Both might like to eat brussel sprouts but one prefer freshness but the other might think of it as frozen and expensive (1). Thus, although speaker and listener might share similar meaning to a message, it should be remembered that at no time will the meaning be identical.

Another problem is that we perceive stimuli according to our own expectations. As an example, while working in an advertising agency, came to my knowledge of a particular visualizer who believed that he was being harrassed by the art director. He was in fact been experienceing difficulty completing his work edequately. Almost everyday the art director passed the studio, examined his work and made some sarcastic comment about the quality of his artwork. But anyway, he strived to improve. The, one late evening the art director approached the studio, inspected his work, smiled and said, "Good job!" The next morning he resigned.

Actually, in this example, the art director's utterance were intended to be complimentary as the visualizer was performing satisfactorily. But to the visualizer, based on his past experiences perceived the praise as further criticism. This example illustrates that expectations are based upon past experiences in similar situation. As Barker (1971, p. 38) idicated, "The listener's past communication climate has helped condition his perception of the immediate listening setting, the speaker, and the message being transmitted."

We tend to perceive stimuli according to our own attitudes and beliefs. At times, whether we realize it or not, we distort information so that it "fits" our model of the world. This is the process of selective perception but it applies to the listening activity in the same manner as with perception in general. Manuel Escott (1973) commented that, "we listen more carefully to things we want to hear and tend to blot out things we do not want to hear." (Peterson, Goldhaber & Pace, 1982, p. 33)

Finally, during the perceptual stage, problems of listening may occur to an ongoing relationship between speaker and listener. Not only will we give closer attention to a credible source, but we will also be more conscious of how we interpret communication from that source. However, if we perceived the source to have low credibility or power, we may likely attach little significance to what the source says. Thus, the nature of the relationship affects the meaning assigned to messages. A good example is the superior-subordinate relationships.

Other problems that we are not likely to listen well if we are physically or emotionally unable to listen, if we are disinterested or distracted, if we are quarrelsome or if we are falling behind or going ahead of the conversation (Crawley, 1982, p. 126). Listening problems are, however, numerous and serious. We must always be aware that listening problems can be the cause of serious interpersonal conflict.

Rewards Of Effective Listening:

Dr. Sigmund Freud is famous for his discovery about human personality. But the most intriguing thing to know is the method by which he discovered it. Fundamentally, this method grew out of Freud's discovery that in order to get to know and understand the patients, it is necessary for the doctor to refrain from giving advice, to abstain from moral judgements, and to listen patiently and for a long, long time while the patient talks as freely as he or she will and in an

extraordinary detail (Johnson, 1966, p. 37). For all practical purposes, this was the beginning of the modern development of listening as a fine art.

Barker (1971) listed several benefits from effective listening. Firstly, to listen effectively will increase our knowledge and experience. In other words, by "picking other people's brains", we gain a shortcut to knowledge. For example, by really listening to lectures and asking questions gives us information that might take days, weeks, or years to learn by reading books. Thus effective listening also saves time which may be translated into money, energy and productivity.

Poor listening is costly whereas effective listening can result in profit. Alert listening helps us pick up hints in business and personal affairs. For example, after an advertising presentation, a smile from the client followed by a subtle question will indicate that the client likes the presentation. This means money to the agency if the account executive and the team are aware not to make unnecessary communication errors. Keeping your sense open to "freebies" will give us tips on how to bring money as well as decrease our incidence of communication errors.

Better listening means improved work performance. We are in the advantageous position in making decision when we have all the facts, instructions, and details. As an example, an advertising account executive who really listen to the client will achieve a better job in planning the campaign.

Careful listening also help us to learn to hear between the lines. People in sales, for example, often jump to conclusions about what customers want or need. It is common to have salespersons try to sell something they wanted us (as customers) to have rather than what we had come to buy. A salesperson, who is also a good listener will realized that we might want something else than the product or service he or she is trying to push.

Interpersonal problems can be prevented by listening effectively. We often talk and act before we really listen and frequently get us into trouble. We committed ourselves to decisions that "cannot", "do not" "would not" be carried out. For example, hasty decisions disappoint family members, associates and customers. Therefore, listening with the whole self reduces chances for misunderstanding or later conflict.

There are numerous benefits of effective listening if we really think about it. As Stuart Chase puts it:

"Good listening aids us in sizing up a person, a meeting, a line or argument. It improves our messages going back to the speaker, deepens serious conversation, breaks up arguments over meaningless questions, reduces verbal conflict. It helps one to remain silent rather than souncing off, to chose one's radio commentators, to decide whether to go farther with a proposition presented orally - such as writing an endorsement, or buying a share of stock."

