(Vers_Jan25)

Abstract

High-quality listening is a multifaceted social behaviour, and theories and research concerning it are mixed in terms of listening definitions and recommendations. The current study canvassed lay practitioners' understanding of optimal listening qualities and training, drawing on a wide range of listening training materials (N = 207) sourced from the World-Wide-Web. Thematic analysis results were critically examined to systematically position praxis against our current understanding of listening theories. Findings are presented as a "dialectical listening theory" which posits that at its core, listeners' behaviours often exist in direct tension with their mindset or intuition. Furthermore, we posit that this tension is amplified when individuals are faced with conversations that conflict with their perspectives or values. Finally, we argue that listeners may need to oscillate between dual-process states of unconscious (intuitive) and conscious (intentional) listening. We conclude that high-quality listening involves direct recognition and strategic management of tensions throughout the listening process.

Keywords: Listening, Listening Training, Thematic Analysis, Dual-processing.

Understanding and Cultivating Effective Listening: A Dialectical Theory of the Tensions between Intuition and Intentional Behaviour

People know when they are listened to well. Speakers form holistic evaluations of their conversation partners and report with some confidence when they feel 'listened to' or not, evaluations that impact their reactions to the conversation (Lipetz et al., 2020). In their conceptual and empirical work, researchers have attempted to address what listening looks like, largely in terms of the relational observed and unobserved behaviours used by the listener (e.g., Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022). Yet researching the nature and outcomes of listening has not been straightforward because approaches to conceptualising the construct are complex, varied, and fragmented and have spanned a range of disciplines, including psychology, communication, management, and linguistics (Bodie et al., 2008; Glenn, 1989).

Outside of the research domain, listening is understood to be a fundamental tool that benefits individuals in professions that rely on communication. Those who listen well tend to perform better at their jobs including sales, healthcare workers, customer service professionals, journalists and leaders (Drollinger et al., 2006; Harro-Loit & Ugur, 2019; Itzchakov, 2020; Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022; Wouda & van de Wiel, 2014).

Beyond helping people to perform better, many professional roles such as coaching, mentoring, consulting, counselling and psychotherapy may rely on listening as a core skill or activity (Burt, 2019; Lai & McDowall, 2014; Rogers, 1942; Stein, 2021). Recognising the significance of listening as a performance enabler, practitioners have given ample attention to developing listening training to help others to improve their listening (e.g., Itzchakov, 2020; Itzchakov et al., 2022b). The sum of knowledge by the lay practitioner is largely untapped in academic research, but this knowledge can help researchers develop clearer working definitions of listening and advance listening theory; including addressing gaps in our understanding about how to train people to listen well.

Academic Conceptualisations and Implications of Listening

Several branches of listening research have developed in recent years. For example, listening has been used to improve impaired attention (e.g., in children with autism spectrum disorder; Irwin & Brancazio, 2014), language acquisition (Feyten, 1991), learning and well-being in educational contexts (Rave et al., 2022), and to facilitate relationships with others (Bodie, 2012; Kluger et al., 2021). The current paper is particularly concerned with the latter – interpersonal listening – which is sometimes referred to as "active listening" (Rogers & Farson, 1957) or "active-empathetic listening" (Drollinger et al., 2006) in the academic literature. Interpersonal listening can be understood as "a complex behaviour that helps signal involvement or the degree to which participants are enmeshed in the topic, interpersonal relationship, and situation" (Coker & Burgoon, 1987, p. 463).

Several components of interpersonal listening have been identified from listening research, which comprise our understanding of listening to date (Itzchakov & Kluger, 2017; Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022). These include attention (e.g., gazing, focusing, remembering), comprehension (e.g., processing, interpreting, learning), and positive intention (e.g., validating, empathising, being non-judgmental). These three constructs have been found to have strong positive causal relationships with feeling listened to (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022). Further downstream, as individuals perceive themselves to be listened to well, they report many greater benefits such as well-being (Itzchakov, 2020; Itzchakov et al., 2022b; Itzchakov & Weinstein, 2021; Trahan & Rockwell, 1999), shared understanding and openness (Itzchakov et al., 2022a), and willingness for future self-disclosures (Weinstein et al., 2021, 2022; for reviews see Bodie, 2011b; Kluger et al., 2021).

Training People to Listen Well

Researchers have been implementing listening training for the past several decades in work that has attempted to test the outcomes of listening in everyday contexts. The earliest listening training study of which we are aware focused on telephone counsellors dating back to the 1960s (Ross & Shoemaker, 1969), and more recently, meta-analytic data from 32

studies show an average moderate effect size on listening behaviours from listening training at r = .38, 95% *CI* [.30, .46], τ = .21 (Kluger, 2020). There is some evidence that even relatively brief training can be successful. Training as short as two hours or two days can improve listening behaviours (e.g., Aakre et al., 2016; Davidson & Versluys, 1999; Graybill, 1986; Lisper & Rautalinko, 1996). In a few cases, researchers reported the transfer of training to practical contexts, for example, after listening training was delivered to counselling students (Levitt, 2001) and insurance customer service employees (Rautalinko & Lisper, 2004), their professional practice was enhanced. However, listening training is not consistently effective in creating the intended downstream benefits. For example, Rautalinko and Lisper (2004) reported customers did not experience different listening as a function of employees receiving training. In a parental communication program, although parents were objectively assessed as showing improved listening and felt more confident and competent, the children did not notice any differences, nor were there downstream effects on children's well-being (Graybill, 1986). In addition to downstream effects on the intended recipient of listening, another component of listening training that is inconsistently reported is the amount of time taken to train people to listen well. Establishing effective training methods that address time limitations is imperative in practice and we are still unclear on the optimal amount of time needed to train people to listen well. Recent findings suggest that very brief 10-minute training interventions embedded in broader courses may lead to negligible changes (Martin & Butera, 2022) and possibly extended programs yield better results (Rautalinko et al., 2007). It is as yet unclear whether it is difficult to train individuals to listen well or whether the basic approach to training listening needs to be developed.

Laypeople's perception can help to expand on broad and multi-faceted constructs (such as listening) to contribute to the scientific discourse, and they can offer academics resolution when concepts under study are intuitive and present within public conversations (e.g., Haddock et al., 2022; Schlehofer et al., 2008). Given the wide recognition of listening

as an important human ability (Bodie, 2012), listening training resources are publicly shared on the World-Wide-Web (www), but this content has lived in relative isolation from research and published literature. A critical analysis of this information from a lay community of practitioners can provide important information on what tensions or challenges exist in how we define, learn and apply the listening process in everyday practice, and how practitioners address tensions or challenges in vivo. Our findings form a normative listening theory that we expect will guide future listening research that is of practical relevance on the one hand; and on the other, informs listening training strategies that broad agreement suggest matters most.

