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# Self-Imposed Silence and Perceived Listening Effectiveness

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*Thus far, listening training has been limited to lectures on the process of listening and experiential exercises designed to provide for practice in listening and for assisting in a person's ability to recognize his or her own beneficial and detrimental listening behaviors. Using a new process—silence—for developing listening skills, this study compared the effects on perceived listening effectiveness of a self-imposed period of silence versus attending a lecture on listening skills versus a combination of a self-imposed period of silence and attending a lecture. While no significant differences were found for either lecture or silence or the combination of the two on measures of perceived listening effectiveness, qualitative data from journals kept by the participants suggest that the act of self-imposed silence greatly improves awareness of one's listening effectiveness and the value of developing beneficial listening skills.*

Keywords: Self-imposed silence, listening effectiveness, listening skills, listening training

**L**ISTENING EFFECTIVENESS is growing in importance as managers recognize the value of strong communication skills in improving the workplace environment. Instruments for measuring perceived listening effectiveness were developed by Barker, Pearce, and Johnson (1992); Cooper and Husband (1993); and Watson, Barker, and Weaver (1995). Thus far, listening training has been limited to lectures on the process of listening and to experiential exercises designed to provide for listening practice

and to assist in recognizing a person's own beneficial and detrimental listening behaviors.

## Background

The ability to listen effectively is increasingly recognized as a critical skill among managers and leaders (Gilley & Moore, 1986; Johnson & Bechler, 1998; Lahiff & Hatfield, 1978), salespeople (Bohn, 1999), and in work teams (Levine, 1994). According to Haas and Arnold (1995), listening plays a central role in how co-workers assess one another's communication effectiveness more than any other type of communication.

While working for years with business people as well as students to improve their listening skills, we looked continuously for better approaches to listening training. A newspaper article (Soriano, 2001) triggered the idea that perhaps self-imposed periods of silence might enhance people's awareness of their listening behaviors. A literature search yielded an absence of studies involving silence and listening. However, related evidence did show that interruptions by interviewers while listening to job candidates (McComb & Jablin, 1984) and interruptions by physicians while listening to patients (Nyquist, 1996) had negative consequences for how the interviewers and doctors were perceived and how much information they were able to obtain. Given this absence of direct evidence, we decided to conduct a pilot study to determine whether such research was feasible and, if so, to establish a procedure for conducting an empirical study.

A pilot study conducted by Johnson and Pearce and presented at the Association for Business Communication International Conference in 2001 focused on listeners becoming aware of their communication behaviors by voluntarily engaging in periods of self-imposed silence. Participants were undergraduate business students enrolled in three sections of a required organizational communication course at a major mid-Atlantic university. First, the students attempted two hours of silence and reported their results the next week via a written description of their experience. After discussing the results, the students who wanted to attempt 24

hours of silence volunteered to participate. After the 24-hour silence period ended, the students completed an expert-validated questionnaire about the experience. Questions concerned the individual's experience with speaking English, the physical circumstances in which the experiment took place, the difficulty level of remaining silent, the methods favored to communicate while remaining silent, and the principal things they learned about their own listening habits and those of others.

Analysis of the descriptive data showed that the silence period greatly improved the respondents' awareness of both their own listening behaviors and those of others. Awareness levels were heightened through such experiences as being forced to listen regardless of the person or the topic, finding it more difficult to be quiet than expected, and noticing things and people they had never noticed before.

Based on the pilot study, the current study was developed to test experimentally the effects of silence and listening training on listening awareness. The following hypotheses guided the study's development.

Hypothesis 1: Participants experiencing a period of self-imposed silence will score higher on measures of perceived listening effectiveness than those exposed to only a listening lecture.

Hypothesis 2: Participants experiencing both silence and a listening lecture will score higher on measures of perceived listening effectiveness than those exposed to only one form of listening training (silence or lecture).

## Methods

The study used an experimental design to test the effects of exposure to a lecture on listening, experiencing a period of silence, or a combination of both lecture and silence on perceived listening effectiveness. One hundred sixty-seven participants took part in the study. Each person was exposed to one of three treatments. All participants completed a pretest of perceived listening effectiveness before treatment.