(1954, p. 173)

The most important thing is to be aware of the rewards of effective listening as it will heighten our overall effectiveness.

The Principles Of Listening:

According to Thomas Blewett, Allen Erickson, Arthur Heilman, Charles Irvin and Lloyd Pratt, listening is a skill which can be taught (Toussaint, 1966, p. 159). Howard and Tracz (1984, p. 5) added that we learn to listen by (i) realizing the importance that listening skills have to our future, and (ii) practicing listening skills in a concentrated, concerted manner. Perhaps, by learning to listen is to be able to listen comprehensively.

Listening comprehension will be facilitated if we listen effectively, listen for total meaning, listen with empathy, listen with an open mind and listen critically (DeVito, 1986, p. 183 - 84):

1. **Listen Actively:** It is important to recognize that listening is not a passive activity. We can hear without effort but we cannot listen without making an effort. Moreover, listening is more demanding than speaking. In speaking we controlled the situation. But in listening, we are forced to follow the pace, the context, and the language of the speaker.

Therefore, act like an active listener. For example, try to recall how would we almost automatically reacts to important news. We do this almost reflexively because this is how we listen most effectively.

2. **Listen for Total Meanings:** We must listen not only in the words used but also to the meaning in the non-verbal behavior of the speaker. As an example, sweating hands and shaking knees communicate just as surely as do words and phrases. Also that we must be aware that along with the verbal and non-verbal behaviors, the meaning of any speech lies also in what is omitted. For example, a speaker who talks about racism in the abstract is different from the speaker who talks in specifics.
3. **Listen with Empathy:** We also need to feel what the speakers feel, in other words, to empathize with the speaker. It is important to feel what they feel, to see the world as they see it and to walk in their shoes. Only when we achieved this, then we will be able to fully understand another's meaning.
4. **Listen with an Open Mind:** It is not easy to listen to arguments against some cherished belief. It is not easy to listen to statements condemning what we really believed. It is also not easy to listen to criticisms of what we think is just great.

Listening often stops when hostile remark is made. Therefore, to listen with an open mind is that when hostile feelings first develop, it is particularly important that listening continues.

5. **Listen Critically:** We need to listen fairly but critically, if meaningful communication is to take place. Dr. Douglas Kelley teaches methods for interviewing witness but his method can also be applied to listening:
- a. Is to delay our reactions and looks for motives.
 - b. What level of abstraction is the speaker on? Are there any referents for his or her remarks? What important characteristics is he or she leaving out? soeajer ib?
 - c. Is the speaker talking chiefly in the accepted symbols of culture (example, our Glorious Heritage, Founding Fathers etc.), avoiding the necessity for thought or is he or she really trying to think?
 - d. Does the speaker's personal ideology show conspicuously (example, a hard-money man, a single taxer etc.) by certain phrases?
 - e. Is the speaker dealing in facts, inferences or value judgements? For example, if the discourse is all personal opinion, I may detour the message around and out the other ear.
 - f. The sum of careful listening is to identify the speaker's field of perception, how he or she feels about the events, what his or her needs and drives appear to be and what kind of person he is. Thus, this might help in dealing with him or her, giving him or her a fair answer or to go along with him or her.

Understanding The Listening Process:

According to Barker (1978), listening is a four-stage process involving hearing, attention, understanding and remembering. Hearing refers to the physiological process which involves sound waves that stimulate the receptor organ and the movement of the electrochemical impulse to the brain. Attention is the process of selecting auditory impulses by the brain. Understanding occurs when the brain attaches a meaning to the impulse. Finally, remembering is the act of storing the stimuli in the memory area of the brain (Emmert & Donaghy, 1981, p. 212).

Thus the process of listening goes - as we hear we later choose whether to perceive a message or to reject it. If you choose to perceive it, we then gave meaning to the message. It is to our hope that the meaning we attached to the message is the one that is intended by the sender. Lastly, we store the message and this is extremely important because it has a direct effect on future intrapersonal processing.

Another way of explaining the listening process is the SIER Model (Steil, Barker & Watson, 1983, p. 21). According to this model, the listening act really consist of four connected activities - Sensing, Interpreting, Evaluating and Responding (see figure 1).

