

Listening Proficiency: Challenges in classroom dynamics

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Abstract

Listening is an essential tool for effective communication that enhances classroom dynamics and achievement in academic performance. This paper examines challenges students encounter when listening in the classroom. It employs the observation method in order to have firsthand assessment of classroom dynamics. Findings show that students are faced with challenges such as distractions from other fellow students, lecturers' inability to employ appropriate teaching methods and manage classroom activities. In conclusion, this paper recommends that students be more attentive in class, students and teachers should reduce all kinds of distractions as much as possible. Also, curriculum planners should expand the English language studies to include more practical lessons on listening skills development.

Introduction

A classification study of the four basic communication skills reveals that listening and reading are regarded as receptive skills, as against speaking and writing which are classified as expressive communication skills. Reading and listening are classified as receptive skills because they are required for obtaining and processing information. Listening is an innate ability (that needs to be developed) and it is the first communication skill that an individual learns as a child, while reading is an ability that is learnt formally. Writing and speaking are expressive skills which are required for expressing self opinion, emotions, ideas and reacting to circumstances. Listening, therefore serves as a foundation for acquiring the other skills.

Contrary to earlier opinions of scholars that among the language skills, listening and reading are passive skills while speaking and writing are active skills, recent studies have shown that decoding spoken or written messages involves active cognitive process. Smit (2006) observes that the listener does not passively receive and record messages but needs to activate different types of knowledge in order to understand what the speaker means. This observation shows that listening is not a passive activity in which the listener absorbs a speaker's idea but a complex cognitive process. Egenege (2004) also observes that listening involves hearing, paying attention, analyzing the speech sounds and reacting accordingly. Listening is a step further than hearing; it involves hearing and attaching meaning to what is heard. It is a process that requires concentration on what is being said despite distractions. Listening is the most frequently used skill in the classroom and in daily

life. Adler and Rodman (1991) point out that students spend an average of 14 percent of their communicating time, writing; 16 percent, speaking; 17 percent, reading; and 53 percent, listening. This statistics shows that listening is one of the most frequent activities which an individual engages in daily life. This result also reveals that much of what students' learn is acquired by means of listening since they spend most of each school day listening. Listening is a major factor of interaction.

The interaction between students and teachers and among students in the classroom accounts for classroom dynamics. It is a relationship that requires freedom of expression and certain behavioral rules and discipline to maintain orderliness. According to Brain (2017) classroom dynamics help people know how to set up a positive classroom atmosphere where students feel comfortable learning and communicating with each other and with their teacher. The effectiveness of classroom management is guaranteed when teachers allow for feedbacks from the students. Feedback is an indication that the message communicated is received and understood. Feedback also reveals that the students' listening proficiency is high.

Why is academic listening needed?

Listening comprehension in an academic context is much more complex than listening comprehension in a social context, because there is little or no room for negotiation of meaning (Smith 2006). In an academic context, the student is expected to understand the lecture content the way the lecturer intends it to be understood and process it, to be recalled at a later stage for test or examination purposes. To this end, the student is expected to come into the lecture situation with attentiveness, focus and an objective attitude.

Smith (2006: 29) defines listening comprehension in an academic context as:

a problem solving skill in which the student plays an active and crucial role. The listener determines not only the subject of the spoken text from the introductory words but also makes correct predictions of the possible development of the spoken text. Academic listening is more than the correct matching of sounds and words. It also involves deriving meaning from meaning – bearing words such as conjunctions and discourse markers. The students further have to be able to select and interpret input from aural and visual cues.

From this definition, it is clear that academic listening places special demands upon listeners. For the student to be successful in academic listening, he needs relevant background knowledge and the ability to distinguish between important and unimportant information. He also needs the ability to interpret the meaning of the words he hears. Richards, cited by Huang (2005), suggests that the students need some micro-skills for academic listening such as the ability to identify the purpose and scope of a lecture and follow the topic development and the ability to recognize and indicate when they fail to understand enough of the input conveyed in the lecture. With these micro-skills, the

student will be able to assimilate, store and retrieve lecture content whenever it is necessary.

From the above discussion, it is seen that students need academic language skills to be able to function and succeed academically. However, academic listening skills are overshadowed by the various distractions such as noise in the classroom. Nevertheless, since most of the study in the University is done through the lecture method, efforts should be made by both students and instructors to reduce all forms of distractions as much as possible and promote the development of academic listening skills in students.

