

BARRIERS TO LISTENING: COMPARISON BETWEEN
BUSINESS STUDENTS AND BUSINESS PRACTITIONERS

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Barriers to listening as perceived by college students and business practitioners were compared. A pilot study identified 14 barriers and then students and practitioners were asked to indicate their perceptions of the seriousness of the barriers. A rank order correlation indicated that the two groups were not significantly related. Also the mean rankings were significantly different between the two groups on 11 of the 14 barriers. The conclusion is made that different perceived barriers to listening exist for students and practitioners; consequently, different instructional units on listening should be designed for the two groups. Specific differences in the rankings of the two groups are discussed with implications for instructional strategies.

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Educators and business practitioners are concerned about the problems created by deficient communication skills in high school and college graduates. For this reason, speaking and listening are now included as basic skills requirements in the Public Education Title II program (Lieb-Brilhart, 1979). In addition, the Education Testing Service has added a listening proficiency test to the National Teacher Examination. In most states, passing the test is required for teacher certification.

Increasing numbers of courses are emphasizing pragmatic approaches to listening instruction. The importance of effective listening, particularly in business situations, is well documented. In a recent report which examined 25 studies, effective listening was mentioned most often as the most important communication skill necessary for entry level positions (DiSalvo, 1980).

Listening research has identified a hierarchy of basic auditory skills needed for discriminative as well as other types of listening (Weaver & Rutherford, 1974), yet further research is needed to determine factors which "short-circuit" or block listening effectiveness (Hirsch & Arnold, 1982). There is a considerable amount to learn about the listening process that we do not know, and much of what is "known" has not been verified by empirical research. Many listening barriers are difficult to isolate and/or diagnose because speakers and listeners are unaware that something has gone wrong until a breakdown in communication occurs. Since many listening barriers go relatively unnoticed, it is important for theorists and practitioners to identify specific listening hazards in advance.

Listening textbooks identify barriers which hinder listening and discuss techniques by which to improve listening skills (Barker, 1971; Nichols &

Stevens, 1957; Steil, Barker, & Watson, 1983; Wolvins & Coakley, 1982).

Unfortunately, without empirical research to verify most of these techniques, the "real" effects remain relatively unknown. In addition, external generalizability is reduced since previous research fails to use different subject populations and communication situations.

Listening researchers have executed experimental and descriptive research in an attempt to isolate variables in listeners, speakers, messages and environments which affect listening comprehension and ability (Barker, 1971). Internal and external barriers hinder listening effectiveness. Internal barriers are variables within the listener which affect listening effectiveness. Specific factors include age (Brown, 1959), motivation (Goodyear, 1969; Smeltzer & Watson, 1982), listener fatigue (Wiksell, 1946), personality characteristics (Haberland, 1959), mental ability (Nichols, 1948), general anxiety (Beatty, 1981), and ego involvement (Barker, 1971).

External barriers which inhibit listening include characteristics in the speaker, message, and environment (Barker, 1971). Nichols and Stevens (1957) identified ten barriers to effective listening. Among these different barriers, researchers have examined delivery techniques (Barker, Watson, & Kibler, 1982), emotional responses (Miller & Baron, 1973), distractions (Bauchner, Kaplan, & Miller, 1980; Brandt, 1979; Osterhouse & Brock, 1970; Maier & Thurber, 1968), thought-speech speed differentials (MacLachlen, 1979), and rebuttal tendencies (Brandt, 1979).

Of particular importance is research which suggests that distractions during oral messages tend to enhance the persuasive impact of the message in certain situations (Baron & Miller, 1973). Since students as well as business professionals must learn to critically evaluate information they receive, it is

essential for educators to identify barriers that may hinder rational decision-making. Unfortunately, without empirical research to validate barriers that are isolated, little credence can be given to textbook suggestions by either business people or students.

With this in mind, research in this area needs to isolate specific barriers and determine whether or not these barriers have consistent affects across different subject populations. If there are differences, listening training should be designed to compensate for differences salient to a particular group.

This study was designed to isolate specific barriers which business students and practitioners perceive as barriers to listener reception during communication. The study was designed to answer the following questions:

1. Are there statistically significant differences between mean rankings of listening barriers identified by business students and business practitioners?
2. Is there a significant relationship between the rankings of listening barriers identified by business students and business practitioners?
3. What are the rank orders for listening barriers identified by business students, business practitioners, and both groups when combined?

PROCEDURE

Sample

The sample consisted of 114 college students and 106 business practitioners for a total of 220 subject. The 114 students were all business majors with no work experience beyond part-time or summer employment. The business practitioners were not students and had at least three years of full-time business experience.

Instrument Development

College students in communication classes and business participants in "Effective Listening" workshops were asked to list what they considered barriers to listening. Students and business practitioners identified 27 barriers to effective listening and then were asked to rank order the barriers. Based on a factor analysis of the rankings, 16 items were selected to be used in the instrument.

Two pilot studies were conducted. The first pilot study revealed that two of the items were ambiguous so these items were omitted in the final instrument. At the same time six communication professors evaluated the list of 14 barriers to verify the items as potential barriers and to insure that the items were clearly stated.

A second pilot study was conducted to test the reliability of the instrument using a test-retest format. The rank order correlation, using the Spearman rank order correlation coefficient, was significant at the .05 level of confidence. Communication professors then established construct validity for the instrument by confirming that the instrument was measuring the construct "Listening Barrier." It was not possible to establish criterion-related validity using a commonly accepted statistical procedure. The final instrument is presented in Table 1.

Method

The subjects were asked to complete the instrument as an exercise in their communication courses and "Effective Listening" workshops. Subjects were asked to read the instructions and then to complete the instrument.