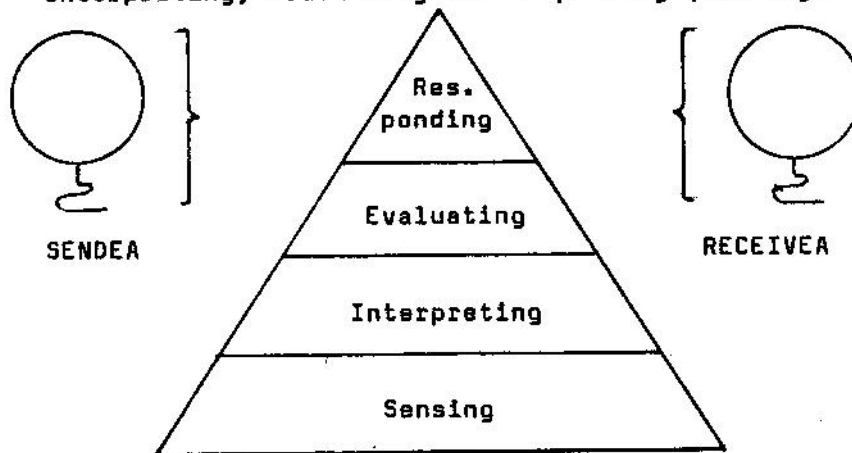


Fig. 1 SIER: Communication Stages Model

As being discussed earlier in this paper, listening is not synonymous with hearing, but a good listener always begins at the level of sensing the sender's message. If the listener does not sense the message, he or she can do nothing further with it.

When the message has been sensed, another activity that comes into play is accurate interpretation. An effective listener must always remember that words have no meaning - people having meaning.

We then engaged in another act and that is evaluation. Here we decide whether or not to agree with the speaker. The evidence is weighed, fact is sorted from opinion and judgement is rendered. Best listeners delay judgement until the message is fully presented. They also work hard at developing their judgemental skills and abilities.

The final act in the listening process must result in response. Responses can be of many kinds, ranging from nonverbal cues to the speaker showing that we have received the message (for example, smile, frown etc.) to giving the speaker feedback - asking questions and requesting classification. In other words, the listener asked question liked, "What's expected of me now? and/or "What action, if any, should result?" The response stage of listening is crucial for judging the success of the listening act as a whole. It is the only external act compared to the first three stages which are internal in nature.

Perhaps, another model worth knowing in discussing the listening process is the ARCURRC Model (Buzan, 1984, p. 67 - 69). This model enable us to get a clearer picture of the entire process and moreover, might help us to focus our attention on any area of the process that needs specific improvement. The ARCURRC Model is composed of seven steps; (i) assimilation, (ii) recognition, (iii) comprehension, (iv) understanding, (v) retention, (vi) recall, and (vii) communication/use.

The first step of effective listening is the ability to assimilate. Assimilation refers to the

physical ability of your ear and brain to absorb the sound around us. The next step is the ability to recognize, meaning the ability of our brain to decode the message which has entered through the ears. Specifically, it refers to the base level at which we will be able to recognize, for example, that a sound entering the brain was a word, a bird's song, and engine running etc.

Comprehension is the third step of the listening process. Comprehension refers to the ability of our brain to interpret accurately the message that enters it. As an example, the ability to comprehend the meaning of a sentence spoken to us. After comprehending, then we will be able to understand. Understanding refers to our brain ability, after having assimilated and comprehended the information, to link that information to our already existing data store of knowledge.

The fifth step is retention. Retention means the ability of our brain to store the information it has heard. Through developing understanding skills, the best we can do is to structure and restructure ideas as they are being presented to us. The next step is to be able to get back out of storage what we have retained or the recall stage.

The final stage of our listening process, according to this model, is the communication or use stage. At this stage we actually used the information we have heard to communicate to others. This can take place in at least four ways, through spoken words, written words, representational and communication with self (thinking). The entire process of the ARCURRC Model goes full circle.

Understanding the listening process is vital in getting the most from our listening. By presenting the Barker's four stage of listening, the SIER Model and the ARCURRC Model we might be able to develop the various skills in connection with the process. Besides that, we might also gain enormous insight into presentation skills, for we will structure our communication in such a way to enable other people to

listen to it most effectively. Another factor, it is also important in making listening as a strategy for effective communication, which we will be discussing.

Listening To Ourselves:

At time when we are most aroused, excited and demanding, we are at least able to understand our own feelings and attitudes. Yet, in dealing with the problems of others, the most important thing is to be sure of one's own position, values and needs (Roger & Farson, 1982, p. 32).

