

Why Don't We Listen? *

By Edgar Dale

IT does not require rigorous research to prove that there is more talking in this world than listening. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare had Gratiano say: "I am Sir Oracle, and when I ope my lips, let no dog bark!" But uninterrupted speech may fall on deaf ears. A recent issue of a state teachers' magazine pleads with teachers not to leave in droves before the main speaker at the convention has finished. The lecture fails to captivate, the sermon lulls, the discussion lags. Why don't we listen?

The answers are simple and complicated. We don't listen because we can't hear. In a radio interview Alfred Lunt was once asked: "What do you think is the most important talent for an actor or actress to develop?" He said, "You know, Lynn and I have talked about this, and we agree that it's the ability to speak so that the person in the last balcony seat can hear,"

In about one meeting in four I find that some members of the audience seem to have trouble in hearing the speaker. Panel discussants often contribute to this, especially in the poor use of microphones. A speaker faced with a microphone may say, "Take it away. I can speak without it." He is usually wrong. Or he gets too close or too far from the microphone, and either blasts the audience or is not heard.

It is a simple matter for the chairman of the meeting to make certain that the acoustics are favorable. Further, a thoughtful speaker in a strange hall might check with his audience to see if they are hearing him. For small-group discussions chairs should be arranged in a circle. Members of a discussion group should not have to twist around to hear each other. They should be comfortably seated and be able to listen comfortably. We must, of course, be mindful of the advice which one student gave another about a lecturer. "You can't hear him beyond the fifth row. Don't sit any closer than the sixth row."

Most discussions about listening ignore the fact that we all like to talk more than we like to listen. I remember a person who said, "It was a wonderful meeting. I talked twice." We have all heard of

compulsive talkers but did you ever hear of a compulsive listener? So unless a person is either a professor or a chaplain in a penitentiary (both are addressing captive audiences), he must take as well as give.

I have no easy solution for this tough problem but I should like to proffer one suggestion. You can keep tabs on yourself. What per cent of the total discussion time did you use? Were you a hog or a host? Did you help your friends entertain ideas? Or did you bore them with what you thought? And every conversational bore thinks he is scintillating. J. B. Priestly says, "It is the most shadowy play of vanity to arouse the interest of people in whom we are not prepared to interest ourselves."

Why don't we listen? We don't listen because we are fed up. Too many people are firing too many different ideas at us. We can't absorb them that fast. A poor speaker covers ten points. A good speaker **uncover**s one. The one idea (perhaps with two or three close relatives) provides the meat and potatoes, and the able speaker seasons this solid food with anecdotes. On this point Priestley says:

Anecdotes are the condiments in talk—the most general forms of talk are apt to be either flat or rather grim without some seasoning of anecdotes. The stories themselves should be welcomed for their own sake, should be good enough to stand by themselves, if necessary. But at the same time they should be illustrative, apt and pointed, coming in easily to carry the talk forward.

Anecdotes also provide thinking space, give us time to reflect a little on what has been said.

People may listen actively or marginally. The marginal listener mishears and misquotes. No matter whether we are listening to a lecture or are participating in a group discussion, we ought to know what was said. When someone says the minister gave a wonderful talk this morning, we have learned not to embarrass him by asking, "What did he say?" How many people really listen to the Biblical text as it is being read in the pulpit? And how many people try to see the connection of the sermon and the text?

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We don't listen because we don't become involved. The speaker isn't answering the questions we have at the front or the back of our minds, so our listening is marginal, not active—a background to a pleasant reverie. We remain "spectators," eavesdroppers, not involved participants. Maybe this is all the speech deserves, but perhaps we may put too much of a burden on speakers. We can expect them to set off a spark, but shouldn't we bring the kindling? The responsible listener is responsive. He meets the speaker half-way and doesn't defy him to arouse his interest.

A good listener has mastered some of the skills of a good reporter. A reporter approaches an expert with questions in mind—not the kind of superficial, amateurish, hackneyed questions you sometimes hear on television interviews, but questions which have grown out of reading and study. If we have no questions, we will fall asleep or daydream. We can test our reportorial skill by noting whether the television or radio interviewers we are watching or listening to, asked the questions we would have asked. And if they are able reporters, they will also ask questions that we were not wise enough to ask this time but may learn to "ask" next time. Further, if the speaker is good, he will not only answer our questions but he will raise new questions in our mind.

Why don't we listen? We don't listen because speakers do not suggest what we might do about the problem they have discussed. True, their major responsibility is to define the problem. But out of their wisdom they should also help the audience define some possible responses, some hunches about possible action. Omar Khayyam had the same problem:

Myself when young did eagerly frequent
Doctor and Saint, and heard great argument
About it and about; but evermore
Came out by the same Door where in I went.

They don't listen because the speaker's words are too abstract, cold, unevocative and ill-chosen. Speakers should use short, lively words, eschew sesquipedalian verbosity.

Can the schools do something about listening? Assuredly they can and must. Many excellent suggestions for teaching listening are found in the three forward-looking volumes prepared by the National Council of Teachers of English and published by Appleton-Century, Croft, Inc.: **The English Language Arts**, **The Language Arts in the Elementary School**, and **The English Arts in the Secondary School**. Teachers can see that listening skill involves language, improves reading and writing skills. Radio and recordings offer a wonderful opportunity for sharing the ideas of an able speaker or dramatist and they con-

tribute to a well-stocked mind. Classroom discussions do not need to pool misinformation or be forensic displays of ignorance.

