

## **An Exploratory Study of Listening Skills of Professionals across Different Cultures**

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*The significance of listening skills for the efficiency and effectiveness of individual and organizational success is starting to be recognized around the world. This study sought to explore the listening skills of working professionals from three countries – India, Malaysia and the United States of America (USA). A total of 633 completed surveys were received from working individuals within the three countries. The results show the respondents from Malaysia have lower self-perceived listening competencies compared to India and USA. The study found no significant difference on listening skill due to age differences. However, respondents within the age group of 61 to 65 years old were found to be better listeners.*

**Key JEL Codes:** L200, L290, M100

**Field of Research:** Management education, business research

### **1. Introduction**

According to Flynn, Valikoski and Grau (2008), “Listening involves hearing and cognition and assumes the ability to selectively perceive, interpret, understand, assign meaning, react, remember, and analyze what is heard” (p. 143). From this definition of listening, it is obvious the significance listening has in everyday life, especially the workplace where task comprehension is essential to remaining employed. With global expansion and increasing technological complexities, listening, and thus comprehension, plays an important role in the business world. Based on this fact, employers and employees should work on effective listening, where they pay attention to what someone says, instead of thinking ahead to their response, and strive to improve their listening competencies. Brownell (2003) found listening to be one of the most essential requirements for those individuals desiring to move into the managerial leadership ranks.

The following sections of this paper include a literature review of past studies related to listening and its relationships with national culture and age. This review of literature leads to our two research questions. Next, the methodology discusses our use of Glenn and Pood’s (1989) Listening-Self Inventory and describes the participants from the three countries. Then, we present our analysis of the findings and discuss what those results mean. Finally, we conclude our paper with implications, state the limitations, and make recommendations for future research.

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## **2. Literature Review**

Listening has been regarded as passive and receptive, while speaking and writing are seen as active and productive skills. It has been argued listening is an ability, which develops without assistance (Osada 2004). Another difficulty is that listening has lacked “clear definition and understanding” (Bostrom & Waldhart 1980, p. 221). Admittedly, part of the mixture of meaning in the listening literature might spawn from a lack of one generally accepted definition of listening. Wolvin and Coakley (1992) argue that listening research is still in an exploratory state even though it spans the past four decades.

Researchers have found a relationship between national culture and listening (Brownell 2005; Hall 1976; Purdy 2000; Wolvin & Coakley 1996; Zohoori 2013). Individuals from different countries may perceive listening behaviors differently, approach listening in different ways, and display specific listening styles (Kiewitz et al. 1997; Lewis 1999). Mujtaba and Pohlman (2010) have stated that working professionals tend to behave according to how they are socialized within their respective cultures. This is called the global-culture approach that assumes organizations conform to the culture and practice of their own group (Zaidman 2001). Adler (1986) argued national culture had a greater impact on employees than organizational culture. Nevertheless, the global-culture approach does provide an understanding of broad differences in communication among cultures.

Regarding age, only a few studies have explored the impact of age in relation to listening skills. In Brownell’s (1990) study, young managers between 24-34 years of age were compared to managers who were 45 years old and older. The older managers were given positive evaluations of listening skills. While Tsai (2005) studied traditional-aged college students at different levels (freshman, sophomore, junior and senior) and found that, the seniors’ performance on both the Listening and Reading Vocabulary Levels Test as well as on Listening Comprehension Test was significantly better than the performance of the freshmen students. In another study, Conway (1982) attempted to find a relationship between education level and listening skills, and he found a definite relationship exists between the two. He conducted a similar test of 400 freshman students at the beginning of their first semester and then again at the end of their first year of studies. He found marked improvement in the students’ listening skills after the first year, which is contrary to Fitzgerald’s (2009) findings, which found no relationship between age and education with listening skill and leadership style.

Listening and nonverbal communication training has been found to significantly influence multicultural sensitivity (Ford, Wolvin & Chung 2000; Timm & Schroeder 2000). But, according to Cooper (1997, p. 76), hardly any research studies have explored the impact or relationship of listening with demographic information such as age, education and work experience. Thus, “much work remains to be done in both theory and practice” regarding listening and its relationship to other variables (Morley 2001, p. 69).