We must be able to recognize and understand the meaning which a particular problem have for us with all the feelings which it stimulates in us. Another thing is that, to have the ability to express this meaning when we find it getting in the way of active listening will clear the air, and, enable us once again to be free to listen. In other words, if some person or situation touches off feelings within us which tend to block our attempts to listen with understanding, begin listening to ourselves.

As a matter of fact, listening to oneself is a prerequisite for listening to others. It is often consider to be an effective means in dealing with problems of listening. Therefore, a person's listening ability is limited by his or her ability to listen to oneself.

The Process Of Using Listening As A Strategy:

According to David W. Johnson (1972) there are five general purposes or intentions in listening: listening to understand, to probe, to interpret, to support, and to evaluate. Crable (1982) added in one more purpose, that is, listening to alter or create change of some sort.

The using of listening as a strategy is actually a process involving three steps (Crable, 1982, p. 126).

The first step is, we should define the problem we are attacking. For example, is it a problem of a relationship? If so, what elements of the relationship are we trying to mediate? Is it dominance, similarity, power or distance? Is the problem one of our perceptions of the other person? In what way is the perception uncomfortable? What do we think need to be done? Is the problem one of a conflicting interpretation? The next step is that, we must select the goal for our listening. The final stage is to respond as a listener in ways that will help us achieving our goal. The problems named in step one can be used as a way of explaining steps two and three. It is important to be aware of listening problems (as discussed earlier) as these of a great help in using listening as a strategy for effective communication.

I happened to know a friend of mine who was about to get married. The problem was that they were engaged in a conflicting role expectation. His fiancée has decided that she would like to be a housewife. He had no objection, but he was unaware of her reasons for wanting to do so. Probably the best strategy of listening for him, is listening to understand. Before conflicts develop, it is important to arrive at a mutually compatible decision. As for the example, it is about the future marital situation. Thus, listening to understand involves none than choosing a goal (the second step). It also involves responding in ways to let the other person know that your goal is to understand (the third step).

We might come across an experience of a friend doing something that we find inexcusable. The problem is that, he or she seemed not wanting to talk about it. If we let it going on and on, conflicts might emerge. What should we do? Perhaps, to avoid conflicts is by making an effort to probe. Probing is defined as the use of listening to discover hidden or unknown information. Probing might not be an easy task to do though, but our probing listening response, however, can help us achieve our goal. An interested head nod or a concerned facial expression, instead of a wandering glance, might help. You may want to tell your friend, "Go on, I see it now." Perhaps you might later ask pertinent question aimed at getting more information.

Our goal of probing may be related to a different listening goal, that is, to interpret. Looking at the example above, our reaction may be we did not understand it. We may need to reinterpret or recreate our perception of him or her. It is important to realize that listening involves a double decoding of messages. We must try to interpret both the literal meaning of the words and the intention of the sender (Chase, 1954, p. 165). Probing and reinterpreting can help us avoid some kind of interpersonal conflicts.

While being an undergraduate student, I had a problem with my roommate. He seemed to feel much too submissive towards me. In this case, my goal of listening to him is the desire to support. When the two of us were talking about something on which I am considered an expert, what I did was tried to listening to him is the desire to support. When the two of us were talking about something on which I am considered an expert, what I did was tried to listen well as a way of boosting up his confidence. In other words, I have to be empathetic about it, besides listening supportively. Thus, conflict may be avoided when the dominance relationship becomes more what we want it to be.

Sometimes our listening goal may be to evaluate. Listening to evaluate may mean that we use the strategies of argumentation for evaluation. A good example, may be, in deciding what sort of person that we might wish to marry someday. Is our relationship with the other really what we think it should be?, What evidence do we have that this is the person or relationship for us? The important point is that, we must be aware that we are doing it as we do it. This is because a person who listen to evaluate probably will respond as an evaluator, not as a supportive or probing person. Therefore, if we find that we are evaluating as we listen, make sure that evaluation is how we have chosen to approach the situation.

Finally, the strategy of listening use to alter perceptions or relationships. We already may have engaged in perceiving, and in verbal and non-verbal analysis of the other person. We may find that the

only way to approach the problem is by helping the other person to change. That maybe difficult though, but something tell us that we should try to do it in various situation. For example, in a relationship that we really care for. When relationships are strong, but conflicting in some way, people can and do change. Strategies are never surefire, but certain conflicts can be mediated by listening well and listening to alter the relationship.