Following the pretests, Group 1 received a listening lecture and then completed a posttest. Following the posttest, this group also completed the silence assignment. Group 2 completed a silence assignment followed by a posttest. After the posttest, this group attended a listening lecture. Group 3 completed a silence assignment, attended a lecture on listening, and then completed a posttest. Thus, this study tested the effects of a listening lecture versus silence versus lecture and silence on measures of perceived listening effectiveness.

### **Participants**

Students in seven sections of an organizational communication course at two mid-Atlantic universities took part in the study. This junior-level course is the same at each university and is the required organizational communication core course that must be taken by all business majors. The content covers the principles of both verbal and nonverbal communication at the interpersonal, group, and organizational levels and includes written and oral presentation of standard business documents. Participation in this study was voluntary, as an alternate assignment could be chosen. Results were confidential, and participants gave oral consent to be included in the study results.

Each class section was assigned an experimental treatment, and all participants in that section followed the relevant procedure. The sample of 167 students was 48.6 percent male and 51.4 percent female. All but two students were business majors. The most frequent business disciplines represented were business administration and management (31.9 percent), information systems/computer information management systems (24.6 percent), and marketing (15.2 percent). Accounting majors comprised 8.7 percent of the sample, finance 7.2 percent, and human resource management 6.5 percent. The disciplines of economics, real estate, electrical engineering, and interdisciplinary studies accounted for the other 5.9 percent. Most (84.9 percent) spoke English as their first language; however, several individuals spoke English as a second or even third language. Gujarati (one of India's 18 officially recog-

nized spoken languages) and Vietnamese were spoken by 2.1 percent each. Fourteen different languages made up the remaining first language for 10.9 percent of the participants. The number of years of speaking English for this 10.9 percent of participants ranged from one to 15. Sixty-one percent of the participants were European-American, 19.9 percent were African-American, 4.8 percent were Asian, and 4.1 percent were Asian-American. The other 10.2 percent included six different ethnic groups. Even though most of the participants had no prior listening training, 16.6 percent did have some prior listening training, primarily consisting of a couple of hours in a speech class.

### **Silence Assignment**

Participants were asked to take part in 12 continuous hours of silence. Specific instructions were provided for the silence assignment (Appendix A). The silence period was to take place during the day (so sleeping through the time did not count towards completion of the assignment), and most of the day was to be spent doing whatever that person would normally do. Consequently, participants attended class, spent time with friends and family, or participated in work or group activities during the silence experience.

Participants were asked to keep an hourly journal during the 12-hour silence period that identified their feelings during the experience and also answered several directed open-ended questions about the experience (Appendix B). They were told to restart the 12-hour period if the silence was broken. Each time a participant started over, he or she was to start a new journal as well. These materials were turned in at the completion of the assignment.

Participants engaged in a variety of activities during the silence period. Taken from the participants' journal entries, these activities included attending class, working in the computer lab, working at employment sites, going to lunch with friends, working out at a gym, shopping, and attending church. The participants also interacted with many people during the period of silence. The people involved most often with the participants included family,

roommates and friends, co-workers, classmates and professors, and the general public. Since participants could not speak during the assignment period, they used other methods of communication. These included writing notes or flashing pre-written notes, sending e-mails and instant messages, and making gestures.

Additionally, at the end of the silence period, all participants filled in a questionnaire that included demographic information and open-ended questions about the silence period and what the participants learned about themselves, others, and listening (Appendix C).

### **Listening Lecture**

Each person attended a listening lecture, approximately two hours, at some point in the study—either as part of the treatment process or after the treatment. The listening lecture included common topics on listening such as types of listening behaviors, barriers to listening, emotional and mental filters that affect listening, and effective listening techniques. Topics were identified before the lecture, and each instructor involved covered the same material.

