EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR THE TEACHING OF LISTENING SKILLS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT
The paper examined effective strategies for the teaching of listening skills in primary schools. Listening was conceptualised and types of listening identified. The paper also provided ideas on how to listen and discussed some factors that negatively affect listening. Why the teaching of listening skill is often neglected was investigated and finally, strategies and activities for teaching listening in primary schools were provided. The paper concluded that since listening is a foundational skill, its teaching and learning must be prioritised in order to enhance the acquisition of the other language skills of speaking, reading and writing.

KEYWORDS: Strategies, Listening skills

INTRODUCTION
There are four language or communication skills. These are listening, speaking, reading and writing, in that order. Listening is the very first language skill and is therefore foundational to the acquisition and development of the other three language skills. Before an individual attempts to speak a language, he must first listen to the language as it is spoken. One cannot for instance, speak French without first listening to speakers of French language speak it. The auditory faculty must first be engaged before the speech faculty can be activated.

Whereas the skills of speaking, reading and writing are very popular and widely taught, the skill of listening is hardly ever taught as it does not even feature in the time-table of Nigerian primary schools. But one will find speech, reading, and writing on the timetable. Even in tertiary institutions, one would easily find English language graduates with grammar (speech), reading and writing as their area(s) of specialisation. Hardly would one find a graduate whose area of specialisation is listening.

This situation has made the skill of listening to take a back seat in the general scheme of things with regards to language teaching and learning. It is possibly because of this clear neglect of this foundational language skill that mastery in the other skills has been negatively affected. This paper therefore presents functional strategies and activities by which the teaching
of the listening skill can be enhanced with the intended spill-over effect of enhancing speaking, reading and writing.

CONCEPTUALISING LISTENING SKILLS

The word listening is from the verb listen. It means, among other things, to be attentive. According to Ella and Onwochei (2009), listening is not synonymous with hearing for while hearing is a physical process, listening is both physical and mental, involving responding intellectually and emotionally to what one hears. Listening therefore, involves making a conscious effort to receive, attend to and assign meaning to messages.

From the first day of an individual’s life on earth, he is bombarded with a lot of utterances from the awe-struck mother’s cooing to quieten and reassure the child, to the verbalised admiration of those who come to rejoice at the birth of the child. At this stage, all the child can do is to ‘listen’ (even though not consciously) to all the utterances around him. He hears but he cannot respond or fully participate. Hearing is an aspect of listening but it does not require as much concentration as listening because it is often times unconscious. As long as one has functional ears, he will hear as the auditory organs are kept open for sound waves to pass through. Listening, on the other hand, is more advanced, intentional and meaningful than hearing as listening involves paying full attention to sound sequence as a means of getting meaning from a speech act. Because listening is not physical, it is often regarded as a passive activity while speaking is regarded as an active activity (Ojo, 2005).

Listening and speaking are oracy skills while reading and writing are literacy skills. Furthermore, listening and reading are receptive or input skills; that is, avenues or means by which we take in or receive information. On the other hand, speaking and writing are referred to as expressive, output or productive skills; that is, avenues or means by which one produces information for others to consume (Enighe, Galadima & Surma, 2013; Onwochei, 2017).

TYPES OF LISTENING

There are different types of listening in operation in today’s scientific and communicative world. Enighe, Galadima and Surma (2005) identified three types while Ella and Onwochei (2009) identified four. A few types of listening will therefore be discussed here.

Marginal listening: This refers to the type of listening where only bits and pieces of an information are picked up by the receiver. Because the whole information is not got, this type of listening can lead to misunderstanding of what was said. Marginal listening can also result in wrong or faulty conclusions. This type of listening should not be encouraged by teachers especially for academic purpose.

Evaluative listening: This type of listening involves paying too much attention to assessing or judging the source of information. The real impact of a message is usually lost when the listener
devotes too much time to approving or disapproving the communication message or the communicator. This type of listening should be moderated such that even though the listener pays attention to the speaker by way of assessment, the time spent on this should not steal into the time spent consuming the information from the speaker.

**Projective listening:** This holds great prospects for effective communication as the listener pays full and undivided attention to the content of the communication and not other extraneous variables.

**Comprehensive listening:** This as the name implies, is full, comprehensive and all-round listening. It involves both the evaluative and projective aspects of listening. The listener assesses the communicator, convinces himself that the communicator is worth listening to and then pays full attention to the information received.

**Attitudinal listening:** This is listening with a mind full of biases and prejudices. The listener is already having ready-made barriers as a result of pre-conceived notions as to what the speaker will say which the listener believes will be against him (the listener).

**Informational listening:** This refers to a situation where the listener has specific information he/she desires to get from the speaker. Once these information are got, the listener does not feel obligated to continue listening.