### **2.1 Research Questions**

The present study explores the listening behaviors of working professionals in three countries. Two research questions guided this study.

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Research Question 1: What are the perceived listening behaviors of working professionals in India, Malaysia and the USA and do they differ between countries?

Research Question 2: Is there a difference in the means for working professionals in the 20 to 30 age group, the 31 to 40 age group, the 41 to 50 age group, and the 51 and older age group who responded to the listening survey?

### **3. Methodology**

The Listening-Self Inventory by Glenn and Pood (1989) was chosen for this study as it was designed to help managers identify barriers affecting their individual listening performance. Gaining awareness of positive and negative listening behaviors would help working professionals know what they might need to improve regarding their listening skills.

After consulting with a statistician, the decision was made to use the edited version of the Glenn and Pood's self-assessment found in Stephen P. Robbins's Self-Assessment Library. Robbins (1999) had changed the original response choice of either yes or no to a five-point Likert's point scale consisting of 5=Strongly Agree, 4=Agree, 3=Either agree or disagree, 2=Disagree, and 1=Strongly disagree. It was believed that the Likert scale from the edited version would give wider choices or a range to the answers of the respondents.

Before submitting the questionnaire for data collection, a pilot study was conducted using a sample of 16 respondents from USA (including both managers and non-managers) and 10 respondents from India (including academicians, managers and non-managers). The pilot group had no issues with completing the questionnaire and thus had no recommendations for changes to the questionnaire.

To determine the internal consistency of the scale, Coefficient Cronbach Alpha was calculated for all 15 questions and yielded a score of .592, which is considered a good reliability score. Then the survey was distributed by the three researchers in their respective countries using face-to-face data collection and Qualtrics, a web based research surveying software program.

#### **3.1 Participants**

Since the present study was related to assessing and comparing the listening skills of working professionals, a large spectrum of organizations ranging from 13 industries were asked to participate in the study. A total of 633 participants completed the online or paper version of the survey. The total participants included 247 individuals from India, 147 individuals from Malaysia and 239 individuals from the USA. These individuals worked in both managerial and non-managerial positions in firms across various sectors. Management level was comprised of personnel who were involved in policy making, planning, decision making processes, organizing and controlling business activity, procurement, manufacturing, marketing, finance, and human resources while the non-managerial level were involved at the operation levels only. Of the 633 who identified their gender, 60.1 percent were male and 39.9 percent were female. The median age for managers was 36 while the median age for non-mangers was 28.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1 Research Question 1: What are the perceived listening behaviors of working professionals in India, Malaysia and the USA and do they differ between countries?

Table 1 reveals the mean score for each of the 15 items on Glenn and Pood's (1989) Listening-Self Inventory. The items consist of four positive statements (Statement 4, 12, 13 and 15) and 11 negative statements (Statement 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 14). When the results showed a high mean score for negative statements, it revealed that the respondents had a lower self-perceived listening skill. On the other hand, if the respondents had a high mean score for the positive statements, it was deduced that this was a positive listening skill.

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**Table 1: Mean Score for Listening-Self Inventory**

Items	India (mean)	Malaysia (mean)	United States (mean)	Mean Score (for three countries)
1. I frequently attempt to listen to several conversations at the same time.	3.14	3.16	2.82	3.00
2. I like people to give me only the facts and then let me make my own interpretations.	2.35	2.77	2.4	2.46
3. I sometime pretend to pay attention to people.	2.5	2.79	2.64	2.64
4. I consider myself a good judge of non-verbal communications.	2.33	2.93	2.05	2.34
5. I usually know what another person is going to say before he or she says it.	2.74	3.12	2.89	2.91
6. I usually end conversations that do not interest me by diverting my attention from the speaker.	2.98	3.01	3.14	3.03
7. I frequently nod, frown, or whatever to let the speaker know how I feel about what he or she is saying.	2.32	2.19	1.92	2.12
8. I usually respond immediately when someone has finished talking.	2.57	2.65	2.35	2.47
9. I evaluate what is being said while it is being said.	2.17	2.34	1.89	2.07
10. I usually formulate a response while the other person is still talking.	2.68	2.88	2.33	2.58
11. The speaker's delivery style frequently keeps me from listening to content.	2.43	2.53	2.63	2.49
12. I usually ask people to clarify what they have said rather than guess at the meaning.	2.18	2.17	1.98	2.06
13. I make a concerted effort to understand other people's point of view.	1.94	2.29	1.68	1.90
14. I frequently hear what I expect to hear rather than what is said.	3.36	2.97	3.37	3.27
15. Most people feel that I have understood their point of view when we disagree.	2.63	2.69	2.37	2.54
<b>Average score</b>	2.6	2.7	2.4	

