

The Effect of Listening Comprehension Skills on Students' Performance in Oral English Language Test

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Abstract

This paper presents the report of a study that investigated the effects of listening comprehension skill training on students' performance in Oral English Test. To investigate the effects that the teaching of listening comprehension skills would have on the performance in Oral English test, 82 Senior Secondary School 2 students were selected from a Senior Secondary School in Bokkos town in Plateau State, Nigeria.

On the whole, the finding shows that instruction in listening comprehension skills has a significant effect on the students' performance in an Oral English test. It thus means that students' performance in Oral English can be enhanced when they are taught listening comprehension skills and given variety of opportunities to practice and use the skills in oral communication.

Introduction

Learning English language can be difficult especially when the learners are not in the target language environment. The input they receive may not always be comprehensible due to differences in the patterning of the target language being learned and the learners' first language (L1).

Listening is an important and critical aspect in language development without which spoken language is not possible. Listening skills have been recognized as crucial for developing language competence generally, but comprehension specifically. Generally, language users rely on their listening skills and strategies for comprehension and when such users' listening skills are lacking or poor, comprehension becomes impaired. Secondary school students' performance has often been rated as poor. The WAEC **{spell out?}** Chief examiner's yearly report has often made reference to the students' poor performance in oral English. The reports often attributed the poor comprehension of students to lack of listening skills which may result from the teachers' lack of concern for and seriousness about the teaching of listening skills. Complaints about poor listening skills have also been made by teachers, parents and the general public. That is why it becomes necessary to

investigate whether instruction in listening skills does impact on students' listening comprehension and communication generally.

Background to the Study

The importance of listening comprehension skills in the development of language competence cannot be over emphasized. Listening skills have long been recognized as crucial for developing language competency in children. Generally, language users rely on listening skills and strategies for comprehension. It therefore means that if language users lack listening skills their comprehension will become impaired (which will also make their communication to suffer).

It is public knowledge that performance of secondary school students in Nigeria in the SSCE Oral English language paper has continued to decline over the years. The causes of the poor performance have been attributed to various factors but principal among them is the poor listening comprehension skills demonstrated by the students.

Poor performance in listening comprehension skills which forms 20 percent of the overall score in oral English inevitably results in failure in the Oral English Language Examination. Besides, having taught for over two decades at the secondary school and the university level where most graduates of the secondary school eventually go to, this researcher has observed with apprehension the increasing difficulty it takes each year to assist students develop good listening skills that make for effective communication.

The comments by WAEC Chief Examiners, English Language Paper about the performance level in English in Nigerian Secondary Schools provide enough cause to worry. Considering the overwhelming complaints about the poor listening skills and proficiency of secondary school students, there is need to investigate and establish whether instruction in listening comprehension skills does influence the students' oral English performance positively.

Statement of the Research Problem

Listening comprehension is a complex and necessary process in oral communication. Second language (L2) users like their first language (L1) counterparts require listening comprehension skills to develop their communicative competence. Many secondary school students fall short of the required listening comprehension skills to enable them to carry out their communicative activities. It is obvious that a poor listening comprehension skill among secondary school students has been a source of concern. Educationists, parents, teachers and other stakeholders have called for investigation into the causes of poor listening comprehension skills, and ways to improve listening skills with the hope to improve the students' oral English performance.

Purpose of the Study

This study sets out to establish the effect of listening comprehension skills training on the performance of students in oral English. It also sets to compare the performance of male and female students in an oral English test and suggest strategies that would help enhance students' performance in listening comprehension skills.

Research Questions.

The following questions were posed to guide the conduct of this study.

- What effect does instruction in listening comprehension skills have on secondary school students' oral English performance?
- What factors positively impact on students' listening comprehension skills?
- What strategies can language teachers employ to effectively teach listening comprehension skills?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested in this study:

- There is no significant difference between the test performance of students in the experimental group and that of those in the control group.
- There is no significant relationship between the performance of the male and female students in a listening comprehension test.

Review of related literature

Oral or spoken English which became compulsory in 1988 in SSCE English Language Examination is an important aspect of English Language. For one to communicate, one must first listen and then comprehend what has been spoken. Every user of a language needs to master the skills of listening. This is a natural pre-requisite for language development. Listening therefore plays an important role in the performance of students in oral English generally, but more so, because these students are second language learners outside the target language environment. Proficiency in English language is crucial for all second language users, especially secondary school students who need to master it for entry into the university and to function in an English speaking community.