### **Measures**

Perceived listening effectiveness for both the pretest and posttest was measured with the *Listening Styles Inventory* (Barker, Pearce, & Johnson, 1992). The instrument contains 10 statements about listening behaviors to which participants respond on a scale ranging from 5 for Almost Always to 1 for Almost Never (Appendix D). The inventory includes a scale to convert total points scored to one of three listening behavioral styles: active, involved, and passive. Also included are brief narrative descriptions of behaviors associated with each of the styles. Participants addressed several topics in the journals, including the number of times they attempted the silence experience, the activities they participated in during each hour of silence, the people involved with them during the silence period, how they communicated, their temptations to break the silence, their feelings during the experience,



how they prevented themselves from breaking the silence, and the difficulty level of remaining silent.

## Questionnaire

The participants answered demographic questions, gave reasons for breaking the silence each time they broke it, and answered several directed open-ended questions about the experience. They also answered the following three questions: 1) Based on the silence experience, what did you learn about yourself? 2) What did you learn about others? 3) What did you learn about listening?

## Results

Before determining the effects of the three treatments (silence, listening lecture, or a combination of silence and listening lecture), the equivalence of the groups involved was tested. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) tested for differences on the pretest measure of listening effectiveness for the instructor and for the experimental group. No significant differences were found, resulting in the conclusion that the groups were indeed equivalent.

Hypothesis 1 postulated that individuals experiencing the silence assignment would score higher on perceived listening effectiveness than those exposed to only a listening lecture before the posttest. In viewing the mean scores of the two groups, the silence group showed a mean score of 38.73 on the listening posttest, while the lecture group scored a mean of 37.21. Next, a t-test was used to assess whether this difference in scores represented a significant difference between the two groups. No significant difference was found. Second, a paired samples t-test was used to assess differences between the posttest and pretest for each of the two groups. Again, no significant differences were found. Thus, while the raw score is higher for the silence group, there is no statistical support for Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2 stated that posttest listening scores would be highest for the group exposed to both silence and a listening lecture before the posttest. The mean score on the listening posttest was 38.53, compared to 37.21 for the lecture only group and 38.73

**Table 1. Comparison of Pretest and Posttest Scores**

Group	Pretest Mean	Posttest Mean
1 (Pretest, Lecture, Posttest, Silence)	37.19	37.21
2 (Pretest, Silence, Posttest, Lecture)	38.20	38.73
3 (Pretest, Silence, Lecture, Posttest)	37.68	38.53

for the silence only group. Again, an analysis of variance was conducted to determine if this represented a significant difference between the groups. No significant differences were found.

In addition, a regression analysis was used to assess the predictive ability of the pretest listening score, treatment exposure, past listening training, and demographic characteristics on the dependent variable of perceived listening effectiveness. Only the pretest score showed any power in explaining the variance associated with the posttest score ( $R^2 = 0.32$ ).

Did any of the treatments result in improvements to perceived listening effectiveness? Statistically, the answer appears to be no. Paired samples *t*-tests showed no significant differences from pretest to posttest for any of the three treatment groups, although each group showed a slightly higher score in the posttest. Table 1 provides this comparison.

In line with past research, significant differences were found for participants who had had listening training before participating in the current study. These differences were significant for both the pretest and posttest and are detailed in Table 2 and Table 3.

Even though both test hypotheses were rejected, the qualitative data provided in the journals suggest another explanation is possible. To analyze this data, we reviewed quotations from the journals and categorized them into themes representing the feelings and outcomes of the participants. The following items from these journals are discussed: temptations to communicating verbally, emotions experienced during the silence period, and what was learned from the experience about one's self, others, and the act and process of listening.

**Table 2. Pretest Differences Based on Past Listening Training**

Group	Mean	Std Deviation	F-Value	Significance
Past training	38.96	4.17	3.04	.08
No past training	37.32	4.09		

**Table 3. Posttest Differences Based on Past Listening Training**

Group	Mean	Std Deviation	F-Value	Significance
Past training	39.83	4.08	5.80	.01
No past training	37.37	4.54		

### **Temptations to Communicating Verbally**

Respondents expressed frustration and temptations to break their silence. Some mentioned that the people with whom they interacted teased them and used other methods to tempt them to speak. The telephone ringing or someone asking a question was also tempting. Interestingly, several participants mentioned the desire to sing along with music as a strong temptation to break their silence. The habit of talking was also identified as a strong force.

