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Developing Listening Skill in Children for Communication, Interaction and Learning

By

Esther Oduolowu

and

Amosun Moses Dele

Abstract

It is obvious that of all the language skills that children develop, listening is the one developed earliest and practised most frequently. As much as 80 percent of the information learners obtain is the result of listening, yet listening has suffered much neglect, and taught least often in the classroom and had been referred to as the neglected or forgotten language art, in spite of the benefits that can accrue from it. Where listening and speaking are taught, both skills are viewed and taught as a different discrete skills. However, 1980s and 1990s have witnessed a paradigm improvement in the teaching of listening and speaking skills with the integration of both listening and speaking skills as one communicative process called oral communication or oral language. This paper examined the concept of listening skill, its development as interactive and communicative processes in children, the benefits that both listening and speaking skills have on children's language, intellectual, social, academic and emotional development. Problems militating against development of listening skill were also identified and suggestions on how to help children develop their oral communication were made.

Introduction

Listening skill is one of the important skills that enhance communication, interaction and learning in children. Encouraging skills and versatility especially in listening and speaking, is vital to developing understanding of ideas and experiences of children (Deryn, 2001). However, it has been noted that of all the obstacles teachers face in supporting children's learning today, getting young learners to listen and focus attention usually rank high on the list (Jalongo, 2008). Also, Ige (2005) observed that pupils have difficulty following instructions and identifying what teacher said or what facts were stated due to apparent deficits in attention and concentration, as well as comprehension. Thus, it is not surprising seeing many pupils who suffer the

problem of listening, asking their teachers to repeat what is said during dictation in English lesson.

Experience have shown that what prevent the learners from listening attentively in the classroom include environmental problem such as noise, distractions as well as psychological factors such as fatigue, hunger, illness among others (Jalongo, 2008, ASHA, 2004). These problems can lead to a great disadvantage in the process of language development in pupils and the outcome of this on pupils' academic achievement can be adverse (Bruce, 2005), since it has been found that one of the most significant predictors of school achievement is oral language ability, that's ability to listen, comprehend and speak effectively. Thus,

the paper discusses developing listening skills for communication, interaction and learning in children.

Listening is described as voluntary act which requires the desire to use the ear in order to focus on selected sounds (Madaule, 1997). Listening is the ability to select the sound information that one wants to hear in order to perceive it in a clear and organized fashion. The listening function is, therefore, very closely related to attention span, vigilance and concentration. Whereas hearing is the passive perception of sounds, listening is the voluntary act which makes the listener to focus on selected sound.

Listening, either as a unitary skill or a series of sub-skills, include:

- (a) selecting facts and details: this is ability to pick the relevant ideas out of junks.
- (b) sequential ordering: that's arranging ideas logically
- (c) selecting a main idea: by identifying the central idea in a given paragraph or passage.
- (d) Summarizing: by removing irrelevant from the fact.
- (e) relating one idea to another: by identifying the relevance of one idea to another idea.
- (f) inference making: through guessing the meaning of a word as used in a passage.
- (g) critical listening which includes analyzing, interpreting and evaluating information (The International Encyclopedia of Education, 1995).

Listening and speaking are interactive processes that directly affect each other. Speaking is an expressive language skill in which the speaker uses verbal symbols to communicate, while listening is a receptive language skill which involves the interpretation of verbal or written symbols into meaning. Listening and speaking were once viewed as separate within the school curriculum and usually were taught as a number of discrete skills, however, 1980s and early 1990s have brought another perspective. Listening

and speaking are now considered interactive and taught as one communicative process. Both skills are now referred to as "oracy", "oral communication" and "oral language". Oral communication as the process of interacting through heard and spoken messages in a variety of situations and instructions which integrate the teaching of listening and speaking over various situations is called communicative approach to language teaching (The International Encyclopedia of Education, 1995). Classroom practice that advocates for integration of both listening and speaking skills contends that traditional method of teaching listening skill by getting learners to listen to a piece of language and then to answer subsequent comprehension questions does not only have limitations for developing reciprocal listening skill but also encourages a passive view of listening skill (Anderson and Lynch, Candlin and Widdowson, 1989). Since the listeners are not allowed to indicate when there is a comprehension problem or to provide feedback that they have understood the message (Jalongo, 2008). Since, listening and speaking are expected to be taught in the classroom through communicative approach, effective oral communication among children therefore underscores the role of listening and speaking in the classroom learning.

Pertinent Ideas about Oral Communication and Its Roles

Oral communication, especially listening skill, is the first of the four skills of language. Listening is where language development begins (Jalongo, 2008). Right from infancy, children are learning valuable lessons that support their language development, through listening and observing, infants build their knowledge of the world around them and they are able to differentiate between voices, sounds and facial expressions. They imitate sounds and respond to voices by cooing, gurgling and laughing. As children mature, their listening and speaking skills continue to develop by

using one or two words to communicate their needs. As they are introduced to more language and experiences, they begin to express themselves in longer statements with more descriptive language. As children grow, their listening and speaking skills grow too, they are able to express themselves using the experiences they have been building on since infancy <http://www.kged.org/programs/index.jsp>.