**Critical/Analytical listening:** Here, the listener listens to find fault or he listens in order to pick out areas for criticisms. As no man is perfect, one who listens for the purpose of fault finding or criticism will always find them but would have missed the real content or substance of the communication.

**Therapeutic or reflective listening:** This kind of listening relies mostly on emotions or feelings. This is the type of listening involved when we listen to music we love or voices of loved ones we miss. Medical science has proven that this type of listening can serve as a therapy for alleviating pain and some illnesses that may be psychological in nature.

**Appreciative listening:** This is listening for pleasure or entertainment.

Having looked at the different types of listening, it is clear which type the teacher should encourage and which he should not. However, an individual is capable of engaging in all the types of listening depending on the situation, occasion or need.

**HOW TO LISTEN**

Every language skill has its own ‘how’. There is how to read, how to speak, how to write; listening is not exempted. The ‘how’ of listening is however dependent on what the listener conceives listening to be and the benefit(s) he or she intends to derive from listening.
According to Underwood in Doki (2017), “listening is the activity of paying attention to and trying to get meaning from something we hear” (p.76). To listen successfully or to achieve effective listening therefore, one must be able to work out what the speaker is saying when he uses particular words. The ‘how’ of listening therefore, involves the following elements: Listening for main ideas, listening for interpretation and critical evaluation, listening for enabling skills, recognising the spoken sentence (Doki, 2017).

**Listening for main ideas:** This is very important and an effective listener must watch out for the main idea(s) contained in the communication of the speaker. One of the ways a speaker presents his main ideas is by announcing the title of his speech. The title tells the direction the speaker intends to take and may provide insight into the main idea. Another, is by the speaker calling attention to certain aspects of his presentation. He does this by using sentence markers like “the most important point here is…”, etc. The use of these types of sentence markers indicate the main idea(s).

Furthermore, when listening for main ideas, a listener should watch out for constant repetitions as speakers usually repeat the main points of their talks without necessarily drawing attention to it. Emphatic points therefore form relevant points (Doki, 2017).

Also, speech patterns as well as writing on the board could indicate main ideas. Some speakers would mention their main points and then go on to explain or give illustrations. For other speakers, the reverse is usually the case. The difference in speech patterns is what the listener should watch out for as he or she seeks to identify main ideas. Also, some speakers write main points on a board if it is available. The effective listener must therefore pay attention to whatever the speaker writes as it may provide a lead to identifying the main idea(s).

**Listening for interpretation and critical evaluation:** To achieve this, the listener must be able to listen between the lines, make inferences, identify surface and deep meanings as well as making deductions and observations. The listener engages in “listening for specific purpose” (Enighe, 2017) in order to interpret what he or she has listened to, criticise it if need be and evaluate it by weighing the merits against the demerits in order to pass personal judgement, make generalisations or arrive at valid conclusions.

**Listening for enabling skills:** Even though listening is a skill in itself, there are sub-skills that can be derived from listening. These include ability to concentrate on the information being received, ability to think along with the speaker, ability to pre-empt the speaker or anticipate what the speaker is about to say, ability to relate what is being said to what was said before in order to form a united whole. These are the sub-skills that should come to play when listening is taking place.
Understanding the spoken sentence: According to Doki (2017), understanding the spoken sentence entails the listener’s ability to distinguish between the clauses that make up the sentence; the phrases that make up the clause(s) and the words that make up the phrase(s). The listener must know when a sentence begins and when it ends. Recognising the speaker’s intonation (the exertion of greater breath and muscular energy in the production of certain sounds), is of utmost importance here as this will help the listener in understanding the speaker better.

It is evident that listening cannot be done anyhow. The intentional listener who is serious about making his listening experience effective must not engage in what Enighe (2017) calls listening for no obvious reason (LFNOR) as this would be a waste of one’s precious time. The three levels of listening for instruction(s) will not be achieved when listening is for no obvious reason.

FACTORS AFFECTING LISTENING

Like in all the other language or communication skills, there are some identified factors that militate against the acquisition and effectiveness of the listening skill. A few of them will be presented here.

Absence of listening readiness: The learner’s chronological age is a determinant of listening readiness. An 18 months old child cannot possibly engage in the functional and effective listening that would produce comprehension. The older the listener therefore, the higher the listening capacity.

No listening models: In the classroom, teachers hardly listen; they would rather be listened to. At home, parents and other significant others are too busy to listen. Children therefore grow up without listening models. Because they did not have listening models, they grow up not to be listening models themselves.

Misconception that teaching listening is boring: Teaching listening can be very exciting and interesting if the teacher knows what to do. Unfortunately, some teachers were themselves never taught listening. Since one cannot give what one does not have, teaching listening becomes an up-hill task for these teachers and their best attempt at teaching listening results in boredom for the learners.

