

LISTENING FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION: A STUDY OF UNDERGRADUATES OF NNAMDI AZIKIWE UNIVERSITY, AWKA

Chinyeaka Laretta Okwuchukwu

Abstract

In almost every human interaction, listening plays a vital role and so determines the effectiveness of such communication events. Sadly the comportment of many university undergraduates during lectures leaves much to be desired. This to a large extent impedes their communication effectiveness. The purpose of this study therefore is to determine how attentive students are during lectures, identify the causes of possible deviant behaviors and to suggest some remedies. To carry out this research, an unobtrusive participant observation and interview methods were adopted. Findings revealed that many undergraduate students of the university are victims of poor listening habits. It was recommended that a more conducive learning atmosphere provided in order enhance effective communication.

Introduction

Listening, one of the four language skills is a skill most people engage in for the greater part of the day's activities in all spheres of life. We have to listen to others in face- to-face interactions as well as when using the telephone. It appears to be a general assumption that as long as we don't have any physical hearing impairment we are capable of listening and so need no formal instruction.

Many people often believe that listening involves no work. They think listening skills just develops over time. As a result of this, it has been neglected or its importance played down or it has been overshadowed by other components of language viz speaking, reading and writing. In addition, our individualistic society values speaking more than listening, because it is the speakers who often are in the spotlight. But it is crucial to effective communication. In the words of Stanton (23), "it is really the receiver-the-listener- who communicates rather than the speaker." He adds that unless somebody listens to the message and understands it, there is no communication but only noise.

Listening is a term that is often confused with hearing. It is assumed that people who have ear should be able to listen effectively. Hearing according to Pearson et al (109) "is simply the act of receiving sound". Pearson and Nelson (46) rightly point out that "we can close our eyes to avoid perceiving something and shrink away to avoid touch, but our ears have no flaps to cover them. It is almost as if for our protection our ears should never be closed, even when we sleep. Because we cannot close our ears we receive sounds." Gamble and Gamble (193) state that it is a process that occurs automatically and requires no conscious effort on your part. According to them as long as the physiological elements within the ears are functioning properly, the brain will process the electro chemical impulses received and the person will hear. What is done with the impulses after receiving however belongs to the realm of listening.

Problem of the Research

In communicative situations with university undergraduates in formal settings such as lectures, many of them display behaviours that portray gross inattentiveness. This research investigates the cause of students' attentiveness in formal situations.

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Research Questions

The study was carried out based on the following research questions which serve as a guide: what behaviours of students in formal situations portray inattentiveness? What are the possible causes of such deviant behaviours? What are the impacts of such behaviours on communication effectiveness?

Research Methodology

The methodology adopted in this research is unobtrusive participant observation and oral interview methods. Data for the research was collected from undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka through unobtrusive participant observation by the researcher during lectures. To determine the causes of students' inattentive behaviours during lectures, oral interviews involving thirty undergraduate students of the university were conducted and analysed.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is mentalist theory by Noam Chomsky. He considered Linguistics a part of Psychology. He emphasizes the role of the mind. According to the theory, every normal child has an innate ability to acquire language. Chomsky's basic claim is that the grammar for human language is too complex and abstract to be learned on the basis of the type of experience to which children have access (Grady et al 494) Therefore Chomsky posits that significant components of Grammar must be inborn. This innate ability (competence) possessed by the individual is developed in him as part of his maturation (performance) as he is exposed to language learning. In line with this theory, listening, which is one of the language skills is an innate potential possessed by every normal human being that needs to be developed. This explains why an individual can hear sounds even though passively. He has to engage in active listening in order to make sense of a communicative event.

Review of Relevant Literature

Listening as defined by the International Listening Association (ILA) is "the active process of receiving, constructing hearing from, and responding to spoken and /or non- verbal messages." (qtd in Hybels and Weaver II (102). Gamble and Gamble (193) for their part define listening as "a deliberate process through which we seek to understand and retain aural (heard) stimuli" a view, upheld by Azikiwe (109). All these underscore the fact that listening is not a passive activity as widely held by many. The ability to hear is innate but the ability to listen well is hard work and takes sustained effort. It is a skill that must be developed and practised from infancy. Writing on the need to further develop the listening skill, Disavlo, Larson and Sevler (276) point out that listening, like any other skill has to be learned and practised. According to them, when researchers polled 450 graduates of business programs about what kind of communication skills they needed on the job, the graduates responded that listening was the most important skill for success. When they were asked what skill they wished they were taught in college, listening ranked number one.

Unlike hearing, listening depends on a complex set of skills that must be acquired. Thus whereas hearing cannot be manipulated, active and conscious effort is needed to comprehend and remember what we hear in listening. As aptly put by Adetugbo (38) "to listen effectively you will be constructing mentally a coherent interpretation of what you hear."

However, hearing, is an aspect of listening which usually does not require much effort. “An advanced and more meaningful stage,” in the words of Eze (43),”is listening which involves paying attention to sound sequences as a means of getting meaning from speech acts.”

Out of four language skills, listening is an act most people engage in for the greater part of the day. Percentage of time devoted to various communication skills as presented by Hybels and Weaver (107-108) shows that 53% of our time is devoted to listening, 14% to writing, 16% to speaking and 17% to reading. They note however that although we spend the greatest amount of time listening, it is the skill that is taught the least.