Concept of listening

The *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* defines listening as paying attention to somebody/something that one can hear. One normally listens in order to take notice of what somebody is saying in order for one to follow.

Listening, according to Crystal (1995), is the most universal and natural medium for the reception of language. From this definition, listening can be classified as one of the receptive skills that is critical for the productive skill. It serves as a pre-requisite for language production. Listening is indeed an active skill. Rost (2002) defines listening in its broadest sense “as a process of receiving what the speaker says (receptive orientation), constructing and representing meaning (constructive orientation), and creating meaning through involvement, imagination and empathy (transformative orientation)”. Listening is a complex active process, making it difficult to describe. Listeners must discriminate between sounds, understand vocabulary and grammatical structures, interpret this within the immediate as well as the larger socio-cultural context of the utterance (Wipf, 1984).

Research into speech perception has shown that listening involves far more than mere decoding the sounds. Rivers (1983: 80-83) in her discussion of speech perception identified three stages involved in speech perception. The first, is that the listener must recognize that sounds are actual messages and not just noises. This recognition means that the listener must recognize that sounds are elements of the language system. In the second stage, the listener identifies sounds along with lexical and syntactic forms by segmenting and grouping them. The third stage involves recording in order to retain the auditory message the listener needs to pay attention to what the speaker is saying in order to respond appropriately. Listening is an active skill, which must be used by the listener for effective communication to take place. That is why the skill needs to be taught in secondary school. This may help improve the performance of students in oral communication in English.

Listening processes

Two distinct processes - “top-down” and “bottom-up” – involved in listening comprehension have been identified by Vandergrift (1997). According to him, listeners use top-down process when they utilise prior knowledge of the topic, the listening context, the text type, the culture or other information stored in long term memory as schemata (typical sequences or common situations around which world knowledge is organised). Listeners use content words and contextual clues to form hypotheses in an explanatory fashion. On the other hand, listeners also use bottom-up processes when they use linguistic knowledge to understand the meaning of the message. Listeners build meaning from lower level sounds to words, to grammatical relationships, to lexical meaning in order to arrive at final message. From experience, listening comprehension is neither top-down nor bottom-up, but interactive, interpretive and linguistic.

Richards (1990) differentiates between interactional purpose for communication and transactional listening. According to him, the former has to do with the use of language, which is the social need of the participants, for example, small talk and casual conversation. Interactional listening is highly

contextualised and two-way, involving interaction with more than one speaker. Transactional listening on the other hand is more message-oriented and is used primarily to communicate information, for example, news broadcast and lectures. Richards further states that transactional listening requires accurate comprehension of a message with no opportunity for clarification with speaker, (this is one-way listening).

Knowing the communicative purpose of a text or utterance will help the listener determine what to listen for and therefore, which processes to activate. Knowing the context also greatly reduces the burden of comprehension, since listeners know that they need to listen for something very specific. Listeners therefore listen selectively, according to the purpose of the task. This in turn determines the type of listening required and the way in which listeners will approach a task.

Kline (1996) has identified five other types of listening: informative, appreciative, relationship, critical, and discriminative. Informative listening is primarily concerned with understanding the message. He states that this type of listening is found in all areas of our lives, for example, listening to lecturers or instructions from teacher's briefing etc. What we learn depends on how well we listen. This is dependent on one's vocabulary, concentration and memory.

Appreciative listening includes listening to music for enjoyment. It is the response of the listener, not the source of the message that defines this type of listening. The quality of appreciative listening, according to him, depends, in large part, on three factors: presentation, perception and previous experience.

Relationship listening, on the other hand, is based on the reason, either to help an individual or to improve the relationship between people. According to Kline (1996) three behaviours are key to effective relationship listening: attending, supporting and empathising.

Discussing critical listening, Kline states that the ability to listen critically is essential in democracy, on the job, in the community, at the service clubs, in places of worship, and in the family etc. We are required to place a premium on critical listening and the thinking that accompanies it.

Aristotle outlined three things to keep in mind when talking about critical thinking. These are ethics or speaker credibility, *logos* or logical argument and *pathos* or psychological appeals.

Discriminative listening, as explained by Kline (1996), is the most important type because it is basic to the other four. In this type of listening one has to be sensitive to the speaker's rate, volume, force, pitch, emphasis, impact of certain responses, and pauses etc. There are three main issues to consider about discriminative listening: hearing ability, awareness of sound structure and integration of non-verbal cues. Kline finally states that effective listening requires skill.

