

What "True Listening" Means in Terms of Acting? How to Train Actors Listening Truly?

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Abstract: This study delves into the concept of "true listening" in acting and its challenges, originating from the author's experiences in acting education. Feedback consistently noted issues with genuine listening, despite the author's belief in their attentive listening, leading to a perceived lack of engagement. The study explores the essence of "true listening," emphasizing its significance in Chinese acting education alongside "true seeing" and "true touching." It identifies two key aspects: external attention and responsive engagement to stimuli. The study uncovers phenomena like "arrogant listening" where actors memorize lines and anticipate responses, sidelining actual listening, and "inferior listening" driven by line memorization anxiety. Additionally, actors' tendency to pre-plan improvisation, termed "pre-set listening," hinders responsiveness. The notion of "isolated listening" parallels modern detachment from information. To address these issues, the study recommends utilizing Stanislavsky's "system" and the Meisner technique. Stanislavsky's "creative state" concept fosters genuine listening, while exercises encourage authentic partner exchanges. The Meisner technique cultivates present-moment engagement through truth-sharing exercises. The study concludes with suggestions for Chinese acting instructors, aiming to enhance acting education by illuminating "true listening" and strategies to overcome challenges.

Keywords: Drama Education, Acting technique, Meisner Technique.

1. Experiences of Myself (Background of the Research)

During my acting education in China, a recurring critique from my instructor concerned my apparent lack of genuine engagement with my scene partner's lines. Initially, I believed I was indeed attentive, leading to a perplexing disconnect between my perception and the instructor's feedback. Consequently, I endeavoured to overtly emphasize my attentiveness to elicit approval, inadvertently resulting in a superficial portrayal of active listening.

Furthermore, in my undergraduate studies, my acting teacher emphasized the importance of authentic sensory engagement—listening, observing, and touching—without imparting practical strategies. This deficiency persisted until my early studies at the Central Drama Academy, where Ita O'Brien pointed out a similar issue during her workshop. However, the workshop's focus on intimacy limited discussion on "true listening." Similarly, interviews with Chinese actors revealed a shared challenge.

These experiences prompted the current study, aimed at dissecting the elements of genuine listening in acting and devising effective training methods. The study delineates the components of authentic listening, delves into the reasons behind counterfeit engagement, and proposes tailored training incorporating identified factors and specific acting techniques. The study concludes by offering pertinent recommendations for Chinese acting educators, considering the unique pedagogical landscape.

In summary, this research seeks to unravel the essence of "true listening" in acting, address the disparity between genuine and feigned engagement, and provide a comprehensive framework to foster authentic listening skills among actors.

2. What 'True Listening' Means (Besides on Stanislavsky's "System")

Many Chinese actors regard "true listening, true seeing, true touching" (真听, 真看, 真感觉) as the motto of their acting. The "truly listen" mentioned in this study comes from this as one of the elements. I try to start my research from a very popular Chinese acting textbook which based on Stanislavsky's "system" (Foundation of stage acting), in this book I found two expressions about "true listening": 'Only by immersing oneself in the circumstances, paying attention to the partners, listening, seeing, touching and thinking truly, and continuously progressing with the development of the plot, can the acting be authentic and organic.' ("把注意力沉醉于创作的环境里去, 关注创作的对象, 做到真的去听、去看、去感受、去思想, 并随着戏剧情境的发展而连贯不断地进展下去, 才能使演员的表演具有真实性和有机性。") (Bolong & Yue, (2002))

'There are actors who seem to be watching and listening during acting, but on closer inspection, they are watching but not seeing, listening but not hearing, and do not really receive the stimuli given by the performer. They react as they are prepared' ((Bolong, Yue, (2002))

(“有的演员在表演中似乎是在看、在听, 但是仔细观察就会发现他们是视而不见, 听而不闻, 并没有真正地感受同表演者所给予的刺激, 就作出自己准备好了的反应。”))

The first quote offered actors two basics of achieving authentic acting, firstly, dive in the circumstances and partners, then achieve listening, seeing, touching, and thinking truly, after that, with the attention further the acting. Putting attention on outside world, being a horizontal actor, is a condition of "true listening". Therefore, whether the actor's external attention is an essential factor in "true listening".

The next quote mainly emphasizes motivation and gives an example of "false listening", "watching but not seeing,

listening but not hearing". If actors' attention was focused on the partners and the circumstances but not respond to external stimuli, and pretend responses that had prepared before, that also cannot be called "true listening". In other words, every stimulus of movement and speaking in acting has been from the outside world, rather than the actors' own preparation. This is the second key point of "true listening", external stimuli respond.

All in all, "true listening" often mentioned by acting teachers contains two main points. First, actors must pay attention outside. Second, actors must respond form external stimuli to further the acting. Sometimes, "True listening" just means listen to the lines which spoke by partners, but in acting actors also need to respond to other sounds, such as the sound of an explosion, partners' footsteps. So, the object of "true listening" includes all the sound on the stage.

