

TUTORIAL
4.18

Becoming a Communicator 1

This tutorial discusses some key skills needed for culture and language acquisition - listening and observation.

Introduction

Two of the most important skills needed for language and culture acquisition are listening and observation. The most successful learners spend a lot of time early on just *listening* and *observing* - listening to the sounds, tones, and stresses of the language and also when and how people are speaking, and carefully observing what is going on around them. Both of these skills may seem like passive activities, but in fact they require thought and discipline and even take some practice to become good at. Most people are not naturally great listeners or observers, so we will be looking at some ways to practice these skills even while you are still in your own cultural setting.

Active Listening

"Hearing is passive, listening is active. Understanding the difference between hearing and listening is an important prerequisite for listening effectively."

Dr. John Kline

In the Yanomamo tribal language, *jiliyao* means to hear, and *jiliblao*, to listen actively. This recognises the fact that hearing and listening are actually two different activities.

In the last tutorial we talked about the *communication landscape* - and identified the components of interpersonal communication - we saw that there are many more contributing factors to clear communication than only the words that are being spoken. So it follows that when we listen in order to learn how to communicate, we probably shouldn't just listen to the words; *"To study language by listening only to utterances, is to miss as much as 75 percent of the meaning"* David McNeil.

It has been said that communication is:

- 7% verbal - words

- 38% vocal - volume, pitch, rhythm, tone, stress
- 55% body movements - mostly facial expressions

Barriers to good listening

The fact is that we typically retain, for a few minutes, only 65% of what is said to us - and two months later, our recall is down to 25% of what we were told. Why is this? Below are some of the common barriers to good listening. Most of us will recognise at least some of these 'bad habits' - either because we have had them done to us or we may even do them ourselves...

- Constantly *comparing* yourself to the speaker (Who is smarter? Who's had it rougher? This is too hard for me.)
- Trying to *mind read* what the speaker really thinks (He probably thinks I'm stupid for saying that.)
- *Planning* what argument or story to give next.
- *Filtering* so that you hear only certain topics or don't hear critical remarks.
- *Judging* a statement to be "crazy," "boring," "hostile," etc. before it is completed.
- *Daydreaming*.
- *Remembering* your own personal experiences instead of listening to the speaker.
- Busily drafting your prescription or *advice* long before the speaker has finished.
- Considering every conversation an intellectual *debate* with the goal of putting down the opponent.
- Believing you are *always right* so don't need to listen.
- Quickly *changing the topic* or laughing it off if the topic gets serious.
- *Placating* the other person ("You're right...Of course...I agree...Really!") by automatically agreeing with everything.

Qualities of a good listener

So, what are the qualities of a *good* listener? Typically we all practise good listening some of the time, especially if we are interested in a topic or genuinely want to get to know someone better. These are attitudes and skills we need to become aware of, to begin to practise and to seek to do more automatically - because to become a good communicator, one of the first steps is to practise active listening as a skill, attitude and eventually a habit of life.

Characteristics of a good listener:

- Pays attention.
- Is attentive and active, not focused on formulating responses.
- Listens with objectivity, to discover what the speaker thinks (doesn't transfer preconceived personal beliefs to the speaker).
- Does not judge the speaker before hearing him out.
- Verifies understanding, and only responds after understanding.

- Restates key points to affirm understanding and build further dialogue.
- Summarizes key points to affirm understanding and build further dialogue.
- Asks (non-threatening) questions to build understanding.

Observation

“To acquire knowledge, one must study; but to acquire wisdom, one must observe.”

- Marilyn vos Savant

Observation is something we do all the time as a natural course of life, but if someone intends to learn how to relate naturally in another culture, observation needs to be a skill that is honed and developed. Often there are insights into culture that we can miss if we don't actively observe patterns of behaviour and try to fit those into a framework to understand why people are doing the things we see them doing.

Observation is one of the primary methods of gathering information for someone in the early stages of cross-cultural learning. It is particularly valuable because it helps someone to view actual behaviour - rather than socially pressured or conditioned statements. For example, think about what you might answer if someone asked you, “What time do you get up in the morning?” You would probably give a single time that is an ideal (when you would like to get up, or think you should get up) or an average of the time you usually get up. Now, think about the picture someone would get if they were able to *observe* your morning routine for two weeks - would the answer that you gave initially be true all of the time or most of the time? Do you get up the same time on weekends as weekdays? Observing behaviour rather than just asking a question is the difference between the *ideal* and the *real* - what people say and what they actually do can sometimes be different, and you can get a better picture if you are a careful observer.

People who are astute observers often end up being more “natural” participants in the culture, because they have learned how local people behave, have seen the gestures they use, noted the facial expressions and tone of voice that is used in different circumstances. Naturalness is important to clear communication, because it allows people to listen without being distracted by the confusing messages given by ‘unusual’ behaviour.

Of course, later on when a person can speak and understand the language more fluently they will be able to investigate more deeply the motivation for certain behaviour and gain more of an insight into a person's thinking, by talking to them - but observation will always be an important part of understanding what is going on.

