

Decoding is a mechanism in which the receiver, after receiving the message from a communication source, attaches meaning to the received message. In this way, being an essential function of the receiver, it plays an important role in communication. The decoding skills are listening and reading, which are discussed in detail in this chapter.

## 7.1 Effective Listening

Effective communication can also be viewed as a function of effective listening both on the part of the receiver and the source. The biggest block to personal communication is the inability to listen intelligently, understandingly, and skilfully to another person (Manning and Curtis, 2007). According to Rowson (2005) listening is an essential part of being a good communicator. He indicated two types of listening; casual-listening without concentration and critical-listening with concentration. Listening involves paying close attention to, and making sense of, what we hear. In this communication oriented age listening is more important than ever. This is why in most companies, effective listeners hold higher position and are promoted more often than people who are ineffective listeners (Lucas, 2001). Thus a source must be a good speaker and at the same time he/she must be a good listener as well. The same is true for a receiver. It is often said that listening is harder than talking. Listening involves three skills: hearing, comprehension, and retention (Burgoon, 1974). Some people are poor listeners and they go on talking most of the time. While dealing with such people we may not expect that our views are properly heard, comprehended, and retained. Even when we think we are listening carefully, we usually grasp only half of what we hear, and we retain even less. This may make communication ineffective and time consuming. Some people are regarded as poor listeners while others are good listeners. As extension worker you need to know the factors, which are responsible for poor listening.

## 7.1.1 Reasons for poor listening

Listening is one of the most important skills you need to develop to do better as communicator. It is the second most difficult skill. Reading is the most difficult. Listening takes time or you have to take time to listen. There may be many reasons for poor listening such as:

- **Relevance:** Considering the message as uninteresting or irrelevant. Sometimes people perceive the message as irrelevant and they take least interest and pay little or no attention.
- **Pre-perception about the speaker:** A person having negative opinion about the speaker is unlikely to pay attention to him/her and listen carefully.
- **Emotional involvement:** Sometimes the listeners become over-stimulated or get emotionally involved either in the speaker or the subject of discussion, which negatively affects listening.
- **Speaker orientation:** The listeners may become critical of how a speaker talks rather than focusing on the contents i.e. what is being said. This situation may divert their attention and result in poor listening. In this context Manning and Curtis (2007) argue that one way to improve communication effectiveness is to assume responsibility to be a good listener by judging content, not delivery.
- **Focus of listening:** It involves a person listening only for facts rather than looking for the meanings. Good listeners are those who maintain a balance.
- **Selective listening behaviour:** Generally people tend to pay attention to those messages which are easy to understand or which make sense to them and ignore the difficult ones. Manning and Curtis (2007) argue that poor listeners usually declare a subject dry after the first few sentences. Once this decision is made, it serves to rationalize any and all further inattention.

- **Concentration on details:** If you concentrate on details, you may be a poor listener.
- **Faking attention to the speaker:** Poor listening is quite often the result of day dreaming when the listeners are not paying attention to the speaker. They are physically present, but mentally absent. It is one of the worst listening habits. Good listening requires the temporary suspension of all unrelated thoughts – a blank canvas.
- **Pre-occupations:** Generally people tend to be pre-occupied with specific beliefs, attitudes, values, knowledge, experience etc. which make them biased. They are unlikely to listen opposite views.
- **Imperception:** Poor listening may also be the result of inability of the listener to perceive the message accurately in its true perspective.
- **Poor speech delivery:** Sometimes poor speech delivery becomes a cause for poor listening. The listeners tune out if the delivery is poor. In such a situation the fault lies with the speaker.
- **Presence of noise source:** Noise may be viewed as a serious barrier to communication. It includes all factors, which may adversely affect the fidelity of the communication process. Any physical or psychological disturbance may result in poor listening on the part of the receiver.

### 7.1.2 Tips on improving listening skills ✓

Before getting into the discussion of tips on improving listening skills, it seems quite logical to look into the elements of listening. The elements of listening behaviour include eye contact, body language, verbal responses, and vocal tone. Barker (1978) identified the following four basic elements of listening:

- **Hearing:** This element relates to the stimuli received by the ear in the form of sound waves. It may be regarded as first step toward listening.

- **Attention:** This element relates to the concentration paid by the listener to a message. This shows the interest and seriousness of the person in the message. Lucas (2001) argues that even when people do pay attention, they do not process a speaker's message exactly as the speaker intends.
- **Understanding:** This element relates to the ability of a person to assimilate the received message based on his knowledge, experience, attitude, beliefs etc. It involves interpretation of the intended meaning of the message.
- **Remembering:** This element relates to the retention of a message through short term and long-term memories. It involves ability of a person to recall information.

Based on the reasons for poor listening and elements of listening, the following are some important tips on effective listening:

- The first step towards improvement is self correction. Analyse your shortcomings as a listener and try to remove those.
- Stop talking and be fully attentive to the speech.
- Keep your mind open.
- Establish good eye contact.
- Find areas of your interest.
- Try to listen what is said, not what you want to listen.
- Listen carefully to the entire message before making any judgement or drawing any conclusion.
- Listen to the words and try to picture what is being said.
- Use affirmative head nods.
- Demonstrate appropriate gestures.
- Try to make distinction especially in case of words with similar sounds.

- Be patient and don't react too quickly. Let the speaker say everything he/she intends to say. Be relaxed and don't give the impression to the speaker that you want to jump in the talk.
- Remember that each sentence you hear is spoken within the context of a particular situation. It is this context that enables you to understand what is being said.
- Observe all verbal and non-verbal clues and behaviour to get the entire message.
- If you have any doubt about something, ask for clarification.
- Be patient especially in situation when information seems irrelevant or uninteresting.
- Listen for meanings, not for facts only.
- Focus on content, not on delivery. A careful listener will be concerned about evidence no matter who is speaking.
- Listen for central theme rather than for facts.
- Be careful in interpreting the words having multiple meanings.
- Ask questions to give impression to the speaker that you are fully involved in what he/she is saying.
- Withhold judgement, refrain from judging either the speaker or the subject matter being discussed, before listening to his/her views. Listen to the speaker's ideas, examine evidence and assess reasoning then make up your mind.
- Remain objective, don't be over stimulated due to emotional appeals of the speaker.
- Take notes, if essential, to demonstrate your seriousness in the discussion. When note taking is done properly, it helps improve your concentration and keeps track of a speaker's ideas.

- Think a little ahead of the speaker and look for what the speaker is going to say next.
- Try to feel what the speaker is feeling.
- Try to create noise free atmosphere by removing all possible obstacles to effective listening.

## **7.2 Effective Reading**

Reading is also an important communication skill, which is concerned with decoding of message by the receiver. Efficiency in reading can greatly influence the effectiveness of communication. It also involves comprehension. Some people may have well-developed reading skills and they may go through a lengthy report with comprehension very quickly. They can be regarded as efficient communicators. On the other hand, there may be many people who are poor readers. They may take too much time to go through even a very simple writing. It is extremely important for a reader to budget his/her time carefully in reading different literature. As extension workers we generally receive a lot of message through reading. Thus we must know the reasons for poor reading and also know how to improve effective reading skills. This can also benefit us as effective writers.