

Teaching Listening: Some Thoughts on Behavioral Approaches

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This paper provides an overview of the issues involved in providing listening instruction to those who work or who are preparing to work in organizations. Questions are posed regarding the nature of listening and listening instruction. A behavioral approach is suggested, and the benefits and concerns regarding this perspective are examined.

The field of business communication is expanding as practitioners more clearly articulate their communication needs and as scholars better define the parameters and key constructs of the field. No longer confined to teaching primarily written skills, business communication educators have embraced the entire spectrum of communication principles and practices essential to effective management in today's fast-paced, ever-changing organizational environments. One topic that has recently become recognized as central to successful management practice is listening.

The importance of effective listening to managerial success is well-documented. DiSalvo (1980) discovered that listening was repeatedly identified as the most important communication skill necessary for entry-level positions in a wide range of companies. A study of general managers in the hospitality industry (Brownell, 1993) revealed that listening was perceived as the most important communication competence for career development. Numerous other researches have reached similar conclusions (Harris & Thomlison, 1983; Hunt & Cusella, 1983; Rhodes, 1985; Sypher, Bostrom, & Seibert, 1989; Sypher & Zorn, 1986). Consequently, business communication educators are now challenged to provide instruction and training in this critical communication competence.

Our discussion unfolds as four specific areas are addressed. First, the background and underlying assumptions of the behavioral approach are discussed. Several studies that support this perspective are then presented, accompanied by an example of how listening instruction might be facilitated using a behavioral model. Several issues related to assessment are also examined as they affect educators' ability to determine the effectiveness of their efforts.

Author's Note: The 1989 Research Conference of the International Listening Association, Atlanta, Georgia, stimulated many ideas presented in this paper.

BACKGROUND AND ASSUMPTIONS OF THE BEHAVIORAL APPROACH

Business communication specialists who focus on listening represent a variety of backgrounds and perspectives. While many are grounded in speech communication, psychology, and the social sciences, educators in English and the humanities have also contributed much to the development of the field. For instance, the NCTE's 1945 Commission on the English Curriculum was the first study committee to focus exclusively on listening concerns; seven years later, this association published the first full chapter on listening as part of their curriculum guide (Brown, 1987).

Business communication educators and scholars who focus on listening have, for some time, operated under the assumption that listening can be taught. They propose that individuals become more effective listeners through deliberate interventions that modify or change existing habits and patterns of behavior. These educators, then, assume the task of developing strategies designed to produce the specified results. They seek definitions of listening that can be readily operationalized and applied in management classrooms and training seminars.

By taking a *behavioral* perspective, the business communication educator's approach is in contrast to the position of researchers who argue that the most useful (if not the most accurate) definitions are those that present listening as an exclusively cognitive, covert process (Goss, 1982; Kelly, 1967). Although they recognize information processing as an important construct in the listening process, business communication educators have operationalized the concept of listening in models that identify behaviors that can be learned, observed, and applied. In business environments in particular, listening instructors seek approaches that rely almost exclusively on overt, readily identifiable actions that serve as indicators of less-observable mental processes. Employees perceive that their managers listen to them and customers remark that service employees pay attention to their concerns when the appropriate *behavioral indicators* are present. It is on the development of those indicators that business communication specialists have focused their attention.

Implied in this behavioral approach is the assumption that individuals become better listeners when they begin to *behave* the way instructors teach them to behave—when they replicate a particular model and act

the way effective listeners act. The behavioral approach to listening in organizations is clearly positioned, then, at the extreme end of the overt/covert debate; that is, in order to demonstrate that instruction has accomplished its goals and that listening has indeed improved, participants' exit behaviors must be different in some observable way from their entrance behaviors. As their colleagues in related fields simultaneously make advances in the area of intrapersonal processes, it becomes apparent that the argument over whether listening is largely a covert mental process or largely a cluster of overt skills will continue indefinitely as researchers, educators, and practitioners define what listening is—and what they want listening to be—from their particular point of view (Witkin, 1990).

Let's assume that a definition of listening as overt behaviors or, more specifically, as clusters of interrelated behaviors, is a useful way to conceptualize the process for teaching and training purposes. The next step is to examine briefly some of the indicators that have been identified and the research that supports this framework.