Barriers to Effective Listening

Listening is a skill that has many barriers to its effectiveness. Hargie (200) posits that barriers to effective listening are present at every stage of the listening process. According to him;

At the receiving stage, noise can block or distort meaning stimuli. At the interpreting stage, complex or abstract information may be difficult to relate to previous experience, making it difficult to reach understanding. At the recalling stage, natural limits to our memory and challenges to concentration can interfere with remembering. At the evaluation stage, personal biases and prejudice can lead us to block people or assume we know what they are going to say. At the responding stage, lack of paraphrasing and questioning skills can lead to misunderstanding.

Not being prepared to listen was pointed out as another barrier to listening. According to Pearson et al (114), a survey conducted by a corporate training and development firm noted that 80 % of corporate executives taking part in the survey, rated listening as the most important skill in the workforce. Unfortunately, nearly 30% of those same executives said that listening was the most lacking communication skills among their employees.

On the importance of listening among students, Kiewra and Dubois (243) note that “students have a special need to be active listeners because such listeners generally do better in school than passive listeners, who record but do not evaluate what they hear.”

Data Presentation and Analysis

We analyse our data according to our specified objectives:

- i) To determine how attentive undergraduate students are during lectures.
- ii) To identify possible causes of deviant behaviours
- iii) What are the impacts of such behaviours on communication effectiveness?

The data for the research (unobtrusive participant observation) were collected in the following circumstances of interaction;

- 1) A) the researcher was delivering lectures
B) the researcher was unobtrusively observing another group of students from a window while another lecturer was taking them on a course.
- 2) (Oral interviews) – the researcher carried out structured oral interview with thirty students from the departments she observed.

A sample of some of the structured questions (interviews) are :-

- i) Are students always attentive during lectures?
- ii) Have you observed any of your course mates display signs of inattentiveness during lectures?
- iii) Do you sometimes find yourself not very attentive during lectures?

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- iv) What was the cause of your inattentiveness?
- v) What in your opinion are some of the causes of students' poor listening habits
- vi) What in your opinion are some of the behaviors that show inattentiveness in students?

Relevant data for sample for (a) above

The researcher at different lecture periods observed the following: two students dozing off. About five of them were from time to time looking out of the window such that she had to caution them. Two of the students were quietly chatting and smiling. She asked one of them what she had just said and he stared at her in confusion. About three students were sighted playing with their phones which the researcher seized but returned to the owners after serious reprimand.

Example of data (b) above

The researcher observed unobtrusively (while another lecturer taught a class) that some students had their heads bowed on the desks. About four of them were busy chatting. Some of them were gazing outside at passers-by and moving vehicles. One particular student waved at a student who was passing by. About two were sighted playing with their phones.

Samples of the questions and responses from oral interviews with the students are as follows:-

- i) Are students always attentive during lectures?
Majority of the students interviewed stated that from their observation many students are not very attentive in class.
- ii) Have you observed any of your course mates display signs of inattentiveness during lectures?
All the students interviewed responded in the affirmative.
- iii) Do you sometimes find yourself not very attentive during lectures?
Majority of the students interviewed owned up that they had sometimes caught themselves not paying full attention to lectures, but that they got refocused immediately while others stated that they always paid full attention.
- iv) What was the cause of your inattentiveness?
Majority of the students interviewed attributed it to the noise from the moving vehicles from nearby roads, passersby from the corridors and sidewalks. Some of them pointed at hot atmosphere as most of the ceiling fans were either malfunctioned or the lights were out.
- v) What in your opinion are the causes of students' poor listening habits?
In addition to the reasons the students gave for their own inattentiveness, they suggested nonchalant attitudes, illness, overcrowded lecture halls and ostentatious behavior among others.
- vi) What in your opinion are some of the behaviors that show inattentiveness in students?
Some of the behaviors they mentioned include: dozing off, chatting, playing with phones, not answering simple questions correctly and asking irrelevant questions.

From the foregoing presentation and analysis, most of the research questions have been answered. Many students as seen are victims of poor listening habits. Much of the causes were attributed to physical distractions such as noise pollution and mental distraction. Again some of the findings point at juvenile delinquency such as in the instance of a student who was waving at a friend passing by. Another factor is the conducive learning atmosphere. As pointed out earlier, there is irregular power supply and even when there is light, some of the appliances such as ceiling fans are malfunctioned. The researcher recorded general poor performance from the particular class of students she observed.

Conclusion

This research surveyed the listening habits as depicted by the students of the institution under investigation. Many of the students from observation displayed gross inattentiveness that point at poor listening habits. Most of the causes of poor listening are external to the students investigated. Moreso, the place of teaching active listening cannot be overemphasized. Many people erroneously believe that listening is a passive activity that requires the least attention when compared to other language skills. Listening is an intricate and difficult skill and like other language skills – speaking, reading and writing, it requires adequate training and practice right from infancy. Indeed, an active listening habit will go a long way to enhancing an effective communication. This is because it is the receiver – the listener- who communicates rather than the speaker. Further to this, it is recommended that a more conducive learning atmosphere be provided and that the teaching of active listening be emphasized in order to enhance effective communication.

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