Present Study Aims

Researchers have developed working definitions of listening, but there is little consensus in the academic literature about what listening entails or how best to develop others' listening (Weinstein et al., 2022). The current research employed thematic analysis (Robinson, 2022) to draw insights on how we understand and develop listening from the large body of practitioner training materials on interpersonal listening. The paper describes the practitioner's understanding of listening and listening training recommendations in light of researchers' current perspectives. Themes are then critically examined by identifying practical challenges, problems or tensions in the learning process. Using this approach, we attempt to construct a new, normative theory (rationally define universal principles and values) of listening and learning to listen to inform listening theory, future research directions and best practice in listening training.

Method

Sourcing Data

A search was carried out on publicly available www content using the search engine Google because of its top ranking and global coverage of over 90% of the web (RapidAPI, n.d.). Search terms included "listening and training"; "listen and training"; "active listening exercises"; "listening courses"; and "listening skills". These terms were chosen to capture

variations of search terms that cover “listening skills training courses”. The term “active listening” was chosen to acknowledge that the term has been broadly applied to listening training since its popularisation by Carl Rogers (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022; Tyler, 2011). To ensure adequate breadth and depth of qualitative data in the sample size, analysis continued until a point of saturation was reached with themes (Fusch & Ness, 2015). The top 207 texts (approximately 15 pages) were sourced from search results and included blog posts, articles, training course outlines, and freely available training materials. Articles and content specific to listening for the purpose of learning a language or educational learning were excluded as this form of listening is markedly different from the type of listening we are interested in exploring further in this study, namely, listening for human connection.

Search settings were set to the default region (United Kingdom) and English language by Google. Results included organisations and institutes in the United States, Netherlands, and Australia, for example, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Astra Zeneca, PositivePsychology.com, and Professional Development Training (respectively), but there was a limited representation of entities in non-English speaking countries.

Epistemology and Approach to Thematic Analysis

From a position of critical realism (Bhaskar, 2008), assuming that empirical observations of reality will be subject to some interpretation by researchers, our epistemological position assumed a “hybrid” approach to thematic analysis that incorporated both deductive and inductive measures; known as Structured Tabular Thematic Analysis (ST-TA; Robinson, 2022) – steps of which are outlined in detail in Supplementary Information, Appendix A. ST-TA method was chosen as it is appropriate for analysing large quantities of short-text (rather than lengthy interview transcripts) and because the epistemological position of ST-TA is well aligned to this research project (Robinson, 2022), situating itself between the essentialist approach of (Boyatzis, 1998) and the constructionist approach of Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

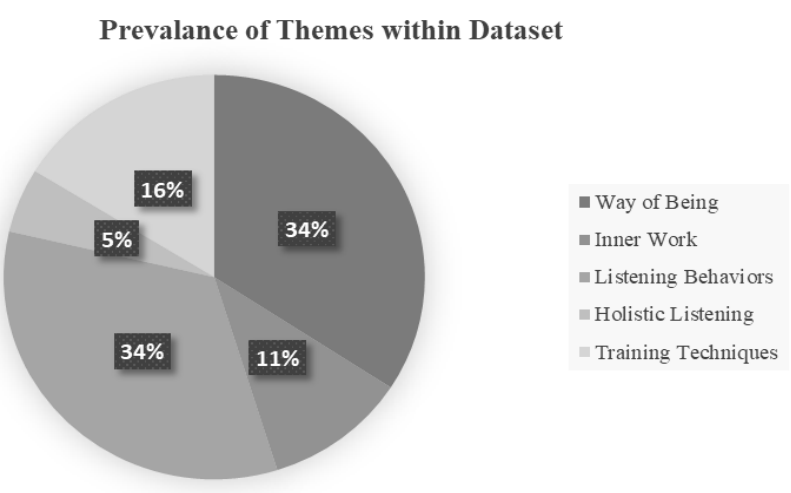
The eight step ST-TA approach (see Supplementary Information) rigorously guided the identification of essential, common listening factors in publicly available listening training texts while acknowledging the research teams' collective experience and subjective influence (as psychologists with experience in organisational, coaching and clinical psychology) in identifying themes. Analysis began with an a-priori set of codes from an initial set of sources, before inductively developing themes and codes through analysis of further text. Qualitative data was interpreted at a semantic level (surface meaning of language). A team of coders looked for frequently used terms, different terms that referred to the same underlying meaning and terms that were emphasised within the text to develop initial themes and sub-themes (Owen, 1984). Coders then engaged in reflexive discussion, adopted a consensus approach, before inter-rater reliability (IRR) analyses were calculated for each of the codes (Boyatzis, 1998 - see Supplementary Information, Table 2). Finally, a consensus was sought on the final set of themes, sub-themes and descriptions and documented.

