

Pseudo-Listening vs. Real Listening

Brief: Pseudo-listening is ineffective because the listener does not retain much of the information, while real listening involves comprehending and internalizing the material.

Learning Objective: Understand what distinguishes real listening from pseudo-listening.

Key Terms:

- **Pseudo-listening:** A type of non-listening that consists of appearing attentive in conversation, while actually ignoring or only partially listening to the speaker.
- **Tangential responses:** Broad answers or responses that are not relevant to the topic at hand.

What is Pseudo-listening?

Pseudo-listening is a type of non-listening that consists of appearing attentive in conversation, while actually ignoring or only partially listening to the speaker.

A common example of pseudo-listening is trying to multitask by talking on the phone while watching television or completing work. Pseudo-listening is the most ineffective way to communicate because after the conversation is over, the pseudo-listener will not have retained much of the information.

Reasons for Pseudo-listening

While the specific reasons for pseudo-listening are as unique as every communication situation, they often share common motivations. You might recognize some of these from your own experiences:

Forming your response to the speaker instead of focusing on what is being said

Preoccupation, when there is too much on your mind

Preexisting familiarity with the topic of conversation, which results in less effort to actively listen

Only listening for information you want to hear, giving little attention to the rest

Listening only for the flaws in the speaker's argument in order to gain an advantage over the speaker

Desire not to offend someone who is sharing experiences you find boring

Comparison to Active Listening

Individuals who are pseudo-listening often display nonverbal cues to compensate for their non-listening, such as nodding their heads, looking at the speaker, smiling at the appropriate times,

and displaying other aspects of paying attention. When we receive these appropriate nonverbal cues, we can find it difficult to distinguish a person who is active listening from a person who is pseudo-listening.

If someone gives broad answers or responses that are not relevant to the topic at hand, they are likely a pseudo-listener. These types of responses, known as “tangential responses,” often run alongside the topic being discussed, but ultimately have nothing to do with the main topic of the discussion.

Real listening includes comprehending and internalizing material, which is a learned skill. If a person has poor comprehension skills, there’s an increased likelihood of either pseudo-listening or a total lack of listening.

A person who is truly listening will generally display certain body language, such as maintaining eye contact or positioning their body towards the speaker. More importantly, real listening reflects an internal desire to understand a person's perspective, enjoy a person's company, learn new information, or provide assistance or comfort, among other things.

Students, Pseudo-listening, and Public Speaking

Recent studies reveal that students are rarely focused on learning and developing the skill of listening. It’s possible for a student to go through every level of education without ever having a class teaching them how to listen effectively in everyday life. This lack of developed listening skills can have a negative effect on a student’s ability to be an effective public speaker and a responsible audience member.

Compounding this problem in our digital age, students fall victim to pseudo-listening because of all the distractions at their fingertips, such as phones, computers, social media, iPods, etc. In the 21st-century, it takes an extra effort to commit to real listening.

From Concept to Action

Reflect on your pseudo-listening habits. When are you most likely to engage in pseudo-listening? Are you able to get away with it? Do you ever experience negative consequences? How do you feel when others pseudo-listen to you? Are you willing to take the extra effort required to commit to real listening? Why or why not?

OER TEXT SOURCES:

“Pseudolistening.” Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pseudolistening>. Accessed 24 March 2019. [CC BY-SA 3.0]