



Rating your listening focus

1. In recent meetings you've attended, did you notice what percentage of the air time was taken up by the native speakers of English?
2. Do you try to focus on the quality of your listening, as much as the eloquence of your speaking?
3. Do you stay with the current speaker's idea until you have fully understood it? Or do you change the topic and put forward your own idea?
4. Do you regularly ask for more detail about other people's perspectives?
5. Do you check the accuracy of your listening?
6. Do you know how to spot inferences?
7. Do you understand how to expose underlying meaning?
8. Do you draw in others, so that you can listen to them as well?

Using the above questions to help you, on a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your ability to listen?

Would others agree with your self-rating?

What is one thing you could do in order to improve your listening ability?

HOW TO SUCCEED ACROSS CULTURES: LISTEN WELL!

In a conversation, speakers and listeners keep changing roles

Talking to another person is like climbing a tree that climbs back. In this dramatic and somewhat disconcerting analogy, the linguist Frederick Erickson captured an important point: conversation is always complex and always a joint production, as you alternate between speaking and listening. For this reason, you need to prioritise learning to listen well if you want to succeed across cultures. What you say influences how the other person responds, and so on. But this is endlessly complicated when you're operating across a cultural divide because there are multiple points where clear transmission and accurate reception of even a simple message can falter. This problem is intensified when people don't listen to each other with care.

Your cultural background will cause you to encode your message in the particular ways favoured by your upbringing. At the same time, the other person's cultural background will affect how they decode what you say. Misunderstanding can creep in at every stage. The other person may not interpret what you said in the way you intended, obscuring your real meaning. The fact that miscommunication has occurred can even pass unnoticed by either of you, with serious consequences. In some contexts, such as aviation or mining, misunderstandings can even result in injury and death. In more low-key business situations, where lives are not directly at risk, trust, rapport and results can all be jeopardised, when listening skills are weak. A business-critical (but frequently overlooked) question is this: in a conversation, do you tend to prioritise speaking or listening?

The Western speaking-centred focus

In societies where English is the dominant language, from an early age children are encouraged to 'speak up' and express themselves, even in front of adults. At school, children as young as five or six can be invited to stand in front of their classmates and share orally something interesting or unique about themselves and their lives, in sessions called 'Show and Tell.' Later, the ability to participate fully in class discussions, to present and to debate is valued. Being eloquent – or at least articulate – is rewarded and seen as a sign of intelligence. At university and in the workplace, you are encouraged to air views, argue points, debate ideas and solve problems verbally. In fact, speaking well is often valued more than listening well.

For example, in UGM filmed research on meetings, we sometimes step in and call a halt to proceedings. We confront meeting participants in the following terms, "Jim has been speaking for a couple of minutes. Can you please summarise what he's been saying?" Every time we do this, many of those

around the table either can't do it at all, or can only do it in the roughest of ways. Sometimes people admit they were busy planning what they wanted to say when they jumped in next. Sometimes they acknowledge their minds had just drifted off on to something else altogether. Jim may have been talking but few people were actually listening! In this way, poor listening leads to weak collaboration and low quality problem solving.

Internationally, especially in Asia, poor listening contributes to serious commercial risks as a result of information loss and misunderstanding. The Western habit of focusing on speaking at the expense of listening also causes another kind of problem, especially in negotiations. In UGM data, we see that Chinese, for instance, can actively encourage foreigners to talk even more than usual by remaining silent themselves. When Westerners are faced with counterparts who say little, they often fall into the dangerous trap of 'over-talking': saying much more than they had planned or was commercially wise!

The Asian listening-centred focus

Across Asia, it's often seen as more appropriate for children to listen than talk. After all, parents have more experience and more authority. In China, for instance, school students are expected to spend most of their time listening to their teachers. Being assertive, articulate and eloquent can signal disrespect, selfishness and lack of humility. A good employee is one who 'listens to talk' (*ting hua*). Learning to listen with full attention is rewarded in societies characterised by deference to subtle hierarchies of status and authority. Argumentation and debate are not desirable features. Listening helps people to avoid confrontation and conflict.

Listening well is a vital skill for success in Asia

The prevailing communication style across Asia is indirect. Often some of the message is inferred or implied, with the main point being postponed. There is an old Chinese analogy for this, "When you paint a dragon, you draw the eyes last." Not everything is spelt out, especially if the point is contentious. Indeed, not being explicit gives you room to retreat later if need be. "Misfortunate can come from the mouth," is a well-known proverb. This preference for leaving things implicit requires counterparts to adopt an active role in decoding and deciphering the real point. Thus indirectness inevitably places greater importance on the role of the listener. When your counterparts imply, hint, infer and suggest, you need highly attuned listening skills, if you are to keep up!

The 'Analects' make it clear that, for Confucius, for instance, an agile tongue showed a shallow mind and, as reflection deepens, so listening should dominate. The essential inadequacy of the spoken word is best managed by attentive listening.