Results

Themes Summary

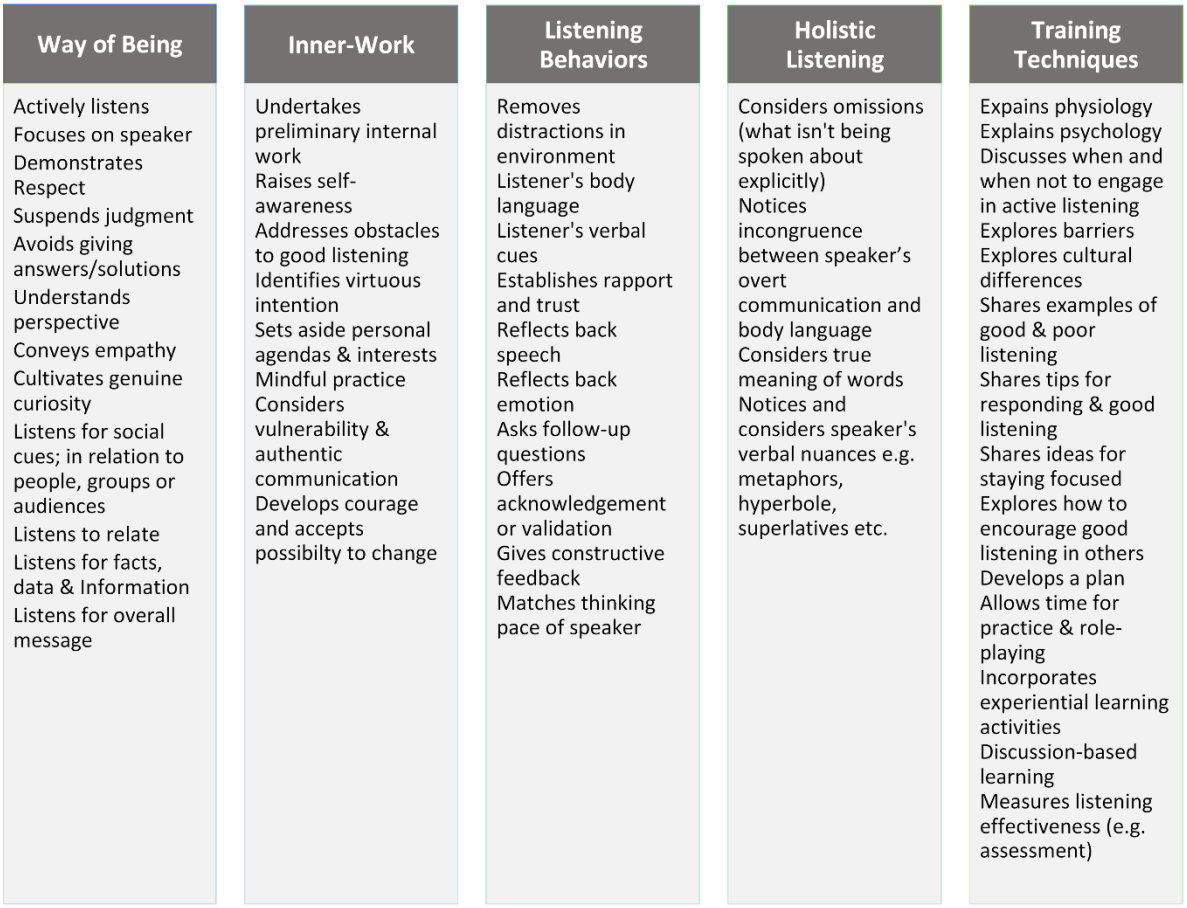
Our research team identified a total of five themes, outlined in Figures 2 and 3 and described further below (refer Supplementary Information, Table 1 for final themes and sub-themes).

Figure 1 *Portion of Codes Attributed to Each Theme from the Dataset of 207 Training Texts*



Way of Being and *Listening Behaviours* were similarly prevalent at 34% of the analysed data. *Training Techniques* (16%), *Inner-Work* (11%) and, *Holistic Listening* (5%) were less prevalent. Note: Percentages referred to under discussion of themes represent a percentage of the subset being discussed.

Figure 2 *Themes and Sub-themes Identified from Thematic Analysis of the Data*[1]



Way of being, the listener's conscious focus, intention, and manner as they engage with the speaker. Practitioner training sources emphasised that listening is an active, conscious process rather than a passive one (14.6% of the subset), listeners are to focus their attention in full (13.5%) to relate and connect with the speaker (8%).

[1] 25% of sources were double-coded, we did not include second rater codes in the calculation of prevalence to avoid biased representation of categories. Codes that presented with low IRR were excluded from calculations.

During relational listening, understanding the listener's perspective (11%), showing empathy (9%), and to a certain extent, curiosity (4%) become important elements in the *way of being*. Treating the speaker respectfully was a core sub-theme, entailing avoiding interrupting, talking over, or presenting counterarguments to the speaker (12%). Furthermore, listeners must suspend judgment and resist deeply analysing their own reactions during the interaction in the moment (11%). The focus on the speaker, rather than the self, was important if the speaker's perspective was to be understood (11%). Practitioners also recommended to *avoid giving answers/solutions* (2.3%), which although less frequent showed a significant level of agreement in the IRR analysis.

The final component of this theme referred to the listeners' mindset, which guides attention to specific information. Some practitioners recommended listening more broadly for the overall message or story (5.5%) and fewer to listen for meaning on a human or interpersonal level (3%). Business or work-related texts analysed (6.4%) recommended to focus on listening for accuracy or for facts, data, information, and accurate recall.

Only one or two sources recommended listening for "self-voice" (e.g., I, me) to gain insight into the speaker's attributions. This sub-theme (known in academic literature as *active voice*; Tannenbaum & Williams, 1968) was removed after IRR analysis due to low agreement. Following discussion, it was deemed a specialist, linguistic technique that mostly sits outside the framework of the lay practitioner's listening training.

Inner-work, the listener can engage in preparatory work to prepare for upcoming conversations and develop into becoming a better listener. This theme reflects discussions of the inner-work or psychological strategies that a listener might apply during the conversation or prior to ensure that deep listening can occur. As a deliberate process, the listener considers what values drive their intention to listen (18%). The focus is on a benevolent intention; for example, the listener can embrace humility or opt to learn from and connect with the speaker.

The listener also maintains a mindful presence on the moment (17%) where they

intentionally work to relax their personal defences. This requires raising prior awareness of one's own biases, beliefs, or feelings (20%) and one's personal objectives, interests or agenda (15.4%) so that these do not end up creating a distraction during the interaction. Bad habits that might obstruct listening (e.g., impatience, distractibility) should be planned to overcome (13.6%), and are recommended to be developed outside of the listening interaction and not during the conversation.

A few advanced training materials discussed the importance of developing personal courage (8%) and feeling safe to be vulnerable as a way of facilitating the possibility of changing one's views (2.5%) which is a potential outcome of listening well. It was recommended that listeners engage in such preliminary internal work to prepare themselves for the challenges of hearing messages they might not want to hear (5%).

Listening behaviours, observable listening behaviours that signal high-quality listening. The most common factors within this theme include the listener's body language and facial expressions (16%), reflecting back what the listener has heard (e.g., paraphrasing and summarising) (15.4%), asking questions (15%), offering verbal cues to indicate listening (12%) and reflecting back the speaker's body language (7%). Many training activities were focused on practicing these skills. Asking follow-up questions was understood as helping to convey understanding or demonstrate that the listener has accurately attended to, recalled, and interpreted what the speaker has communicated. Verbal cues include affirmations such as *"uh huh"* and *"yes"* but also the use of silence and pauses (4%) to match the speaker's pace. To provide full attention, listeners should remove distractions such as mobile phones (10%). A moderate amount of practitioner resources (9%) emphasised giving constructive feedback (e.g., "*that's great news*") and acknowledging or validating (5%) the listener's message (e.g., "*I see*," "*makes sense*"). Showing behaviours that express care, build trust, and create rapport (e.g., asking how the speaker is, reassuring that you care) was also recommended (6%).