In essence, the sense of hearing is fully formed and functioning right from infancy. In fact, research has established the fact that a foetus attends to his/her mother's voice and can distinguish it from the voices of other women (Saffran and Griepentrog, 2001). This is the reason why baby's listening skill should be developed very well as soon as the baby is born. Also, Eisenberg, Fink and Niparko (2006) observed that acquiring listening and speaking skills are so fundamental to functioning in society that it is an important component of health-related quality of life, and central to the child's early development of other skills including survival, social and intellectual skills (Wolvin and Coakly, 2000), because a child uses language to express himself/herself and to communicate his/her needs.

Moreover, children spend the majority of their classroom time listening. As much as 80 percent of the information learners obtain is the result of listening (Bredenkamp, 2000). During interactive classroom children's ability to engage, listen, interact and respond are still important determinants of both communicative and academic success (Lapadat, 2002). Rose (2006) observed that to make sure that children build a good stock of words, learn to listen attentively and speak clearly and confidently, far more attention should be given to promoting listening and speaking because, these language skills, including reading and writing are central to children's intellectual, social and emotional development. Oral language

ability is one of the most significant predictors of school achievement. Researchers in the fields of speech-language pathology and education agree that spoken language proficiency is an essential precursor to learning to read, write and spell. For example, an area of language that professional refers to as phonemic awareness (the ability to pay attention to and analyse the sounds or phonemes of language as with rhyming and word play is intimately connected with learning to read (Bruce, 2005). Thus, a child who has a speech, language or listening problem upon entering kindergarten will be at a distinct disadvantage for learning and participating in class.

Besides, pupils are expected to produce written outcomes as evidence of learning in our examination system. A child who cannot listen, speak and interact very well with his/her classmate therefore may not be able to cope academically and socially. This is confirmed by Bruce (2005) when he affirmed that children with limitations in phonological processing and listening are at risk for early decoding problems, which can then lead to problems of reading comprehension. Children who are confirmed with such poor listening and speaking skills are referred to as having a language impairment (L1).

Also, Bruce (2005) established that other children who are sufficiently competent in listening and talking, but for whom phonological processing performance remain poor may be viewed as being at risk for reading disorder (RD). Reading disorder means poor reading achievement occurring after sufficient opportunity to learn to read. Jalongo (2008) corroborated the above report. She confirmed that problem with listening are often major obstacles in acquiring literacy with print.

While commenting on the effect of listening on children's academic achievement particularly in reading and school failure, Cruger (2005) submitted

that children with receptive and/or expressive language difficulties will likely struggle in school because they cannot easily learn under typical classroom conditions. These children cannot always keep up with the pace of verbal instruction, they may not consistently understand the content of idea being discussed, and they may not have strong skills for communicating what they do or do not know. As a result, they may become withdrawn in school or appear unattractive because they lose their focus when they do not understand what is being discussed.

As children use language to learn in various subjects areas, it becomes necessary for them to communicate with peers in large and small groups as well as with the teacher. The focus is not upon listening and speaking perse but upon using language to communicate and to learn. Collaborative talk can occur between peers in quite an informal way or in more formal cooperative learning groups. Therefore, listening and speaking become valuable not only as isolated skills or groups of skills, but as vehicle for learning across all subjects areas (Jalongo, 2008). In spite of all these roles that are inherent in the development of listening and speaking skills, some problems can militate against it.

Problems militating against Listening Skill

There are many factors that may serve as obstacles to successful listening. These factors informed children's listening behaviour that varies from one situation to another. These factors include the following.

- i. Physiological factors like permanent, irreversible and significant hearing loss or impairments in children (Marschark, 2007).
- ii. Uncomfortability of the social setting where listening takes place; namely
 - (a) acoustics: sometimes children's ability to pick up on key auditory

information can be affected by environmental factors. For example, the amount of noise around us can drown out the sounds that are important. Sometimes, reverberation (echo) can also make listening difficult (Petry, McClellan and Myler, 2001).

- (b) distraction that causes a break in attention when listening, such as air conditioning noise, audio-visual noise, children voices, teacher's appearance and mannerism, moving and dragging chairs, noise from outside the classroom such as traffic, lawnmowers, children on the play ground etc. A break in attention by any of these when listening can be more damaging than when reading; especially, if we cannot interrupt the speaker, so much is going on.
- iii. Psychological factors such as fatigue, hunger, illness, toileting needs, interest in the message or if the child does not feel accepted by the teacher (Jalongo, 2008).
- iv. Cognitive and language processing obstacles like attentional difficulties, learning disabilities, language disorder and language processing problems (Bruce, 2005).
- v. Lack of capabilities to be active listeners. A child who does not see good reason to listen will not be motivated to do so, he/she may not be physically, cognitively or emotionally capable to listen or the child may not have constructive habits to listen, such as getting ready for story time (McDevitt, 1990).
- vi. The challenge of learning through a foreign language. Learning through a foreign language or studying a foreign language takes a determined effort to make sense out of the messages that are heard because misunderstandings of such language are very common.