DEFINING LISTENING IN BEHAVIORAL TERMS

It becomes readily apparent that when we talk about listening *behaviors*, we are talking about those behaviors that are perceived and subsequently interpreted by others who participate in the communication event. We have good reason, however, to believe that academics' and practitioners' definitions vary (Lewis & Reinsch, 1988). Even in the workplace, agreement regarding what constitutes "effective listening" is marginal at best.

When employees are asked to define exactly what they mean when they say their managers listen, no single response emerges. While some report that their manager "looks at me when I talk," others are satisfied because when their supervisor hears about a particular problem, she takes appropriate action.

An organization's main tasks and its culture also have a significant influence on the specific meanings organizational members assign to various individual actions. An employee's background, goals, and expectations play a role in determining how listening behaviors are interpreted. In spite of lingering ambiguities, the body of research that conceptualizes listening in terms of distinct behaviors is growing steadily (Brownell, 1990; Gilbert, 1989; Husband, Cooper, & Monsour, 1988; Rhodes, Watson, & Barker, 1990). If listening can be taught as a cluster of separate skill areas—and current studies suggest that it can—then researchers and trainers have a starting point from which to explore issues related to the assessment of participant needs, the development of instructional programs, and the measurement of training results.

Identifying Indicators of Listening Effectiveness

This author, for instance, used questionnaire research to examine how managers perceive their own listening behaviors and how their subordinates' perceptions of these behaviors compare to the manager's self-reports. The survey instrument for these studies was developed after a thorough literature review and several focus groups. These efforts resulted in a list of over 50 behaviors that were most frequently associated with perceptions of listening effectiveness. Analysis of data from a pilot study revealed 26 items loading on five separate factors. These 26 items were then presented to respondents on a questionnaire containing seven-point Likert scales.

In one study, 102 middle managers and 731 of their colleagues from a public utilities company and two high-technology companies were surveyed. The instrument was then further refined and the study replicated in the hospitality industry with 144 middle managers and 827 subordinates. Questions were then modified so that the survey could be used to examine management students' perceptions (N = 369) of their listening behavior. In each case, respondents were asked to indicate their opinion of the extent to which they demonstrated each of 26 listening behaviors. (Colleagues and subordinates were asked to make judgments about their managers' listening behaviors.)

Factor analysis of this data-supported initial findings and indicated that listening behaviors were perceived to cluster around five distinct components; hearing (concentration), understanding (comprehension and memory), interpreting (sensitivity to nonverbal cues), evaluating (objectivity), and responding (acting on what was heard). The HURIER model that was subsequently influenced by this research provides one example of a behavioral approach to listening that conceptualizes the process as a cluster of interrelated skill areas. It is briefly described below as one example of how the behavioral approach might be implemented in a classroom environment.

The HURIER Behavioral Model of Listening Instruction

The HURIER model (Brownell, 1985, 1986) provides a framework for skill-based listening instruction by defining listening as comprised of six interrelated components. Each component can be addressed and competency developed by focusing on the specific attitudes, principles, and skills that represent that aspect of the model:

1. hearing: concentrating on and attending to the message
2. understanding: comprehending the literal meaning of the message
3. remembering: recalling the message so that it can be acted upon

4. interpreting: sensitivity to nonverbal and contextual aspects of the message
5. evaluating: logical assessment of the value of the message
6. responding: selecting an appropriate response to what is heard (Figure 1)

2. Participants will consider employees' nonverbal behavior when interpreting messages.
3. Participants will become more accurate in identifying employees' feelings from vocal indicators.