A very limited number of resources focused on encouraging "story-telling" as a

specific narrative technique. Only one resource recommended disclosing similar experiences to show understanding as a technique to connect with the speaker, while several others advised the contrary, to reserve self-disclosure. None of the trainings picked up on points highlighted in the primary articles used for a priori coding; addressing power imbalances between the speaker and listener to remove impediments to trust and openness (Kasriel, 2022) and reflecting back muted or amplified emotions (Passmore, 2011). These four sub-themes presented with low IRR. As a result, they were excluded from the final interpretation of findings. It was agreed between the coding team that some of these could be considered advanced techniques.

Holistic listening, attunes to less overt communication signals and identifies incongruence with overt signals to intuit the real message. This theme highlights elements of listening training that encompass a holistic interpretation of the speaker's communication, and in particular, moving beyond the surface-level interpretation of body language and verbal expression to identify underlying or unsurfaced emotions and messages. The codes within this theme were less frequent than in other themes (representing only 5% of the dataset), suggesting that they are either reserved for more advanced audiences or emerging as a trend in lay practitioner training. The most commonly occurring sub-theme involved omissions; noticing what is not being spoken about explicitly (34% of the subset). For example, a person may share how much they enjoy the travelling or relocation requirements of their job, but they may omit a less obvious downside such as missing family. In this example, a good listener might have a hunch (possibly implicitly identified) by combining this "common sense" knowledge with noticing signs of sadness in the speaker.

Another sub-theme was incongruence, or recognising the underlying emotions of the speaker despite seemingly contradictory body language or verbal expression (27% of the subset of data). For example, a speaker might verbally express that they are excited to act, but their non-verbal behaviour reflects low energy, apathy, or disengagement. In this case the

listener learns more about the speaker from attending to their body language than their words.

Noticing verbal nuances was another common sub-theme under this theme (21% of the subset of data) such as hyperbole (exaggerated expression or terms not meant to be taken literally, such as "*I've said it a 100 times*"), metaphors (e.g., "*climbed a mountain*"), or figurative speech (e.g., "opportunity knocking") to consider again whether there is an underlying emotion or message sitting behind this use of language. Use of such terms may also indicate how important or intense an experience might have been for someone. A final sub-theme focused on understanding the true meaning of words, considering a deeper meaning of what is being communicated beyond surface-level interpretation (19% of the subset). People may substitute words for something less direct out of politeness or because they do not feel they can communicate authentically (e.g., using the word "interesting" when they really mean "strange" as a negative reaction). The listener must interpret the speaker's verbal intonations and nuances (e.g., sarcasm, politeness) and often, combine this information with the listener's own knowledge and experience (e.g., idioms often have cultural associations). Together these sub-themes form *holistic* listening.

Training techniques, content and features of listening training design. The final theme addresses elements of the training design that support the development and training of listening. The most common elements included sharing examples of poor listening contrasting against good listening (15%), the opportunity to practice using role-play or exercises (15%), addressing common barriers to listening such as filtering, advising etc. (13%), and sharing tips for common verbal cues and responses to indicate listening (8.5%). Incorporating the experience of feeling deeply listened to (5%) and discussion-based learning (2%) also presented as training techniques. Two themes, reflective questions (4.6%) and pacing training to allow time for reflection (5%), both presented with low IRR, and following discussion the analyst team agreed to merge these themes with discussion-based learning as it was agreed there was overlap between these three sub-themes.

Formally measuring or assessing listening effectiveness was recommended by 5% of sources, for example, by using the "The Listening Profile" adapted from (Brownell, 1996). Some sources described the psychology of listening (2%), but a larger number described the auditory, physiological process of hearing (11.4%). However, it could be argued that the psychology of listening overlaps with *Way of Being* and *Inner-Work* themes, even if they aren't explicitly referred to as "the psychology of listening". A small number of training materials included ideas for staying focused (4%), formulating a plan for listening in advance (2.4%), considering when it is appropriate to engage in active listening versus not (2.4%), how to encourage others to listen well (2.2%) and finally, noting cultural differences (2.4%).

Discussion

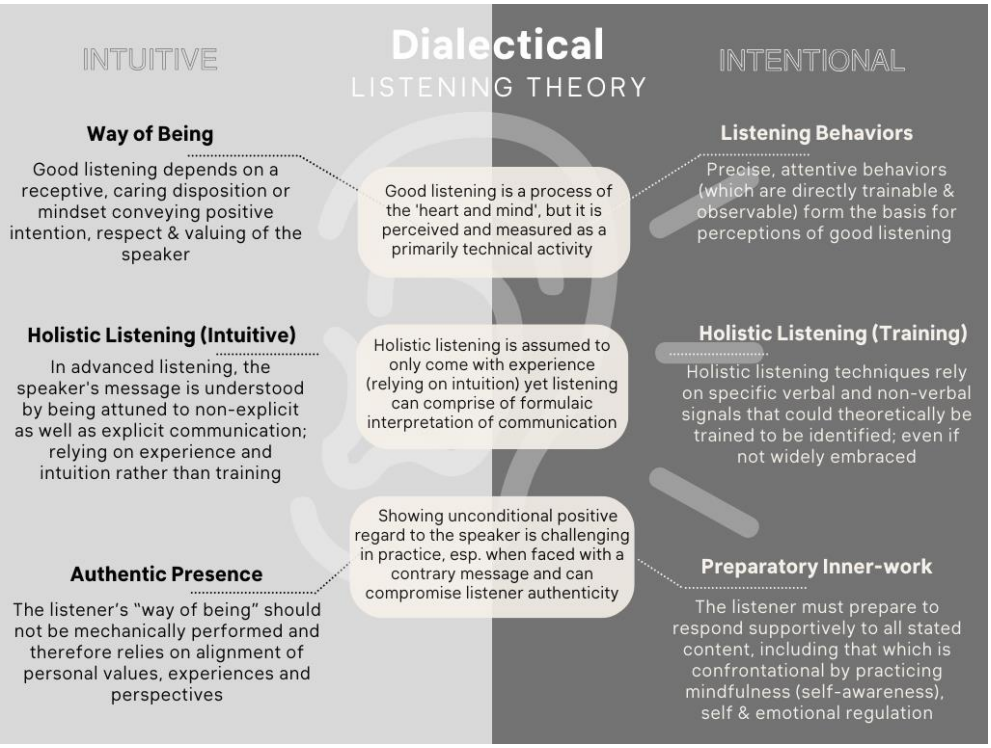
Integrating recommendations from listening training sources provided by practitioners on the web, we sought to utilise this largely untapped data source to further inform listening theory, research, practice and training. Five themes were identified that reflected both the internal process of listeners and their relational behaviours. These were termed *Way of Being*, *Inner-Work, Listening Behaviours, Holistic Listening*, and *Training Techniques*. Together, they highlighted a number of tensions between the practical application of listening and key philosophical ideals that listening theory supports. These tensions are discussed in further detail below and presented as "dialectical listening theory" (DLT), alongside strategies practitioners employ to overcome or address these challenges.

