How We Listen

Culture, Gender, and Conversation Style | Level B2 | EnglishBridges.com

Before You Read

Discuss these questions with a partner.

1. Think of a friend who often finishes your sentences or talks while you are still speaking. Does it bother you, or does it feel friendly?
2. What does a good listener do with their face, eyes, and body? What does a poor listener do?
3. How might ideas about good listening differ by country, age, gender, or personality?

Reading: How We Listen

Imagine you are halfway through a story when your listener **cuts in**. She finishes your sentence and adds a detail of her own. Does that feel supportive or rude? Conversation has its own **rhythm**. Researchers recorded talk in ten languages. Speakers in all of them avoided talking at once and replied after a tiny gap. The gaps differed between languages, but only by a fraction of a second. Even so, a slower speaker may seem cold, and a faster one may seem **pushy**, even when both are polite.

Some groups treat **overlap** as a gift. A well-known linguist described a style in which listeners talk along with the speaker to show enthusiasm. People with a different style usually wait for a pause, and for them the same behavior feels rude. Popular opinion divides the world into loud and quiet talkers. These **stereotypes** contain a grain of truth and a great deal of simplification. One estimate says people in Portugal feel uneasy after two and a half seconds of silence. In China, it says, people can wait eight to ten. Nobody knows how those numbers were measured, so take them lightly. How much silence can you **tolerate**?

Listening **cues** are not universal. Japanese speakers use short sounds and nods, called aizuchi, far more often than most English speakers do. A Japanese listener may feel that a silent English-speaking audience is not listening. Head movements can be **ambiguous** too. In Bulgaria, a side-to-side shake has traditionally meant yes. In India, a head wobble is often described as meaning anything from yes to maybe. In much of the English-speaking world, **steady** eye contact signals honesty. Elsewhere, a long **gaze** at an older person can seem **confrontational**. In some eye-tracking studies, British viewers fixed on the eyes, while Chinese viewers looked more at the nose area.

Then there is gender. A later review of dozens of studies found that men interrupt slightly more than women, but the difference is small. It is larger for aggressive interruptions that show **dominance**. Social **status** matters at least as much. People with more power tend to interrupt

more, whatever their gender. Any claim that **exaggerates** these differences deserves suspicion.

The writer does not suggest memorizing rules for every country. Averages describe groups, and the person in front of you may be an exception. A better habit is to **interpret** behavior generously.

Vocabulary: Fill in the Blank

Complete each sentence with a word or phrase from the box. Use each one once.

cuts in **confrontational** **dominance** **tolerate** **ambiguous** **interpret** **steady** **overlap** **pushy** **rhythm** **exaggerates** **status** **gaze** **cues**

1. My brother always _____ before I can finish my sentence, and it drives me crazy.
2. The drummer kept a perfect _____ all through the song.
3. The salesperson was so _____ that I left the shop without buying anything.
4. When two people speak at the same moment, the _____ makes it hard to hear either one.
5. I can _____ a little noise, but this music is far too loud.
6. Good listeners notice small _____ such as a smile or a frown.
7. His answer was so _____ that nobody knew whether he meant yes or no.
8. She kept a calm and _____ voice while she gave the speech.
9. He held her _____ for a long moment before he looked away.
10. The meeting turned _____ when the two managers began shouting at each other.
11. In many animal groups, the strongest male shows _____ over the others.
12. Doctors usually have a high _____ in society, and people respect them.
13. My uncle always _____ when he tells fishing stories, and the fish gets bigger every time.
14. People from different cultures may _____ the same smile in very different ways.

Word Partners: Collocations and Word Families

Part A. Collocations

Match the two halves to make common phrases. Write the letter on the line.

1. get into a	_____	**a.** gaze
2. meet her	_____	**b.** salesperson
3. a high	_____	**c.** rhythm
4. pick up on	_____	**d.** stereotype
5. an ambiguous	_____	**e.** subtle cues
6. a pushy	_____	**f.** meeting
7. challenge a	_____	**g.** wording
8. a confrontational	_____	**h.** status

Now choose three of the phrases and write your own sentences.

Part B. Word families

Complete each sentence with the correct form of the word in brackets.

1. The comment was open to more than one _____. (*interpret*)
2. There was a lot of _____ in her message, so I asked what she meant. (*ambiguous*)
3. That is a huge _____, and it is not true. (*exaggerates*)
4. The team was _____ in the second half and scored four goals. (*dominance*)
5. Please be more _____ of other people's opinions. (*tolerate*)
6. The two leaders had a _____ about the border. (*confrontational*)

Comprehension Questions

Answer in full sentences.

