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Andrew D. Wolvin  
*University of Maryland*

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# THE LISTENING JOURNAL: AN INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY FOR A LISTENING AWARENESS PROGRAM

*Andrew D. Wolvin*

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

The need for training in listening is a problem which has baffled educators for years. Studies demonstrate the tremendous amount of time that we spend in listening within our communication time. Paul T. Rankin's classic study gave us some working percentages, percentages which have held up in other, more recent, research projects. Through his analysis, Rankin discovered that we spend 75% of our time in oral communication. Of that time, approximately 45% is spent in listening and 30% of our time in speaking.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the evidence that we do so much listening, our educational system has not kept pace with training effective listeners. A study of the language arts curriculum of almost any school system would reveal a decided emphasis on training in writing and reading, the least used communication skills. If a student is fortunate, he will be required or encouraged to take a semester of speech training in senior high school. But the course undoubtedly will emphasize speaker skills. Much of our speech curriculum, it seems, *assumes* a transfer into listening skills. A person trained in speech organization, for example, is expected to recognize structural elements in messages to which he is listening. Listening training, as a result, is frequently bypassed.

The problem is not restricted to the sphere of elementary and secondary education. Communication programs in higher education offer little in the way of listening training as well. Some material may be included in the basic speech course, and the Reading and Study Skills Center frequently offers tips on note-taking. A few progressive departments may even offer a full course in listening, especially popular for future teachers and trainers in various communication fields.

Meanwhile, the need for listening training continues. A recent Conference on Career Education, for example, offered some eloquent pleas from representatives of business and industry careers for Speech Communication programs to build in listening competencies. Give us a person who can listen, they asserted, and we'll train him for the specific job skills.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Paul T. Rankin, "Measurement of the Ability to Understand Spoken Language," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1926), pp. 77-96. Other studies which support this position include Donald Bird, "Are You Listening?" OFFICE EXECUTIVE (April, 1955), pp. 18-19, and Lila Breiter, "Research in Listening and Its Importance to Literature," unpublished M.A. thesis, (Brooklyn College, 1957).

<sup>2</sup> See CAREER COMMUNICATION: DIRECTIONS FOR THE SEVENTIES (Speech Communication Association, 1972).

On the whole, however, despite the strong need for training listeners, we are not responding too readily to curriculum development in the area. This neglect of listening training may not be just an oversight. We really have not reached a level of maturity or sophistication in listening pedagogy.

One of the problems in listening training is that we have not developed a very definitive operational concept of the listening process. We can guess that listening goes beyond hearing into stages of meaning assignment, evaluation, retention, and response.<sup>3</sup> But we have not developed tests which can isolate the process from the many variables which, of necessity, come into play. Back in 1948, Nichols identified some of those variables in the process which influence listening. His research pointed to such factors as age, sex, intelligence, reading comprehension, background, educational influences, etc., as operating on the listener during the listening process.<sup>4</sup> Since Nichols' monumental research, we have come to regard the influences of selective perception and attention as very integral to the listening process.<sup>5</sup>

The process of listening, then, involves a wide range of factors which have not been isolated. These factors, of course, greatly hamper our ability to test listening abilities. When an individual's performance on a listening test is inextricably bound up with his vocabulary level, etc., it is difficult to place much reliance on the test data.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, we seem to be at an impasse on test development. Since the variables are so overwhelming, potential researchers get discouraged and abandon efforts to build more reliable listening tests. This abandonment seems to be a phenomenon of the early 1960's. Not much test research has been undertaken since Lundsteen's efforts in 1963.<sup>7</sup>

The lack of reliable testing has scared off potential listening pedagogues. We voice the need for listening training, but we avoid curriculum development because listening, as a communication skill, is so difficult to pin down.

Such a position, however, will never get us anywhere! Where we con-

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Larry L. Barker, *LISTENING BEHAVIOR* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), chapter 2.

<sup>4</sup> Ralph G. Nichols, "Factors Accounting for Differences in Comprehension of Materials Presented Orally in the Classroom," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Iowa State University, 1948), pp. 89-93.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Carl H. Weaver, *HUMAN LISTENING* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1972), chapter 2.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, E. F. Lindquist, "Listening Comprehension," and Irving Lorge, "Listening Comprehension," *THE FIFTH MENTAL MEASUREMENTS YEARBOOK*, ed. Oscar K. Buros (N.J.: Gryphon Press, 1959), pp. 650-655; and Harold M. Anderson and Robert J. Baldauf, "A Study of a Measure of Listening," *JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH* (December, 1963), pp. 197-200.

