

NATURE, IMPORTANCE AND PRACTICE OF LISTENING SKILL

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ABSTRACT: *Of the four linguistic activities, listening is often overlooked, both in importance and practice. Yet, listening is a process, involving more than mere hearing of sounds and noises, as it includes identifying, understanding and interpreting spoken languages. It enables students become aware of language and how it is used and gives them creative use of grammar. Listening helps students acquire detailed comprehension. It assists students approach a foreign language with greater confidence and expectation of success. Small-group activities in listening stimulate their imagination, challenge them to think and ginger them to speak. Listening and vocabulary are closely related. Of equal importance is listening for overall meaning. Students highly involved in listening learn better and faster and have sounder judgments about what is heard. It is believed that listening and speaking are by far two most important communication skills. Listening skills can be taught through direct, integrated, incidental, eclectic and dialogue approaches.*

KEYWORDS: Listening skills; language learners; listening practice; Kinds and levels of listening; Teaching methodology of listening; Listening techniques

INTRODUCTION

Language scholars of today regard language as a social activity, an activity of four fundamental kinds or uses, namely, speaking, listening, writing and reading (Jibowo, 2005). Of the four linguistic activities, it is listening that most speakers are often unaware of, in both its importance and practice (Dadzie and Awonusi, 2009). Importance of listening lies in the fact that it enables students become aware of language and how it is used. It gives students the creative use of grammar (Boyle, 1987). This is why teachers need to be prepared to use a variety of techniques to help students acquire effective listening skills, learn grammar and vocabulary which they need at their level, as well as words which they want to use.

Listening helps students acquire detailed comprehension (Baker, 1971). It assists students approach the foreign language with more confidence and a greater expectation of success. Small group activities in listening stimulate students to use their imagination, challenge them to think and ginger them to speak (Harrowth, 1966). Listening and vocabulary are so well interrelated that their knowledge could enable students to acquire a great deal of experience of a variety of kinds, and at different levels of listening. Students highly involved in listening learn better and faster (Boyle, 1987). They make sound judgments about what is heard. Good note taking could supplement listening.

Nature of Listening Skills:

For someone to claim to have listened with comprehension, he/she must have passed the stages of hearing, listening, auditing and cognizing. By hearing, we mean the process by which speech sounds are received and modified by the ear. Listening is the process of identifying the

component of sounds and sound sequences, whereby known words are recognizable. The process by which the continuous flow of words is translated into meaning is regarded as *auding*. *Cognizing* deals with the various aspects of knowing which are characterized by different conceptualizing experiences of which comparison is made, inferences drawn and categorized and sensory images formed (Gbenedio, 1996; Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). In other words, when one listens, certain activities, although not as easily noticed as those of the speaker, are performed. The ears provide a conduit through which the sounds reach the brain while the eyes provide the means of seeing, which is a vital component of the ways of identifying meaning (Allan, 1986). The Council of Chief State officer (CCSSO, U.S., 2009) defines listening in terms of the ability to understand the language of the teacher used in instruction, comprehend the important details, abstract pertinent information, and to keep abreast with the training modules through which teachers provide information. Listening can thus be seen as a process, which involves more than mere hearing of sounds and noises, but including identifying, understanding and interpreting spoken languages (Harrowth, 1966). According to Goffman (1967), two interaction strategies are necessary for listening. First, is when the speakers have to scale down their expressions and the second, is when the listeners have to scale up their interests, each in the light of the other's capacities and demands. This creates a channel enabling effective communication between persons of different backgrounds. The following types of listening have therefore, been identified:

- i. **Active Listening:** Active listeners learn better and faster. They make sound judgments about what is heard. Perhaps, active listeners write down important ideas in complete sentences. They listen for ideas more than details. Of equal importance is their ability to listen for overall meaning.
- ii. **Partial Listening:** They are those who listen with a rebellious ear. They are those who are thinking of their next reply rather than listening to what is taking place.
- iii. **Intermittent Listening:** This applies to those who listen with a deaf ear. They close their ears to unpleasantness. They are those who compulsively nod and shake their heads in agreement when they are not listening at all. Since attitudes affect our perception of information, the more we allow our emotion to intrude into the listening process, the more distorted will be our recollection of what has been said.
- iv. **Appreciate Listening:** A good listener virtually absorbs all the speaker's meaning by being sensitive to tone of voice, facial expression, and bodily action as well as to the words themselves. Sincerity, depth of conviction, confidence, true understanding and many subtle implications may well be revealed, regardless of the words used (Sharifian, 2009).