The mean score shows that the Indian respondents scored a high mean (2.18) for one positive statement (Statement 12) as compared to Malaysian (2.17) and USA (1.98) respondents. For five negative statements (Statement 2, 3, 5, 6 and 11), the

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respondents from India scored a lower mean (2.35, 2.5, 2.74, 2.98 and 2.43) compared to respondents from Malaysia (2.77, 2.79, 3.12, 3.01 and 2.53) and USA (2.4, 2.64, 2.89, 3.14 and 2.63). Scoring a lower mean for each negative statement showed that respondents from India perceive they have better listening skills, which could be attributed to the fact that the Indians generally showed respect to the speaker by listening to his or her conversations. Indian employees and managers would not pretend to listen or indulge in tactics to divert attention from the speaker. In addition, they would avoid arriving at conclusions before the speaker completed his or her conversation. However, the Indian respondents would ask people to clarify what they have said rather than guess at the meaning.

On the other hand, the Malaysian respondents scored a high mean in three positive statements (Statement 4, 13 and 15) with 2.93, 2.29 and 2.69 respectively compared to India (2.33, 1.94 and 2.63) and USA (2.05, 1.68 and 2.37). The high mean score for these statements showed that the Malaysians perceived themselves to be better listeners when compared to the Indians and North Americans on these statements. Statement 4, which referred to the use of non-verbal communication in listening, is one of the characteristics of Hall's (1976) high context communication. Malaysia is a high context culture, and Malaysian listeners know to be observant of nonverbal nuances so that they can fully understand the message (Gupta 2010). Statement 13 and 15 emphasized the concern for others when engaging in listening process, which is a trait of collectivist culture as stated by Hofstede (Samovar, Porter & McDaniel 2010). Malaysia is a collective culture, thus Malaysian listeners show concern for the opinions of others when they are listening.

Finally, the USA respondents scored a low mean for the remaining six negative statements (Statement 1, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 14) with 2.82, 1.92, 2.35, 1.89, 2.33 and 2.37 respectively compared to India (3.14, 2.32, 2.57, 2.17, 2.68 and 3.36) and Malaysia (3.16, 2.19, 2.65, 2.34, 2.88 and 2.97). By scoring a low mean for negative statements, USA respondents perceived they have good listening skills on these questions as compared to India and Malaysia. These findings support a 2004 study by Ellis who studied the leadership and listening skills of enlisted officers of the Coast Guard in the United States of America. His study found that the enlisted leaders had self-scores, which were "high" on the listening behaviors of attention, respect, response, memory, and open mind. In addition, these enlisted officers rated themselves "very high" on the listening behavior of empathy. Interestingly their subordinate observers rated the coast guard managers as "high" in all six indices, which seemed to valid the self-assessments of the officers. Castleberry, Shepherd and Ridnour (1999) found in their USA study that high sales performers are considered to have better selling skills and that their listening skills had a significant impact on individual activities that matter to a salesperson's performance.

The average score for professionals in India, Malaysia and USA from Table 1 are 2.6, 2.7, and 2.4 respectively. This result showed that the working professionals in USA perceived they had a slightly higher overall listening competency compared to their counterparts in India and Malaysia. This result could have occurred because the USA respondents are more aware of the importance of listening to workplace success. Sypher, Bostrom, and Seibert's (1989) survey of employees at a large insurance company headquarters in the USA found that how one perceives another's listening ability is the window through which all of his or her other communication abilities were

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evaluated. They also found that better listeners held more senior positions within the organization and were promoted more frequently than those that were perceived to not listen as well. While Waner's (1995) study found that business professionals viewed listening as one of the most important communication competencies required for success.