### **Emotions Experienced During Silence**

Generally, the participants reported negative emotions associated with the period of silence. It was obviously a frustrating experience. Some of the words used to describe this experience include tense, nervous, frustrated, sad, subdued, helpless, isolated, anxious, upset, tired, irritable, impatient, self-conscious, funny, weird, uncomfortable, rude, disappointed, and detached. A few participants, however, said they felt relaxed and content. In assessing the extent of negative to positive comments, one group chosen at random made 98 negative comments but only 21 positive ones. Perhaps the participants' ability to be seen as leaders was compromised by the frustrations of remaining silent. Stang (1973) found that the most talkative person in a group setting was seen as the leader, regardless of what that person said.

## Self-knowledge

After the silence period, participants answered the question, "What did you learn about yourself?" The comments made are both interesting and insightful. The list below highlights sample comments taken from the participants' journals:

- I can have just as much fun and interact with people when I am silent.
- It takes will power not to talk.
- I hated being quiet, but I paid more attention in class.
- I depend more on body language than I realized.
- I felt left out without the spoken language.
- I can get more done by being quiet.
- I learned how much I depend on talking.
- It is hard to listen because I dwell on my own thoughts.
- I never realized just how much people talk in a day.
- I rarely listen as well as I speak.
- I picked up on underlying messages I missed before.
- I interrupt a lot when I am able to talk.

Three themes really stand out in these sample comments. First, the participants emphasized how difficult it was not to speak. Talking is very much a habit for people, and changing a habit can be difficult. Second, they recognized that while listening is difficult, it is necessary and critical. Some of the comments mentioned becoming aware that the act of talking, thinking about their own thoughts, and interrupting others in order to talk again had prohibited their listening effectiveness in the past. Third, they noticed the benefits of speaking less and listening more.

## Understanding Others

Next, participants were asked what they learned about others through the silence experience. Comments in response to this question emphasized the awareness of human nature gained through the process. Sample comments are listed below:

- People don't know how important listening is.
- People want to talk more than they want to listen.
- Others interpret the same communication in many different ways.
- People do not really listen to what you say.
- People talk for no reason.
- The quieter I am, the more people around me open up.

These comments highlight a lot of the same ideas discovered personally by the respondents. They appear to have a stronger realization of how they use speaking to "drown out the silence." The comments also give recognition to the inherent give and take between listener and speaker in the communication process and the preference of many for the speaking role.

### **Learning about Listening**

The participants were also asked to comment on what they learned about listening from the silence experience. These comments were perhaps the most insightful. Samples:

- Listening is a great tool to use to learn more about the world around you.
- Silence makes you listen a lot more.
- We take listening for granted.
- Silence helps you hear things you wouldn't normally hear.
- Listening is a skill that takes work.
- I can better comprehend what others say when I don't talk and just listen.
- I can listen with more precision when I am not talking.
- Listening is more important than talking.
- People tell you more and give more information when they know you are really listening and won't be cutting in.
- Listening requires more effort than speaking.
- Listening requires patience.
- Listening really takes thought and focus, and I don't listen when I think I am listening. I learned that when I think I am listening, I am usually spaced out and losing focus.

- Listening is respectful and deserved.
- I learned that I need to listen more. When I am at home, I am too quick to speak when it might be better if I didn't. When listening, I got to actually "hear" more. I enjoyed listening.

Like the earlier comments, these again highlight that listening is not an easy task and certainly not as easy as the counter-role of speaking. It is important to note, though, that the participants appeared to recognize a heightened awareness of the process of listening and of their own skill level in listening following the silence experience.

### **Discussion and Implications**

This study sought to determine the effects of three treatments on perceived listening effectiveness: a listening lecture, a silence experience, or a combination. Statistical analysis of the pretest and posttest scores between and among groups failed to show improvements in listening associated with the experimental treatments. Although posttest scores were numerically higher than pretest scores for each of the treatments, they were not significantly higher.

Analysis of the demographic data yielded stronger results. Participants who had listening training before participating in the experiment scored significantly higher on both the pretest and the posttest than participants who had no prior listening training. This finding supports earlier evidence reported by Barker, Pearce, and Johnson (1992) and Brownell (1994). It appears, then, that listening training improves perceived listening effectiveness.