Physical environment: When the physical environment is noisy, listening will be negatively affected. Noise refers to all forms of physical or psychological interferences that distort a message (Enighe, Galadima & Surma, 2013). Noise could be physical which includes all physical distractions and obstructions e.g laughter, hisses, shouts, shuffling of feet, blaring of car horns, sounds of heavy equipment, etc. It could also be semantic which refers to interference of a message through words or what is known as “language differentiation” (Ojo, 2017).
involves wrong pronunciations, incorrect grammatical structures and wrong tenses, mother
tongue interference-laden diction, etc. Noise could also be attitudinal which refers to
interpretation of messages on the bases of cultural, religious or gender beliefs as well as on the
basis of individual perceptions and feelings.

**Ill-health:** This refers to situations where ill-health impairs effective listening. This especially
applies to individuals who lack auditory perception or have hearing difficulties as a result of
some childhood disease or an accident. Where this is the case, listening will be negatively
affected. Also, a physically sick person may not listen effectively as his or her attention would
be more on the discomfort or pain caused by the sickness. Sickness of the mind (emotional,
mental, psychological) as well as sickness of the pocket or wallet also fall into this category
and impede effective listening.

**WHY THE TEACHING OF LISTENING SKILLS IS OFTEN NEGLECTED**

Various reasons account for why the teaching of the listening skill is often neglected
especially in primary schools. A few of those reasons will be considered in this paper.

The first reason why the listening skill is not taught is the misconception that no human
being has to learn how to listen as long as the individual has functional ears. But listening is a
language skill and like the rest of the language skills (speaking, reading and writing), it has to
be taught and learnt. We teach speaking skills, especially in oral English. We also teach reading
and writing skills. Writing even has a special exercise book in the primary school that children
use to learn how to write. Why then do we gloss over the teaching and learning of the listening
skill? Skills are learnt in order to be acquired. Effective listening skills must therefore be learnt
in order for them to be acquired.

Another reason why the teaching of the listening skill is often neglected is the confusion
between hearing and listening. Some people erroneously believe that anybody who can hear
sounds can listen. For these people, there is no distinctive difference between hearing and
listening; the two are used interchangeably as near or exact synonyms. As such, the argument
is that if one cannot be taught to hear, one should not be taught to listen. But whereas listening
is a language skill, hearing is not. Furthermore, the fact that an individual has functional eyes
does not mean he or she can read without training. The fact too that we have functional hands
does not mean we can write without training. It therefore follows that the fact that we have
functional ears is not a guarantee that we can listen effectively without training.

In addition, even people who acknowledge or recognise the need for training in
listening skills, battle fiercely with the problem of inadequate time to teach listening skills and
a dearth of textbooks. Some people argue that the primary school timetable is already so heavily
loaded without the inclusion of listening lessons. As such, if listening lessons are to be
included, school time would have to be extended and the school day elongated. However, as
germane as this argument is, the point remains that listening is so important that whatever can
be done to inculcate this skill especially in primary school children, would not be an exercise
in futility.

STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES FOR TEACHING LISTENING SKILLS IN
PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Teaching listening, like teaching other language skills requires functional strategies that
will not only arouse primary school pupils’ interest but will sustain their interest. However,
care should be taken to adopt activity-based strategies in line with the chronological age of
children in the primary school. It is important for the teacher of listening to speak clearly and
distinctly in order to be a model. When speech is compelling, fluent and exemplary, it would
naturally command listening (NTI, 2018). When the teacher’s speech is full of drudgery, it
‘kills’ listening interest. So teaching listening must begin with lively, spirited and animated
teachers whose oral command of the English language is worth listening to.

Also, teaching listening requires that the teacher himself or herself would model
listening to the pupils. When a pupil talks to a teacher and the teacher appears not to be listening
or is distracted, the teacher has just modelled to the child that it is alright not to listen. But when
teachers listen when pupils speak, it models to the pupils that listening is important. Sometimes,
children speak gibberish – unintelligible speech that does not make sense; but even at that, a
child would want to see and know that he is being listened to. This way, listening ability will
be passed from teacher to pupils by example and not only by precepts.

Some activities that could be employed to teach listening include recognition drills, use
of listening adjective games, true or false, Simon says, the gossip, giving of verbal clues for
finding hidden objects (treasure hunt), story completion, storytelling, news sharing, rhymes
and poems, etc.

Recognition drills: This is a listening activity that involves the use of minimal pairs where
particular sounds are taught e.g. washed – watched; fan – pan; sink – zinc, etc. It is important
for a teacher who wants to inculcate listening skills to his pupils to begin each English lesson
with this kind of activity, pointing out the difference in sounds.