Tensions Experienced in Cultivating Listening

Themes revealed three interesting tensions (see Figure. 3) in the practice of listening and listening philosophy; i) A listener can learn to perform technical behaviours and verbal cues, but listening in this way may not compare well with listening that is driven by a specific mindset or "way of being"; ii) Listening very well (holistically) is more than a set of behaviours and relies on a "sixth sense" or intuition in addition to a way of being. Listening therefore, comes with time and experience (versus training alone) despite the presence of

formulaic techniques; and iii) Maintaining a listening "way of being" and "unconditional positive regard" can be challenging in the moment and has the potential to compromise listener authenticity, especially when faced with confronting or contrary messages.

Figure 3 *Dialectical Listening Theory (DLT) – Three Tensions in Learning to Listen*



We summarise these tensions as a dialectical listening theory (DLT). At a basic level, an excessive focus on technical performance detracts from an ideal mindset compromising the quality of listening. Listening performance may be further challenged for listeners who fail to intuit accurately the underlying meanings from explicit expressions, and finally, good listening may be difficult to maintain when faced with messages that directly challenge or conflict with our own beliefs and values. On the whole, our findings support that efforts in technical mastery can improve the listener's effectiveness but this alone is unlikely to suffice in generating positive downstream effects from high quality relational listening.

These tensions present us with an overarching dialectic or paradox during high quality listening; at an advanced level, unconscious (or intuitive) processing of speaker communication is a key driver of listening, supporting greater authenticity on the one hand.

Yet, when we stray away from conscious and focused processing of information (i.e., deeper processing of verbal cues by the listener; Burleson, 2011), our natural human tendency to convey personal biases or assumptions can impede non-judgmental listening, exacerbated when faced with conversations that conflict with one's own perspectives or values. Good listening then, may compromise listener authenticity as we actively seek to suppress our own judgments. It appears that good listening demands both unconscious, intuitive *and* conscious, intentional processes (Bodie & Jones, 2021), that may sit in conflict with each other.

Our analyses identified several strategies employed by listening trainers to address these challenges or tensions. This includes engaging in preparatory "inner-work" (or self-development) to listen well, and learning to apply psychological strategies (such as mindfulness) "in the moment" to address the challenge of withholding judgment and maintaining an authentic focus during listening. The second tension of relying on intuited or implicit processes to demonstrate holistic listening is not proactively addressed in listening training and from this dataset, appears to rely solely on gaining maturity in listening "experience". We discuss these potential resolutions further below in light of current and future academic research.

Managing the Tensions

To manage the first tension, technical performance versus mindset, practitioners suggest developing a ***way of being*** – an overarching mindset and approach that provides the core foundation needed for the optimal listening experience aligning with the *philosophy* of "active listening" - popularised by the humanist approach of Carl Rogers in the 1950s: that listening is only effective when the person embraces their role as a source of love and support (Rogers & Farson, 1957). Rogers' book titled "A Way of Being" (Rogers, 1995) was more broadly philosophical writing about human potential, but he also applied this term to conscious and empathic listening as part of the therapeutic process, suggesting that good listening comprises more than a set of behaviours. The tension being that good listening

cannot simply be "parroted" or mechanistically performed through trained behaviours.

A wealth of research supports the view that active listening behavioural responses directly contribute towards the *perception* of listening by the speaker, for example, an automated, computer-driven social skills training (for populations diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder) based on analyses of head-nodding and back-channel responses alone predicted perceived listening skills at a correlation co-efficient over .43 (Tanaka et al., 2020). This can have downstream relational effects on speakers' trust, intimacy, and closeness (Gearhart & Bodie, 2011; Kluger et al., 2021). Yet, there is conflicting evidence relating to whether behaviour alone will suffice as good listening. Some researchers have found that viewing listening as simply mastery of skills or behaviour can be detrimental to social relationships and reduce listening motivation (Garland, 1981; Lachica et al., 2021). As a parallel, when considering the use of technology or "robots" to mirror active listening and mimic a human quality (Johansson et al., 2016), we suggest that this may be limited in the interpersonal impact on the speakers being listened to. Furthermore, we are unclear whether 'holistic listening' – discussed further below - can be (effectively) learned and expressed by humans, let alone artificial intelligence, particularly as research into combined processing of verbal and non-verbal cues of communication is still emerging (Zhang et al., 2021).

In addressing the question, should listening training programs focus on helping people to identify and develop their "way of being" and if so, how? While some programs sometimes spontaneously target this explicitly (e.g., Kubota et al., 1997), it is worth noting that careful systematic approaches to developing listening behaviours can by proxy increase confidence and reduce anxiety of listeners (Hansen et al., 2002; Itzchakov, 2020; Nemec et al., 2017). Indeed, mastery in learning can in turn improve learner attitudes with more enduring results (Kulik et al., 1990). Briefer listening trainings have shown mixed results in improving listening attitude over and above listening ability (e.g., Behrs, 1994; Tatsumi et al., 2010) suggesting that developing a "way of being" through achieving mastery in listening

behaviours might take time. This advocates the implementation of more intensive, paced training programs.

