LISTENING AND EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT
Listening as one of the language skills is thoroughly explored in the paper. Its true nature and definition is given. The paper further discusses the importance of listening which has not been given adequate attention it deserves among the four language skills, namely speaking, writing, reading and listening. Different models of listening have also been x-rayed. This is followed by the various benefits of effective listening to individuals and society. The paper also examines the factors militating against effective listening cum inherent challenges in certain messages/information and provides solutions to them. Above all, the paper focuses on how to improve listening skills among individuals and groups in the society. Finally, the paper highlights the critical relationship between listening and the overall process of communication. At the end, the paper concludes that there cannot be “mutual understanding and appropriate feedback” which are the essence of communication if listening is not effective in the process. The entire paper is presented to learn, encourage and improve listening skill for a more effective communication in the society.

Keywords: listening, communication, language skills, sender

INTRODUCTION
There are four components of language that makes it function most efficiently; they are: speaking, listening, writing and reading. For individuals and groups to communicate efficiently in our day to day interactive processes there is need to develop the four skills in language as almost every human dealing in the society involves communication. Obviously, the society seems not to see the necessity to develop the listening skill. It places premium only on the other three - writing, reading and speaking, presuming that listening has little vital role to play in the communication process or it cannot be developed beyond its natural ability. This erroneous thinking has made the level of communicative competence of many individuals in the society to be very low. Most of the crises the individuals and societies experience on regularly basis at homes, in the offices, schools, organisations and in government etc may be adduced to poor listening competency which results in misunderstanding of messages. That is why language learning in most of our schools is centered on teaching and learning the skills of reading, writing and speaking. All of which involve learning a set of rules governing a language and the way such rules are expressed in written and in oral composition/presentation. Essentially, reading is vigorously pursued at the earliest stage of education. Volumes of books have been developed on these three skills in language. At primary school there are programmes meant to drill the pupils practically on how to master these skills to the detriment of listening skill. Ironically, researches have shown that we spend the greatest amount of time listening to people (Saundra Hybels et al 2001:64) yet it is the skill that is taught the least in school. Listening is the most important skill for success. For example, students in colleges and tertiary education find themselves listening to their lecturers and tutors in the class to be successful in their courses of studies. Children listen to their
parents and other older relations, even their teachers to imbibe the right values that will make them successful in life and relate well in the society they find themselves. In the church, members listen to their pastors. In the work place, in the bus, at the market we listen to individuals. At home in the evening, we are glued to our radios or televisions.

In the light of the above, it becomes very necessary to pay much greater attention in developing the listening skill.

**What is listening?**

The ‘International Listening Association’ defines listening as “the process of receiving, constructing meaning from and responding to spoken and or nonverbal message (Heybels & et al 64)”. This implies that listening involves the entire body and mind in trying to extract meaning from both the spoken and unspoken messages. The unspoken message in this sense implies the underlying emotion that is attached to what is being said. Emotion comes with a speech spontaneously and unconsciously. In this respect, it can be stated that spoken words usually carries with them the feeling of the speaker (non-verbal messages). As a result, for a listener to have full meaning/interpretation of the spoken message, the listener must pay adequate attention to both the spoken words and the non-verbal cues (body language) of the speaker, which go with his words. Because the non-verbal behaviour adds meaning also to what is said. This non-verbal behaviour is exhibited with parts of the body: eyes, face, lips, voice (tone), gestures, poise etc. For example, a speaker may frown his face to indicate that he is not comfortable with what he is referring to. That is the reason, listening goes far beyond hearing the words. It requires mental processing of what is being said in the mind of the hearers to arrive at a clear meaning and understanding of the message. Madelyn (1981) as cited by Kumayi (2008:48) make the distinction between hearing and listening very clear:

> I suspect leaders don’t bother to improve their listening skill probably because they assume hearing and listening mean the same thing. How wrong! Hearing differs from listening. When you hear, you simply respond to aural stimuli; your ear picks up the sound. It’s a reflex activity. Listening, however, involves both reception and interpretation of what you hear. In simpler terms, hearing is accidental communicative activity, while listening is deliberate.

From what Madelyn posits above, we can firmly say that hearing is characterized by mere recognition of the fact that someone is speaking without little or no attention to what is being said, while listening is characterized by digesting what is being said, noting its kinetics through mental processing. In otherwords, listening involves genuine mental and emotional participation of the hearer in what is being said.

**Listening Models**

Having defined listening, it is necessary to note that there are various degrees of listening, depending on the purpose(s) of intent. They fall under the following categories. In this respect, Compbell cited by Hybels et al (2001), a professor of rural sociology identifies three basic models of listening.