Listening and classroom communication

Classroom communication is an interactive and interpersonal activity within the classroom. It is all the teaching and learning process that takes place between a teacher and students in the classroom. As such, there is a dimension of interpersonal connection and interaction through sharing and analyzing information. Classroom communication exists between the teacher and the students and between one student and another student. Bittner (1989) posit that interpersonal communication is communication in a face- to- face situation, which may be nurtured when both parties effectively listen to each other. Communication is hindered and sometimes interpersonal relationships are dissolved where good listening skills are lacking, Shunnarah (2008) points out that teachers and students from different linguistic and ethnic backgrounds interacting in the classroom may experience some conflicts because of their differences in values, opinions and world views. This conflict may be in terms of inability to understand and respect the differences in their cultural values, vocabulary and illustrations used by either the teacher or the students, which are capable of affecting the listening comprehension in the classroom.

Good listening skills are required for the attainment of success in the classroom. According to Bass and Davis (2005), receiving information from lecturers, interacting with other students and understanding instructions are crucial for better academic performance. Good listening makes all these activities possible. In agreement with this view, Maarx (2007) asserts that by effectively listening to educators in the classroom, students can ask questions when details are unclear and are better prepared for examination and moreover, educators can identify problem areas in their teaching and adjust their approaches to suit students' benefits if they listen to students. In the same vein, Bass and Davis (2005:2) state that "85% of our learning derives from listening". This reveals the crucial role of listening in achieving academic success.

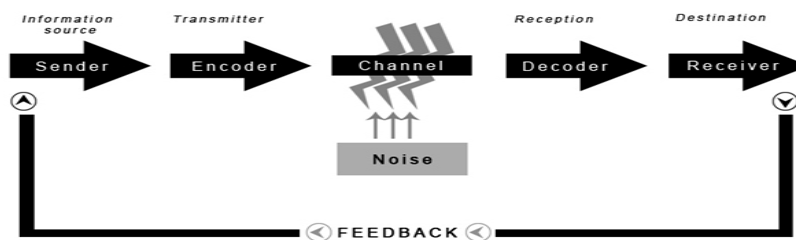
To attain effective listening in a classroom setting, there must be clarity of speech and use of vocabulary and illustrations that students can identify with. It is unnecessary to use vocabularies that cannot be understood; this may only end up confusing the students and may hamper their willingness to listening. The teachers and students should acknowledge and respect the differences in their cultural beliefs and values, be open to others' perspectives, concentrate and be attentive to verbal and nonverbal cues during interaction.

This form of skillful communication in the classroom promotes teacher and student effectiveness and enhances learning outcomes.

Various factors have been identified to contribute to the causes of students' poor academic performances. Some have pointed to the lack of effective listening in the classroom as one of such factors. This deficiency in effective listening may be traced to inadequate teaching of the skill by teachers, students' inability to employ the skill efficiently during classes and disconnection between teachers and students in the classroom. Vandergrift (1999) asserts that listening comprehension was identified as a vital skill in the language learning process after much debate about its validity. He observes that although listening is seen as a language skill, no prominent place is given to it in the school curriculum. Curriculum studies reveal that much attention is not given to listening as it is given to reading, writing and speaking in the English syllabuses of Nigerian primary and secondary school education. Teachers take time to teach the other three language arts skills; they explain what the skills are about and how students can acquire them practically. However, when teaching listening, teachers erroneously assume that the students should acquire the skills as they listen to lectures, so they only explain what the skill is about without teaching them practical ways of acquiring the skills. As a result, many students graduate from secondary school without adequate training in listening and enroll in tertiary institutions with few listening experiences. Furthermore, the disconnection between teachers and students in the classroom may be as a result of teachers not taking time to receive feedback from their students after teaching. The communication process in the classroom is not complete without the teachers receiving feedback from their students to know if the teaching is understood or not. This study therefore attempts to evaluate challenges in academic listening using the information communication model and observation method with a view to assessing activities in a classroom context.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework guiding this study is the Shannon and Weaver communication model also called Information model (Oyelade, 2006).



