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THE IMPORTANCE OF ACTIVE LISTENING IN BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

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Active listening is a skill, an ability that together with the art of giving presentations, argumentation and persuasion, negotiation as well as with effective business writing constitutes a closed circle in the communication process. It is a powerful tool in modern, multicultural working environment, in the world of globalised business which is today, more than ever, coloured by the multicultural differences. This article is going to introduce a skill that has very often been neglected due to the overall learning and communication process that puts its very stress on speaking while it has been scientifically proven that as small children the first ability that we learn is how to listen and then how to speak, to read and, finally, how to write. While very often an onus has been put on speaking and writing ability, listening has somehow been neglected. This article shows some of the techniques of a good listener which can help us to improve our listening ability and prevent barriers in listening process and thus gain much more confidence in business environment.

Key words: communication, listening, active listening, characteristics of a good listener.

1. Introduction

The idea of writing this article has come from my working practice of a second language teacher and everyday experience of working with first and second year university students. Working for several years as a teacher of business English as a second language among the university students, I realised that the majority of students of business and management have almost no knowledge of the concept of listening as a skill and even less about the concept of active listening. The idea of listening is not connected to just mere receiving or hearing the other people's messages and just passive receiving of those messages, but it stands on the basis of any effective communication and human interaction. This article is a part of a second year's Business English student's course and its scope is to introduce and to make them use this elementary skill in their everyday practice which can be beneficiary for stu-

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dents already enrolled in the world of business, tourism and hospitality management in general.

2. Communication as the basis for human relations

Communication can be defined in numerous ways, it is a complex term used differently depending on a situation, but maybe the most common interpretation is that communication is the act of transmitting and receiving information by using words, sounds, signs or behaviour.

It is a process through which a certain kind of information is exchanged among individuals, and this process is a basic form of social interaction, which is a fundamental characteristic to all human beings.

Communication can be verbal (face-to-face, telephone, radio, television), non-verbal (by using body language, gestures, the way a person acts or even dresses) or written (in the form of e-mails, letters, books, the internet) and we can also use visual aids in the form of maps, logos, graphs, charts and other tools that can convey information.

When talking about interpersonal communication, this action does not just occur; it is more likely a process in which participants mediate their act intentionally or unintentionally in given place of activity.

The essential part of every communication is the person who sends and the receiver of information, but in face-to-face communication we cannot generally establish these roles while both parties exchange information with each other, even if in mere slight ways such as through eye-contact or some kind of body language.

There are numerous different subtle ways to communicate with a person, for instance the pitch of someone's voice can demonstrate an emotional state or a mood, while motion such as a nod or a hand signal can be an addition to a spoken message.

The communication process has two ways, meaning that the participants do not only swap information, but also generate and distribute meaning, in which reaching the mutual understanding is of the utmost importance.

Misinterpretation of information can appear at any phase of the communication process, therefore effective communication includes decreasing possible misunderstanding and surmounting all obstructions to communication at any stage in the communication process.

Most people assume that communication means getting involved in a conversation, and this is correct, but human beings also interrupt, prevent, recommend, encourage, criticize, evaluate, admonish, deflect and so forth. However, besides talking, listening is also required in good communication and it is in some way the most substantial ability.

3. Active listening

Listening is the first ability that we as small children develop. Active listening does not imply being a passive receiver of other people's thoughts and messages, but involves our whole person, our emotions and feelings. It is our ability and willingness to hear and under-

stand. It is a state of mind that involves paying full and careful attention to the other person, avoiding premature judgement, reflecting understanding, clarifying information, summarising and sharing (Hoppe, 2006).

4. Barriers of listening in working environment

4.1. Avoid judgements and prejudice towards other people

A good listener is a witness, not judge of your experience (Nichols, 2009). Very often, while listening, people create barriers due to the judgements they have towards their speaking partners. Some of them may be the judgements created throughout their working experience or experience in general while some prejudices are judgements created at the moment in which the listening process takes place and may be caused by nonverbal signs and body language, but even other types of prejudices based on the person's religion, gender, social status, nationality and other categories.

Having judgements towards other people can prevent us from listening, can interrupt the flow of thoughts and create the negative atmosphere that is another obstacle in the listening process and communication in general. Having judgements is something that both speaker and the listener should avoid; since "talking and listening creates a unique relationship in which speaker and listener are constantly switching roles" (Nichols, 2009). We should avoid our own judgements while somebody else is speaking, and avoid judging the others while we speak because this can consequently prevent our listener to listen to us. By paying attention to us and our not judging the others, we can concentrate better on other people's messages, we can become more objective and can thus take the message in a more controlled manner.

4.2. Avoid having assumptions towards others

One of the principal barriers in listening and thus in interaction with other people is fostering assumptions of what other think or probably think regarding certain subjects. During a conversation in which we switch the roles from listener to speaker and vice versa, assumptions, together with judgements are the major preventer in understanding of the message the speaker (no matter whom they are) wants to communicate.