Moreso, second language is introduced when very young children who are English language learners are still becoming proficient in their first language. A second language speaker's speech may contain words or phrases that the listener can hear adequately but is unable to understand because of serious problems with the syntax or semantic of the foreign language or unfamiliarity with the speaker's accent (Deryn, 2001).

- vii. Some cultural practices do not encourage listening and speaking development of children. In Africa, especially in Nigeria, it is a taboo for children to talk and participate fully in a discussion when their parents or elderly persons are talking. The popular adage that a child should be seen and not heard which is still being held in most Nigerian environment underscores the attitude of Nigerian to developing the listening and speaking skills of their children. The African child is reared so as not to question the wisdom of his/her parents, but to maintain a lifelong obedience to the authority that age confers (Marshall, 1982). In this perspective, parents believe that authoritarian approaches are in their children best interest. Likewise, teachers are never wrong and pupils do not become self-motivated until they are freed from the power structure of the teacher-pupils relationship (SAA, 2001).

Nigerian children are taught to obey their parents, teachers and elderly ones in all things even in a matter that affects their welfare. As a matter of fact, where a child is very close to the elderly ones discussing, he/she has to pretend as if he/she is not hearing and listening to what they are talking about. This may account for inability to actively attempt to integrate the incoming information and

seek clarification when the interpretation building process meets an obstacle in most Nigerian children during teaching and learning process.

Thus, it is not surprising that children's listening behaviour varies from one situation to another and since listening is fundamental to functioning in society and development of other skills such as social and intellectual skills, obstacles to listening must be checked. The following possible solutions are proposed for checking obstacles to successful listening.

Possible Strategies for Developing Listening Skill

1. Creative activities involving children in various kinds of talking and discussion experiences such as drama, role playing, puppetry, debate, interviewing experimenting, commenting, giving feedback, asking questions for clarification, formal reporting and large and small group discussions could be used to enhance listening skill (Jalongo, 2008; Atoye, 1994).
2. Teach your child riddles, songs, tongue twisters, and rhymes in your home language. They are fun, rich in vocabulary, and help children become sensitive to the sounds that words make. Also, imitating the sound of a toy or any kind of vocal play helps develop important auditory skills (<http://www.parentguide.dpsk12.org/docs>).
3. Parents should speak to their children in the language they speak well (home language). A child needs to hear others who are more proficient in their home language speak and have conversations with them (<http://www.parentguide.dpsk12.org/docs>).
4. Keep your language or message simple, clear short, repetitious and consistent in interacting with the child. Sometimes the language helps to actually write down a script

for the language you will use during a routine (Jalongo, 2008).

5. Model good oral communication by giving children undivided attention when they are speaking and giving prompt and thoughtful responses to children's questioning (Wolvin and Coakly, 2000).
6. Set a purpose for listening and hold children responsible for it by making them to prepare to answer question at the end of the instruction (Jalongo, 2008).
7. Increase children's responsibility by putting them in charge of greeting classroom visitors, guiding classroom tours, making announcement, conducting interviews etc (Jalongo, 2008).
8. Give visual support material to children to assist their interpretation of what you teach them and what they hear (Jalongo, 2008).
9. Teachers should also embark on systematic teaching of listening skill and be accorded its rightful place on the timetable, since listening can be taught (Ige, 2005).
10. All pedagogical problems that hinder children's successful listening such as noise, distractions, unclear messages, poor listening habits etc. must be minimised. For example, the listening environment must be improved by reducing all kinds of noise. Poor listening may be checked by modeling and giving undivided attention, distractions in the classroom may be curtailed by making sure that both the physical arrangement of the classroom and its procedures support listening (ASHA, 2004).
11. Periodic hearing screening and medical treatment should be carried out on children when appropriate (Jalongo, 2008).

Conclusion

It has been shown from the discussion that listening is very important and fundamental to children functioning in society and learning because listening is

where language development begins. From infancy, the formation of sense of hearing helps a child to differentiate between voices, sounds and facial expressions. Later on, a child imitates sounds and responds appropriately through cooing, gurgling and laughing until a child is able to express himself or herself. This experience in child underscores the reason for early development of skills of listening and speaking in a child. This implies therefore that to effect active and successful listening in child, an integrative approach should be given to the teaching of oral communication, where learners or children are given opportunity to practice both sets of skills and integrate them in conversation and seek clarification when the interpretation building process meets an obstacle.

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