1. **Combative Mode:** In this mode, the listener is not interested in what is being said but only waiting to promote his own idea which is quite different. Combative listening also includes listening for purpose of identifying loopholes of what is being said, in order to use them to condemn totally all that is said.

2. **Active Mode:** The listener in this model is highly interested in what is being said. He pays keen attention to it. He takes note of the main points from their supporting details. He also outlines the important points, think up questions or challenges involve in what is being said. He smiles, nods, frowns etc. where necessary as he listens. Sometimes make comments like ‘oh’, ‘mmm’, ‘I see’, which give feedback to the speaker. He predicts what may come next as he notes the central ideas and supporting points. He also relates the points to his own experiences, look for
similarities and differences. So all the way, he is emotional and mentally participating in what is being said.

3. **Reflective (Critical) Mode:** Like the active mode, the reflective listener takes an active role in the communication process. He listens carefully and thoroughly. In the reflective mode, the listener evaluates and challenges what has been heard. These challenges might take place in his mind or they may be expressed directly to the speaker. His first job is to question the speaker’s motives. He challenges and questions ideas, try to know their sources. He distinguishes facts from opinions. He also recognizes the biases of the speaker. On the whole, he thinks very well before accepting or rejecting what is being said. Sometimes he delays his position until he receives all the facts and other evidence and has the chance to test them in the market place of ideas.

In addition, Nichols as cited in Hybels et al (2001:84), talking from the point of view of interpersonal communication also identifies **Empathic listening.** He says “Empathic listening” is listening to other people’s feelings by way of giving emotional support to your speaker and he says the ability to do this, creates intimacy with others. Nichols adds that when listening goes with empathy, the listener suspends his ego and immerses himself in the other person. Only by doing this, he says, will the listener be able to enter into the feelings of the speaker. This kind of listening according to him helps the speaker to cope with his feeling or problem and can win trust which can create the foundation for a lasting relationship.

**The Benefits of Effective Listening**

The benefits of effective listening are many. They include the following:

1. It makes messages to be clearly understood.
2. It helps to make the appropriate responses in the communicative process.
3. It deepens interaction and develops good interpersonal relationship.
4. It can help in feeling the pulse of others and give the required support. According to Marwell (2008) “listen to the whispers and you won’t have to hear the scream”
5. It facilitates comprehension and deepens our knowledge of issues in a discourse.
6. Listening indicates respect and care for the speaker which encourages the speaker to express himself thoroughly and exhaustively.
7. In the workplace, it leads to improve staff morale and loyalty.
8. It creates harmony and tension-free in work climate which encourages cooperation and promote new ideas that will improve productivity.
9. On the social level, it establishes stability and cordial relationship in the family.

**Problems Militating Against Effective Listening**

Inspite of these benefits of effective listening as stated above, many individuals in the society are not able to enjoy such benefits due to certain factors. These factors can be classified into two categories:

a) Poor listening habits.

b) Inherent challenges in certain information/messages.

Several factors have been identified to be the cause of poor listening habits. They are:

i) **Lack of Concentration.** Some people erroneously believe that listening involves no effort. So they just sit back and be looking at the speaker without sparing any effort to think over what is being said. In no time, their minds will drift away. At the end, they realize that they paid little or no attention to what has been said. They are passive listeners. This occurs mostly when the speaker or the subject is not interesting. Once it becomes a habit, the listener will lack the capacity to listen to people with sustained interest and attention. This could lead to failure in examination in school, boring companionship, forgetfulness, misinformation, weak memory etc on the part of the listener.
ii) **Misapplied Attention:** Often occasions arise when, instead of listening to the subject matter of the speaker, some listeners prefer to pay attention to the speaker’s mannerism, gestures, accent or how the speaker looks and dresses. At the end, they lose the messages/information. There are also times, when the listener will unduly pay too much attention to one of the points of the speaker and dwell on it, thereby missing all the other points.

iii) **Reacting Emotionally To Trigger Words:** In psychology, reacting emotionally to “trigger words” is when a listener ignores or distorts what a speaker is saying because such words invokes certain emotion in him as it causes the listener to remember specific feelings and experiences in his life. When this happens, the listener’s ability to listen is drastically reduced because he allows his emotion to take over. For example, he might just be angry or upset and stop listening to what is being said.