The instructor then provides the necessary background information for each area to be addressed. In

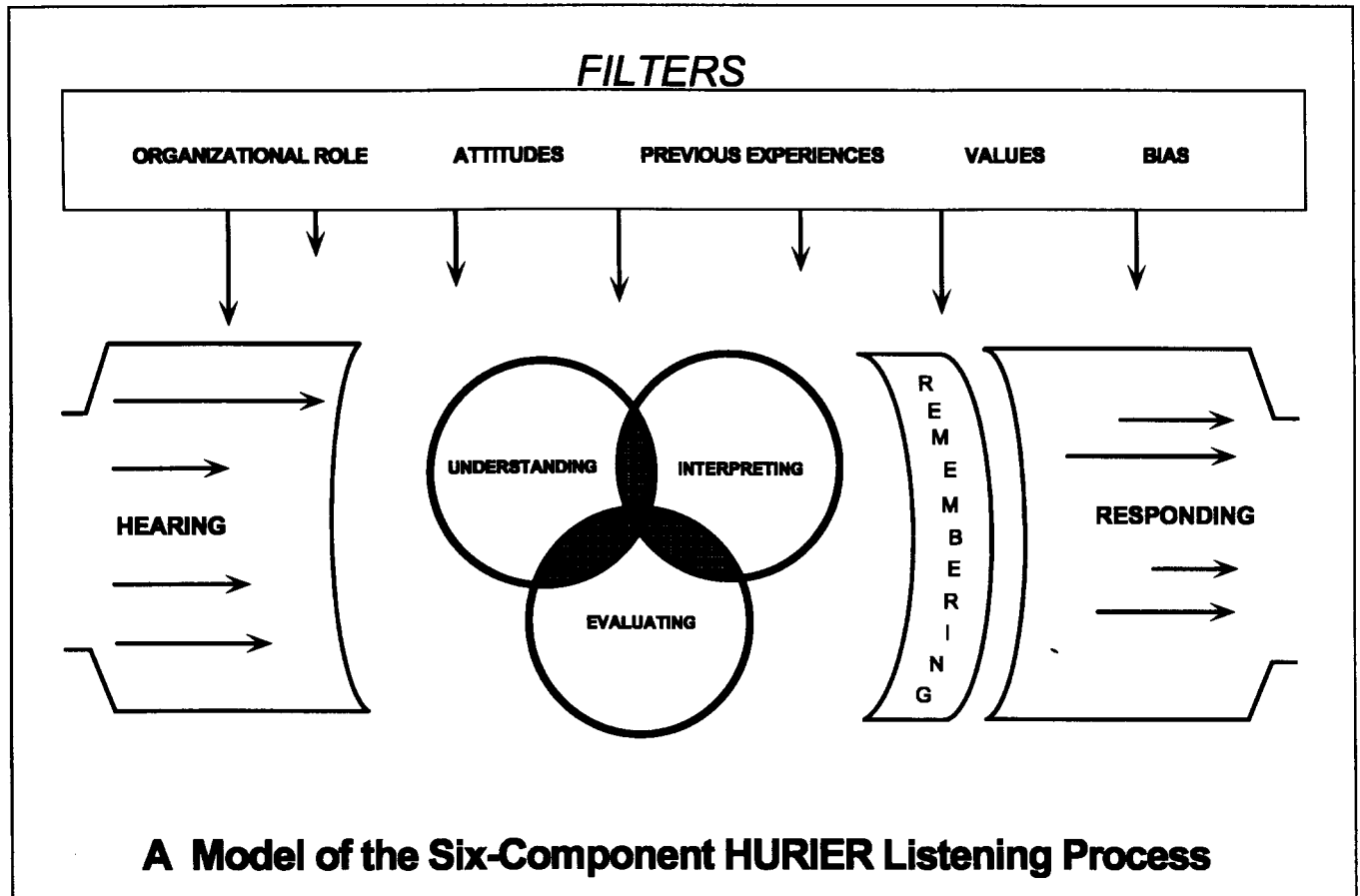


Figure 1. The HURIER Model of Listening Instruction.

Trainers may determine in advance which of the six components of the listening process they want to emphasize and select activities and instructional strategies that target the particular skills associated with each.

For example, a director of human resources management may be charged with facilitating employee empowerment in his or her organization. A comprehensive plan is being put into place in an effort to encourage managers to develop greater concern for ideas generated by members of their workgroup. Recognizing that many managers have been heavily task-oriented and less responsive to employees' feelings and viewpoints, the HRM director decides to begin with training that focuses on the component of interpreting messages. The first set of instructional goals might include the following objectives:

1. Participants will understand how individual differences affect perceptions.

this case, the trainer might discuss issues related to diversity, present the types and principles of nonverbal communication, and discuss the ways in which identification of employees' feelings contributes to more effective communication. He or she would then select appropriate methods and materials to facilitate these themes (see the appendix).

