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THE NATURE AND IMPROVEMENT
OF LISTENING SKILLS

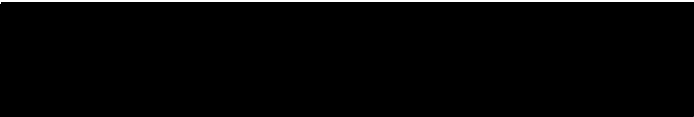
by

J. L. Crites

THE NATURE AND IMPROVEMENT
OF LISTENING SKILLS

Substantial Paper
Eastern Illinois University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Masters of Science in Education

Advisor 

by
J. L. Crites
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The basic objective in a language arts program is to develop the skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening.¹ In order that this objective may be accomplished successfully, an appropriate amount of emphasis must be placed on each of the four skills. A great amount of attention has been given to the teaching of reading, writing, and speaking, but the skill of listening seems to have been neglected. This neglect has probably been due to the inability of teachers to recognize listening skills, and the lack of any recognized or proven methods of teaching them.

The problem in this paper is three-fold--namely, to study the nature of the listening process, to identify nature of the listening skills that should be developed in pupils, and to list the best methods of developing these listening skills.

¹Paul KcKee, Teaching Children to Read in the Intermediate Grades (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957), p. 3.

Purpose of the Study

To really appreciate the time people spend listening in the course of their daily living, Rankin² made a survey in 1928 to determine the percentage of time 68 different persons in different occupations spent in talking, reading, writing, and listening. The results showed that 9% of their communicating time was spent in writing, 16% in reading, 30% in talking, and 45% of their time in listening. Further study by Rankin showed that at the same time in the Detroit Public Schools, reading was receiving 52 per cent of the attention in the classroom instruction, while listening received 8 per cent of the time.

The purpose of this study is to review the literature for information pertaining to the recognizing of listening skills, and methods of developing the skill of listening.

In accord with this purpose the writer will attempt to review the literature in the educational field in recent years to determine what has been found that will aid in teaching listening.

²Paul T. Rankin, "The Importance of Listening Ability," English Journal, Vol. XVII (October 1928) pp.628-630.

CHAPTER II

THE NATURE OF THE LISTENING PROCESS

A Definition of Listening

What is listening? The term listening is often used synonymously with the term hearing. Although the two terms bear close relationship to each other, it is important that we know and distinguish the differences between the two.

Funk and Wagnall³ discuss the terms hearing and listening as follows:

To hear is simply to become conscious of sound, to listen is to make a conscious effort to hear. We may hear without listening. In listening the ear is intent upon the sound. Listening implies some attention to the meaning or import of the sound. Between hear and listen is a difference like that between the words look and see.

We may say that hearing, as one of the five senses of the human body, requires no voluntary effort of thinking upon the part of the hearer. The hearer becomes aware of some sound or noise that enters the ear. He may or may not recognize the sound although it is a familiar one. If the hearer responds to the sound and begins to attempt to determine its source and recognize it in light of his own experi-

³Funk and Wagnall, New Standard Dictionary of the English Language (1956) p. 1445.

ences, then he is listening. Listening involves the process of thinking. In this manner says Treamor,⁴ "the sense of hearing is transformed into the art of listening."

Factors That Affect Listening

Factors that affect the listening process are rather difficult to evaluate. According to science, an individual thinks four times faster than he can talk. What then should a listener be doing with his thoughts during this extra time? The answer to this question comes from the National Council of Teachers of English.⁵

Listening is more than hearing. It involves following attentively the thread of conversation, the development of an idea, the points of an argument. Like reading, it requires comprehension in terms of the past experience of the listener and often involves critical examinations of what is heard. Whenever attention wanders, a portion of what is being presented is lost.

The National Council of Teachers of English⁶ also has this to say about passive listening.

Speaking and writing are sometimes called the expressive phases of language, and listening and reading the receptive ones. This does not mean that reading and listening are more passive for the learner. In comprehending ideas given orally or in print the learner is actively engaged in

⁴J. H. Treamor, "For Every Lesson, Listen!" Elementary English, Vol. XXXIII (May 1956) pp. 292-294.

