2.5: Listening in Public Speaking Settings

To this point in the text, and for most of the rest of it, we focus on the “sending” part of the communication process. However, public speaking only works if there are listeners. Studying public speaking should make you a better listener because you see the value of the listener to the communication process and because you are more aware of what you do in a speech.

Listening is not the same thing as hearing. **Hearing** is a physical process in which sound waves hit your ear drums and send a message to your brain. You may hear cars honking or dogs barking when you are walking down the street because your brain is process the sounds, but that doesn’t mean that you are listening to them. **Listening** implies an active process where you are specifically making an effort to understand, process, and retain information.

Also, although both reading and listening are methods of taking in information, they are very different processes. You may have taken a learning styles inventory at some point and learned that you were either a visual, auditory, or kinesthetic learner, or maybe a combination. Many of us have a strength in one of these areas, or at least a preference. Having a particular learning preference should never be used as an excuse; we learn in all three modes, depending on the context and subject matter, even if one is stronger. As one of the appendices will note, real research of these three learning styles is actually limited.

Also, when you read, you can go back and read a passage over and over until you understand it. This is more difficult in listening. If the message is recorded, you can play it over, but if the situation is a speech, once may be all you get. Many studies have been conducted to find out how long we remember oral messages, and often the level of memory from oral communication is not very high (Bostrom & Bryant, 1980).

In this section, we will focus on **comprehensive listening**, which is listening focused on understanding and remembering important information from a public speaking message. There are other “types” of listening, based on the context and purpose. The first is **empathetic listening**, for understanding the feelings and motivations of another
person, usually with a goal to helping the person deal with a personal problem. For example, if a friend says she is thinking about dropping out of college at the end of the semester, you would want to listen for the reasons and feelings behind her choice, recognizing that you might need to ask sensitive questions and not just start telling her what to do or talk about your own feelings.

The second type of listening is **appreciative**, which takes place while listening to music, poetry, or literature or watching a play or movie. For example, knowing that the melodies of classical musical have a certain A-B pattern informs us how to listen to Mozart. To be good at this kind of listening, it helps to study the art form to learn the patterns and devices.

The third type is **critical listening**, which we will address in Chapter 14 in discussing critical thinking and logic. In critical listening the audience member is evaluating the validity of the arguments and information and deciding whether the speaker is persuasive and whether the message should be accepted.

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Your Audience and Listening

With this understanding of how listening differs from other forms of message reception, we can think of public speaking as "linear in time." It does not allow you to loop back, as in reading. For that reason, a speaker must make listening easier for the audience. The main way speakers achieve this is through **planned redundancy**. Planned redundancy refers to purposeful ways of repeating and restating parts of the speech to help the audience listen and retain the content.

The speaker uses a relevant introduction to emphasize the interest and importance of the subject, uses a preview of the main points to forecast the plan of the speech, uses connective statements between points to remind the audience of the plan and re-emphasize the content, and then uses an overall summary in the conclusion to help the audience remember or do something with the information. As mentioned before, you might not be able to "cover" or dump a great deal of information in a speech, but you can make the information meaningful through the planned redundancy as well as through examples, stories, support, and appeals.

A speaker can also help the audience’s listening abilities by using visual aids (discussed in Chapter 9), stories and examples (discussed in Chapter 7), audience interaction or movement at key points in the speech (if appropriate and if your instructor approves it), and specific attention-getting techniques (also discussed in Chapter 7).

In short, listening is hard work, but you can meet your audience half way by using certain strategies and material to make listening easier for them. At the same time, an audience member has a responsibility to pay attention and listen well. In the next section, we will look at how you can improve your listening ability in public speaking situations. We will not look at listening in private, group, or interpersonal communication settings. Those often require other skills such as empathy and paraphrasing in order to understand your communication partner fully and to meet his or her emotional needs. If a friend comes to you with a problem, he or she may be more interested in your concern than that you can recall back the content of what was shared or that you can give him or her advice.

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Barriers to Listening

Since hearing is a physiological response to auditory stimuli, you hear things whether you want to or not. Just ask
anyone who has tried to go to sleep with the neighbor’s dog barking all night. However, listening, really listening, is intentional and hard work. Several hundred years ago we lived in an aural world—by that is meant most people took in information through hearing. That is why you will often hear stories of great speakers who orated for two or three hours, and that was considered acceptable. It does not mean everyone stayed awake all the time, but it does mean that the majority did not find it unusual or impossible to listen for that long.

A famous historical example is that of the Gettysburg Address, that wonderful, concise speech by Abraham Lincoln given in November of 1863 to commemorate the battlefield of Gettysburg. It is a speech we still read and sometimes memorize as an example of powerful rhetoric. The speaker before Lincoln was Edward Everett, a renowned statesman of the time from Massachusetts, who spoke for over two hours. Today we prefer the Lincoln’s example of conciseness to Everett’s version. In other words, we just do not have the listening power we used to. Perhaps we do not need it, or due to neuroplasticity (“Definition of neuroplasticity,” 2015) our brains have adapted to other means of efficiently taking in information.

In addition, as mentioned earlier, some people are not strong aural learners. In that case, listening may not be a personal strength in addition to being a skill that has deteriorated in society over time. But that does not make it unimportant or something we should not try to improve upon. Therefore, the first barrier to listening is our lack of capacity for it, whether from societal expectation or personal psychological preferences.