Besides, I found an expression very close to "true listening" in the English context: 'active listening'. It began with the humanistic approach of Carl Rogers, an eminent psychologist of the twentieth century. It is defined as:

Active listening is a communication technique based on the listener feedback to the speaker. While hearing is a physical process, listening requires attention and focus. In addition to acknowledging that the words have had heard, active listening involves reflecting feelings and meanings to show understanding. Ideally, the listener also pays attention to body language, tone, and other nonverbal clues regarding the speaker's message (Comstock, 2018)

It is also easy to extract the same keywords, attention and external stimuli respond as "true listening" ("真听") in Chinese. Meanwhile, since "true listening" is a literal translation of "真听" in Chinese, I regard "true listening" and "active listening" as the word difference caused by literal translation in Chinese and English, with the same meaning.

3. Reasons of "False Listening"

In my experiential purview, instances of erroneous listening highlighted by instructors often coincided with my thorough comprehension of the script's dialogues. Proficiency in memorization led to a predicament: my anticipatory awareness of my partner's forthcoming lines resulted in a lapse of genuine auditory engagement. Succumbing to this predicament, I regrettably forwent attentive listening, instead relying on my memory to recite my lines without external stimuli. This mode of "false listening" can be aptly denoted as "hubristic listening."

During Ita O'Brien's workshop, my inaugural English-language performance rendered me apprehensive about line retention. To ensure seamless continuity, I diverted my auditory attention away from my partner's utterances, focusing instead on my subsequent lines. This inadvertent shift incapacitated my capacity for "true listening," marking the genesis of what I term "deficient listening."

Moreover, through the observance of Jake Harders, I discerned comparable instances of spurious listening during improvisational exercises. Students, in their zeal to script their improvisation, excessively premeditated their performances. Consequently, they rigidly adhered to their preconceived narrative, forsaking adaptation to their partner's actions and dialogues. This scenario diverges from the, as students lacked anticipation of their partners' responses, demonstrating instead an unwavering commitment to their predetermined agenda—a phenomenon I refer to as "premeditated listening."

In a broader context, the ubiquity of information inundation—be it from mobile devices, newspapers, or mere pedestrian traversal—diminishes one's propensity for meticulous contemplation of received content. This proclivity, widespread on a global scale, culminates in a cognitive reframing wherein information assumes the semblance of textual or auditory symbols, thereby eroding its inherent meaning. This impairs sensitive responsiveness to the conveyed information. Analogously, within the thespian realm, actors frequently encounter a parallel attenuation of responsiveness to on-stage cues. In congruence with Sigmund Freud's cognitive frameworks, I designate this phenomenon as "insular listening" (Cullari & Kusché, 2019), mirroring a psychological defense mechanism to cope with information inundation.

4. Approaches of Acting

In this research, I chose Stanislavsky's "system" and Mesiner technique. For choosing Stanislavsky, the reason is that most of the drama schools in China currently beside on Stanislavsky "system". Therefore, from the perspective of future practice in China, Stanislavsky's "system" is easier to be accepted by Chinese actors. In Mesiner technique the spontaneous response is very important. Responding is also an element of "true listening".

4.1. Stanislavsky's 'System'

Stanislavsky's discerning observations offer a compelling lens into the nuances of attention. He aptly illustrated a phenomenon wherein children, when impelled by teachers to be attentive in class, manifest outward signs of concentration through furrowed brows or fixed gazes directed at blackboards or books (Stanislavski, 2008). Strikingly, this resonates with my personal encounter, as elucidated earlier, where the instructor's call for "true listening" was met with a veneer of attentive engagement. Central to Stanislavsky's discourse is the notion of the "creative state" (Stanislavski, 2008), which finds pertinence in the domain of acting.

This conceptual framework furnishes an invaluable template for gauging the efficacy of an actor's creative state. It encompasses a sense of seamless tranquility, an inner metamorphosis, an all-encompassing cognizance of every facet of the scene, a detachment from the audience's response, a courageous embrace of on-stage decisions, and a profound authenticity of emotive expression (Jackson & Джексон, 2013). Disparate from quotidian existence, the "creative state" engenders heightened activation of both physical and psychological dimensions within actors. This augmented state of being propels intensified concentration and heightened responsiveness, effectively contributing to fostering genuine auditory receptivity—an indispensable ingredient in authentic listening.

To facilitate students' cultivation of the "creative state," I devised a bespoke exercise intertwining the notions of the "creative state" and attentive listening. Collaborative in nature, this exercise entails a dyadic interaction wherein participants generate uncomplicated dialogues from routine interactions. Participant A articulates their composed sentences, while Participant B reciprocates naturally and rationally. The underlying objective for Participant B is to guide Participant A toward articulating their own sentences organically. Conversely, Participant A endeavors to decipher their partner's intended response through the provided cues. This pedagogical endeavor ingeniously amalgamates the

principles of the "creative state" and authentic listening, channeling participants toward optimal engagement.