Good observation is simply noticing the *details*:

- The physical location:
 - What is the setting? (where the situation is taking place, what kind of a room or building or setting, what people are wearing, what props or objects are involved - anything of note)
 - What kind of a situation is it? (formal or informal, people's purpose for being there, etc.)
- The human interactions:
 - How many people are involved?
 - Who are they? (gender, ages, social group, etc.)
 - How are they related? (strangers, workmates, relatives, business relationship)
- Communication:
 - What kind of communication is taking place? (verbal, non-verbal, formal or informal, etc.)
 - Who is communicating to whom and how?
- Timelines:
 - What is the sequence of events?
 - Was something going on before you arrived?
- Questions:
 - Write down any questions you have that come to mind for future reference (anything you would like to investigate or understand more about, people in the situation you might talk to later, things you can find out later)

Practise is necessary to become a good observer, but there is a lot of opportunity to practise! It is a good thing to seek to develop a healthy curiosity about what is going on around you and to notice the details in a situation and in people's behaviour. You will have plenty of opportunity for observing and learning from people as you develop relationships with them.

Observation or Interpretation?

Observations should be mere statements of fact; they record what the observer sees, but they do not contain any explanation of or assign any meaning to what is observed. As such, they do not - or at least should not - involve any interpretation.

Interpretations assign meaning to ("interpret") the facts; they involve conclusions, judgments. These interpretations inevitably come from the observer's experience of what the observed phenomena means in his or her culture. But if the person doing the behaviour is from another culture, then that behaviour may very well have a different meaning - with the result that the

meaning assigned by the observer may be very different from the meaning intended (assigned by) the doer.

It is natural when observing a situation to interpret what you are seeing - and to come to a hasty conclusion about the motivation of the people involved. Because in our own culture we are able to base these conclusions on things we know about the typical ways people behave and what that behaviour probably means. However, we need to be careful in another culture to actively practise *not* coming to quick conclusions and to keep an open mind about what is really going on.

We do have to interpret or make sense of the things we see and hear and we do have to decide what they mean - that is a normal function of daily life. So you should interpret what's going on around you, but you should know that when you interpret across cultures, you may sometimes be wrong. You can't be so sure of your interpretations - at least not until you understand the host culture better.

We will look at some examples of observation, as opposed to interpretation. Below you will find some pairs of statements. In each case, one of the statements is an observation, (a mere description of the facts or behaviour you are witnessing), and the other is an interpretation, (your explanation or opinion of what those facts or that behaviour means).

Observation	Interpretation
That man is talking quite loud.	That man is very angry.
That family dresses very well when going to town.	That family is wealthy.
That woman always wears a veil when she goes out in public.	That woman is quite conservative.
That woman never makes eye contact when she speaks to me.	That woman is cold and reserved.
That man never contradicts his boss in public.	That man is afraid of his boss.
She never speaks up in meetings.	She doesn't have strong opinions.
That worker never does anything until he is told.	That worker is lazy.
She said yes when the real answer to my question was no.	She lied to me.
They never show affection in public.	Their marriage isn't going well.
He yelled into his phone and used short, pointed sentences.	He's very aggressive/angry.



Below are some statements about the scene in the photo above. Sort the statements into two lists - observations and interpretations. (Answers are at the end of this tutorial.)

- The women are standing in a group looking at something.
- One of the women's children is sitting nearby.
- The man is annoyed and wants me to go away.
- The walls are made of mud-brick.
- The man is interested in me taking a photo.
- The man is drinking a coke.
- The people are standing outside their home compound.
- The women are waiting for something to happen.
- The little boy on his own is bored.
- All women must cover their heads and wear long trousers.
- The house roof and wall is damaged.
- There are ladders going up to the roofs of the buildings.
- The women are wearing brightly coloured clothing.



DISCUSSION POINTS

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1. Below are some statements and quotes about listening - not just listening to learn, but listening as an important part of *relating* to other people - do you agree with these statements and why?
 - Listening is the communication skill most crucial to success.
 - Listening to gain information may be less important than listening to improve relationships.
 - Listening is the skill that can make or break a relationship.
 - We humans are relational individuals and it is sometimes as important to understand the person as what the person is saying.
 - “Listening is as powerful a means of communication and influence as to talk well.” John Marshall
 - “I like to listen. I have learned a great deal from listening carefully. Most people never listen.” Ernest Hemingway
 - “If we were supposed to talk more than we listen, we would have been given two mouths and one ear.” Mark Twain
 - “What a shame, what folly, to give advice before listening to the facts!” King Solomon (Proverbs 18:13 NLT)



ACTIVITIES

Becoming a Communicator 1

1. Practice active listening in your conversations this week. Make any observations about the way you normally listen and how easy or difficult it is to change those habits (if they needed changing). Also what did you notice about the way people listened to you?
2. Go and observe some kind of community activity or event that you have rarely or never taken part in before. This could be a sporting event, an entertainment event, an activity that others are doing, or a visit to a public place (it should be somewhere people are involved and where you

can observe them closely). Take notes using the framework in the tutorial of the things you observed during the activity - the physical location, the human interaction, the communication, timelines and questions. Try to avoid taking an active part in things and affecting the behaviour of people by your presence - your goal is to simply observe what is going on. Also note how you felt about the experience and how easy or difficult it was.

Tutorial exercise answers:

Observations -

- The women are standing in a group looking at something.
- The walls are made of mud brick.
- The man is drinking a coke.
- The house roof and wall is damaged.
- There are ladders going up to the roofs of the buildings.
- The women are wearing brightly coloured clothing.

Interpretations -

- One of the women's children is sitting nearby.
- The man is annoyed and wants me to go away.
- The man is interested in me taking a photo.
- The people are standing outside their home compound.
- The women are waiting for something to happen.
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