Focus on Listening

Developing listening skills

Think of listening as an active pursuit, not a passive one. It is equally important in study, in employment, and in your personal life.

Why?

 Employers of graduates are looking for this kind of transferable skill. Cottrell (1999) cites a study showing that listening comes high on a list of skills desirable to employers.

Listening does not necessarily imply understanding, but if you get better at listening you will gain:

Understanding  You can get clues about others’ attitudes and understand their point of view better, even if you do not like them or agree with them.

Information  You motivate others to continue talking and give you as much information as they can.

Co-operation  People appreciate your interest in what they have to say, and are likely to work better with you. People will listen to you in return.

How?

You might be prevented from listening well by your own state of mind, or by outside distractions. To overcome this try to:

• put aside thoughts of what you are going to say next
• avoid interrupting
• resist distractions
• face the speaker, so you both see and hear
• ask for clarification where you don’t understand
• focus on the main points
• make brief notes (key words)
• prioritise: if you’re in a hurry, postpone to a time when you can give your full attention
In group work, informal meetings or conversations:

- use encouraging language (‘I was interested in your point…’)
- ask for clarification (‘Could you give an example of that?’)
- paraphrase (‘You said…’)
- don’t interrupt
- don’t undermine other people

In lectures/seminars:

- if possible find out beforehand what will be included, so that you know exactly what you are hoping to gain
- identify the main points, both before and during the session
- compare what is being said with your own thoughts/viewpoint
- take opportunities to ask questions