SHANNON-WEAVER'S MODEL OF COMMUNICATION

According to information model of communication, a source produces a message, which he encodes and sends through a channel to a receiver who interprets (decodes) the message

and generates feedback to the source. The transmitter is a tool that converts the message to a signal suitable for the channel to be used and the channel is the medium through which the signal is transmitted to the receiver. In the transmission of the message from the source to the receiver, there is the noise factor which can distort the communication process. This communication model is relevant to interpersonal communication. The source refers to the speaker, who produces a message which may be verbal or non-verbal, spoken or written form, music, picture, and so on (Oyelade, 2006). The channel is seen as the voice mechanism, which is the medium through which the message is sent from the source to the receiver (Severin and Tankard, 1982). The receiver is the listener who receives the message, decodes it and generates necessary feedback. The receiver is significant because he is the final destination of the sent message. Without his active participation, also known as response or feedback, the communication circle cannot be complete. It is important to note that there is interdependency among these elements that make up the communication process. If one is not present, automatically there will be distortion and incompleteness in the communication flow.

According to the information model, in the context of listening comprehension in the classroom, the source can be referred to as the lecturer who passes across his lecture content through his voice mechanism (which is the medium) to his students, who are the receivers. The students listen to the lecture content to decode it and actively participate in the communication process by generating response through class exercises, assignments, tests and examinations. The feedback provided by the students may be immediate or delayed, oral or written. Relating the information model to the teaching and learning in the classroom, the lecturer, as the first element in the communication process, needs to use appropriate techniques to communicate his lecture content properly to his students. The students, who are the receivers in the communication process, need to concentrate and listen attentively to the lecturer for them to be able to decode the message the educator is sending to them. Tilahun (2008) observes that listening attentively in class is a major challenge to students because many of them lack the basic listening skills that are needed for academic achievement. So, such students may not be able to understand what the lecturer says in class.

Shannon and Weaver identify noise as a factor that can hinder communication. This noise can be in various forms; common among them are physical or environmental noise, and psychological noise. Noise from an electricity generating set close by when a class is going on, or from other students discussing outside the classroom or a student answering a phone call during classes, is a form of physical noise which can distract other students from being attentive to the lecturer. Ohata (2006) points out that any distraction that comes to a student who is concentrating in class can seriously impair comprehension. Such distractions may affect the students' listening behaviour negatively which may result in loss of lecture content by students. This is why Shannon and Weaver's model draws the attention of both the sender (lecturer) and the receiver (student) to the presence of noise, so

that it can be reduced as much as possible. There are also psychological noise factors which vary from student to student. Students with financial problems, emotional instability, inability to sleep well at night because of power outage, may face psychological distractions during classes. Such distractions may result in inattentiveness on the part of the student and inability to understand what the instructor teaches in class. The last element on the information model is feedback which the students are expected to give to the lecturer. It may be in form of answering questions in class, assignment, test or examinations. This feedback enables the lecturer to know whether the information passed across has been understood by the students the way it was intended. If it has not been understood properly, then he can adjust his language and teaching techniques to suit students' needs. The lecturer will be able to do this if he takes time to listen to his students. For effective communication to take place in the classroom, it is not only that the students should listen attentively to the lecturer but also, that the lecturer should listen to his students when they give him feedback, especially during class activities. This may enable him to know whether he is being understood or not.

Students' inability to listen effectively in the classroom makes them unable to learn efficiently at school. Listening in the academic context demands that students pay attention to what they hear during lectures, process it, understand it, interpret it, evaluate it and respond to it. Students are expected to be actively involved when listening to lectures.

Method of data collection

The observation schedule (Physical Appearance and Dynamics of Classroom – PADC) was used to obtain data for this study. Particularly, it was used to record information about the physical appearance of the lecture rooms where the listening took place, the size of the classroom, the environment of the classroom, the adequacy of seats/writing desks for students, the sitting arrangements of students, the number of doors in the classroom, ventilation, and the positions of the doors. Also, the observation method was used to elicit information about the classroom dynamics such as the location and movements of the lecturer in the classroom, the availability of podium and audio visual materials for lecturing, availability of handouts for students, the audibility of the lecturer to students, lecturer's use of practical examples and body language, level of attentive listening by students, and participation of students in classroom activities. Information was also elicited on the ability of lecturer to manage students' behavior and classroom activities, the interactions between lecturer and students, and among students, students engaging in distractive actions such as making or receiving phone calls, students giving feedback to lecturer in form of questions, comments or non-verbal clues and any other form of activity going on the classroom.