Listening strategies

There is a link between listening comprehension and oral communication. Grognet (1997) in his research shows that when a student has no listening ability both his general language ability and oral communication are lacking, that is, at zero level. In the same vein, when the student's listening ability is equal to that of a native speaker of the same socio – economic level, his general language ability and oral communication are very high.

Methodology and Population of the Study

The quasi- experimental design involving the use of experimental and control groups was used to test the effect of listening comprehension skills training on students' performance in an Oral English test.

The study population consists of 15 Secondary Schools in Bokkos Local Government Area. The students population is over 3, 000 students.

Sample and Sampling Technique

One secondary school was sampled for the study. The study sample consisted of 82 Senior Secondary (SS) 2 students. Two streams of SS2 students were selected. The simple randomisation technique was used to select both the experimental and the control groups. The students were first randomly picked and then selected by the class prefects to belong to either the experimental or the control group. The students from SS2 A became the control group while those from SS2 B the experimental group. Initially 100 participants were sampled but through pre-test, 82 (41 in each group) met the standard of the activities by scoring 80 percent. The sample consists of boys and girls.

Method of Data Collection

The data were derived from two major sources: test scores (pre- test and post-test) and treatment that is, the instruction given to the participants. The data for this study were collected from participants listening comprehension test cores administered to them during the period of the study.

Administration of the test/treatment

A pre-test was first administered to all the participants the first day of the study. The students were then given the treatment. This consisted of four weeks of teaching, which was done in two ways, (1) participants in the experimental group were taught Oral English using listening comprehension skills, (2) while those in the control group were taught oral English without focusing on listening comprehension skills.

The oral English topics covered by the researcher were English consonants, emphasising their place and manner of articulation, diphthongs, homophones and stress. The experimental group listened to what was being

taught to them several times before being asked to produce them. The control group on the other hand, listened only once, and then produced what was being taught them immediately.

Method of Data Analysis

The data collected from both the pre- test and post- test were analyzed and their means and standard deviations computed. In addition, a t-test was computed to compare the relationship that may exist between the two different samples on a given dependent variable.

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

The presentation of the findings of this study is based on the data obtained from test score of the two groups of participants. The findings reveal that the pre-test means for both the experimental and the control group are 56.46 and 57.68. This shows that both groups are similar in their performance. After 4 weeks of teaching, their condition changed. The experimental group had a higher mean score (65.66) while the control group had a mean score of 53.76 (which is even lower than their pre- test mean). An analysis of the raw scores show that two of the participants scored 30 and 15 respectively. These are very poor scores. The performance of the experimental group increased from 57.68 to 65.66 after the treatment. The increase in the mean suggests that the teaching of listening comprehension skills has positive effect on the performance of the participants in the oral language test. This, to some extent, is a clear indication that if more time is given to the teaching of these skills, the students are likely to perform better.

From this result, it can be deduced that the teaching had a positive impact on the participants in the experimental group since they performed much better than their counterparts in the control group. The decline in the performance of the control group in the post-test appears to be the result of time lag and loss of interest that could be due to many factors.

To establish the relationship between the performance of the male participants and their female counterparts, the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was used. The result shows that there is no correlation between the performances of the two groups as the computed t of -0.02 was recorded. This means that there is no correlation at all.

Conclusion

The present study has shown that the difficulties students encounter in pronouncing the sounds and words correctly, and the placement of stress patterns can be traced to their mother tongue. It was discovered that some of the difficulties they faced during the oral production exercises were either due to the lack of such sounds in their mother tongue or the presence of other

sounds that do not exist in English due to the structure of English language which is completely different from the participant's mother tongue.

Students' lack of interest in oral English was another problem identified in this study. It is believed that the participants' attitude towards oral English along with poor teaching (as it was noticed in this case), and lack of the required textbooks by most of the students might have been responsible for it. This state of affairs would certainly lead to poor performance. It therefore becomes pertinent for qualified teachers to be employed, so that students can be equipped with the necessary listening comprehension skills if they are to do well in oral communication generally. The teaching of oral English should be given more attention than it currently receives. Parents should as a matter of urgency, take their children's education seriously by providing them with the necessary learning materials.

As English is Nigeria's second language and the language of education, commerce, international relations, mobility and globalization etc. listening and speaking it well is a matter that must be addressed if the citizens are to communicate in the world's community of nations.

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