ENHANCING RECEPTIVE LISTENING IN THE CLASSROOM

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Abstract: In a world which is becoming more complex and more diverse by the minute, emotional intelligence seems to be the key to that type of communication able to accommodate the endless nuances and subtleties arising from the differences in frames of thinking of the individuals engaged in the social negotiation. Effective listening, with its subcomponents, active and receptive listening, is one of the often underestimated skills that needs to be refined, in order to render communication free of misunderstandings and unnecessary emotional overload. The article gives an overview of the concept of listening, with a view to highlighting the need to enhance this skill in the classroom.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, active listening, receptive listening, self-management, self-awareness, professional communication

Emotional intelligence has been recognized as a must-have in its own right and has been on the companies' agenda for many years now. There has been increased awareness of the fact that, in spite of all best intentions, professionals'individual efforts, input of time and creativity get wasted if they are not able to find a common psychological ground on which to get together harmoniously. While technical expertise remains the prerequisite for getting any job, the ability to manage the relationship with oneself and with the others has become of paramount importance, because "in brief, companies look for individuals who can get ahead, get along, and find meaning at work"(Chamorro-Premuzic,2015).

As defined by specialized literature, emotional intelligence pertains to two realms of the human mind and soul, namely the ability to recognize and deal with one's emotions and the ability to recognize and deal with others'emotions (Garner 1983; Goleman 1995; Bar-On, 1997). Goleman (1997) breaks down the term into *self-awareness, self-management, social awareness* and *relationship management* (Goleman, 1998). Self-awareness starts with the acknowledgement of one's internal dialogue and recognition of the way in which the latter is transposed into words, actions, para-verbal and non-verbal language. Self-management is the ability to control one's internal dialogue and to adopt a more objective stance towards one's own person and behaviours. Social awareness results in an ability to read and react empathically to the others' states of minds. The harmonious development of the three components result in a judicious relationship management, which entails "developing others, influence, communication, conflict management, visionary leadership, catalysing change, building bonds, teamwork and collaboration" (Goleman 2001:28).

In order to be able to develop others, to influence, to foster collaboration and bonds, one has to be able to communicate well. To communicate well is to speak up your mind and put your message across in a way that takes into consideration other people's frames of thinking, subjective perspectives, sensitivity and right to diversity. Good communication entails clarity of the overall message, careful structuration of ideas, as well as adaptation to the fact that others may have a different understanding of things, a different philosophy of the subject at hand and, ultimately, a different perception on what good communication itself is. Therefore, to be a good communicator is first and foremost to be a good listener, followed by the capacity to put together the verbal and non-verbal messages sent by the other party, and to

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step out of one's own skin, allowing a different vantage point to replace one's own regular mindset.

The question that has been challenging the underpinning of EI theories is: can one really increase their EI? Can one really take a step back and look at oneself and the others with lenses less blurred by the tinge of subjectivity? Another related question is: why would people want to change in the first place? According to Boyatzis, there are three main reasons: a person may want to increase professional efficiency and enhance his/her potential at the workplace; a person may feel the need to better him/herself as an individual out of the sheer desire to reach their human potential; and finally, a person may want to refine his/her skills in order to be able to help others develop in their turn and become more emotionally intelligent (Boyatzis, 239). The third reason seems to ring true especially for teachers whose job is, in essence, to help others to broaden perspectives, find their limits of potential, shape already existing skills and add new ones. Therefore, listening to one's students, helping them to put their message across in clearer words, probing the depth of their minds and soul by asking challenging questions, and also understanding what is beyond the mere words they utter, are abilities that a teacher needs to develop consciously and consistently. The art of asking the right questions and listening actively was once called "maieutics" and it was a didactic tool of the Socratic school. Nowadays, the activity of coaching, which deals mainly with the personal development of the individual, therefore with the increase of EI, included, uses the same mechanism to unlock the latter's hidden potential. It remains a useful skill to be internalized by teachers as well and to pass it on to students. The enormous potential of the art of *listening* to create meaningful and authentic relationships is yet to be acknowledged more than already is in real life. In the next part of this article we will briefly present the concept of receptive listening, (as different from that of active listening), with the purpose of highlighting why this is a skill one should aim to enhance and why teachers of foreign languages and not only should strive to develop in their students.