<sup>7</sup> Sara W. Lundsteen, "Teaching Ability in Critical Listening in the Fifth and Sixth Grades," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, 1963).

tinue to work on testing designs and procedures, it makes sense to continue with some efforts at instructional strategies. At this point, the most viable objective of current listening training is the development of listening awareness. If a student can understand something about listening behavior and, then, something about his own responses within that construct, he can build toward greater effectiveness as a listener.

Essentially, we can teach students *about* listening behavior in an effort to heighten their awareness of the listening process.

One strategy for heightening listening awareness is for each student to develop a listening journal. The listening journal can be a log of listening experiences of various levels. Students are asked to record the experience, identifying it by type, and to analyze their behaviors as listeners during the experience. It is effective to stress a variety of listening experiences, giving the students exposure to disciplined listening in appreciative, discriminative, comprehensive, critical, and therapeutic levels.

It is important, however, to emphasize the need for concentrating on an analysis of the listening response rather than on a description of the situation. A description, of course, would provide the student only with a diary, a log, rather than a meaningful journal which constitutes a real learning experience.

Some excerpts from journals completed by some of my adult listening students can illustrate the kinds of recorded analyses students can make in their own listening awareness program. The first journal entry ought to be the personal goals or objectives which a student sets out for himself as the basis for his awareness program. One student developed these objectives for her personal listening improvement:

1. To fully analyze my listening disabilities.
2. To develop the ability to habitually assume a listening attitude.
3. To develop the ability to set goals and improve skills in different listening situations.
4. To develop the ability to organize what is being said (main ideas, important details, and sequences), in order to facilitate the recall of the message.
5. To develop the ability to keep an open mind (even though I dislike the speaker, and disagree with his philosophies or his position).
6. To develop the ability to stop what I am doing and give my full attention to others when they are speaking to me, particularly my family.
7. To develop the ability to concentrate fully on what others are saying, without letting my mind wander.
8. To develop the ability to reserve judgment of a speaker and his message until I have listened to what he has to say.
9. To develop the responsibility of providing appropriate feedback to the speaker, so that he will know if and how his message is being received.
10. To develop the ability to listen to a speaker even though his delivery is poor.
11. To develop the ability to listen to material that is dull and uninteresting to me.

12. To develop the ability to make inferences and draw conclusions.
13. To gain some understanding of the listening process.

These kinds of objectives, then, provide the basis for structuring the kinds of listening experiences.

One type of listening experience which students can analyze is appreciative listening, listening which emphasizes enjoyment or sensory impressions. In this level of listening, one can listen for such elements as the beauty or impact of a speaker's style, the impressions from music, or images from literature presented orally. One student described an appreciative listening experience as she listened to "sounds around us:"

"Living close to the park, my husband and I decided to take a walk through it. It was a beautiful autumn morning and, without really thinking about listening, I became aware of all the sounds around us. As we walked, we could hear a conglomeration of sounds. It reminded me of hundreds of birds flying over us. Dorothy Wordsworth in her journals would write of all the things she would see and hear as she walked with her brother through miles of woods and countryside. I wanted to take in everything I could so that later I, too, could remember that beautiful autumn day. I listened to the leaves and could almost hear the forsythia whispering to the trees. Perhaps it was the influence of an eighteenth century poetry course on Blake and Wordsworth which kept reminding me of a communion with nature and man. Whatever, the day was filled with sights and sounds that I can remember and feel now. Specifically, as we walked, I can remember the sounds of our footsteps as if we were intruding on this lovely setting. It was as if we dared to speak, the mood would be lost—nature couldn't be heard. Strangely, as more people entered the park, man seemed to become dominant over nature and the sounds changed. Children, dogs, and cars changed the entire experience into a beautiful Sunday *afternoon* in the park. The change wasn't annoying, but the difference between the sounds of nature and the sounds of civilization were evident. I left the park feeling that I *could* listen appreciatively."