4.3. Pay attention

We often encounter a person who is hearing the things we talk about, but is not genuinely listening. People tend to 'fake attention' when they have other things on their mind, but that kind of 'listening' (or in fact; the lack of listening) is considered contemptuous and deceptive. Thus in order to overcome this barrier it is important in every conversation to always make an effort and to truly hear and listen to what our speaking partner has to say. Likewise, it is recommended to bypass our own assumptions or contemplating our feedback during someone else's speaking.

4.4. Stress, tiredness and fatigue

“Stress, tiredness and fatigue largely affect the ability to pay attention. When we are tired or lethargic, it becomes difficult for us to concentrate on what the person is saying. Similarly, stress disconnects us from what is being said” (Ortiz Crespo, 2010). When discussing about effective communication; the mental state of a listener can also often elevate a barrier because he is not able to operate at his normal capacity during a stage of anger, impatience, depression and due to this kind of state it is suggested to abstain from conversations.

4.5. Too much information

Sometimes the information overload can create a barrier because it is hard to keep focus and to concentrate when loaded and burdened with abundant information from various sources. It is favourable to prevent being in an ambience which is making it difficult to be a good listener (turn off computer, television, radio etc.).

4.6. Selective listening

One more consequential barrier to affective listening is when a person is not paying enough attention and is making minimal effort to really hear what the speaker has to say in given moment. For example, a listener in this case will hear the information only when it is beneficial and convenient to him in some way (he will select the pieces of a discourse), but when the information is not useful or interesting enough, he will actually pseudo listen (half listen); pretend to listen what the other person is saying.

4.7. Egoism

Egoism can also be used as a barrier to productive communication and active listening. It refers to the listener who is self-centred; who is thinking about himself and his own interest during the conversation, therefore he becomes more indifferent and detached from the speaker. Egoism obstructs our capability to comprehend the whole message and to sympathize with the speaker.

4.8. Physical barriers

During conversation we can sometimes encounter several components that create a particular physical barrier which prevents us from concentrating. For example, noise can complicate our ability to hear the speaker, temper with our focus and thus disabling the listener to hear the whole message. Poor lighting can occasionally intervene with our ability to see the gestures of the speaker. Additionally, small and limited space can cause “distractions and concerns related to claustrophobia together with defensive attitudes towards the intrusion of personal space” (Ortiz Crespo, 2010).

4.9. Interrupting

Interrupting the speaker is considered to be a bad manner and needs to be avoided in order to create a positive environment for the communication. Not all interruptions are considered "bad listening." An interruption could be unintentional if we misread cues and think a person is done speaking only to have him or her start up again at the same time we do. Sometimes interruptions are more like overlapping statements that show support (e.g., "I think so too.") or excitement about the conversation. The listener should make an effort and attempt to evade dictating the course of the conversation by interrupting. To overcome this barrier, the easiest way is to use suitable body gesture like raising the hand or mannerly requesting further analysis using phrases such as "Excuse me for interrupting", "Can I stop you there for a moment", "Do you mind if I..." and so on.

5. Characteristics of a good listener

5.1. Pay attention to your body posture (body language)

It is extremely difficult to talk to a person who is not sitting properly on the chair or is moving all the time. It is important to pay attention to our body language while listening in order to send positive signal to our speaking partner. A listener must pay attention to his posture, the way he is sitting on the chair, the way he holds his arms because by sitting with arms and legs crossed, can subconsciously effect our speaking partner and give the signal that we are closed to the relationship or to the other person's ideas (Taylor, 2006) or that for some reason we feel uncomfortable in certain situation which again may confuse the speaker on one hand or, even worse, may put the speaker into a position of power. "Power is expressed through highly specific, evolved nonverbal displays (widespread limbs and enlargement of occupied space by spreading out) project high power whereas contractive, closed postures (limbs touching the torso and minimisation of occupied space by collapsing the body inward) project low power" (Carney et al., 2010).

Leaning forward is also a very useful simple sign that can motivate a speaker and keep the conversation going on.

Nodding (moving our heads up and down) indicates agreement and encourages our speaking partner to continue and open up. By nodding every now and there in a conversation we confirm that we are listening.

Mirroring of the facial expressions of the speaker is also one way to show that the listener is interested in the topic of the conversation and relates to someone's emotional experience, but it needs to happen spontaneously, otherwise it can be seen as rudeness toward someone.

5.2. Keep an eye contact

By looking to our speaking partner, we show our interest, we show our speaking partner that we are following. The speaker can get easily confused or distracted if a listener wanders off overlooking. That is why it is important to pay attention both to eye contact and our overall face expression while listening. It takes time to learn to pay attention to our face expres-

ssion, but once we learn how to control our expressions, we will have more success in communicating with others. Our relaxed face expression and our positive attitude will relax our speaking partner and he will prevent eventual judgements.