The theme ***training techniques*** further reflected practitioners' emphasis on embracing both intention and behaviour during training with strategies that suggest *listening skills* (behaviours) are better built alongside *intention* (way of being) supporting empirical views by (Itzchakov & Kluger, 2017; Kubota et al., 2004). While the non-scientific practitioner and layperson widely embrace the term "active listening" to describe good listening, some researchers (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022; Tyler, 2011) argue that use of the term has morphed to focusing on only teachable behaviours (such as paraphrasing and reflecting) rather than the original essence of active listening (Rogers & Farson, 1957) which relies on empathy and unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1980). In an influential paper, (Tyler, 2011) analysed 12 business training sources sourced from the www and found that materials lacked sufficient depth to capture the true intention behind Roger's concept of active listening (Tyler, 2011). Interestingly, the frequency of codes in our analyses put the *Listening Behaviours* theme on par with the *Way of Being* theme. With the larger set of sources here, we were able to observe that the spirit of active listening, as well as its techniques, remains alive in practitioner recommendations today.

A second issue that we identified with listening training centres on the concept of ***holistic listening*****.** Originally proposed by (Lipetz et al., 2020), while lay people can describe how good listening looks in terms of broken-down components, listening is broadly perceived holistically. The listener's intention, way of being, and behaviour all play a role in shaping the speaker's holistic perception of feeling listened to; together they may be "greater than the sum of their parts". Through this theme, we extend the concept of holistic listening to emphasise the importance of a *listener's* ability to perceive the speaker's intended message as a whole (e.g., even if it is not explicitly communicated) through omitted information, inconsistent body language etc. and possibly before it even enters the speaker's conscious

awareness. Despite the lower prevalence of holistic listening in this dataset, the findings highlighted its importance. Many of the resources analysed were limited to training outlines for basic level listening training, yet closer inspection of rejected sub-themes in the analyses (that presented with low occurrence/IRR) points to the presence of a broader range of advanced listening techniques (e.g., recognising linguistic patterns) to support holistic listening.

Holistic listening is not a new concept. For example, it is widely acknowledged in therapeutic literature (e.g., Therapeutic Metacommunication; Kiesler, 1988, Gestalt Therapy; Perls et al., 1994). Beyond linguistic patterns, holistic communication supports that listeners interpret a combination of verbal and non-verbal cues *together*, yet communication research which extends beyond linguistic processing is only just emerging - revealing a gap in our understanding in how we interpret body language and verbal communication together (Beattie et al., 2014; Trujillo & Holler, 2023; Zhang et al., 2021).

Holistic listening is attributed an almost magical quality by practitioners, described as intuitive – relying on a "sixth sense" – that only comes with experience. The ephemeral nature of this theme might explain why only 5% of the dataset contributed to it, revealing it is less prevalent in training materials targeted towards the layperson. It is perceived by practitioners as a challenge to teach or train novice listeners how to listen at this level and it seems that practitioners accept this level of listening is reserved for the more mature (experienced) listener (e.g., in coaching; van Nieuwerburgh, 2017; Passmore, 2011). Indeed, holistic listening relies on automatic cognitive processing - supporting the capacity to "integrate[s] different parts of the speaker's talk into a working whole" (Bodie, 2011a, p. 279). Doing so may require the use of working memory (Janusik, 2005), synthesising information (Aotani, 2011), and making inferences (Hauser, 1984) based on verbal intonations and nuances (Nemec et al., 2017). We speculate that true holistic listening cannot be developed in a short time but must be practiced and trained alongside the development of

inner-work. As an advanced level of listening, we suggest it deserves future attention by researchers in the context of relational listening.

The focus on intuitive versus conscious processing at an advanced level of listening sits in contrast to previous findings by listening researchers, which conclude instead that advanced listening requires more conscious and considered processing of information, while basic levels of listening rely more on automatic cognitive processes (Burleson, 2011). It may be that this contrast exists because of a distinction between everyday listening such as in superficial conversations, which may happen with less conscious effort, and the effortful listening a trainee may exert when first attempting basic-level listening training. Questions of effort, deliberation, and intent, will be fascinating to explore in future studies of listening that is deep and empathic, in contrast to listening within less personal conversations.

A third challenge was identified: In practice, it is difficult to maintain a conscious, positive intention during listening, especially when speakers' views differ from those of the listeners or conflict with their values (Adamu et al., 2022). Consequently, it may be challenging for the listener to remain authentic in their "way of being". When listening deeply and seeing the world through another's perspective, there is a risk to mental frameworks that make up "the self" which may be challenged (Rogers & Farson, 1957). This may result in automatic, unhelpful or obstructive responses by the listener, such as withdrawing from emotions, over-involvement or improper recall, to person-specific triggers - referred to as "countertransference" in the field of psychotherapy (Fauth, 2006), leading to an impeded relationship and therapeutic outcomes (Hayes et al., 2018). It was widely believed that countertransference is pathological and avoidable, however, more modern viewpoints accept it as a natural human response, one that can be managed or even leveraged to enhance understanding of the speaker (Gabbard, 2001). The question of whether such unconscious and biased responses can be managed or overcome, and how best to achieve this, is not only debated by countertransference researchers, but also by researchers in unconscious

or implicit bias training to support diversity, equity and inclusion in organisations and communities (Noon, 2018; Schmader et al., 2022). .

One practical strategy proposed for overcoming countertransference is demonstrating good listening skills (Fauth, 2006). Yet, our findings suggest that being able to listen well is the result of having addressed the underlying conflicts in the first place. This final tension is practically addressed by listening trainers in this study's review through the theme ***inner-work***. On a technical level, inner-work sub-themes in the results represent components of mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2005), integrated self-regulation (Weinstein et al., 2013), and integrated emotion regulation (Roth et al., 2019). Indeed, these are considered core components of managing countertransference (Gelso & Hayes, 2001) by psychotherapy researchers. This is mobilised by practitioners through taking time to engage in *preliminary internal work*; preparing to listen by reflecting on one's own emotions and perspective, acknowledging potential obstacles such as personal biases or bad habits, and practicing psychological strategies (e.g., clearing the mind, focusing, emotion regulation). This preparatory work can help individuals to develop a strong internal foundation for non-judgmental responding *prior* to engaging in listening interactions. We suggest that these personal regulation strategies should be included in listening training programs, with sufficient time for self-development to occur (e.g., by allowing time for self-reflection and discussion-based, experiential learning).