Another student described a listening experience at a Readers Theatre production. The production was based on some old radio scripts, and it was staged as if the readers were in a studio—complete with sound effects!

"This production was very enjoyable and really activated the audience's listening ability. The stage was divided in half with one side having a radio listener and the other side having the radio broadcasters. The lighting emphasized the broadcasters more than the radio listener. I think this took away from the listening experience because of the visual contact.

"Their methods for sound effects were very interesting and added to the

realism. By watching the objects used for different sounds, the visual contact again took away from the listening experience, however.

“It was interesting to speculate on how dependent people were on listening for their entertainment in the past. Today, with more television than radio emphasis in the home, we don’t have the appreciative listening fitness required of people in the 1930’s and 1940’s.”

Listening for discrimination gets into the whole area of auditory discrimination, a very important first step in early childhood education. It is interesting to become aware, however, of how much discriminative listening we do as adults. One mother described her need to listen with discrimination:

“I did a great deal of discriminative listening today. My daughter is sick, and I find myself listening intently for her while screening out other unimportant sounds. I hadn’t realized how much discriminative listening I do as a mother.”

Comprehensive listening—listening for understanding—probably is the most “teachable,” because we can get at some measures through testing programs. Consequently, many listening programs, especially those prepared for the commercial market, are designed solely for comprehensive listening. Such factors as listening for main ideas, following directions, and sequencing are part of effective comprehensive listening. Typically, we emphasize public communication situations when dealing with comprehensive listening (how to take notes, etc.). One student discussed some of the problems in comprehensive listening in a lecture setting:

“This evening in my Marketing class, I did not think I could learn anything. I had stayed awake for thirty-four hours and thought I would fall asleep in class. I decided that, in order to gain anything from the class, I would have to focus my attention completely on the lecture and not let my mind wander. I concentrated on main ideas only. Prior to this, I had taken notes on key phrases and ideas. I found that my attention span was greater because I was actually listening to what the professor was saying. I wasn’t writing as much as usual, but I seemed to be understanding more. Usually (and unfortunately) the notes that I take in class depend upon the type of exam to be given at the end of the semester. In this particular class, exams are very general essays. It seems as though comprehensive listening is well suited to these kinds of tests. And my understanding of the subject is heightened.”

Comprehensive listening is just as difficult in an interpersonal communication situation, as this journal entry illustrates:

“I went to speak to the Budget Office chief today about presenting a basic course on the budget process in the agency. I was dealing with a subject about which I knew very little, and I probably don’t care to know very much. I found the listening situation to be a difficult one. I kept catching myself wandering from the conversation. Several times I had to go back and make sure I had caught the gist of what was being said. I have a long-running battle to listen to anything that involves figures because I find the subject matter difficult to deal with. This only further added to my difficulties in listening accurately. I guess I wasn’t too successful in listening, since I had to go back in and ask many of the questions I should have asked the first time.”

Critical listening skills, of course, apply to interpersonal communication situations as well as to mass media. One recent student found house-hunting to be a real test of critical listening capabilities:

“We had the day off from work, so we went house-hunting. I was an extremely critical listener. I know Barker says you shouldn’t only listen for facts, but that was all I wanted to hear in this situation. My estimation of the credibility of house salesmen is not very high, and I tend to question everything that they say. I was so busy thinking of all the questions that I wanted to ask, that I failed to listen very carefully to what the man’s answers were.

“An additional problem arose when I reacted to an emotionally laden word. The salesman called me “the little woman of the house.” I became so wrapped up in his use of that term to apply to me—a six foot tall woman who didn’t even own a house—that I completely stopped listening for a few minutes.

“Even after I had cooled off a little, I found it difficult to listen to the man objectively. Near the end of the conversation, I began to lose interest in the whole thing, especially after he quoted a price of \$60,000. If I had kept a more open mind, I might have picked up some information that would have been useful in looking at other homes.”

It is obvious that there is tremendous value in an awareness program in critical listening, particularly as we are bombarded with persuasive stimuli every day. Understanding the nature of the strategy can aid the listener in his decision about the persuasive message.

Another very real social need is for awareness in what might be termed “therapeutic” listening—listening to provide the speaker with a “sounding board” for his problems. Rather than practice amateur psychology, a good therapeutic listener operates to provide the kinds of responses that encourage the speaker to continue. Ideally, talking through a problem can enable the speaker to solve it himself.