Importance of Listening awareness in Language:

Language is an important aspect of our everyday lives often requiring inventiveness by its speakers. In other words, real language use may often appear untidy necessitating considerable effort and skill to reduce to simple grammar patterns. Students need to be aware of all language possibilities. Importantly, they have to be aware of how language is used, as well as its different variations and linguistic twist. Hence, reading and listening are specifically important, as they are vital discovery activities that enable students unmask creative ways in which language is used, and also help to raise their awareness about the use of grammar – amongst other things (Ted Power, 2009).

As teachers, we should be prepared to use a variety of techniques to help our students learn and acquire grammar. We should ensure that our students are aware of the vocabulary they need at their level and that they can use the words appropriately. If we are really ready to teach students what words mean and how they are used, we need to demonstrate this together with other words in context (Grabe & Stoller, 1997). Words do not just exist on their own, they live with other words and they depend upon each other. We need our students to be aware of this. This is why, once again, reading and listening will play such a part in the acquisition of vocabulary (Boyle, 1987; Longman Nation, 2005). When students learn words in context they are far more likely to remember them than if they learn them as single items. And even if this were not true, they would at least get a much better picture of what the words mean (Omaggio, 1986).

Competent users of a language are proficient in a range of language skills. It is pertinent for teachers and language instructors to see that the students' language skills are transferred to the use of English (Short & Echevarria, 2004). In other words, although teachers may not be teaching students to read, they are teaching them to read in English. And because they are dealing with a foreign language, teachers will need to help them with the skills that they are already, albeit subconsciously, familiar with. Emphasis should be on reading for gist, for example, or listening for detailed comprehension (Ur, 1984). If teachers concentrate on these skills and sub skills, it will help the students to approach the foreign language with more confidence and greater expectation of success (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2004); (Rossner, R. & Bolitho, R., 1991).

Small-group activities in listening stimulate students to use their imagination, and challenge them to think and ginger them to speak as well. Listening is enhanced as students care about understanding what others have said. Imaginative activities further provide a crucial connection between language skill acquisition and autonomous interaction (Rivers, 1983a).

Listening and vocabulary are definitely related. If students know the meaning of all the words used by a speaker, they are likely to have a better understanding of the material and consequently a better retention. If the student's family is talkative, there is a good chance that the students will have a natural "ear for language" that he/she will have a grasp of good structure, and that he/she will have a great deal of experience in a variety of kinds and levels of listening. A listener learns better and faster and makes sounder judgments about what is heard when mentally and physically active – when the listener is involved. Active listeners use the extra time to weigh and consider what the speaker has said. They may attempt to repeat key ideas, to ask questions related to the topic, or to test the accuracy of the speaker's assertions (Baker, 1971).

Good listeners often make notes on what the speaker is saying. Perhaps, they write down words or phrases denoting key ideas, perhaps they write the most important ideas in complete sentences. The physical activity reinforces the mental activity. However, note-taking by itself is not a sign of good listening. Good note-taking supplements, but does not replace good listening. To achieve maximum effectiveness, we listen in the first place to learn and to gather data for evaluation of equal importance is our ability to listen for overall meaning. We note that it requires sensitivity to both the verbal and the nonverbal elements of the message to get full meaning from what is said (Baker, 1971). A good listener, therefore, virtually absorbs all the speaker's meaning by being sensitive to tone of voice, facial expression, and bodily action as well as to the words themselves. Sincerity, depth of conviction, confidence, true

understanding, and many subtle implications may well be revealed, regardless of the words used (Sharifian, 2009).

Depth of its importance:

It is also believed for some reasons that listening and speaking are by far the two most important communication skills (Rudolph, Ann & Ernest, 1976). In group activities, students are able to create and develop new ideas which they are able to communicate effectively to other members of the group when they speak. Likewise, understanding what other students have said requires good listening skills (Herrell & Jordan, 2007). Creative and imaginative activities are characterized by the specific underlying qualities (Hinkel, 2006).