⁵National Council of Teachers of English, Language Arts for Today's Children, (Appleton-Century Crafts, Inc.) Vol. II (1954) p. 77.

⁶Ibid., p. 78.

perceiving these ideas and weighing them against his experience and in deciding upon his actions in response to them.

Another factor to be considered in effective listening is the element of time. In terms of retention science says that we remember one-half of what we hear immediately after listening and only one-fourth of what we hear two months after listening.

To show how time enters into response a study was made by Broadbent⁷ at the Medical Research Council in Cambridge, England. The study was made using navy personnel in the communications division. The findings showed that when there was a short silence between questions and answers, 98% of the answers given were correct. When the second question came before the first was answered, 90% of the answers to the interrupted questions were correct, and 80% of the interrupting questions were understood well enough to receive correct answers. When one question was overlapped with a second question the accuracy dropped to 70%.

This study indicates that the listener must be given time if he is to formulate his ideas so that he can repeat them orally at a later time.

Another factor that affects listening is the circumstances or situation in which the listener finds himself.

⁷D. E. Broadbent, "Can't Talk and Listen Both", Science News Letter, Vol. LXI (June 14, 1952) p. 373.

Furness⁸ states that "listening power is developed in a social situation". In a social situation many things may interfere that will lessen the comprehension on the part of the listeners. The listener must depend upon the speaker to use a "text that is both audible and intelligible".⁹ The speaker must be sure that his words are easily heard. His text must be well organized and on a level comparable to the level of the listener. New terms need to be explained if they are beyond the experience of the listener. Furness¹⁰ also cites other factors involved in a listening situation by making the following comparison between reading and listening.

The reader can vary his speed of comprehension with the difficulty of the material. He can skim and skip familiar lines. He can re-read if he has missed the point. The listener has to follow the tempo of the speaker. He cannot skim, skip or select passages that fit his needs. The listener's comprehension may be affected by the speaker's enunciation, inflections, mannerisms, facial expressions, dress, personality, or general delivery.

Another factor that affects listening is mentioned by Fessenden.¹¹

Any mental, emotional, or physical condition that interferes with the function of the ear would seem to have a direct effect upon the listening efficiency of the individual.

⁸E. L. Furness, "Improving Reading Through Listening," Elementary English, Vol. XXXIV (May 1957 p. 307.

⁹Ibid., p. 310.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 310.

¹¹Seth A. Fessenden, "Levels of Listening-A Theory," Education, Vol. LXXV (January 1955) p. 288.

Fessenden¹² also states that "the neurological handling of sound increases in complexity directly in proportion with the increase in complexity of the sounds." He gives the following examples.

1. There is less physical effort in listening to a pure tone than to the tone of a musical instrument.
2. There is less physical effort in listening to a single instrument than in listening to an orchestra.
3. There is less physical effort in listening to words and ideas that are easily familiar than to words and ideas that are complex and new.

Thus the listener may be affected in many and various ways that may tend to decrease his listening efficiency.

Levels of Listening

Listening is a composite of activities which are physical, mental, and emotional. The listener must first hear the spoken sounds in succession. The sounds must be audible and intelligible. These sounds, if audible and intelligible, are recognized as words, and through the thought process become meaningful ideas. The ideas frequently affect the listener emotionally. If the listener is in agreement with and subscribes to the ideas expressed, he will tend to be pleased and receptive. If the ideas conflict with his own, he may become irritated and reject them entirely, or he may accept them in part and incorporate them into his existing pattern of ideas.

¹²Ibid., p. 288.

To further clarify the activities in the listening process, some authors identify the levels of listening. These levels of listening are shifting and lines of separation are indefinite. They are in constant change according to the sounds which strike the ear of the listener. Fessenden¹³ identifies the following seven levels of listening.

1. The first level is that in which we learn to isolate sounds, ideas, arguments, facts, organization, and the like.
2. The second level is that in which we learn to identify or to give meaning to those aspects which we have isolated.
3. The third level is that in which we learn to integrate what we hear with our past experiences.
4. The fourth level is that in which we learn to inspect the new, and the general configuration of the new and the old data.
5. The fifth level is that in which we learn to interpret what we hear.
6. The sixth level is that in which we learn to interpolate comments and statements that we hear.
7. The seventh level is that in which we learn to introspect as well as listen.