The need for awareness in therapeutic listening is pervasive. A recent San Francisco organization has been established to provide listeners for people who have no one who will listen to them. The popularity of telephone "Hotlines" is further evidence of this need.

The need was demonstrated by one teacher who described how much she is called upon to function as a therapeutic listener during her daily routines:

"I find that one of my strong points is that of being a good sounding board for others. A day doesn't go by that someone hasn't come to me to talk about something that is preying on his mind or about a problem. It's not necessarily that they've come to me so that I might help them, but that I will listen.

"Each and every day of the week, I will have children either in my class this year or in classes from years before who will come up to 'talk.' Their 'talk' ranges from everything from family to friends to boy or girl friends to questions and concerns about sex. Many would gladly give up their recess time if they could come up and talk to me. For this reason, I set up a 'conference time' with each child during the week. During that time, we may not be disturbed by anyone, except in an emergency.

"In conference time, the children may tell me anything they wish. If they have a particular 'gripe,' this is the time to talk about it. Some are hesitant at first and must first build up a trust. Once this trust is established, they are very open and the 'conference time' is up before we know it. This is an excellent time to get to know children's reactions and feelings about things. It has helped my class to be a very unified group and has prevented many problems that could have come up in the course of the year.

"Children respond very favorably when they find that their ideas have been received. There is an inner pride that no one can take from them. It is surprising how good many children's ideas are, if we would just take the time to listen.

"Because my principal and I are friends, it is not uncommon for him to call me up to his office before or after school to discuss some school matter. As it usually turns out, I listen to what he has to say, and he figures out a solution while he is talking to me. I've even been known to go in and come out again without saying a word, and yet he said that he enjoyed having a little talk with me.

"Parents come in to discuss their children and to tell me something that may help me to know their child a little better. It is not uncommon for me to hear more information than they intended

to say, much of which does not even pertain to their child. Many are hungry for someone to listen to them.

“I have several close friends in whom I confide and who, in turn, confide in me. Sometimes, one of them will call to tell me of an especially good time he had doing something; other times, one of them may call to talk out a problem; other times, it is just to tell of the day’s events.

“I have found that I should be expected to accept the responsibility of listening with an open mind and of giving positive feedback and reinforcement to the person who is talking only when I deem it is necessary. It is surprising to me how many of the people I listen to solve their own problems just by talking them out to a sounding board.”

Recording listening experiences such as these provides an excellent basis for a complete self-improvement program through enhanced self-awareness. The success of the project, however, depends upon the student’s determination of honest, thorough objectives for himself at the outset. Obviously, self-motivation must be built into the project. It is important, also, to establish the program for many levels of listening, to broaden the individual student’s listening experiences. Otherwise, the student may well focus just on comprehensive listening in the classroom setting.

After the student has recorded these kinds of experiences for the semester, it is a useful concluding project to have him write a self-analysis of his listening behavior, identifying his strengths and weaknesses for his own future reference. Since he has set out his objectives initially, these objectives can serve as the basic criteria for the self-evaluation.

Students testify to the value of this type of self-awareness listening program. It gives them an excellent opportunity to understand their own listening responses and to apply their understanding to their actual listening situations. In concluding his journal, one student identified these benefits in his self-analysis:

“Recording listening experiences has been a great help to me. I find now that when faced with a difficult listening task, rather than turning away, I will try and apply a listening technique appropriate to that experience. I believe listening can be taught, for it has taught me, but more significant, perhaps, is that once listening *has* been taught, the frustration which follows is the realization that very few people do listen. It will take, I’m sure, a lifetime to perfect my listening skills, but each day I become more aware, as I listen, that the majority of people in everyday social situations aren’t really listening at all and probably don’t engage in other more diverse and difficult listening situations.

“As the source in a listening situation, I have realized the importance of sending direct, concise messages to make comprehension easier. I am, in short, more polite and considerate toward the receiver because it is often I who am in his situation. For example, when giving directions to an employee, I speak slowly and simply, always looking for signals of understanding. I have found this very successful.

“I feel that, though I have a very long way to go before I become a good listener, I am at least aware of the fundamental processes and will practice what I know and try to make as many others as possible aware of the importance of listening.”