- a) These activities require students arriving at results through working from the known to the unknown.
- b) The problem to be overcome is ambiguous and confusing.
- c) An ideal acceptable response to the problem is one that is reasonable and logically derived.
- d) Role play forms an essential component of these activities.
- e) The activity provides the opportunity to develop and test the students' listening skills.
- f) Teacher participation in the activities should be minimal, requiring only the initial set up of the activity.
- g) Students are questioned at the end of the activity as a way to test their understanding and how well they have applied their listening skills.

Introducing creative activities as part of the foreign language curriculum, early on at the elementary level, stimulate children to think on their own (Harvey & Gondvis, 2000). Cooperative play and tasks also promote their ability to work as part of a group where they learn how to listen and learn from others. Mentally stimulating problem solving activities can play a pivotal role in promoting interaction and divergent thinking. Role play commonly forms an essential part of the procedure. Accomplishment of assigned tasks requires that the students must have an understanding of what is required. To arrive at a group answer, students have to listen to and fully comprehend one another, a feat that puts their listening skills to test (Jordan & Herrell, 2002).

Activities that enhance listening skills: this can be achieved through active exercises where the teacher facilitates the listening attentiveness of students through specific exercises. For example, a teacher may use a tape recorder to record a broadcast, to which segments of the target language in the form of folk music or a snatch of dialogue is added. Students are then required to listen and discriminate between what they consider relevant bits of information and thus elucidate the story behind the different segments (Short & Echevarria, 2004); (Lawal, 1992). As part of developing their listening skills, the teacher presents exercises to the students in the form of audio tapes who are then required to solve specific problems presented in the tape. The problem solving exercise is in fact a form of listening comprehension exercise. For effectiveness of this exercise however, the script presented in the tape should be adapted to class level (Herrell & Jordan, 2006).

Listening teaching Methodology:

The following methods can be used in teaching listening skill:

- a) Direct Method – The direct method requires provision of time in the timetable for listening comprehension, just as it is done for other subjects. The teacher teaches the children the importance of listening and the difficulties involved. One source of language students can listen to is the teacher. It is also important for students to be exposed to other voices and that is why listening to tapes is so important. If students are residing in a target language community they are likely to have greater access to native speaker speech through personal contact and from a variety of media including radio and television, as well as print media. In the direct method, questions must cover more knowledge of facts; text translation of ideas, interpretation of ideas, and extrapolation of ideas (Asemota, 2007).
- b) Integrated Approach: This is the method whereby the four language skills are taught concurrently including reading, writing, listening and speaking skills (Roblyer, 2006).
- c) The Incidental Approach: This approach is known as learning to listen by listening. It says since students have ears, all they need to do is to listen. The deliberate effort made to listen improves listening ability. Training in listening develops auditory discrimination. In order to develop communicative efficiency in pronunciation, the students need to understand how sounds are made and how stress is used. They can practice pronunciation by first reproducing the sound through imitation, a process which leads to subconscious acquisition of the language sounds and patterns (Asemota, 2007).
- d) Eclectic Method: The Eclectic method makes use of all methods or approaches. The method applies a specific method or technique to suit a specific objective, identified in terms of the learners' word, the items to be learned, and the learning environment. (Ybarra & Green, 2003; Asemota, 2007).
- e) Dialogue: According to Asemota (2007), at the early stage, the most useful material for starting language learning is the dialogue which is meaningful and which can be dramatized. Children first listen to the dialogue, accompanied by the teacher's demonstration, two or three times before they are asked to imitate. Listening to minimal pairs of sounds can help improve students' ability to discriminate between sounds which differ only slightly, for example:

i.	Day	They
ii.	She	See
iii.	View	Few
iv.	Sheep	Ship
v.	The sheep is coming	The ship is coming

CONCLUSION

A good listener, therefore, virtually absorbs all the speaker's meaning by being sensitive to tone of voice, facial expression, and bodily action as well as to the words themselves. Sincerity, depth of conviction, confidence, true understanding, and many subtle implications may well be revealed, regardless of the words used. We also hope to gain information from listening to a speaker. Then, are we able to evaluate the speaker's ability. We are also able to consider the speaker's method to help us determine what elements we should adopt and what elements we should avoid. Teachers should use a variety of techniques to help students learn good listening skills and acquire grammar and vocabulary needed at their level. Developing adequate listening skills is an important tool for language acquisition, and language teachers should utilize this to guide their students in attaining language proficiency.

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