I thought I heard my name: the Cocktail Party Phenomenon revisited

Name and contact details

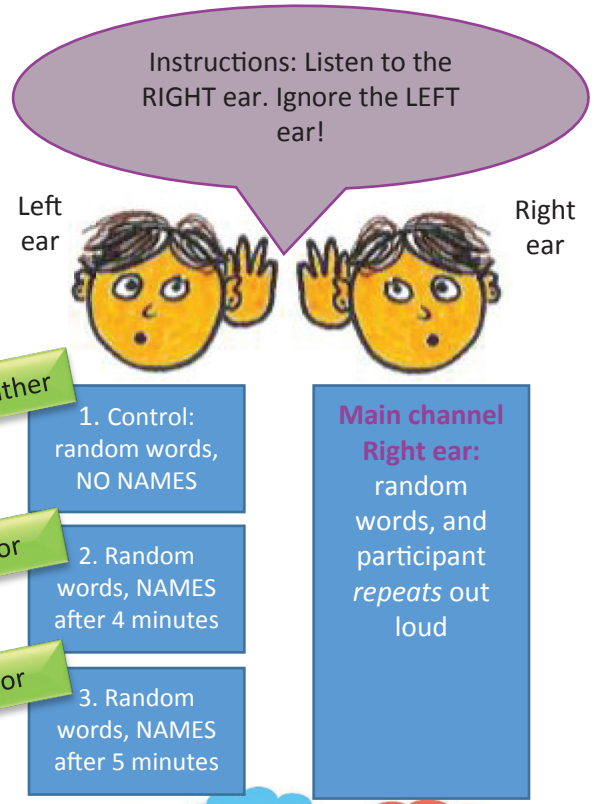
1. Background and theory - What we know:

- The cocktail party phenomenon describes how people are only able to focus on one voice at once when there are multiple conversations going on around them.
- Moray (1959) tested this idea on 12 participants by playing a different monologue in each ear but they were told to concentrate only on one. Only 33% of participants noticed their name when it was mentioned in the background monologue.
- There were limitations with this research: the sample size was too small; the use of retrospective reports meant some participants may have forgotten what they heard; and the use of male voices only may have affected attention.

2. The experiment: What the second researchers then did:

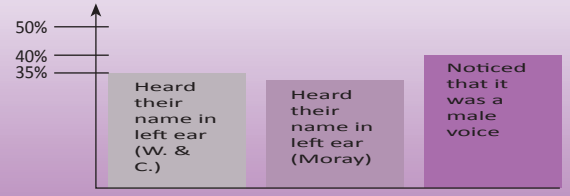
Due to the limitations of Moray's research, Wood and Cowan (1995) tried to replicate the results using more up-to-date and rigorous methodology:

- They used 34 undergraduate students (male and female) who heard a female voice reading 300 words in the right ear (the main channel), which they then had to repeat and a male voice reading 300 words in the left ear which they were told they should ignore.
- Once the sounds stopped they were asked to complete a questionnaire which asked them if they heard anything unusual or if their name had been amentioned.



References: Cherry, E. C. (1953). Some experiments on the recognition of speech, with one and two ears. Journal of the acoustical society of America, 25, 975-979.
Conway, Andrew R.A., Cowan, Nelson, and Bunting, Michael F. (2001). The cocktail party phenomenon revisited: The importance of working memory capacity. Psychonomic Bulletin & Review, 8(2), 331-335.
Wood, N and Cowan, (1995). The Cocktail Party phenomenon revisited: How frequent are attention shifts to one's name in an irrelevant auditory channel? Journal of experimental psychology: Learning Memory and Cognition, 21(1), 225- 260.

3. The results: What did they find out?



Participants said attention only shifted to channel they were supposed to be ignoring when they lost their concentration.

4. What does this mean? Implications for the real world:

- Some people may be able to notice relevant information in background 'noise' without losing attention on the main focus. However, most research now suggests that it is a negative characteristic, indicating that people are unable to block out distracting information, thereby affecting their focus on the significant information. For example, students who are better at filtering out background noise may be more efficient at concentrating on a task.
- This could suggest those with hearing impairments may be less likely to be able to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant conversations in situations such as a room full of people conversing.

5. What Next?

More research to find ways to help the 33% of people who are disadvantaged by this phenomenon would be useful.