RESULTS

Question 1: Are there statistically significant differences between the mean rankings of listening barriers identified by business students and business practitioners? T-tests indicated that there are significant differences between the groups for 11 of the 14 items. The results are presented in Table 2.

Question 2: Is there a significant relationship between the rankings of listening barriers identified by business students and business practitioners? This question was answered using a Spearman rank order correlation coefficient. The correlation was not significant ($r=.112$).

Question 3: What is the rank order of the listening barriers identified by business students, business practitioners, and both groups combined? Business students' top three items were personal internal distractions, disinterest, and inattentiveness. Business practitioners identified environmental distractions, emotional responses, and inattentiveness as their three most serious listening barriers. The top three listening barriers for the combined groups were personal internal distractions, disinterest, and inattentiveness. The results are presented in Table 2.

DISCUSSION

This study was designed to isolate specific barriers business students and business practitioners perceive as barriers to listening. The results provide valuable information for the design of instructional units on listening. The business students and business practitioners perceived 11 of the 14 listening barriers as significantly different from each other. With these results in mind, when designing listening courses or modules, instructors should

consider the needs of different subject populations as well as different listening situations.

In comparing the groups, the study identified several interesting differences. The student group rated personal disinterest, personal internal distractions, and mannerisms of the speaker much higher as listening barriers than the practitioners rated them. It appears that students may let personal involvement and preferences determine the ways that they listen, while practitioners may have learned to avoid these pitfalls.

The practitioners rated the rebuttal tendency, jumping to conclusions, and rehearsing a response much higher as serious listening barriers than the students. Based on the results, it appears that students and practitioners perceive the demands of the working environment differently. It is possible that many of the distinctions revolve around the concept of time. Perhaps practitioners have disciplined themselves to overcome many of their personal listening barriers because they can not afford to have them influence and hinder communication. For example, as a function of their expertise, practitioners may force interest in topics they listen to if not initially interested. Practitioners identified, jumping to conclusions, thinking that you know what person is going to say, the rebuttal tendency, and rehearsing a response as serious barriers; it also seems likely that practitioners may have little patience when listening to others with different points of view or others who have discussed similar topics previously.

With these differences in mind, two surprises were found in the results. "Effective listening often takes too much time." was rated low by both groups. However, based on previous research (MacLachlen, 1979), business practitioners would be expected to rate this high as a serious listening barrier. These

findings suggest that the thought/speech speed differential may not be a problem or that research may need to be continued in this area. Perhaps practitioners are not aware of the time that it takes to listen well or do not realize how much they rely on memos, typed reports, and written follow-up materials. Another finding that was surprising involved the perceived importance of nonverbal behavior as a barrier. "Difficulty interpreting nonverbal behaviors," was rated low by students as well as practitioners. Do these results suggest that both groups feel confident in their abilities to interpret nonverbal behaviors or do the results suggest that the groups do not understand the relationship between listening and nonverbal communication? These questions need further exploration.

Based on the results, it may be unrealistic to expect students to understand the working environment until they have had an opportunity to experience and participate in the "work-world" for themselves. However, educators must learn to isolate barriers in specific environments and train individuals to meet the demands of a variety of listening situations. Based on the results, future empirical research should investigate differences between men and women, sexes and races. For example, would over-reacting to emotional language be more of a problem for minority groups? Perhaps women and blacks are subjected to more subtle abbrasive or abusive language than other groups. In addition, future research needs to determine additional barriers that differentiate between groups other than business students and business practitioners.

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TABLE 1

RANK-ORDER THE SEVEN ITEMS WHICH YOU CONSIDER TO BE THE MOST SERIOUS BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE LISTENING WHILE AT WORK (ONE BEING THE MOST SERIOUS DOWN TO SEVEN BEING THE LEAST SERIOUS).

- ___ 1. Difficulty interpreting nonverbal behaviors.
- ___ 2. Personal internal distractions such as hunger, headaches, or emotionally preoccupied with something else.
- ___ 3. Effective listening often takes too much time.
- ___ 4. Environmental distractions such as typewriters, phones ringing, or other people talking
- ___ 5. Detouring (what a person says makes you think of something else which is off the topic).
- ___ 6. The message is ambiguous.
- ___ 7. Personal dis-interest in the topic.
- ___ 8. Jumping to conclusions about what a person is going to say before it is said.
- ___ 9. Positive and/or negative emotional responses toward a speaker, topic, or occasion.
- ___ 10. Distracting mannerisms of the speaker such as stuttering, pacing, or nervous gestures.
- ___ 11. Rebuttal tendency (developing a counter argument before the speaker finishes).
- ___ 12. Inattentiveness such as daydreaming or preoccupation with other duties.
- ___ 13. Rehearsing a response (thinking about what you have to say rather than listening).
- ___ 14. Over-reacting to language such as cursing and slang.

TABLE 2
Summary of Results

Barrier Items	Mean Ranking Business Students	Mean Ranking Business Practitioners	Mean Ranking Both Groups	Cumulative Rank Value Comparisons
1.	.073	.96	.84	0.93
2.	3.89 (2)	1.83	2.90 (2)	6.05*
3.	0.71	1.26	.97	2.11*
4.	3.06	3.08 (1)	3.07	0.06
5.	1.85	1.91	1.88	0.22
6.	1.91	2.87	1.41	3.5*
7.	4.07 (1)	2.17	3.16 (1)	6.15*
8.	1.06	2.69	1.85	5.42*
9.	1.71	2.61	2.15	2.93*
10.	2.0	1.17	1.60	2.75*
11.	1.07	2.86 (3)	1.93	5.93*
12.	3.88 (3)	2.89 (2)	3.40 (3)	2.90*
13.	1.62	2.66	2.12	3.14*
14.	0.36	0.86	.60	2.55*

*p .05

The number in parenthesis indicates the ranking of that item.
The top three items are identified.