Perhaps, a more general look at listening as a strategy for effective communication is the four rules of good listening presented by Manuel Escott (1982). The four rules are:

1. Think ahead of the talker and try to anticipate what he is going to say,
2. Weigh the evidence used by the talker to support his points and ask yourself if it is valid,
3. Mentally review and summarize each point of the talk as it proceeds, and
4. Watch non-verbal communication or "body language" used by the speaker - facial expressions, gestures which can be as important as verbal messages.

Good listening is comprehensive, but even more important, it is creative (Monroe & Ehninger, 1969, p. 69). There is no right way to listen. In different situations, we may need to listen in different ways. The most important thing to remember is that listening should be done with a purpose in mind.

The Keys To Effective Listening:

Tony Buzan (1984, p. 69 - 72) came out with twenty keys to effective listening which might give us a helping hand:

1. **Maintain Aural Health:** We must make sure that our hearing apparatus is in good health. Consult a specialist if you have problems in this area.

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1. **Maintain Aural Health:** We must make sure that our hearing apparatus is in good health. Consult a specialist if you have problems in this area.

9. **Use Synesthesia:** Synesthesia is define as our mental ability to blend our various senses. When engaging in the act of listening, keep our other senses especially sight, actively involved. The more we can link our senses, the better is our hearing, attention, understanding and general learning will be. In addition, all our senses should work in harmony.
10. **Maintain An Open Mind:** When listening to messages that press our emotional triggers, try to interpret them in a more objective light. Try also to understand the perspective from which the speaker speaks. Even to the extent that we do not agree with it, try to realize that the points of view we are hearing are indeed points of view, just as ours.
11. **Use Brainspeed:** Researches proved that our brain can think four to ten times faster than the speed of speech. Therefore, while we are listening, use our extra mental abilities to anticipate, organize, summarize, weigh, compare arguments, listen between the lines and interpret body language. This suggestion goes well with a slow speaker as we can develop the skill more completely rather than giving away to daydreaming and lose concentration.
12. **Judge Content, Not Delivery:** Try not to get carried away by a "superiority complex" concerning any inadequacies in deliver and style that the speaker might have. Give our full concentration on the content.
13. **Listen For Ideas:** While listening, listen for central themes rather than for individual facts. This is because our brain works more efficiently if it can grasp "wholes." If we do this the facts will take care of themselves, linking to the main structures that the brain has construct when it listens for ideas.
14. **Take Mind Map Notes:** As we listen for ideas, our comprehension, understanding, retention and recall

will be far greater if we take highly efficient Mind Map notes rather than standard lineal or list notes. What is meant by this is that, the note taking involve our entire left and right brain and consequently improve overall listening performance dramatically.

15. **Disregard Distractions:** Do not get hung up with distraction. Accept that they are there but consciously remind ourselves that our mind has the ability to block it out if it wishes. Concentrate on the positive.
16. **Take Breaks:** If possible, try to have break from listening every thirty to sixty minutes. It is important as these breaks will provide the brain the time it needs for integration, as well as giving us more of the primacy and recency effects.
17. **Use Your Imagination:** While you are listening to words, try to create as much and as appropriately as we can mental images of the ideas we are receiving. This is an attempt to make use of our whole-brain as listening may seem to deal with left-brain words only.
18. **Listen With Active Poise:** Develop the same physical attitudes of poise and alertness when you are listening as an animal has when it is listening. Slouched and slumped postural attitudes will automatically collapse our listening abilities.
19. **Remember You Can Continually Improve With Age:** Listening skills will improve if they are nurtured in a mental environment of positive thought about age.
20. **Practice Speaking Communication Skills:** By practicing our own speaking communication skills, we will get a perspective on listening "from the other side. This will have the additional benefit of developing us in a more all-round fashion.

Listening can be a communication strategy. Listening is more complicated than hearing, and the problems of listening can be complex. Yet listening is a subject we hear far too little. Awareness of listening problems can help us to avoid them more effectively, and thus become a better listener. Understanding the listening process is vital too for effective communication.

Good listening is comprehensive, but even most important it is creative. There is no right way to listen but listening is a skill which can be taught. Therefore, the keys to effective listening should trigger and awareness in us as to improve our listening behavior. Listening to ourselves play an important role too, in achieving effective listening. Good listening, finally, requires that one remember, "God gave man two ears but only one tongue, which is a gentle hint that he or she should listen more than he or she talks."

NOTE

1. If he or she is from Asia, brussel sprouts can only be obtained frozen and is very expensive as it is an imported vegetable.

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