Use of listening adjective game: This is an interesting listening activity where the teacher or
a pupil in the class provides a noun and other pupils provide adjectives. For example

Teacher: A goat
Pupil I: A big goat
Pupil II: A big black goat
Pupil III: A big black pregnant goat
Pupil IV: A big black pregnant angry goat
For a child to provide the right adjective, he must listen attentively.

**True or False:** For this exercise, the teacher could share the class into two groups and then make a statement to which each group would be required to say ‘True’ or ‘False’. For each correct answer, the group that answered correctly would score one mark. At the end of the exercise, the marks would be totalled and the winner announced. Example of statements:

- All girls play football. (T/F)
- My mother is a man. (T/F)
- The teacher is always right. (T/F)
- I have a cousin brother. (T/F)

To answer correctly, pupils would have to listen attentively especially as they may be required to provide answers in less than five seconds after the statement has been made.

**Simon says:** This is a game in which the whole class or a pupil (as the teacher deems fit) would do exactly what Simon says. If Simon does not say, the class remains as they were but once Simon says, they respond according to that Simon says. For example:

*Teacher*: Simon says “Stand up”. (The class stands up)  
*Teacher*: Sit down (the class remains standing because Simon did not say “sit down”) (NTI, 2017).

Again, for the right action to be taken, the class must listen attentively to whether or not it is Simon saying through the teacher or the teacher himself speaking.

**The gossip:** This is a game not to encourage the vice of gossiping but to inculcate listening skills. In this game, the teacher either whispers an information to a pupil or writes down an information on a piece of paper for the pupil to read silently and take in. The pupil who has been whispered to or who read and understood the information then passes the information to another pupil who also passes it on to the next until all the pupils have had the opportunity of receiving the information. All of the passing on of the information will be in whispers such that no pupil hears until it gets to his or her turn. When everybody has been told, the teacher either reads out the original information or calls out the pupil that received the original information to say out what he or she was told. It is expected that the original information would have been altered in the course of its journey through the class but that is not a problem. The idea is that every pupil would want to be attentive to receive information in order to have something to pass on to the next pupil. Because this particular activity may take time, it is advisable to break the class into two or three groups so that the teacher will engage one group a day so that no pupil would be left out.

**Giving verbal clues for finding hidden objects:** To actualise this game as an effective activity for teaching listening, the teacher would have to procure some little gifts or ‘treasures’; hide them where they cannot be easily found and then ask the children to find them. As the pupils search, the teacher gives them verbal clues to which they have to listen in order to find the
'treasures'. The teacher must ‘hide’ the treasures when the class is empty so as not to be seen by the pupils. Also, the teacher should know the number of items “hidden” and announce the end of the game when the last item has been found.

**Story completion:** For this activity, the teacher or a pupil selected begins a story with only a sentence and then one after the other, other pupils add a sentence each until the story is completed. For example:

Teacher: As I was going home from school yesterday,
Pupil I: I saw a man who looked like my father
Pupil II: I ran to him and hugged him tightly
Pupil III: On a closer look, I discovered he was not my father
...etc

**Storytelling:** This activity is like oral comprehension. The teacher tells a story and the asks questions based on the story to test how effectively the pupils listened to him.

**News sharing:** Here, the teacher could share the pupils into groups and then require each group to share some very interesting news like the result of a football match they watched, how they learnt to read, announcing the birth of a baby brother, etc. As each group shares their news, other groups listen. At the end of the news sharing, the pupils would be asked to provide the major news items contained in the other group’s news-sharing. It is expected that if they do not listen, they would miss out on the main news items as this is not written for them to reread.

**Rhymes and poems:** In using this to teach listening, the teacher picks out a very interesting poem appropriate for the pupils’ age. The teacher then reads out the poem while the pupils repeat after him. The poem so selected must not be very long, only a few lines and it must have rhymes at the end of each line. For example:

Who sat and watched my infant head
When sleeping on my cradle bed
And tears of sweet affection shed…
My mother
When pain and sickness made me cry
Who gazed upon my heavy eyes,
And wept for fear that I should die…
My mother

A teacher may not use all these activities but he should choose the activity that he can best handle within the time at his disposal and the one that will be more fun to his pupils. Also, the teacher should select activities that are very interactive and that involve the whole class so that no child is left out. Additionally, the teacher can adapt any of these activities to suit his purpose. The ultimate purpose is to ensure that the skill of listening is not only taught but learnt.
CONCLUSION

The teaching of listening skills has been shown in this paper to have direct connection with the other language skills. Since listening is foundational, other language skills cannot possibly be effectively acquired without effective listening. To address the problem of the teaching of listening being a bore, some activities that can enhance the teaching of listening have been provided. It is therefore hoped that the teaching of listening will not only be incorporated into English language lessons, but that the teacher of listening skills will know exactly how to teach the skill both by precepts and by example.

REFERENCES