Beyond this, mindfulness has also been shown to play a role in facilitating relational listening (Goh, 2012; Manusov et al., 2020; Wachs & Cordova, 2007) and to support listening training (Schaefer, 2018). For example, *interpersonal mindfulness* – a relational form of mindfulness consisting of presence, awareness of self and others, non-judgmental acceptance, and non-reactivity (Pratscher et al., 2019), can offer resolution to 'in the moment' challenges of good listening, helping to address the effects on listener bias (Burgess et al., 2017; Gibb et al., 2022; Kanter et al., 2020).

By practicing mindfulness in the moment, it seems that the listener may need to oscillate between "dual-process" states of unconscious, intuitive and conscious, intentional listening – taking time to develop self-awareness, acknowledge and evaluate automatic thoughts or reactions before choosing how to respond. Alternatively, the listener may practice engaging in both states of listening concurrently if indeed that is cognitively possible within the context of listening depending on which cognitive processes or thinking systems are activated during each state of processing (Evans & Stanovich, 2013; Spunt, 2013). While there has been research conducted on dual-process thinking for listening to persuasive (Chaiken, 1980) and supportive messages (Burleson, 2009), we suggest further exploring dual-processing in the context of listening to views that conflict with one's values or attitudes, and the impact on perceptions of listener authenticity, bias and self-awareness can provide important avenues for future study.

Finally, the findings in this study also point to an important consideration in assessing listening skills through observer ratings (e.g., Kluger & Bouskila-Yam, 2017; Trahan & Rockwell, 1999). Those observations are limited to listening behaviours, but we emphasise the importance of assessments that measure actual and perceived *listening attitude*, as well as perception of listening behaviour (e.g., Bodie, 2011a; Mishima et al., 2000), particularly in the context of relational listening as a shared, social phenomenon between more than one party.

Future Research Informed by Dialectical Listening Theory

Together, these findings support that training people to listen well is more complex than learning a set of verbal and behavioural responses. While good listening can be demonstrated in this way (in some cases within a short space of time), listening also relies on establishing a positive and intentional mindset. At a more advanced level, processing of "holistic" communication signals from the listener need to be developed, yet formulaic strategies to support this development could be identified and shared more readily rather than

waiting for “the magic to happen” or intuition to set in. Indeed, it is often argued that intuition is not always accurate and so honing this in can benefit the trainee (e.g., Price et al., 2016). However, this would rely on research in the area of multimodal communication cues having advanced further than it currently stands (Zhang et al., 2021). Much research to date has focused on a single mode (linguistic) rather than multi-modal processing (which might include prosody, gestures and mouth movement) of communication. Questions still remain unanswered, for example, the extent to which people process information in natural conversation by relying on multi-modal cues and the dynamics of such cues (Zhang et al., 2021).

A key challenge that will benefit those learning to listen well is preparing how to maintain a facilitative and supportive mindset in the face of conflicting views or opinions shared by the speaker. Being human means having biases and opinions, and raising awareness of and managing our personal biases in the listening process is a skill that needs to be learned if people are to develop into being good listeners. This could be addressed through engaging in personal development (inner-work; e.g., learning what your biases are, how they relate to your values and how you prefer to constructively respond to those who differ from you); and by learning psychological strategies such as mindfulness and emotion regulation to apply “in the moment”. While these strategies may already be employed by some practitioner listeners such as psychotherapists, this practice could be further investigated for effectiveness by any professional who aims to demonstrate high-quality listening, for example, teachers, doctors, managers and coaches.

Learning to overcome this final tension in listening has a practical utility beyond supporting practitioners to listen well. We advocate that this aspect of listening training might be ideal for supporting diversity, equity and inclusion programs, which traditionally rely on methods such as “unconscious bias training” with questionable impact (Noon, 2018; The Behavioural Insights Team, 2020). Such listening training, which equips trainees with the

skills needed to listen to opposing and diverse perspectives (e.g., Cumberland et al., 2021) without judgment and while maintaining respect may be a suitable alternative approach to investigate in terms of achieving similar intended aims of diversity training. Indeed, listening can depolarise and foster less extreme attitudes (Itzchakov et al., 2020; Itzchakov & Kluger, 2017). Creating comprehensive listening training, or incorporating listening into diversity and inclusion interventions, could support acceptance across individuals from diverse backgrounds, and views and tolerance towards minority groups in society.

Results also hint that *courage* is needed to listen well, a quality that is recognised as important in high-conflict or polarised contexts, such as when listening to communities and oppressed social groups (e.g., Catlaw et al., 2014; Thill, 2009). The listener can face vulnerability in such situations and there is some evidence to suggest listening can reduce vulnerability (Dhaliwal & Harrower, 2009). Work already focuses on how an intentional, thoughtful listener creates an environment of psychological safety, where the speaker can express them self without fear of repercussions (Edmondson, 2004; Sapra & Kumar, 2020). Further work could also explore how the listener can listen without fear of repercussions to the self. To date, the role of psychological safety has been limited to effects on the speaker during listening (e.g., Castro et al., 2016, 2018; Fenniman, 2010; Itzchakov et al., 2023), Castro et al., 2016, 2018; Fenniman, 2010; Itzchakov et al., 2023) not the listener's experience and mindset.

Constraints on Generality

The findings in this review should be interpreted within context and considering the limitations of the data. Researchers were based in the United Kingdom and all resources were written in English. Results are not generally representative of global practitioners or cultural differences, and we cannot make extrapolations for non-Western cultures. While there have been a few works testing listening in non-Western cultures (e.g., Es-Sabahi, 2015; Imhof & Janusik, 2006; Purdy, 2000; Wood & Alford, 2022; Zohoori, 2013), there has been little

focus overall on cross-cultural differences in listening (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022). Future work could analyse cross-cultural training sources to address this gap in research.

Conclusion

This study employed a systematic qualitative review using thematic analysis to explore listening training as it presents in practitioner training materials. The search resulted in 207 listening protocols, and the analysis resulted in five themes: *Way of Being, Inner-Work, Listening Behaviours, Holistic Listening,* and *Training Techniques*. We critically examined themes to identify tensions or challenges in the listening training process.

Analyses addressed practical questions such as: does listening training need to target development of both attitude and behaviours? Can holistic listening be broken down into concrete strategies allowing us to fast-track training of advanced relational (intuitive) listening skills? And, can inner-work (including developing courage, self-awareness, emotion-regulation) alongside learning practical skills such as "mindfulness" lead to better listening, particularly during challenging conversations? Results suggest that such self-development activities are essential in addressing the core tension of maintaining listener focus, neutrality and authenticity.

