

LISTENING

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Introduction

Listening is a very important part of overall communication skill.

Psychologists have estimated that we spend 80% of our waking hours communicating, and 45% (or 27 minutes an hour) of that time is spent listening. The bad news is that only 25% (or approximately 7 minutes an hour) of that is devoted to effective listening.

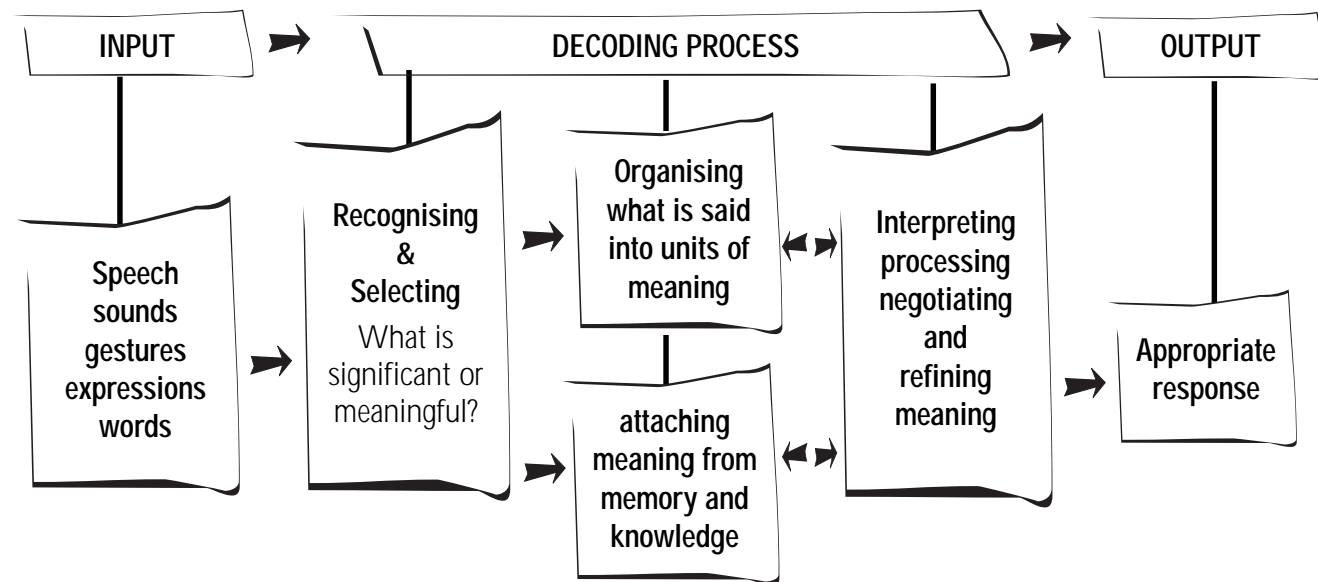
Successful listening occurs when the intended meaning of the speaker is accurately perceived by the listener, in other words when we understand not only what the other person says but also what they mean or intend.

Effective listening is an important part of the role of the facilitator. In the following windows we look at how and why we listen; ways to improve listening; and a check list for facilitators to review and reflect on their own listening practice.

8.1 What happens when we listen?







When we listen we process, negotiate and refine meanings to align what we understand with what the speaker intends.

There are three broad components in the listening process:
input, decoding, and output as illustrated in the diagram below.









8.1 *continued* What happens when we listen?

The listener:

-  takes in the words that are said
-  recognises/selects what is significant
-  organises what is said into units of meaning (sound, function, content)
-  attaches meaning (held in the long-term memory)
-  asks for clarification or more information if an adequate interpretation cannot be made
-  responds appropriately

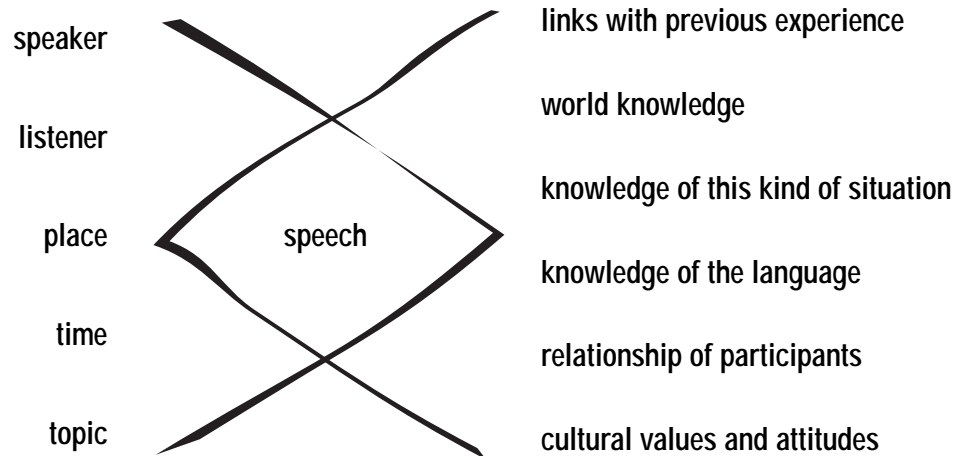
To understand what the speaker intends we process, negotiate and refine meanings. To do this we call on more than just the words that are said. We draw on a wide range of clues, and make use of our knowledge of:

-  the language itself
-  the world (we all have social/cultural filters through which we see the world)
-  our own experiences (associations with these)
-  the people involved in the exchange
-  the situation
-  the purpose of communicating

listening

8.1 *continued*
What happens
when we listen?