5.3. Pay attention

Very often the listener interrupts the speaker by finishing the sentence for him. The speaker has the impression that the listener is not listening and that he cannot wait to take over the conversation. This is a huge barrier in conversation.

5.4. Show emotion

We can tell our speaking partner that we are listening by giving some signals like words and phrases: "I see", "I understand", "Mmmm", "Oh! I know!" In this way we communicate to the speaker that we listen and we want them to continue because "to listen is to pay attention, take an interest, care about, take to heart, validate, acknowledge, be moved... appreciate." (Nichols, 2009). Furthermore, a simple smile can go a long way- it can be used to demonstrate that the listener is really hearing what is being discussed, especially in the combination with nod of the head as a certain confirmation, and indubitably expressing an emotion.

5.5. Allow silence

Being silent when somebody is talking is also a sign that the listener is following the other party, that he wants his speaking partner to continue. There are listeners though who are often impatient while in the communication process, they like to finish the sentence for the speaker creating in that way the obstacle for the listening process. Those kinds of listeners like to talk about themselves or concentrate on what they have to say all the time.

5.6. Sum up when necessary

By asking the other party to slow down; by asking simple questions or by summing up, the listener can check his understanding of the message: "So what you are saying is..."; "If I understood you..." The listener can summarize something not by repeating what is said, but rather by rephrasing it in his own words and in this way the listener can check the understanding while the speaker feels reassured (Taylor, 2006).

5.7. A good listener encourages the speaker

While talking about these positive signals that we can use and adopt in the communication process, it is very important to underline that their double importance; on one side they serve to motivate the speaker by sending them the positive signal and so called "I'm with you feeling", and on the other hand by using the positive tips mentioned above we can better adopt in business environment. Tips like; eye contact, staying still and attentive, being positive and motivating, asking question as a sign that we are following, not jumping into conclu-

sions, may also serve in order to send a positive feedback in a certain business environment; business meeting, negotiation or job interview.

5.8. Go the extra mile

A good listener wants to give some kind of a feedback to his speaker and manages it by expressing his point of view from a different aspect; he can share his observation, reaction and knowledge about the given subject and pay attention what the other person has to say next. If we want to extend our conversation and go deeper into the subject, it is always good to ask questions about possible and hypothetical outcome of a certain situation mentioned in the conversation. A good listener also shows his compassion and affirmation toward the speaker and listens to him blatantly, without judging.

6. Conclusion

In this article the scope was to introduce the concept of listening; active listening as a skill. It is an innate ability that all humans possess and that all human beings learn as the very first skill in their childhood, but that over time gets implied just because silent and for that reason wrongfully considered less important. Nowadays, in the world of stressed multicultural movements as well as in the world of business that is coloured by that same multiculturalism, active listening as a skill presents an assumption for an effective communication process in general and thus an effective human relationship within a working environment. Although it is ability innate to every human, it can easily be neglected over time especially due to certain character abilities, working and cultural environments that can affect and determine the person's behaviour.

That is why some essential knowledge about the benefits of the active listening skill acquisition can help us to create self-awareness and one positive attitude that will form our etiquette in everyday, business, professional environment and would help us in the establishment of positive atmosphere as a platform for mutual acceptance and agreement.

LITERATURE

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Sažetak

VAŽNOST AKTIVNOG SLUŠANJA U POSLOVNOM OKRUŽENJU

Aktivno slušanje je vještina, sposobnost koja zajedno s umjetnošću prezentiranja, argumentiranja, uvjeravanja te pregovaranja, kao i učinkovitog poslovnog pisanja, predstavlja zatvoreni krug u komunikacijskom procesu. To je moćan alat u modernom, multikulturnom radnom okruženju, u svijetu globalnog poslovanja koji je danas, više nego ikad, obojen multikulturalnim različitostima. Ovaj članak raspravlja o vještini koja često bila zanemarena kod ukupnog učenja o komunikacijskim procesima koji stavlja naglasak na govorni (usmeni) dio, dok je znanstveno dokazano da prva vještina koju kao djeca usvojimo jest sposobnost slušanja, a tek onda sposobnost govornog izražavanja, čitanja i pisanja. Pri tom, vrlo često naglasak biva stavljan na sposobnost govorenja i pisanja, dok slušanje kao vještina ostaje zanemareno. Ovaj članak će pokazati neke od tehnika koje dobar slušatelj mora imati odnosno koje nam mogu pomoći u poboljšanju sposobnosti slušanja, spriječiti prepreke u tom procesu te tako doprinijeti u postizanju samopouzdanja i povjerenja u poslovnom okruženju.

Ključne riječi: komunikacija, slušanje, aktivno slušanje, karakteristike dobrog slušača.