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# LISTENING SKILLS: CAUGHT OR TAUGHT?

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The colorful, cartooned, cereal advertisement was over. Smiling, yet somewhat bewildered, four-year-old Susie jumped up from the television and ran to her mother. Pulling at her mother's dress, Susie questioned, "Mommy, why do all the cereals say that their's is the best?"

Tom gazed out the window and saw the class from across the hall entering the playground for recess. "Gee, I wish I . . .," mused Tom. Tom's daydream ended abruptly as he felt the pressure his angry teacher was applying to his shoulder. He knew the penalty for not paying attention, even if she had been giving a boring history lecture for almost an hour. "Why should I listen?" he pondered.

Mr. Smith pulled into the Marathon Station, unsure of how to find the unfamiliar address on his paper. The attendant carefully spelled out the quickest route to Mr. Smith's destination. Reassured, Mr. Smith thanked the attendant and pulled back into traffic. In only a couple of blocks, Mr. Smith was again lost. He had not remembered the sequence of directions he had been given.

These situations, although here fictitious, could really have happened. In our modern age of machinery and media we are constantly being bombarded with information and misinformation alike. We hardly know *what* to listen to or believe, let alone *how* we should listen. In our schools children are listening for a great part of the day too. In one study, Rankin (5) estimates that 45% of the child's day is spent in listening. In another study, Corey(4) relates the chances of a child speaking in the classroom are 1 to 60 compared to the possibility of the teacher speaking. We demand that our children and adults spend a great part of their life listening, yet our actual teaching of listening skills in the schools is a relatively new part of the language arts program.

The development of the ability to listen cannot be over-emphasized. Children gain most of their vocabulary, sentence patterns, and stock of ideas from listening. Much of a child's fund of information, many of his understandings, most of his ethical and moral standards come through listening and observing those around him. I can see real merit for developing the listening skills in the slow learner. According

to Taylor (6), less competent students, those judged to be less intelligent and scholastically below average, show a marked preference for listening over reading. Slower students also retain more from listening. The slower student depends on the special attributes of listening for much of his understanding. In listening he is assisted in interpreting content by the phrasing and expression of the speaker, while in reading he must construct his own linguistic units in order to realize meaning. In listening, the speaker's appearance, gestures, facial expressions, and manner of delivery contribute color and interest and also add to the meaning of the words. By comparison, the print in a book lies non-committal on the page.

What is listening? Perhaps the best definition of listening has been given by a sixth grader who termed listening as "turned-in hearing." (1) I like to define listening in a three-part definition that could be compared to the three-part definition of reading as "identifying, interpreting, and evaluating ideas in terms of one's mental content." (3) In listening, ideas are also identified, interpreted, and evaluated. Identification is hearing. The sounds are recognized, taken in and analyzed. In interpretation actual listening takes place. The listener begins some mental reorganization. He compares what he is hearing to his own mental content. In the final step of the listening process, the listener evaluates. He listens to form more associations with related items from his experiences. He listens to be organizational, critical, appreciative, and creative. Some authorities term this evaluative listening as *auding*. From this definition, both reading and listening are thoughtful processes; the receiver needs mental content. Children could compare listening and reading by saying that reading materials are printed talk. They should read to listen to sounds they would hear if someone were saying the sentences to them.

Listening can be broken down into several kinds. *Marginal* listening is listening with some consciousness. It's when the radio is playing in the background while you are doing other work. *Appreciative* listening occurs when a dramatization, poem, or story is enjoyed. *Attentive* listening is responsive listening for accuracy of comprehension. It is the kind of listening Mr. Smith should have done when he obtained directions from the Marathon station attendant. *Analytical* listening is critical listening. The listener weighs what is heard against personal experience and is alert to attempts of a speaker to sway his opinion by devices of propaganda. Ruth Strickland has even broken down these four kinds of listening into levels of quality of listening. These range from little conscious listening to erratic, mind-

wandering listening all the way to listening with a real meeting of the minds.

An old maxim warns, "Everybody talks about listening, but nobody does anything about it." What can educators *purposely* do to improve the listening skills of children? Classroom atmosphere must be conducive to listening, relaxed and comfortable. The teacher plays a great part in setting a good listening atmosphere. She must analyze her own actions and listening. Is she aware of what gets in the way of the speaker's attempt to communicate with the listener? Has she discussed with the children what listening courtesies and respect she expects from them? Above all, the teacher must demonstrate to her students that she is a good listener. Also a good listening teacher will place value on activities which upgrade listening. She won't bore her students with continuous reading around the room. She will not have to repeat pupil answers or instructions because her students already know the value of getting "things" the first time around. This teacher will also show her interest in what others have said by following up on oral reports.

After the teacher has set the atmosphere for effective listening, there are specific listening skills that need to be taught. Pratt(2) specifies these skills as word perception, comprehension of ideas, and using ideas to build understandings. There is a wealth of information that can be searched through to find activities to develop listening skills. Planned procedures should be used, but the skilled teacher can also teach listening skills as they arise spontaneously in the classroom.

In teaching the skill of word perception, attention should be given to recall of word meaning and deduction of the meaning of unknown words. Sample activities include:

1. Sentences could be read aloud in which certain words are omitted. Using their knowledge of context clues, students could provide suitable ones.

2. The teacher could read a short paragraph containing words that have similar meanings. Children listen to pick out words that mean the same. "Soon the *little* man came to a *small* room. He peered through the *tiny* door . . ."

Noting detail, following directions, organizing materials into main and subordinate ideas, selecting information pertinent to a specific topic, and detecting clues that show the speaker's trend of thought are all comprehension skills that should be taught. Some activities include:

1. The teacher could read aloud names of different objects, including different categories. The class could be divided into

four teams and each team would remember a specific category.

2. Students could sharpen their following-directions ability by listening to and repeating travel directions.

3. Students could listen to short paragraphs which compare people, places, or events. From memory they would recall the likenesses and differences.

4. The teacher could read a selection containing a clear-cut sequence of events. Students would be asked to predict what might happen next.

5. The teacher could read a story containing specific information . . . This completed, the children would be asked to write with good organization, the information they received in the report. Their results would be compared to the original.

Pratt listed using ideas to build understandings as the third type of listening skill. This includes evaluating an expressed point of view or fact in relation to previous learning and making justifiable inferences. This is actually critical listening. Activities to enhance this skill include:

1. Students could listen to television and analyze the mechanisms that underlie advertisements. Does the advertisement make sensory appeal, as in honey-sweet cereal? Is it the so-called "Scotch" instinct of liking a good bargain?

2. The teacher could devise statements in which fact and plausible opinion are intermingled and ask students to listen first for opinions and then for facts that are indisputable.

3. The teacher could choose some program or recording that is definitely propaganda and discuss how public opinion is formed and influenced not only by what people say but by the way they say it.

Educators are partly responsible for limiting the listening process in two ways. First, we have taught our children to tune-out on many valuable sources of information and pleasure. By dominating the classroom scene with lectures and talk that are often without a worthwhile purpose, children through sheer boredom resort to using their imaginations and daydreams to get them through the class period. We have also hurt our children's listening ability by not teaching them to be selective. There is just too much in our media-mad world to take in. Consequently children may select what to listen to at random,

which may result in a great deal being lost or never attempted. Listening is a thoughtful process that must be taught. Our children already know that they hear with their ears. What we must begin to teach them is that they need to listen with their minds.

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