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LISTENING INSTRUCTION IN COLLEGE READING PROGRAMS

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The teaching of reading has been examined from various points of view and in great detail for many years, but a relative newcomer to the literature related to reading is the field of listening instruction. Recent estimates suggest that at least 90% of all listening research has been done since 1952 (Taylor, 1969), and that it has been done at all age and grade levels. Much of it, however, has been devoted to studies with secondary school and adult populations, particularly at the community college—college levels. At these levels, it is possible to categorize the research into four broad (and overlapping) areas, including:

1. Measures of listening ability in subjects who have received no specific instruction in listening;
2. Measures of improved listening ability in subjects receiving listening instruction;
3. Measures of the relationship among the skills of reading, listening, and note taking; and
4. "Speeded" listening.

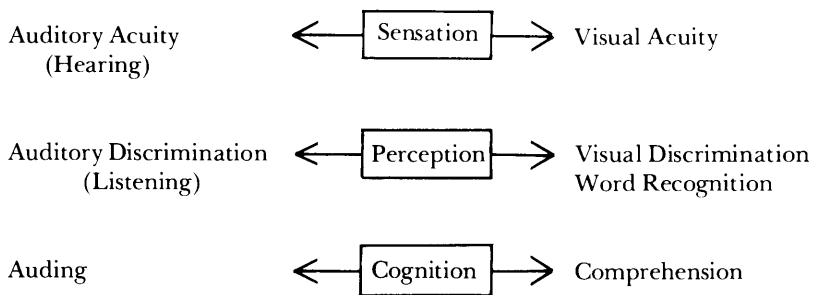
Without going into a lengthy and detailed review of the literature here, a brief summary of some major findings seems appropriate. Subjects who have not received instruction in listening skills are less successful in obtaining and retaining orally-presented information than subjects who have received specific instruction and practice in listening. Such a finding, while apparently obvious, leads directly to the conclusion that listening *can* be taught, and that improved listening ability is desirable (Dumdie, 1961; Cooper, 1967). Also of major importance is the finding that there is a positive and high correlation among listening skills, reading skills, and note taking skills (Erickson, 1964; Duker, 1968). A related finding is that instruction in listening frequently increases a subject's performance on standardized reading achievement tests (Schnell, 1975).

With the preceding information available, i.e., that listening skills can be taught and improved, the question arises as to why so little attention has been paid to development of this area. Some possibilities come to mind: Many people mistakenly confuse *hearing* with listening, leading them to believe that instruction is unnecessary. Others feel that it is not a skill worthy of time in the instructional program. Still others who might like to teach listening feel inadequately prepared to try it.

One of these ideas can be disposed of quickly; the worth of listening skill has been researched and documented in various studies. According to Taylor (1969), it was established as early as 1926 that the average adult's working day was spent largely in verbal communication (70%), with

reading taking only 16% of that time and listening taking 45% of that time. In educational settings, particularly community colleges and colleges, estimates of class listening time run as high as 90% of total class time. There is no question of the value of any skill whose use is so frequently required.

The other two topics are really the central focus of the remainder of this paper. First, let's examine the fallacy that hearing and listening are synonymous. The following diagram will perhaps help produce a more clear understanding of the hearing-listening distinction, while at the same time showing the relationship of listening and reading.



(Model modified from Burnett, "Perception in Reading," 1967.)

The most basic consideration in listening is whether or not the subject has satisfactory auditory acuity, just as satisfactory visual acuity is needed for successful reading. The human ear should be able to respond to various frequencies (pitch levels), generally described as those between 500 and 4,000 cycles per second (CPS), which are most commonly found in speech patterns. Also, there should be a response to intensity, or loudness, levels in the range of 55 to 85 decibels. Measurement of auditory acuity would normally be done with an audiometer; however, visual signals of hearing difficulty may indicate a need for screening to be done.

At the perception level, auditory discrimination and vocabulary knowledge are brought into play as the hearer becomes a listener. The subject responds to changes in stress, pace, juncture, pitch . . . he uses syntactical and grammatical knowledge to anticipate the speaker's ideas or words, and responds to the message as it is received.

As the input of oral language continues, the listener attempts to understand what is being said; he should use his own background knowledge to evaluate what the speaker is saying, in much the same way a reader would attempt to comprehend the printed page.

The second topic is that of developing a program of instruction which could be employed in improving listening skills. Some references of particular value would include:

1. Duker, Sam. *Listening Bibliography*. Metuchen, N. J.: Scarecrow Press, 1968.
2. Russell, David and Elizabeth. *Listening Aids Through the Grades*. New York: Teacher's College Press, Columbia University, 1959.
3. Taylor, Stanford. *What Research Says to the Teacher: Listening*. Washington, D. C.: National Education Association, 1969.

In teaching the skills of listening, much value is found in the materials developed for reading, with only minor modification needed. Several basic skills can be taught rather effectively by using reading materials, only the instructor reads the items to the class members instead of the class members reading the items to themselves. The following list of suggestions is by no means intended to be exhaustive; it is, instead, a sample of things that can be done.

I. Vocabulary Development

A. Study of Verbal Relationships

1. Synonyms: Name a word that means the same as: bad; happy; deceitful
2. Opposites: Give me a word that means the opposite from: correct; postpone; enjoy
3. Analogies: Complete the statement: Leg is to knee as arm is to _____.

B. Common Usage

In your own words, tell me what these terms mean: uptight; wasted; jive

C. Context

1. Supply the missing word in the sentence:
They saw camels in the sandy (*desert*).
That animal is not happy, and has a nasty (*disposition*).
Marks on a bullet allow the identification of the gun which fired it through the use of (*ballistics*).

II. Following Directions

- A. Give directions from one location to another, then draw a map from memory.
- B. Tell students how to perform a task such as tying a square knot, then have them try it.

III. Improving Comprehension

A. Finding Main Ideas

1. Read a short story to the class and ask listeners to give it a reasonable title.
2. Read a passage to the class, asking them to state in one or two words what it was about.

3. Using the “About” word from (2) as the subject, have students state the point of the passage they heard.
- B. Recognizing Important Details
1. Read several statements to the class, having them rank the statements in order of importance.
 2. Listen to a brief lecture, outlining it as it is given.
- C. Following Sequence
1. Listen to a series of directions, then follow them in proper order.
 2. Listen to a story, then relate the events in the order given.

Materials for these activities could all be developed from such reading materials as SRA's *Reading for Understanding*, Barnell-Loft's *Specific Skills Series*, and *Reader's Digest Skill Builders*.

In summary, then, listening is probably the most used of the language arts skills and is the one least likely to be given formal instruction. In college classrooms, the listening time spent is around 90% of total class time, and students who receive formal instruction in listening tend to be more successful listeners than those who do not receive instruction. It appears that all people who teach developmental and/or corrective classes could help their students' academic performances by building some listening instruction into their reading programs. Certainly it would provide those students with a better chance for academic survival than they might have otherwise.

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