USA managers may be more aware of how their employees perceive their listening skills and the impact of those listening skills upon their success as a manager. In Fenniman's (2010) study of 119 employees of a leading Internet-based research company headquartered in the northeastern USA, he found a significant relationship between a perception of listening by the supervisor and the perception of self and other psychological safety from the perspective of the subordinate. In another study by Ellinger, Ellinger and Keller (2003), subordinates perceived that the manager was committed to their success by the managers' display of listening skills. The subordinates perceived that the supervisors were acting in their interests and not just in their own self-interests. While Lobdell, Sonoda and Arnold (1993) surveyed 278 employees of a technical unit at a large utility company in the southwestern USA and determined that the better the supervisor was perceived at listening, the more responsive subordinates perceived them to be. This study also found a positive association between a perception of good supervisor listening behaviors and how the subordinate perceived the openness of the organization as a whole. There appeared to be a positive association between a supervisor's good listening behaviors and the subordinate's individual sense of control and empowerment. Lastly, this particular study showed a moderately positive association between perceived supervisor listening and the employees' sense of commitment. It would seem that it is likely the USA respondents may have learned through their educational training as well as access to research studies that they should develop their listening skills.

Table 2 shows the mean score for the three countries. From the ANOVA score, there is a high level of significant between the three countries (sig. score of .000). The USA respondents (36.37) had higher self-perceived scores on their listening skills compared to India (38.35) and Malaysia (40.37). Among the three groups, Malaysia scored the highest mean score; thus showing that they self-assessed themselves lower than the US and India. It may be that the Malaysia respondents perceived they had lower listening skills because they lacked self-esteem. According to Tafarodi, Lang and Smith (1999, p. 3), "speculative explanations of substantively lower self-esteem in collectivists have pointed to factors such as cultural tightness, less willingness to disregard failure and shortcomings, attribution style, lack of choice in behavioral investment, greater tendency for guilt and shame, and pessimism". Their research found that Malaysians were significantly lower in self-competence when self-liking was held constant.

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**Table 2: The Mean Score of Listening Skills for the Three Countries**

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
US	239	36.37	5.870	.380	35.62	37.12	17	58
Malaysia	147	40.37	5.804	.479	39.42	41.31	27	57
India	247	38.35	5.197	.331	37.70	39.00	23	52
Others	19	35.58	7.647	1.754	31.89	39.26	26	53
Total	652	38.00	5.868	.230	37.55	38.45	17	58

### ANOVA

Listening skill	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1602.249	3	534.083	16.627	.000
Within Groups	20814.749	648	32.122		
Total	22416.998	651			

There is high level of significant different between the groups (ANOVA score is .000). USA citizens are better on listening skills compared to Malaysia.

The results corroborate the findings of Wolvin and Coakley (1996) that culture is the primary determinant of all communication behaviors, including listening. One's culture essentially serves to define who one is and how one will communicate through one's perceptual filter. As Wolvin and Coakley (1996) stated, people must recognize that what is considered "effective listening" in one culture may be totally inappropriate in another culture. For example, in high-context culture such as India and Malaysia, words mean very different things depending on the context, while in low-context cultures, such as the USA, the meaning of a message is contained more directly in the words. Listeners from high context cultures have been socialized to attend to implicit meanings in messages and carefully observe nonverbal behavior. They are more likely to respond to their gut level reaction to what they hear rather than to the facts or statistics presented in the message. People from low-context cultures are likely to spell things out with explicit, verbal communication, something that could be considered inappropriate and even insulting in a high context culture (Hall 1976).