Factors involved in negotiating meaning










8.2 The purposes of listening

Effective communication involves sending and receiving messages and negotiating meaning from those messages. Listening is an essential part of this process.

How we listen and how well we listen is determined by our purpose in listening and by our knowledge of context.

Facilitators need to listen in different ways, for different purposes. At different times the listening will be related to the task at hand. At other times the reason for listening will be to understand the group dynamic.

At different times facilitators could be listening for:











-  overall gist or general meaning
-  specific details and information
-  emotional investment in ideas and/or opinions
-  what is actually said - what language is used
-  what is meant, ie the intended meaning (what we think people intend needs to be clarified with them)
-  non-verbal messages – tone, speed, pitch, gestures
-  what is not said

By listening with purpose facilitators can identify common threads and ideas from the group and then use these to move the discussion forward or to bring the discussion back 'on target'.

8.3 Hot tips

HOT TIPS














Listening is a learned behaviour. The more it is practised the more it is improved:

-  make sure the physical environment is conducive to successful listening take responsibility for communication success (keep your feelings and other distractions in check).
-  make mental notes
-  avoid interrupting
-  allow time for people to say what they want to - some take longer than others. People aren't always clear about what they want to say, or they don't always express themselves clearly
-  be willing to listen
-  provide opportunities for people to be heard and to contribute
-  don't impose your own understanding on what you hear
-  show you are interested in/following what is being said by looking at the speaker, asking questions, providing feedback (nods, sounds, words, smiles, gestures); but listen without making feedback intrusive
-  listen for the language people use and incorporate that style of communication into your session when appropriate
-  identify the goal of the speaker (to inform, persuade, educate, entertain?)

8.3 *continued* Hot tips

HOT TIPS

and there's more!

-  listen for what people don't say as well as what they actually say
-  listen for what people are trying to say, what they actually mean
-  establish and maintain communication links between group members
-  make sure everyone in the group is heard
-  clarify/confirm that you have understood by repeating what has been said or rephrasing it in your own words
-  recognise when a breakdown in communication has occurred and move to repair it
-  tune into non-verbal messages - gestures, body language, speed of talking, tone etc.
-  be careful not to appear to be preparing what you are going to say while others are speaking
-  be aware of your own reactions while you are listening
-  indicate that you are aware of others' feelings
-  be aware of your own emotional responses to what you hear (remember that communication can breakdown if you allow yourself to become too emotionally involved.)
-  take notes if appropriate
-  suspend moral judgement

8.3 Facilitator's check list

ACTIVITY

My Own Behaviour

- Have I created a physical environment where it is easy for people to listen to each other, eg seating arrangements, noise?
- Have I shown a willingness to listen?
- Have I negotiated and refined meaning to align what I understand with what the speaker intends?
- Have I checked my understanding by repeating or rephrasing what has been said?
- Have I avoided preparing what I was going to say while others were speaking?
- Have I avoided jumping in too quickly to offer solutions?
- Have I been aware of my own emotional responses and reactions to what others have said and how they have said it?
- Have I listened unobtrusively, allowing the other person time and space to speak?
- Have I shown interest as a listener by looking at the speaker, asking questions or giving feedback (gestures, sounds, words, smiles)?
- Have I listened carefully to the language people use so that when I speak I can use language they are familiar or feel comfortable with?

8.3 *continued* Facilitator's check list

- Have I been tuned into non-verbal messages - gestures, body language, speed of talking, tone, pitch etc?
- Have I shown that I am aware of the other person's feelings and suspended moral judgement?
- Have I provided opportunities for people in the group to be heard, have I invited people in the group to contribute?
- Have I listened for common threads in what people in the group were saying?
- Have I used what group members have said to keep discussions 'on target'?
- Have I used what group members have said to move the discussion in new directions?
- When it was possible and appropriate have I taken notes as I listened?

Good Group Behaviour

- Group members are willing to listen to each other, allowing others time and space to speak.
- The group listens without making moral judgements.
- The group listens unobtrusively, ie, without making feedback or responses intrusive.
- Everyone checks that they have understood by clarifying what has been said with what was intended.
- Group members are aware that they need to listen in different ways, for different purposes.