These insights could enhance listening training programs and contribute to developing listening theory. Indeed, we posit a new, dialectical listening theory which highlights three main tensions in learning to listen; the overarching theme being a pull between (dual-process) states of conscious, intentional and unconscious, intuitive thinking and behaviour. We suggest that the listener must learn to oscillate between these two states in order to demonstrate effective listening and future research could examine this further.

Expanding on the original research aim, beyond training people to listen to enhance professional performance, foster interpersonal connection and support well-being, the research could also guide tools such as fit-for-purpose listening training which aims to bridge divides across diverse groups of people to support diversity, equity and inclusion. Yet, when

developing listening skills the listener must be aware of tensions in the learning process; which may directly stand in the way of high-quality listening if not resolved.

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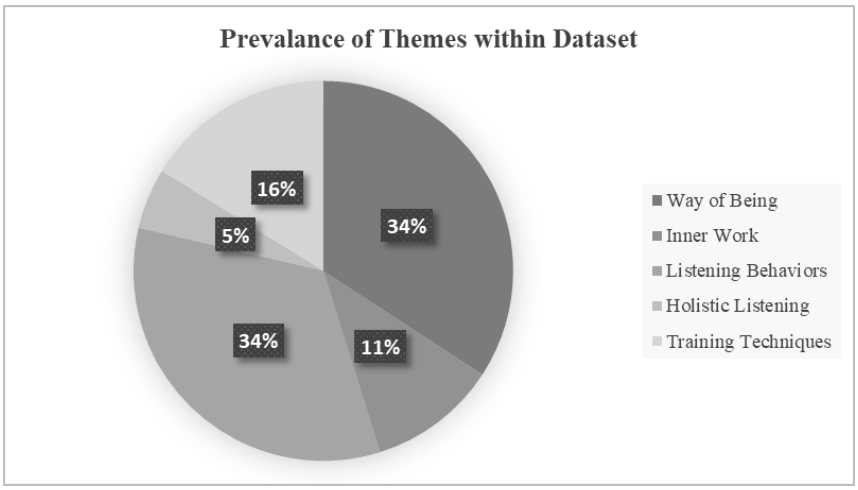
Figures

Figure 1.

Portion of Codes Attributed to Each Theme from the Dataset of 207 Training Texts Sourced from the World-Wide-Web[2]



ALT TEXT: Pie chart displaying percentage representation of the five themes identified.

[1] 25% of sources were double-coded, we did not include second rater codes in the calculation of prevalence to avoid biased representation of categories. Codes that presented with low IRR were excluded from calculations.

Figure 2.

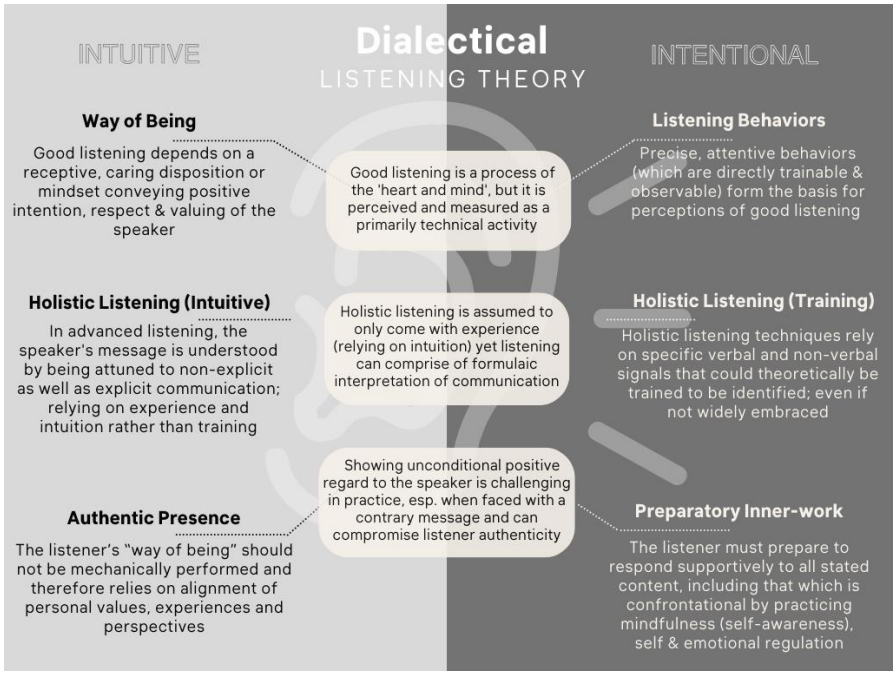
Themes and Sub-themes Identified from Thematic Analysis of the Data

Way of Being	Inner-Work	Listening Behaviors	Holistic Listening	Training Techniques
Actively listens Focuses on speaker Demonstrates Respect Suspends judgment Avoids giving answers/solutions Understands perspective Conveys empathy Cultivates genuine curiosity Listens for social cues; in relation to people, groups or audiences Listens to relate Listens for facts, data & Information Listens for overall message	Undertakes preliminary internal work Raises self-awareness Addresses obstacles to good listening Identifies virtuous intention Sets aside personal agendas & interests Mindful practice Considers vulnerability & authentic communication Develops courage and accepts possibilty to change	Removes distractions in environment Listener's body language Listener's verbal cues Establishes rapport and trust Reflects back speech Reflects back emotion Asks follow-up questions Offers acknowledgement or validation Gives constructive feedback Matches thinking pace of speaker	Considers omissions (what isn't being spoken about explicitly) Notices incongruence between speaker's overt communication and body language Considers true meaning of words Notices and considers speaker's verbal nuances e.g. metaphors, hyperbole, superlatives etc.	Expains physiology Explains psychology Discusses when and when not to engage in active listening Explores barriers Explores cultural differences Shares examples of good & poor listening Shares tips for responding & good listening Shares ideas for staying focused Explores how to encourage good listening in others Develops a plan Allows time for practice & role-playing Incorporates experiential learning activities Discussion-based learning Measures listening effectiveness (e.g. assessment)

ALT TEXT: Table with five columns detailing themes and sub-themes headings.

Figure 3.

Dialectical Listening Theory (DLT) – Three Tensions in Learning to Listen



ALT TEXT: Diagram illustrating the three core tensions between intuitive and intentional thoughts and behaviour with intuitive aspects of listening displayed on the left, intentional aspects of listening displayed on the right and central boxes highlighting the tensions.