These levels are interdependent one to another. The listener may be engaged in more than one level at the same time, or he may even run the gamut of all seven levels in a short listening activity. They are levels indicative of growth and of transition from the simple to the more complex.

Nichols and Lewis¹⁴ condense the levels of listening into three main types.

1. Appreciative listening to any kind of stimuli gratifying to the senses of the hearer.

¹³Ibid., pp. 289-290.

¹⁴Ralph G. Nichols and Thomas R. Lewis, Listening and Speaking, (Wm. C. Brown Company, 1954) pp. 1-2.

2. Critical listening to a persuasive speech for the purpose of evaluating the speaker's argument and evidence.
3. Discriminative listening to informative speech (usually in an instructional situation) for the purpose of comprehension--and perhaps later utilization--of the ideas and information of the speaker.

Ruth G. Strickland,¹⁵ lists the seven following as developmental levels in listening.

Easily distracted by people and things in the environment
 Half listening while holding fast to own ideas and waiting to insert them at the first opportunity
 Listening passively with apparent absorption but little or no reaction
 Listening, forming associations, and responding with items from his own experience rather than reacting to what is presented
 Listening and expressing some reaction through questions or comments
 Listening with evidence of genuine mental and emotional participation
 Listening with real meeting of minds

These seven developmental levels seem to coincide with stages of growth and development, and the ages of childhood. However, adults occasionally regress to lower levels of listening.

The Commission on the English Curriculum¹⁶ classifies the kinds of listening under the following headings:

Passive or marginal listening
 Appreciative listening
 Attentive listening
 Analytical listening

¹⁵Ruth G. Strickland, Language Arts in the Elementary School (Boston: D. C. Heath & Company, 1951) p. 114.

¹⁶National Council of Teachers of English, Language Arts for Today's Children (Appleton-Century-Crafts, Inc. 1954) Vol. II, pp. 80-81.

The above classifications are based upon the various types of listening in which children and adults are commonly engaged.

From the sources quoted concerning levels of listening, it is evident, that even though all the authors are not in complete accord in the way in which they state the levels of listening, more or less, they are in accord on the general understanding of the levels of listening. This understanding gives a basis for establishing skills in listening.

CHAPTER III

REVIEW OF EVIDENCE OF LISTENING SKILLS

Although a definite list of listening skills has not been agreed upon by educators in the field of language arts, research by different authors points to skills that need to be taught in order to improve listening.

In 1953, Pratt¹⁷ made a study of a program for improving listening at the sixth grade level. He used the following listening skills as the basis for his study:

1. Skills primarily associated with accuracy in listening
 - (a) Ability to keep related skills in mind
 - (b) Ability to observe a single detail
 - (c) Ability to remember a series of details
 - (d) Ability to follow oral directions
2. Skills primarily associated with reflective listening
 - (a) Ability to use contextual clues
 - (b) Ability to recognize organizational elements
 - (c) Ability to select main ideas as opposed to subordinate ideas or details
 - (d) Ability to recognize the relation between main ideas and subordinate ideas that support them
 - (e) Ability to draw justifiable inferences

¹⁷Edward Pratt, "Experimental Evaluation of a Program for the Improvement of Listening," The Elementary School Journal, Vol. LVI (March 1956) p. 316.

In this experiment forty sixth grade teachers in Iowa and surrounding states participated. Twenty classes were assigned to the experimental group and twenty classes constituted the control group. Special instruction for the purpose of improving the listening skills stated above was given the experimental group. After five weeks of instruction the results showed that the experimental group made a substantial gain over the control group in their general academic development.

Stratton¹⁸ lists the following listening skills which are included in the English course of George W. Brackenridge Senior High School in San Antonio, Texas.

1. Skill in understanding orders and commands given orally and in acting upon them without delay.
2. Ability to learn efficiently from oral instruction.
3. Ability to memorize orders, instructions, and directions given orally and to repeat them accurately.
4. Ability to listen with critical judgment to arguments, speeches, radio programs, and phonograph recordings.

The committee on English for this high school believes that improvement in academic work partially results from an effort to improve listening skills.

Early¹⁹ has prepared a list of skills for listening that should be developed in the elementary and secondary schools. She lists the skills under three categories as follows.