Once a behavioral framework has been defined and its instructional implications explored, a trainer's attention might be directed to such issues as how listening competence is to be assessed and the effect of improved listening on individual and organizational performance.

ISSUES IN LISTENING ASSESSMENT

Rigorous assessment measures are required if we are to prove that behavioral approaches really work and that class time devoted to the development of listening skills is time well spent. Listening assessment has been exam-

ined and reexamined; listening tests have been criticized and practitioners have become wary of the results reported by many educators who use undergraduate classes to support their claims of listening improvement in workplace settings. Some of this skepticism is the result of how assessment instruments are applied and the purposes to which they have been employed rather than problems with the instruments themselves.

While the first assessment instruments focused primarily on listening comprehension and recall in lecture settings (Brown & Carlsen, 1955), more recent efforts acknowledge the interactive nature of communication and assess respondents' ability to interpret vocal cues and dialogue (Bostrom, 1983; Watson & Barker, 1984). Audio tapes, in addition to the more traditional paper-and-pencil components, have subsequently become a standard part of most assessment packages.

When listening assessment is considered, however, a number of concerns still arise. Four of these issues are addressed below. The first is whether or not the measurement instruments selected correspond to the skills that are being taught. A second issue, common to other types of communication training as well, relates to the matter of skill transfer from the classroom to the workplace or to out-of-class contexts. Listening instructors and trainers also need to ask themselves whether a focus on behaviors neglects other essential aspects of the listening process and whether our assumptions about the benefits of skills training are indeed legitimate. Such questions are likely to surface ethical issues that have implications for how we prepare students to communicate in the workplace. Finally, the long-term impact of improved performance has yet to be adequately assessed.

Issues Related to the Selection of Assessment Instruments

If assessment instruments do not measure what has been taught, it is likely the result of trainers' assumptions that listening is listening, that is, that the term has one commonly accepted definition. As we have seen, instructional goals must be precisely defined. This is particularly critical since well over 50 definitions of listening are currently in use (Glenn, 1989). Assessment instruments, therefore, must be chosen with careful consideration as to how instructional goals match the dimensions being evaluated. In the case of listening training in business communication contexts, skeptics question whether the best of paper-and-pencil measures—from self-reports to short-answer tests—can accurately reflect an individual's on-the-job behavior or changes in performance.

When instructional goals are largely behavioral, it may be appropriate to explore the many uses of video, particularly interactive video, for pre- and posttesting as well as self-assessment. Trainers and researchers alike

have relied heavily on written measures to assess largely behavioral outcomes. Now, more advanced technology has been developed and is increasingly available; listening specialists need only apply these tools to their particular requirements.

Issues Related to the Transfer of Skills from Classroom to Workplace

As with any skills training, another question becomes, Can trainers assume that because students demonstrate appropriate behaviors in the classroom, they will practice their newly acquired skills once they are on the job? There is general agreement that the listening process is significantly influenced by such variables as motivation, intelligence, and experiences. Motivation has been recognized as a major factor in determining the level and persistence of newly acquired behaviors as well as performance on standardized tests. Exactly what role does motivation play in the acquisition of listening behaviors? in the transfer of skills to the workplace? in performance on listening assessment instruments? Researchers have reason to suspect that the correlation between performance in the classroom and in the workplace may not always be strong, and that the problem with many individuals whose performance on the job is poor may be more a lack of motivation than of skill.

Once desirable behaviors have been acquired, other issues related to skill transfer arise. Will participants use these behaviors at the right time and in the right place, that is, will they take situational and individual factors into account? We recognize that skill-building and social sensitivity—street smarts, if you will—may not always go hand-in-hand. The practice of effective listening may depend as much on high self-monitoring (Snyder, 1974) as on the acquisition of specific skills. Possessing the appropriate tools does not necessarily ensure their proper (or ethical) use.