Another barrier to listening is the noisiness and constant distractions of our lives, something that you might not even be aware of if you have always lived in the world of Internet, cell phones, iPods, tablets, and 24/7 news channels. We are dependent on and constantly wired to the Internet. Focus is difficult. Not only do electronic distractions hurt our listening, but life concerns can distract us as well.

An ill family member, a huge exam next period, your car in the shop, deciding on next semester’s classes—the list is endless. Hunger and fatigue hurt listening ability as well. A third barrier to listening not often considered is that our minds can usually process much faster than a speaker can speak clearly. We may be able to listen, when really trying, at 200 words per minute, but few speakers can articulate that many words clearly; an average rate for normal speech is around 100-120 (Foulke, 1968). That leaves a great deal of time when the mind needs to pull itself back into focus. During those gaps, we might find it more enjoyable to think of lunch, the new person we are dating, or our vacation at the beach.

Another barrier is distraction from the people around you. Perhaps the scent of their soap or shampoo is unpleasant to you. Perhaps they cannot put their cell phones down or perhaps they are whispering to each other and impeding your ability to hear the speaker clearly. Finally, the physical environment may make listening to a public speaker difficult. This is not to even mention that the skill of the speaker influences your listening ability. We end up seeing Mr. Goethe’s point from Chapter 1. Communicating can be so difficult that we wonder how we can overcome all these obstacles.

Additionally, confirmation bias is a barrier to listening. This term means “a tendency to search for or interpret information in a way that confirms one’s preconceptions” (Nickerson, 1998). Although the concept has been around a long time, we are more aware of confirmation bias today. It leads us to listen to news outlets and Internet sources that confirm what we believe already rather than being challenged to new ways of thinking by reading or listening to other sources of information. It can cause us to discount, reject, or re-interpret information to fit our preconceptions.

These are all the possible obstacles to listening, but there might also be reasons that are particular to you, the listener.
Often we go into listening situations with no purpose; we are just there physically but have no plans for listening. We go in unprepared. We are tired and mentally and physically unready to listen well. We do not sit in a comfortable position to listen. We do not bring proper tools to listen, specifically to take notes. There is actually research to indicate that we listen better and learn/retain more when we take notes with a pen and paper then when we type them on a computer or tablet (Mueller & Oppenheimer, 2014). Add to this the research that shows how distracting open laptops are to other students. This research has led some professors to bar laptops from their classrooms.

What Can Be Done to Improve Listening?

The previous section explains barriers to good listening behavior and in a sense gives us the solutions. The key is to personalize this information and decide which of it relates to you. Your own barrier might be not coming prepared, being quick to prejudge, or allowing gadgets to distract you. Obviously, recognizing the cause of your poor listening is the first step to becoming a better listener. Here are some steps, in summary:

- Believe that good listening in specific situations and improving your own listening behavior are important. You would not want to be called upon in a meeting at work when you were daydreaming or being distracted by a cell phone. Consider listening in class and to your classmates’ speeches in the same way.

- Since it is so easy to react to a speaker’s ideas with confirmation bias, go into listening knowing that you might disagree and that the automatic “turn off” tendency is a possibility. In other words, tell yourself to keep an open mind.

- Be prepared to listen. This means putting away mobile devices, having a pen and paper, and situating yourself physically to listen (not slouching or slumping). Have a purpose in listening. In your speech class, one of your purposes should be mutual support of your classmates; you are all in this together. Your instructor might also require you to write responses to your classmates’ speeches.

- When taking notes, keep yourself mentally engaged by writing questions that arise, especially if your instructor does not take questions until a break, and you might forget. This behavior will fill in the gaps when your mind could wander and create more of an interaction with the speaker. However, taking notes does not mean “transcribing” the speech or lecture. Whether in class or in a different listening situation, do not (try to) write everything the speaker says down. One, it’s not possible unless you know Gregg Shorthand or type really fast, and two, you will disengage your critical thinking and get too involved in typing rather than thinking. Instead, start with looking for overall purpose and structure, then for pertinent examples of each main point. Repetition by a speaker usually indicates you should write something down.

- For your own sake and that of your co-listeners, avoid temptations to talk to those sitting next to you. It is far more distracting to both the speaker and your co-listeners than you might think. Write down the questions for asking later. Our use of cellular devices in an audience can also be more of a distraction to others than we realize. There is a good reason the movie theaters play those announcements about turning your phone off before the feature!

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the psychological and physical processes going on inside the audience during a speech. Being audience-centered and adapting to your audience involves knowing as much as is reasonably possible about them. Addressing a diverse audience is a challenge, and audiences are, in general, becoming more diverse and more aware of their diversity in the U.S. While diversity is a challenge, it is also an opportunity.
Something to Think About

Can you think of some ways that knowing the psychographic characteristics of your audience can influence your speech preparation? What values, needs, beliefs, and attitudes of your classmates should you consider? Example topics: You want to give a persuasive speech to your classroom audience to encourage them to take a study abroad trip. You want your audience to consider buying a Mac Book Pro rather than a PC as their next laptop.

You want to persuade them that sponsoring a child in a poor country is a way to bring the child out of poverty. You want them to volunteer in the next Special Olympics in your community.

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