¹⁸Ollie Stratton, "Techniques for Literate Listening," English Journal, Vol. XXXVII (December 1948) p. 542.

¹⁹Margaret J. Early, "Suggestions for Teaching Listening," Journal of Education, Vol. CXXXVII (December 1954) p. 18.

Purposefully and Accurately

Understanding meaning of words from context
 Listening to answers to questions
 Listening to questions with intent of
 answering
 Listening for main ideas
 Listening for details
 Understanding relationship of details to
 main points
 Following steps in directions
 Following sequence in
 -plot development
 -character development
 -speaker's argument
 Recognizing speaker's purpose
 Recognizing speaker's plan or pattern
 Recognizing repetition of the same idea
 in different words
 Repeating what has been heard

Critically

Distinguishing between fact and opinion
 Distinguishing between emotive and report
 language
 Detecting bias and prejudice
 Evaluating speaker's argument
 Recognizing speaker's argument
 Recognizing propaganda
 Drawing inferences and making judgments
 Checking misinterpretations by asking
 intelligent questions
 Understanding sales pressure

Appreciatively

Listening to visualize
 Listening for rhythm of speech
 Recognizing tone and mood
 Appreciating speaker's style
 Interpreting character from dialogue
 Understanding effect on listeners of
 speaker's vocal qualities and gestures
 Understanding effect of audience on
 listeners reactions

The listening skills by different authors herein re-
 ported are not literally the same. It is evident they are
 similar in content and meaning. Teachers can make use of such

resources, selecting from the lists those skills which may be best developed at the level at which they are teaching.

CHAPTER IV

TECHNIQUES FOR IMPROVING LISTENING SKILLS

The techniques for improving listening skills are not new. Many of the techniques to be described here have been used by teachers without their realizing the thought and purpose which underlies developing these skills. However, it does not follow that teaching has been effective in improving efficiency in listening. In order that the instruction be most effective, the teacher must keep clearly in mind the purposes to be attained. For this reason the teacher could be advised to refer to the listening skills stated in Chapter III and have them before him as he plans for effective teaching.

Several people in the field of education have suggested techniques that have been found to be effective in improving efficiency in listening. The contribution of Berry²⁰ is worthy of study. She makes the following general suggestions for the improvement of listening:

1. Choose appropriate opportunities for listening in terms of pupils' interest and needs and commensurate with their ability to understand.

²⁰Althea Berry, "Listening Activities in the Elementary School," Elementary English Review, Vol. XXIII (January 1946) pp. 69-80.

2. Provide an atmosphere conducive to listening; seat your children close to the speaker.
3. Discuss with pupils the factors that make a good listener; encourage them to set for themselves appropriate standards for listening.
4. Help children learn when to listen, what to listen to, and how to listen.
5. Utilize everyday class activities to develop more alert listening.
6. Provide children with necessary background or readiness for each listening activity.
7. Place emphasis upon what is said rather than upon errors in usage.
8. Encourage pupils to demand meaning in what they hear; urge them to ask for explanations when they do not understand.
9. Check possible interpretations through questioning.
10. Place emphasis on precision of vocabulary; help children distinguish between homonyms; explain new terms immediately.
11. Provide, when appropriate, for interaction of the speaker and group during the listening period.
12. When practical, see that action or interpretation follows listening.
13. Help children evaluate what they hear; guide older children to discount bursts of oratory in searching for essential ideas.
14. Help older elementary children note how phrasing, pausing, and transitional words punctuate oral speech and aid the listener.
15. Check cases of inattention for defective hearing; compensate by advantageous seating.
16. As a teacher, exemplify good listening habits yourself.
17. Be consistent in the formation of listening habits.
18. Have a means of checking to see whether children have listened.

While the above techniques are of a general nature, they are not only applicable in improving listening, but also make for any good learning situation.

Duker²¹ gives more specific information on techniques for improving listening based upon a study in which paired groups in fifth grade social studies classes were used. In one group no particular emphasis was placed on listening. The other group discussed the different aspects of listening.

1. Listening for main ideas.
2. Listening for key ideas.
3. Paying attention to the topic rather than to various objects and persons in the room.
4. Keeping one's mind on the subject being discussed in order to keep in the spirit of the idea.
5. Taking notes to aid in remembering.