In summation, the insightful observations posited by Stanislavsky traverse the terrain of attentive engagement, resonating with my own experiential trust. The "creative state" stands as a pivotal axis upon which genuine listening pivots. The reciprocal exercise engineered to actualize the "creative state" while espousing attentive listening encapsulates a holistic pedagogical endeavor emblematic of this academic exploration.

4.2. Meisner Technique

The Meisner technique, renowned for its emphasis on nurturing actors' concentration and imaginative faculties, assumes a pivotal role in cultivating spontaneity and instinctual responses. Central to its ethos is the advocacy for actors to embark on their artistic journey from an internal locus, thereby unshackling them from the confines of trite and formulaic "role" portrayals. Krasner (2020) affirms that this methodology champions the attainment of genuine emotional experiences by immersing the actor in a dynamic interplay of impulses, fostering an unerring semblance to actual events transpiring in the immediate present.

Remarkably, the Meisner technique aligns seamlessly with the antecedent proposition elucidated in relation to "false listening." The proficiency engendered by script mastery often engenders a disconnect from the immediacy of auditory stimuli, entwining the actor's psyche in concerns tethered to past or future. Consequently, the authentic act of listening, conducted in the present, stands compromised.

Consequently, the iterative practice of the Meisner technique proffers a viable pathway to restore the actors' present-moment engagement. An illustrative exercise entails a face-to-face interaction between two students—Student A, the speaker, articulates their present-moment feelings, while Student B, the listener, accurately reiterates the sentiments expressed. Efficacious in its simplicity, this exercise holds significant potential in bolstering present-moment awareness. Notably, the practice not only rejuvenates present-moment engagement but also imbues the students with the vitality endemic to theatrical performance. This vitality derives from the rehearsal process mirroring the iterative nature of professional performances, which are presented with unwavering consistency.

Evolving this training paradigm, I graduated from initial sessions to more intricate iterations. Students, in prescribed exchanges, reiterate lines with modulations guided by their partner's demeanor. The cyclic nature of such repetitions engenders a heightened perception of freshness—a quality indispensable in staving off the entrapment of "false listening."

Furthermore, I explored the efficacy of this approach by introducing progressive levels of freedom within the exercise. Subsequently, students, seated back-to-back, replicated the exercise. This tactical variation propelled students to rely solely on auditory cues, inherently cultivating "true listening." The vitality of this modality emanates from its capacity to channel the essence of "true listening" through the rejuvenation of experiential novelty—a hallmark of authentic listening—engendered by the practice's cyclic nature.

In summation, the Meisner technique's tenets seamlessly align with the underpinnings of "false listening," rooted in

script proficiency. The innovative training regimen presented here—an amalgam of iterative practice and modulated freedom—proffers a potent strategy to resuscitate authentic auditory engagement among actors.

5. Further Suggestions for Chinese Acting Teachers

Within the realm of Chinese theatrical education, a prevalent predilection among acting students favors rehearsal over exercise-based methodologies, despite the acknowledged efficacy of the latter. This inclination, while understandable, impels educators to judiciously allocate class time for exercises. A harmonious balance between rehearsal and exercises stands imperative, demanding an astute calibration to optimize pedagogical outcomes. In this context, a noteworthy strategy entails the fusion of exercises with specific scripts or characters, catalyzing student interest through contextual relevance.

However, the landscape of theatrical instruction in China encounters a contemporary challenge: the prevailing climate of isolation has compelled the closure of educational institutions. This exigent circumstance, albeit adverse, prompted innovative adaptations. A foray into online platforms was embarked upon, to transpose pedagogical exercises to the virtual sphere. Initial findings underscored the feasibility of this transition, albeit contingent on stable network connectivity. Students attested to the viability of online exercises, offering a potential recourse in exceptional scenarios such as the ongoing isolation measures.

To illuminate, the confluence of rehearsal-oriented proclivities and the utility of exercises necessitates pedagogical nuance. Educators are poised to orchestrate a harmonious amalgamation, capitalizing on exercises' virtues while mindful of students' preferences. The evolving pedagogical terrain mandates adaptability, as evinced by the virtual transition necessitated by the current predicament. The promising feedback gleaned from this transition underscores the plausibility of circumstantial shifts, buttressing the prevailing pedagogical discourse.

In summation, the Chinese theatrical education milieu, characterized by a proclivity for rehearsal, intertwines with the efficaciousness of exercises, compelling educators to navigate a deliberate balance. The exigencies imposed by isolation have engendered a virtual dimension, bearing testament to pedagogical innovation in the face of adversity. In this amalgamation of tradition and adaptation, the paradigm of theatrical education in China persists in its evolution.

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