Parents can begin their first teaching of listening by reading to their children. The December 1956 issue of **Harper's Magazine** has an excellent article about a circulating library of children's books made available in a southern factory. The parents read these books to their delighted children and thus got acquainted with the best of children's literature at the same time. The seeds of warm-hearted reading and thoughtful listening can be sown in the home.

Many of the students taking courses in children's literature are reading this fine literature for the first time. They did not read these stories as children nor were the stories read to them. They are the first generation to enjoy these books. I remember one beginning teacher of the third grade who told me of the delight her pupils had in hearing her read Laura Ingalls Wilder's **Little House in the Big Woods** which her third-grade teacher had read in class fifteen years earlier. (Thus excellence spans the generations.) Many children and adults have never heard excellence.

Children and adults can learn that you earn the right to speak by listening. They can learn that listening operates best in a mood of mutuality, that to communicate is to share, to get into the other fellow's shoes. Through the sensitive antennae of non-verbal communication we learn whether our companions understand what we are saying. The compulsive speaker, the boring lecturer may not be able to "read" his audience. A friend who heard William Jennings Bryan speak for two and one-half hours to an enraptured Nebraska audience said that Bryan was keenly sensitive to any restlessness and immediately inserted a pointed anecdote or illustration.

Why have we slighted listening as a mode of communication? In part it may be that the school sometimes put a premium on silent communication (reading and writing) or uses oral communication chiefly as a method of testing through reciting. Why should we listen to dull recitations? Would the conversation of the average classroom be interesting or boring? Refreshing or repetitious?

Perhaps as teachers we have not been sensitive enough to what Paul McKee calls "instructional talking." Are we artistic explainers, or do we ineptly repeat instructions over and over again? Could we economize instructional time and effort and keep listening attention high by using some ready-made explanation in films, filmstrips, or recordings? Could we put some of our explanation on a tape recording and let pupils be responsible for re-listening when

they do not understand the first time? By putting a premium on listening carefully, we can prevent inattentiveness from becoming habitual.

We can listen to and look at films much more carefully than we now do. We can help pupils frame questions to put to the film just as we help them prepare questions for a guest lecturer. If you have no questions, you will get no answers.

Do we encourage inattentiveness by making our listening periods too long? How many college students can absorb fifty minutes of straight lecture without a break for questions or little chance to reflect? Is the lecturer presenting new ideas unavailable in textbooks, creative syntheses of old informa-

tion? Or could the student get this information more effectively by reading it outside of class? Our classrooms must not be places where students practice inattentive listening to repetitious discussion.

You cannot learn without listening and you can learn to listen. Listening is like reading. You learn what the other fellow said and ponder what he meant. A good listener is both tender-hearted and tough-minded. The tender-hearted listener gets the feel of a situation, is sensitive to the needs of others, builds emotional kinship. The tough-minded listener knows how to tell a fact from an opinion, is neither a slave to unrelated facts nor at the mercy of sweeping generalizations. He is becoming an educated man.

Special Education

Aurally Handicapped Children

By Francisco C. Tan

CHILDREN who are aurally handicapped are those whose hearing mechanisms are impaired to some degree. These children are at a great disadvantage in their personal, social, and educational adjustments. The extent of this disadvantage depends upon their age at the onset of the hearing disability, the degree of hearing loss, and the type of assistance they have received in overcoming the handicap. These aurally defective children are fundamentally the same as the normal hearing children except their inability to hear normally. Most of them have normal mental ability and certain ones gifted. Unfortunately, however, children with undiscovered or undetected hearing impairments are frequently ignored by many individuals, their behavior is misjudged by others, and their inanimated expression, seeming indifference, and slowness in comprehension become the source of annoyance and irritation to parents, teachers, and associates. Such reaction on the part of those that surround the aurally handicapped children has very unfavorable effect towards the personalities of these unfortunate individuals. This intensifies the difficulties which they must overcome before they are able to make the necessary social adjustments and to progress educationally at a rate that is commensurate with their ability.

Aural impairment may be present at birth, or may be acquired during any period of the person's life. A child born with a hearing disability so great that he cannot hear the spoken word is unable to acquire speech in the normal way. Until such time as this child can be taught speech through artificial

means he is deprived of the opportunity to develop the ability to communicate orally with others. A child who is born with a hearing impairment that causes him not to hear speech distinctly will acquire speech that is indistinct or inarticulate and language that is unnatural and imperfect. Generally, a child whose hearing becomes impaired after he has acquired speech and other language facility is handicapped less in learning situation in which oral communication is involved than a child of the same age who had a similar impairment at an early age before the acquisition of oral language.

It is hypothetically difficult to draw a sharp demarcation line between children with normal hearing and those with slight hearing impairment, between those with slight hearing impairment and those with considerable hearing impairment, nor between children who have extreme hearing impairment and those who have no hearing. For general purpose, aurally handicapped children may be classified as hard of hearing or as deaf depending upon the degree of hearing impairment and the consequent medical and educational needs of those affected require research and study by the specialists in such work.

The Hard of Hearing

Individuals whose hearing for speech is impaired to some degree but not completely lost are for educational purposes classified as hard of hearing. The extent to which a hard hearing child can understand and use language depends in large measure upon his age at the time the hearing impairment occurred and the degree of hearing loss. The extent to which he