1. What happens in the opening scene, and what question does the writer ask?
2. What did researchers find when they compared turn-taking in ten languages?
3. Why can a tiny difference in timing cause a misunderstanding?
4. Describe the style in which listeners talk along with the speaker. How might it feel to someone with a different style?
5. Why does the writer say that the numbers about silence in Portugal and China should be taken lightly?
6. Why might a Japanese listener and an English-speaking speaker misread each other?
7. What does the reading say about eye contact in different places, and what do eye-tracking studies add?
8. What did later research find about gender and interrupting, and what matters at least as much?
9. Do you agree with the writer's advice to interpret behavior generously? Give two reasons.
10. **True, False, or Not Given:** *"Researchers found that all ten languages had exactly the same average gap between turns."* Explain your answer using the reading.
11. **Yes, No, or Not Given:** *"The writer believes that people should memorize listening rules for every country."* Explain your answer using the reading.
12. **Author's purpose:** Why does the writer begin with a listener who finishes the speaker's sentence? Is it (a) to show that the same behavior can feel supportive or rude, (b) to prove that women interrupt more than men, or (c) to explain how researchers record conversations?

True or False

Circle T (true) or F (false). Be ready to correct the false sentences.

1. In ten languages, speakers usually left a very short gap before replying. **T / F**
2. Researchers found that people in all ten languages liked to talk at the same time. **T / F**
3. A well-known linguist described a style in which listeners talk along with the speaker to show enthusiasm. **T / F**
4. The writer says that the numbers about silence in Portugal and China are exact. **T / F**
5. Japanese speakers use short sounds and nods more often than most English speakers. **T / F**
6. A head wobble in India always means yes. **T / F**
7. In some places, a long gaze at an older person can seem confrontational. **T / F**
8. Eye-tracking studies found that everyone in the world looks at faces in exactly the same way. **T / F**
9. Reviews found that men interrupt far more than women in every situation. **T / F**
10. People with more power tend to interrupt more, whatever their gender. **T / F**

Language Focus: Generalizing with Quantifiers and Frequency Adverbs

Quantifiers (*all*, *most*, *many*, *some*, *few*, *no one*) and **frequency adverbs** (*always*, *usually*, *often*, *sometimes*, *rarely*, *never*) show how common something is without saying it is true for everyone.

Quantifiers come before the noun: *Many travelers say… Some groups treat…*

Frequency adverbs come before the main verb but after *be*: *We rarely notice it. They are often described as…*

From the reading:

"**Some** groups treat overlap as a gift."

"People with more power **tend to** interrupt more, whatever their gender."

Tip: *Most people tend to…* is more accurate than *People always…*, and it helps you avoid stereotypes.

Part A. Sentence starters

Finish each sentence so that it is true for you.

Quantifiers (all, most, many, some, few, no one)

1. Most people in my country _____
2. Few people I know _____
3. Some of my friends _____

Frequency adverbs (always, usually, often, sometimes, rarely, never)

4. When I am nervous, I usually _____
5. In my family, we rarely _____

Part B. Questions

Answer each question in a full sentence. Try to use a quantifier or a frequency adverb. Then ask a partner.

6. How do people in your country usually greet a friend?
7. What do many people do while they wait in line?
8. How often do you reply to a message within a minute?
9. Do people in your town talk to strangers on public transport?
10. What do your friends tend to do when you tell them a long story?

Discussion Questions

Discuss with a partner or in a small group. Give reasons and examples.

1. Have you ever felt that someone was not listening to you? What made you feel that way?
2. How comfortable are you with silence in a conversation? How long is too long for you?
3. Do you prefer a listener who stays silent or one who reacts with sounds and comments while you talk? Why?
4. How do people in your country usually show that they are paying attention to a speaker?
5. Have you ever misunderstood a gesture or a look when you met someone from another country? What happened?
6. In your school or workplace, who talks the most in meetings? Why do you think that is?
7. When is it acceptable to cut in while someone is speaking? When is it never acceptable?
8. Do you listen differently on a video call than in person? What changes?
9. The reading says some smiling may come from social expectations. Do people expect men and women to listen in different ways where you live?
10. Is it fair to call a whole country quiet or loud? Why do such ideas stay popular when they are only partly true?
11. When people with different listening styles work together, should one side change its style, or both? Why?
12. Should children be taught to look people in the eye? Why or why not?
13. How can teachers or managers make sure that people with a slower speaking tempo get a chance to speak?
14. If listening styles are shaped by culture, can people truly change their style, or only learn to adjust?

Online Practice

Scan the code or visit **englishbridges.com/lessons/listening-across-cultures** for the full reading, vocabulary activities, the Speed Challenge, typing practice, and AI conversation prompts.