Issues Related to Perceptions of Listening Effectiveness

Behavioral approaches to listening, as we have seen, focus on those behaviors that are perceived as indicators of listening effectiveness. As these perceptions are more fully explored, yet another question arises: Do individuals who are perceived as effective listeners actually listen better than their counterparts? Little or no research to date has established a correlation between those who are perceived as highly effective listeners and the scores these individuals achieve on standardized listening tests (or other measures of listening effectiveness).

We need, then, to determine not only whether *perceptions* of an individual's listening can be improved through instruction (by teaching the individual to modify his or her behaviors) but also whether that instruction also improves listening ability as measured by other means. Those working in organizational contexts

have far too little evidence to substantiate their claim that by learning and practicing behaviors that have been identified as the indicators upon which individuals make judgments of listening effectiveness (eye contact, body posture, notetaking, and the like), something further has also happened.

In fact, training organizational members—managers, in particular—to display behaviors associated with effective listening without equal concern for accompanying but less measurable cognitive responses raises ethical concerns. To deliberately give the impression of listening when, in fact, the individual is not mentally engaged in the encounter can be described as misleading at best. Service organizations, in particular, are constantly confronted with this and similar dilemmas. As employees are more and more frequently asked to provide emotional labor (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993), educators are challenged to respond to questions that touch the very essence of what it means to communicate effectively in service environments.

Issues Related to Assessing Long-Term Benefits of Listening Training

Finally, little concrete evidence has been gathered regarding the long-term effect of listening training on individual and organizational performance. The correlation between improved listening and specific performance outcomes (increased morale, greater productivity, lower turnover and absenteeism, and the like) has not been directly substantiated. If participants score significantly better on a standardized listening test after listening instruction or if their employees give them higher ratings on their listening behaviors, what does this mean to them and to their organizations? Intuitively, we are confident that listening training does—that it *must*—have a direct and positive impact on performance. Objectively, there is scant evidence documenting the bottom line—the ways in which employees and organizations change as a result of improved listening ability.

CONCLUSION

Our assumptions and paradigms, then, have developed on several fronts. First, most communication specialists have come to believe that listening can be taught and learned. In organizational settings, some of the most useful definitions of listening are based largely on observable behaviors rather than on covert, mental processes. Relatively little, however, is known about how listening behaviors are best taught in academic or corporate classroom settings, or how trainers can insure that, once learned, these behaviors will be appropriately applied in the workplace. Further, skill assessment is still problematic. Given the important role of motivation, testing listening behaviors in a classroom setting may not even duplicate on-the-job situations closely

enough to provide valid and reliable information about an individual's likely performance in the workplace.

Research in listening has just begun to explore the many aspects of this complex and central communication process. Those seeking vital research topics would do well to investigate such areas as the relationship between those perceived as good listeners and their personality, management style, and other interpersonal dimensions. As we enter an age of increasing technology, the impact of computers on human communication—listening included—is likely to be examined. Similarly, multicultural workforces may require that we rethink our current listening models and consider new dimensions in our definitions of effective performance.

From an organizational standpoint, the benefits of listening to the individual and to the organization must be demonstrated in quantifiable, tangible terms. Currently, few longitudinal studies have been conducted to examine the impact of comprehensive listening instruction on individual or organizational performance. Clearly, skeptics will soon challenge the notion that effective listening has a positive impact on organizational performance, just as they have questioned the notions of empathy and trust as desirable characteristics or accuracy as a desirable outcome in organizational environments (Eisenberg, 1984; Eisenberg & Goodall, 1993). Business communication educators must be ready to provide a clear and convincing response.

If we ask leaders in our public schools, our universities, and our work organizations to support efforts to develop listening ability, we need on all fronts to gather the kind of indisputable support that will convince these administrators and organizational leaders of the necessity of listening instruction. Behavioral approaches, by focusing on observable change, may prove to be one of the most useful methods in this process.

In its broadest sense, listening is one of the primary tools with which we forge our global village, one of the only links that bind us to our near and distant neighbors, and one of the survival skills that humankind throughout history has shared. Clearly, efforts to better understand the listening process and the ways in which individual's listening can be improved must be among business communication educators' top priorities.

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An appendix follows on pages 25-26.



Hey, it's winter already!

Can ABC spring meetings be far behind?

Check the calendar of events at the end of this issue
and pick a place to brighten your life.

(The locations alone will cheer you up.)