Study population

The study is conducted in College of Physical Education, Mosogar, Delta State. The subjects of the study are Year 1 students of the college and the lecturers that handle them in the courses at that level, particularly those involved the first semester course, Use of English; one of the courses in General Studies programme of the college.

Presentation of results

(A) Physical appearance of the classroom

1. Class size: Large classes
2. Environment of the classroom: Conducive for learning
3. Adequacy of seats for students: Seats were adequate for students
4. Availability of space between the seats for easy movements: All seats had no space for easy movements
5. Number of doors in the classroom: There were four doors in each of the classrooms
6. Position of entrance doors: All classrooms had their entrance doors at the front of the classroom.
7. Adequacy of ventilation: They all had adequate ventilation
8. Availability of air conditioners and fans: They were not available

(B) Classroom dynamics

1. Location of lecturer (stays in one position or moves around in the classroom): Lecturers stay in a position while lecturing
2. Availability of audio visual materials for lecturing: No audio visual materials for lecturing
4. Audibility of lecturers: Some lecturers were audible while others were not
5. Ability of the lecturer to use language and illustrations that the students are familiar with: The lecturers used language and illustrations that the students are familiar with
6. Lecturer's use of body language and practical examples to aid students' understanding: Lecturers promoted students' understanding through body language and practical examples
7. Level of interaction between lecturer and students: In all four classrooms, lecturers had good interaction with their students.
8. Level of interaction among students: Students had good level of interaction among themselves.
9. Ability of lecturer to manage the students' behaviours and classroom activities: In two of the classrooms, the lecturers were not able to manage the students' behavior, while in the other two, the reverse was the case, the lecturers were not able to manage classroom activities.

10. Evidence of attentive listening by students: In two of the classroom, about half of the class was not paying attention to the lecturer, while in the other two they were attentive.
11. Students talking to one another, making phone calls or involved in other forms of activities: In two of the classrooms, students who were not attentive were busy talking, walking outside, and making phone calls. In the other two classrooms, most of the students were found paying attention with only a few looking around to get comfortable seats, making calls and talking to people outside. The few students not listening were mostly sitting behind, while those sitting in the front were busy taking notes.

Discussion

Concerning physical appearance, the four classrooms used are all large and have environments conducive for effective listening, with adequate seats for all the students. However, the classrooms lack availability of space between the seats for easy movement. Each of the classrooms has four doors including the entrance door. They all have adequate ventilations. The classrooms all had air conditioners and fans but none of them are functioning.

The dynamics of the classrooms are inadequate for productive activity of listening: all the lecturers stayed in a position while delivering lecture in the classroom. None of the classrooms has audio or visual equipment for teaching. The result of this is that audibility of some of the lecturers is impaired and demonstrations and illustrations are not vivid and so largely inadequate even though there is evidence of concerted effort of the lecturers to use practical examples, gestures and gesticulations to aid students understand their lectures.

There is a commendable level of interaction between the lecturers and the students. However, in two out of the four classrooms observed, the lecturers are unable to manage the students: about half of the class is inattentive to the lecturer. Some of them converse; some fiddle with their phones, making or receiving calls or chatting, some others walk about the classroom bantering. This shows that the classrooms are fraught with many instances of distractions. In this situation learning is impossible. Tilahun (2008) explains that students are easily distracted from listening to teaching by noise within the classroom and this is exactly the case here. And, the result of this is definitely poor academic performance.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the role of listening in classroom communication and challenges of classroom dynamics. It points out that listening effectively in the classroom is a major challenge to students which correlates with their academic performance. The paper shows various factors distract students from being attentive in the classroom.

This study confirms the workability of the principles of Shannon and Weaver Information model of communication. Students need to listen attentively to lectures to be able to acquire information and develop their knowledge. Also, instructors need to listen to students to receive feedback from them after teaching them. This enables the instructors

know if the students comprehend their lectures or not and whether there is need to modify their teaching methods. Again, both teachers and students need to reduce all forms of noise and distractions which may hinder effective listening in the classroom.

From the foregoing, we recommend that curriculum writers should expand English language teaching to include practical lessons on listening skills development.

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