iv) **The Controlling Listener:** The controlling listener is one who deludes himself by thinking that he knows it all, so he thinks that it is useless listening to ‘inferiors’. They prefer to be listened to. When they are corrected, they always offer ‘better ideas’ than yours. When they are offered the chance to speak, they seldom give allowance to reactions. They want their listeners to accept whatever they say hook, line and sinker. They ignore non-verbal clues and do not care to know when their listeners are tired of listening to them. They always like to dominate discussion. In a conversation, or group discussion, they interrupt the speaker, to speak their mine and they are always impatient with other speakers. In fact, they are highly opinionated persons.

v) **Bias Listener:** He filters the messages in the line of his biases. Such biases could be gender, religious, cultural etc as such persons already have their preconceived notions and prejudice about what is being said. They are highly opinionated people. They do not tolerate or accept ideas contrary to their long-held view.

vi) **Other Poor listening Limitations:** Though they may not be habits perse. They include anxiety (emotional disturbances) and cognitive dissonance -It is a situation where the listener has two or more conflicting attitudes/beliefs about the speaker and may not know how to react to his message.

(b) **Inherent Challenges in Receiving Messages/Information**

i. **Unfamiliar accent:** There are situations when the accents of a speaker constitute a barrier to effective listening. Deep accent sometimes make it difficult for the listener to understand the message. For example, many native speakers of English in Britain hardly understand most Africans when they speak English because their local language accents affect their use of English which make their English less intelligible to the native British speakers.

ii. **Physical Noise Background.** Physical noise of the environment inhibits the listener in his effort to listen to a message/information clearly.

iii. **High Speed of Speech Delivery:** If a speaker is too fast in his rate of speaking, the listener may not be able to keep the pace, and some of the messages may lose in the process.

iv. **Listener’s intelligence Quotient (IQ):** Research (Dale and Wolf. 1988) has shown that the higher one’s intelligence, the higher the ability to listen and understand messages/information.

v. **Semantic Difficulty:** There are cases where the vocabulary of a message/information is beyond the comprehension of the listener. In such situation no matter how hard the effort of the listener he cannot understand the message/information. This situation is called semantic noise in communication.

**Improving Listening Skills**

i) **Show interest in what is being said:** One of the best ways to improve listening skills is to always show interest in receiving messages. The erroneous impression that listening is a passive activity is not true. It is a very active mental activity that involves hearing, observing, interpreting and assigning meaning, all at the same time in the mind.
ii) Where there is noise the listener should mentally tune himself to the message by filtering out the irrelevance. He has to select the information he wants to pay attention to, and mentally ignores the other conflicting ones, determining what is important and what is not. Noise in this sense could be physical, emotion and semantic.

iii) High premium should be placed on nonverbal signals – tone, gestures, facial expression, eye, poise and other nonverbal clues to deduce more meaning from what is being said.

iv) Listening requires responding to what is being said by, for example, nodding your head, saying, ‘really?’ ‘exactly’, that’s interesting’, ‘oh’ ‘that’s true’, a smile etc which encourages the speaker to fully ventilate his mind.

v) No interruption: A speaker should be allowed to end his speech before a listener responds besides those interjections in no 4.

vi) Listener should listen with open-mind, irrespective of his bias, prejudice there should be no prejudging.

vii) Where there is credibility problem that might hinder comprehension, the personality of the speaker should be separated from his message/idea.

viii) Listeners should be curious to find out the motive of the speaker or the message. It will surely sustain your interest in listening.

ix) We should always believe that those who share their ideas and feelings with us, have respect for us so we should honour them back by paying full attention to what they are telling us.

Communication and listening
Communication is an all-encompassing process of sending messages from one point to another. It could be verbal, non-verbal, written or electronic modes - electronic mode can extend to highly complex mass communication process like the use of television, radio, Internet and so on, that may not involve a feedback. In all of these modes, according to Chindaya (2005) two main tasks are involved, namely, comprehension – trying to understand what the other person is saying, has said or written and expression - trying to make oneself easily understood by others in speech or writing. In other words, communication is a two-way process which involves both the sender and the receiver in an interaction process. In the words of Otagburaug (2005) “Communication in the basic and traditional form is the transmission of messages from a sender to receiver with the necessary presence of feedback which could be spontaneous, verbal and or action based.” In this communication process, essence of which, is that both the “sender” and the “receiver” have “mutual understanding”. In otherwords both “the receiver” and “the sender” must assign the same meaning to the message shared. That is why the role of listening in receiving a message and having the desired feedback is very critical in the communication process.

CONCLUSION
As earlier said that listening is one of the basic language skills and it is so critical to communication that without it there cannot be mutual understanding of messages, information ideas and feelings. It is therefore incumbent on everyone to learn to listen sensitively in order to respond appropriately to messages/information/ideas that are shared in our different levels of communication.

REFERENCES
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