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The Role of Listening in Language Learning

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Abstract

Listening is the primary source of language. It is the foundation on which all the other communication processes develop. The very young child is channeled to speech, reading, and writing through listening. Studies of physical disabilities such as hearing disorders and brain damage, have pointed to the interdependence among the various language processes with listening at the base. The present paper critically analyses the role of listening in language learning.

Keywords

Language Skills; Listening; Language Learning.

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Introduction

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channeled to speech, reading, and writing through listening. Studies of physical disabilities such as hearing disorders and brain damage, have pointed to the interdependence among the various language processes with listening at the base.

The International Listening Association defines listening as “the process of receiving, constructing means from and responding to spoken and / or nonverbal messages” (qtd. in Collins and James 7). Borisoff states that “Listening is the active and dynamic process of attending, perceiving, interpreting, remembering and responding to the expressed (verbal and nonverbal) needs, concerns, and information offered by other human being” (Borisoff 8). Lundsteen considered hearing a physical act and listening a mental act. “Hearing, she said had to do with our physiological capacity to receive and process sounds” (qtd. in Borisoff 5).

Types of Listening

Experts use various overlapping descriptions for the types of listening, the one given by Battell is as follows:

Appreciative Listening is listening for aesthetic enjoyment of sound, Active Listening is a willing act of attending to and interpreting with an open mind the words and feelings a speaker expresses, Comprehensive Listening is listening to learn, Critical Listening is listening to make decisions such as when one listens to a political debate, Defensive Listening is listening to discover arguments for oneself and against a speaker, Diabolic Listening is listening to two things at once. This is listening to distinguish the significance of one sound from another, Empathic or Empathetic Listening is listening to put oneself in another person's place to understand, but not necessarily agree with what's being said and why, Therapeutic Listening is listening to help someone talk through a problem, Reflective or Responsive Listening is listening to paraphrase,

summarize and clarify a message and Selective Listening which is listening only to what one wants to hear is selective listening. (2)

The Components of Effective Listening

According to Borisoff there are seven components that are an integral part of the dynamic and active process of listening (9-10). They are the desire to listen which is the first step of effective listening, focused attention for it is easy to miss out on what the speaker says, Perception which is needed to be aware of all the elements of message, speaker and context, Interpretation which is required for understanding, remembering is a critical listening skills that help to retain what has been heard, need to be consciously and actively included, response is essential to completing the process of good listening and all information is meaningful as it describes and relates to a human condition. The various factors stated by Collins and James, that affect the listening process are as follows: There are both internal factors and external factors that affect listening. The internal factors are experience, expectations, culture, knowledge and mood. The external factors are characteristics of the speaker, psychological context, message structure and physical context (18).

Process of Listening

Collins and James break listening into 5 steps which are as follows:

i. Sensing

To listen to something, the sounds out of the environment is first selected and taken through the senses.

ii. Interpreting

The meaning of words is subject to interpretation, and interpretations are highly individualized. The meaning assigned to what is heard depends on education, upbringing and culture. It depends even on temporary influences such as mood, expectations etc.

iii. Evaluating

At this point the listener is deciding whether or not to agree with or believe the speaker.

iv. Responding

The response to a message is the action taken or not taken as a result of hearing it. The response can further an interaction and encourage a speaker, or the response can directly or indirectly let the speaker know that the listener doesn't want to listen.

v. Remembering

Information may stay in the short-term memory while actively thinking about it and then it be transferred to long-term storage, or may be lost. (7-8)

Second Language Listening

“Foreign language educators have also developed taxonomies of listening comprehension as a foundation for enabling students to process the acquisition of the new language” (Wolvin and Coakley 17). Richards (1985) has developed an extensive taxonomy of micro skills required for Conversational listening and for Academic listening. Conversational listening involves the ability to retain chunks of language of different lengths for short periods, discriminate among the distinctive sounds of the language recognize the stress patterns of words, detect sentence constituents, process speech at different rates, and adjust listening strategies to different kinds of listener purposes or goals. Academic listening includes skills such as the ability to identify purpose and scope of lecture, identify relationship among units within discourse, deduce meaning of words from context, and recognize markers of cohesion.

Wolf et al (1983) focus on listening comprehension, appreciation listening and empathic listening. “Given the complexity that underlies this process of (second language) listening comprehension; it has been considered the most difficult skill to learn out of the four skills” (qtd. in USo' Juan and Marti'nez Flor 29).

The essential features of a pedagogic model of second language listening given by Flowerdew and Miller are Individualization, Cross-cultural aspects, Social features, Contextualized dimensions, Affective factors, Strategic aspects, Intertextuality and Critical discourse features (qtd. in Wolvin 158).

Vitality of Listening

A notice board of the Department of Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) at the Christian Medical College Hospital, Vellore read 'If the baby cannot hear he/she will not learn to talk'. That is why the ENT (Ears, Nose and Throat) specialists always advice parents to check their babies' hearing at the earliest to avoid permanent damage. This can be very easily extended to learning the second language – English. If students do not hear or listen to English, they will never be able to speak the language correctly and fluently.

It is their (children's) ability to listen that allows them to join in with the speech of adult from the time that they are a few months old. Listening gives them clues about the sounds and sound combinations which are used to form acceptable words and provides children with an understanding of how sentences are formed.
(Browne 1-2)

Listening is the primary source of language say Flood et al (342). The indications are that far more attention needs to be given, right from the start noted Jim Rose (qtd. in Dawes 1-2), to promote speaking and listening skills to make sure that children build a good stock of words, learn to listen attentively and speak clearly and confidently. Speaking and listening, together with reading and writing, are prime communication skills that are central to children's intellectual, social and emotional development.

The development of listening skills starts at a very early age and for a good reason, says Prescod(6), since it is by listening effectively through normal hearing processes that the child develops adequate speech and language function. That is because speech development is directly linked to hearing. A child who has difficulty hearing will naturally have difficulty acquiring appropriate speech patterns because all human learn to speak by first hearing.

Kroodsma in his book quotes that to sing properly, the young male (bird) must hear the songs of an adult, or else he will develop highly abnormal songs (49). He also noted that some birds even become bilingual (50-51). This is of

much importance to our study as this shows the vitality of listening in second language learning. This is true to second language learners, for if they do not hear the language, they develop abnormal pronunciations or to say wrong pronunciations.

Conclusion

Listening is an often neglected element of language learning and children are expected to acquire the ability to listen critically by the time they enter formal schooling without receiving any special instruction in this area. Listening is the function of all language growth, and a child with a deficit in this area will have disability in all the communication skills.

“A person is functionally deaf if language was learned primarily visually and information is received from the environment primarily visually. Visual input includes speech reading or lip reading” (Madell and Flexer XX). Listening is the natural precursor to speaking, the early stage of language development in a person’s first language (and in naturalistic acquisition of other languages) are dependent on listening.

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