Thus, it seems our study does lend credence that national culture may influence the perceived listening skills of the working professionals from the USA, India and Malaysia. While all three countries can be classified as having the masculine dimension of Hofstede's National Culture Dimensions, the USA scores the highest on this dimension at 63. This means that the behavior of the USA respondents is based on the shared values that people should "strive to be the best they can be" and that "the winner takes



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all". As a result, USA individuals will tend to display and talk freely about their "successes" and achievements in life. While India scores at 56, which is above the mid-range, but being a spiritual and ancient country, the culture is one of humility and abstinence. This often is seen in people who display masculine characteristics that they might be naturally inclined to have. Malaysia scores the lowest on this dimension at 50 (Hofstede n.d.). In our study, the Indian and Malaysian respondents, even though they are culturally classified as masculine, may have been more humble and modest in their self-assessments of their listening skills than the USA respondents.

### **4.2 Research Question 2: Is there a difference in the means for professionals in the 20 to 30 age group, the 31 to 40 age group, the 41 to 50 age group, and the 51 and older age group who responded to the listening survey?**

The ANOVA result (.283) shows that there was no significant difference on listening skill due to age differences (Table 3). Respondents within the age group of 61 to 65 years old were better listeners (mean=36) while those aged 51 to 55 years old (mean=40.65) appeared to have the lowest perceived listening skills. In Brownell's (1990) study, managers over 45 years were given slightly lower ratings than their younger colleagues. Our findings of the age group of 61 to 65 seeing themselves as better listeners supports Castleberry, Ridnour, and Shepherd's (2004) study which claimed that listening skills would improve when people grow older. However, our insignificant differences between listening skill and age differences was similar to prior research by Castleberry et al. (1999, cited in Castleberry, Ridnour, & Shepherd, 2004) in which no significant relationship between listening and age was found.

Also, it may well be that the amount of time that one has available to listen has a profound effect on the person's listening skills. If a listener is rushed or unable to devote much time to the process, then the listening may well be short-circuited. Managers in the age group of 51-55 have many responsibilities and may perceive they have little time to spare, and thus may not realize the importance of listening to others.

**Table 3: ANOVA Result for Age in Comparison with Listening Skill**

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	395.031	9	43.892	1.215	.283
Within Groups	19934.521	552	36.113		
Total	20329.552	561			

## **5. Conclusion and Implications**

This exploratory study examined listening skills of working professionals from three different countries. Although, we cannot say with certainty that the sample from the three different countries is representative of all Indian, North American or Malaysian working professionals, in general, it is indicative of perceived listening skills of the working professionals in those three countries. As can be noted from this study, national culture continues to play a strong role in the beliefs, attitudes, and actions of individuals and thus impacts the listening behaviors of individuals. Therefore, the results of this study substantiates the findings of Mujtaba and Pohlman (2010), Zohoori (2013) and Lewis (1999) who also found that culture does influence one's listening skills. In addition, this study corroborates the findings by Brownell (1990), which found that the age factor has some relationship with listening. The findings suggest that older individuals are better listeners than when they were younger.

Therefore, the findings of this study become relevant and important as more and more business is conducted in multicultural societies across the global village. Individuals must be aware of the traditions and customs of the different cultures so that they can communicate and listen effectively with others. Collins (2006) shared that listeners should pay attention to the context of the communication to improve their understanding of message. Although he did caution that the interpretation of the meaning of a message depends upon contextual cues and those vary by culture.

However, if working professionals from all countries become more aware of their listening skills and seek ways to improve their listening skills, they will become more effective in their cross-cultural communication. Rautalinko and Lisper (2004) noted that training in reflective listening has been associated with increased productivity and increased company profits.

Managers who take the time to listen to their direct reports may not realize the impact of their actions but van Vuuren, de Jong and Seydel (2007) found it to be one of the most important elements in the workplace. According to Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003), taking time to listen to subordinates will make them feel respected and valued, which is critically important for the Gen Y generations of workers.

As organizational structures become flatter, managerial roles will focus more on coaching and collaboration, where listening skills will become paramount to reaching individual and organizational goals. Golen (1990, p. 26) stated, "The importance of listening cannot be questioned in both academic and organizational settings".

### **5.1 Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research**

The limitation of this study is that individuals' perceptions about their own listening effectiveness may differ from the perceptions of others. Another study could be undertaken to compare individuals' self-reports of listening skills to others' [e.g., co-workers, managers, and peers] assessment of their listening skills. Such a study could potentially compare listening behaviors to measures of self-confidence.

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