Identical social studies were taught to both classes over a period of ten weeks. Both classes were given the same bi-weekly tests. A significantly greater improvement in test results was observed in the class in which good listening was emphasized.

In a second part of this study Duker²² tried out various techniques in listening with pupils in a third grade class. From this study he found techniques that were helpful in increasing efficiency in listening.

1. The children closed their eyes and after a short period told about the various sounds they heard during that time.
2. After a lesson children were asked what extraneous sounds they had heard while the lesson was going on. Using this list as a spring board for discussion, the children made up this set of rules for good listening.

²¹S. Duker, "How Listening Can Be Taught," Instructor, Vol. LXIV (May 1955) p. 35.

²²Ibid., p. 35.

Listen carefully
 Pay attention
 Be wide awake
 Look at the speaker
 Don't listen to noises
 Listen so you can answer questions
 Listen so you can learn

3. In arithmetic the child called on to answer a problem clapped her hands the required number of times; the other pupils listened carefully to check the answer.
4. Radio programs, show and tell periods, and the oral reading of original compositions were discussed by the pupils not only as to content, but also as to quality of presentation.

The third part of Duker's²³ study was carried on in the first grade. Most of the objectives in a beginners' program can be carried out through a planned emphasis on listening. The methods used were:

1. Using the common device of having children close their eyes and listen for sounds, the teacher asked for all sounds heard. Then she asked the children for sounds made by human beings, such as the teacher walking, a monitor opening the door, a child sighing. On a stormy day the children were asked to listen for sounds of nature. On other occasions, children were alerted to listen for mechanical sounds. At another time the boys and girls were given practice in identifying sounds purposely produced.
2. Musical records were played after a carefully prepared list of motivating questions had been asked.
3. Practice was given in following gradually lengthening series of oral directions in the form of a game.
4. Listening for various kinds of sounds on walks around the neighborhood was substantially improved by discussions of possible sounds before taking the walks.
5. Listening games, some old, some new, were frequently played.
6. Children made up class charts on listening.

²³Ibid., p. 76.

As a result of emphasis on listening the children did not lose ground in developing readiness for other subjects. The effect of the practice of good listening habits on discipline was marked. Class discussions were improved.

Althea Berry²⁴ has compiled a list of classroom activities in which listening can be practiced. Her listing follows:

1. Conversation and telephoning.
2. Discussions.
3. Reports.
4. Directions and announcements.
5. Story telling and dramatizations.
6. Poetry and choral speaking.
7. Oral reading.
8. Listening to music.
9. Introductions.
10. Programs in which children participate.
11. The radio in school.
12. Recordings and transcriptions.
13. Broadcasting by pupils.
14. Sound films.
15. Creative listening.
16. Sounds around us.
17. Sharing listening experiences.
18. Listening to younger or older children.

The techniques for improving listening efficiency discussed here should be regarded as a part of the total language arts program. When these techniques are used, the listening experience is integrated with the experience of children in speaking, writing, and reading. All four phases of the language arts program are closely associated and must be taught together.

²⁴Berry, loc. cit.

SUMMARY

The writer of this paper has attempted to bring together information of use to others in an understanding and teaching of listening. The writer has emphasized the fact that everyone spends more time in listening than in speaking, writing, and reading combined. Since this is true, schools and teachers must give boys and girls more training in listening. To give boys and girls a more valuable listening experience, the teacher should be aware of the nature of listening.

This paper is the result of a survey of recent literature concerned with listening. The information from the survey is presented in three main parts.

In the beginning, the nature of the listening process is discussed. The term 'listening' is defined, and the factors that affect listening are cited. Also, the levels of listening are presented, so the reader may gain understanding of the listening process.

Next, a review of evidence of listening skills is presented. This evidence points toward a body of specific listening skills that should be developed with pupils.

Lastly, the techniques for improving the listening skills are presented.

In conclusion, it should be clear to all that the listening function is a composite of many skills and abilities. Effective listening ability is an important power for children and adults to possess. Listening must not be left to develop by chance. If it can be said that listening is to be learned, listening skills must be taught.

FINIS

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