The concept of receptive listening has been thoroughly investigated by psychologist Michael P. Nichols in his book *The Lost Art of Listening, Second Edition: How Learning to Listen Can Improve Relationships* (2009) as an effective means to reduce the number of everyday disputes, whether they occur in a personal or a professional environment. Nichols explains that in any discussion there are naturally two different points of view but, when people fight, they insist on repeating their own point of view without listening to the interlocutor's position. Therefore, as Nichols suggests, the technique of receptive listening should be resorted to in order to diminish the tension that disagreements generate between disputants. In broad lines, receptive listening consists in listening to the other's point of view before stating your own. Receptive listening allows interlocutors to move from an opposing position to a receptive one, letting the other express their feelings while you are delaying yours (Nichols, 179). Although receptive listening is primarily used to resolve disputes, it can be successfully extended to any situation of communication in which interlocutors want to improve their listening skills as well as their relationship. According to Nichols, receptive listening occurs in 5 steps that disputants should follow fully aware of the process of listening as such and paying attention to their interlocutor:

1) When sensing disagreement, one should refrain from answering back and should focus instead on the other's point of view.

2) One should encourage the other's thoughts, feelings and wishes without defending oneself and opposing them.

3) One should repeat the other's point of view using one's own words in order to show them what one believes they think or feel.

4) One should ask the interlocutor to correct or detail their point of view.

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5) One should keep one's answer for later depending on how important the issue is. For very controversial issues, a day or two would help to formulate one's own perspective. For ordinary issues, a break is enough, after which one should ask if the interlocutor wants to hear another version (Nichols, 180).

It seems that receptive listening takes a lot of conscious effort, self-control and determination from those people who wish to become better listeners in their personal life as well as at the workplace. The hardest part of receptive listening is to control the impulse to react to what the other is saying, to suspend judgement of the other and your own interests for the moment and to postpone your need and wish to speak. Receptive listening focuses on the interlocutor, who is thus allowed to express their mind and feelings, and not on drawing a conclusion or on ending the discussion. In this way, the interlocutor will feel that they are listened to, encouraged to detail their point of view and that their feelings are acknowledged by the other party, which will definitely make them more open to listen to the other, in their turn. Therefore, authentic communication occurs between two parties that are genuinely interested in discovering and listening to one another, not as passive recipients, but as active contributors.

Receptive listening goes one step further than *active listening* from which it should be distinguished. Active listening has been defined as a communication technique which broadly consists in the listener's repeating or paraphrasing the speaker's words and checking whether they have been correctly understood. In the process of receptive listening, as we have seen, the listener not only actively listens to the speaker by repeating or paraphrasing his/her words, but also tries to understand the ideas and feelings beyond the uttered message and encourages him/her to go more deeply into the subject by asking questions and showing empathy. Empathy, Nichols argues, annihilates defensiveness which is a natural reaction when we feel menaced (Nichols, 261). As a matter of fact, what lies at the heart of disagreements is emotional reactivity which varies according to one's sensitivity and makes people reluctant to listen to one another. So, listening empathically means that you are open to accept the other's emotions no matter how uncomfortable it may be for you, which will make your interlocutor feel important.

As teachers of foreign languages focusing on the most difficult skill of all, namely speaking, we have often noticed that our students' ability to listen receptively needs to be refined. It is often the case that, due to the understandable desire to contribute ideas to the discussion of the topic at hand at a certain point in the classroom, students tend to interrupt each other and sometimes they even repeat what has already been said by the previous speaker without realising that they are basically saying the same thing in other words. That is why a short theoretical presentation of the concepts of receptive and active listening could be useful at a certain point during or after the discussions, with the teacher showing how the main message has got lost, how digressions and interruptions led to confusion and even how emotions got in the way. One could also resort to case studies or simulations, whose underlying didactic purpose is to trigger awareness of one's own harmful habit of not listening receptively or actively; or, at the next level, role plays in which students are given the opportunity to act and react to situations in which the lack of active/receptive listening disrupts smooth communication and even creates embarrassing moments, which, in a real life scenario, could lead to serious problems at the work place and not only.

Therefore, as an important skill within the sphere of EI, listening, with its two components, active and receptive listening, should be learnt along with the foreign language itself, as an essential part of what we all strive for, namely good communication. It is incumbent upon teachers to provide their students with opportunities to become aware of their own listening/speaking patterns, in order to become more complex, more refined and, ultimately, more efficient communicators.

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