It also appears that the participants in this study need to improve their listening effectiveness significantly. Scores of 38 and below on the *Listening Styles Inventory* are interpreted as passive listening style, the least effective of the three styles described by the measurement. Nevertheless, it appears that training can help. For example, Imhof (1998) found that even experienced listeners have considerable room for improvement. Certainly, the low scores of participants in this study suggest that this is true.

The qualitative data gleaned from the participants' journals suggested that the silence experience was useful in improving listening effectiveness. Especially important was the extent to which the experience improved their levels of awareness of their own listening behaviors and those of others. These heightened awareness levels could well lead to reinforcing their beneficial listening behaviors in the future and to changing detrimental behaviors for the better. It could also lead to strengthening their abilities to cope with barriers to listening that both the listening environment and other people create.

If silence is effective in improving listening, as evidenced by the journal entries, why then did that treatment fail to result in a significant improvement in the posttest scores? The answer to that question likely lies in the comments themselves. Participants noted that they were really not as aware of the listening process as they first thought. They noted repeatedly how difficult it was to listen and how they became aware that they talked more than they listened. In this case, it is likely that the posttest score is an accurate assessment of listening, while the pretest score was inflated due to lack of awareness about one's own listening behavior. The results of earlier studies suggest that this is true. Analyses in several studies demonstrated that managers overrate their own listening effectiveness compared to how subordinates (Hulbert, 1989; Husband, Cooper, & Monsour, 1988), co-workers (Cooper & Husband, 1993), and their supervisors (Huegli & Tschirgi, 1975) rate them.

Other evidence supports the value of the qualitative evidence in this study. For example, Roberts and Vinson (1998) found that the willingness to listen resulted in improved listening effectiveness. Numerous journal entries in the current study noted or suggested an unwillingness to listen.

In terms of management communication, there are implications resulting from the findings of this study. As discussed in the literature review, silence has often been thought of as a negative outcome in organizations. One thinks of the need for employees to be silent and to suppress their opinions and complaints. Articles mention the silence of victims (of harassment and downsizing, for

instance) as oppression. For instance, Pang (1996) describes silence as a profound method of communication and went on to categorize silence as oppressive, submissive, and defiant. She paints a picture of women and other minorities as individuals denied the ability to develop a voice.

Literature on organizational commitment has viewed silence as the "loyal" choice that dissatisfied employees take because of a lack of alternatives and the belief that they are heavily invested in the firm. Organizational justice literature encourages the act of voice as a method of reducing dissatisfaction through the act of self-expression and righting wrongs. The act of silence itself has been negatively stereotyped and its value underestimated.

On the other hand, proper use of silence in organizations may well serve as a positive factor in improving one's communication. Elson (2001) reviews the meanings of silence. She describes silence as a tool for growth and recognition of choice and opportunity. The qualitative evidence in this study suggests that periods of self-imposed silence can be beneficial to listening effectiveness and should be included in the managerial listening training program curriculum. In addition, managers may find their ability to listen enhanced through periods of self-imposed silence practiced apart from training programs. These practices can lead to improved managerial listening effectiveness.

## **Recommendations**

The following are suggestions for further research:

- Replicate this study to test the reliability of these results.
- Apply the research procedures and design employed in this study for a different number of hours of silence. Do the results differ based upon the length of the silence period? What is the optimal number of hours?
- Vary the amount of time devoted to the listening lecture. Do score results differ based upon the length of the lecture?
- Test whether or not participants who are told to keep a journal would score higher or lower than participants who are not told to keep a journal.



- Have participants record in each journal entry what they heard that they would not have noticed if they could talk. (Question 7 in the Silence Project Questionnaire covered this generally, but not specifically.)

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## Appendix A. Silence Project Instructions

1. Select a 12-hour period during which you normally interact and talk with people.
2. You will remain silent for 12 hours continuously. If you speak before the 12 hours are up, you need to start the 12 hours over.
3. The main idea is that the 12 hours of silence must be done during a time and in an environment where you normally would interact with others (friends, family, coworkers, sales representatives, classmates, etc.). Any activity that isolates you from others must be avoided, such as sleeping, going to the park