

Listening Skills

1 Introduction

The process of learning a language involves the mastery of the four basic skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. They are grouped into the productive and receptive skills. The listening and reading skills are known as the receptive skills while the speaking and writing skills are called the productive skills. As productive skills, speaking and writing involve the production and/or giving out of information, i.e. output of information. The receptive skills involve a situation where there is an input of information or where information is received. Schematically, the above can be represented this:

Amongst these four language skills, the listening skill receives the least attention in language teaching because students are expected to automatically develop this skill on their own. This attitude accounts for the misconception between listening and hearing. While hearing refers to the sound one hears, listening involves more than that. It requires a high degree of attention, focus, concentration as well as interpretation and understanding of the message being received. Hence, listening does not only require listening to the story/message but also taking cognizance of the technique of the narrative, the message, language use and even the body language of the speaker, etc. In other words, it takes cognizance of both the verbal and non-verbal communication acts of the speaker.

Listening is a difficult skill to learn, thus it requires adequate care in teaching. It is very important to the personal and academic life of a student because it is not only core to the learning of the English Language but also to other courses across the curriculum. Besides being beneficial to the student's studies, it equips him with greater chance of being a successful entrepreneur, manager and even leader, as well as improving the general well being of the individual.

However, despite its importance, the teaching of the listening skill has been neglected and has not been given adequate attention in most schools, both at the secondary and tertiary levels. But as Ige (2005) posits, there should be a clear focus on listening in classroom instruction. Therefore it should pass through the same rigor of teaching as other skills since it is fundamental for effective studies by students in school.

2 What is listening?

According to Wolvin and Coakey (quoted in Ige, 2005), "listening is the process of receiving, attending to, and assigning meaning to aural stimuli." For Otagburuagu (n.d.), "listening skill involves the reception, processing, interpretation and understanding of aural stimuli." Key to the above definitions is the fact that the listening process is incomplete without the processing and understanding of the sounds heard by the listener. This means that a good listener should possess the ability to interpret the message released by the speaker and understand the

meaning inherent in it. In this communication process, there are four variables involved. They include the speaker, the message, the listener and the content interpretation for understanding or meaning. The first trio can be at three triangular points with the last/fourth being at the centre of them or being the product of the trio.

The above buttresses the fact that the purpose or goal of listening is to understand the message. Nwankwo (2008, p.118) argues that “listening is adjudged successful when the listener is able to comprehend the message of the speaker”. Also, Nwankwo (citing Oderinde) asserts that the purpose of listening is to have “the ability to understand without difficulty, spoken English which satisfies the requirements of national and international intelligibility”.

In a nutshell, listening can then be defined as a process whereby sounds produced and communicated by a source are decoded/interpreted by a receiver/listener and are acted upon. It can also be defined as the act of receiving, processing, interpreting and understanding messages delivered orally. In processing the received information, a good listener sieves the content of a message and isolates those linguistic sounds which can be classified as noise. By so doing, the listener transforms the ‘input’ into the ‘intake’, i.e. he then takes the significant part of the message and leaves out the irrelevant. This process of transformation helps the student in note taking and note making. Indeed, listening, as a language activity, is an active process.

Besides aiding the process of learning, listening helps to train students in the art of speaking. It is observed that a good listener makes a skilled speaker. Olaofe (2013, p.86) encapsulates it thus: “...by listening to correct pronunciation, stress, rhythm, and intonation of English, students are being directly and indirectly trained in the art of speaking English correctly”.

3 Listening Contexts/Situations

Communication at work, school, home, church, etc, provides a variety of contexts in which listening takes place. Each of these contexts requires a specific type of listening. They include:

- a. Listening to Lectures: To acquire knowledge and information
- b. Listening to Seminars/Speeches: To acquire knowledge and information
- c. Listening to Debates/Manifestoes: To obtain information, knowledge, to accept or refute a view point.

- d. News Broadcast/News Talk: To obtain information
- e. Listening to Sermons: For worship, knowledge of the gospel, and spiritual upliftment.
- f. Listening to Music: For relaxation, entertainment and information.

As complex as these listening situations are, so do they attract varying degrees of concentration. The effectiveness of the listening activity is determined by the purpose and context of listening.

4 Types of Listening/Listeners

Listening is of different types, each classified according to the context of listening. Some of them are interwoven, yet they represent their distinct entity. Also, people are different in many ways; therefore they do not exhibit the same level of efficiency in listening. Because of the individual peculiarities, we can identify and classify these different types of listening and listeners. The most common of them include:

4.1 Active/Reciprocal Listening/Listener:

An active listener is attentive to the listening situation. He is physically and mentally involved in the listening process. Active listening involves the process of interpreting and understanding the message after which the listener responds appropriately to the message. She/he reacts to the message and thus is involved in reciprocal listening. The response can come in the form of questions for clarity of points or contribution to the existing knowledge, etc. Active listening means active participation of the listener and he does this by jotting the speaker's/teacher's points on paper or making a mental picture of the points. A type of active listener is the sympathetic listener. He is a good listener who develops and sustains interest throughout the duration of the message. He has an eye for details and gives the required feedback in the form of questions or contributions.

A typical example of active listening is academic listening. This is a reciprocal form of listening usually done during the learning process in classroom situations. Academic listening involves active listening, the building up of a mental picture of what is being taught, with a view of getting the salient points as well as asking questions for clarity purposes. The contexts in which active listening takes place include lectures, debates, seminars, meetings, etc.

4.2 Passive/Apathetic Listening/Listener

Passive listening presents a situation where the listener listens without concentration. One can say that the listener hears but does not listen; therefore, he is not mentally alert to the message. This type of listening is situational in the sense that the listener becomes apathetic when he encounters a difficult topic. This often happens in the classroom where topics and subjects that appear difficult to the students are taught. In such situations, the student sees the message as a burden or as boring, therefore, he listens with little attention. An apathetic/passive listener loses interest in the message and diverts attention to other things.

4.3 Reactionary/Prejudiced Listening/Listener

This type of listening can also be referred to as subjective. The listener is subjective in his approach because he takes on the message and the speaker/teacher from a preconceived personal angle. His interest lies not in the meaning of the message but in having a verbal attack on the speaker. An example of this type of listener is the hypocritical listener who finds faults and looks for imaginary loopholes in the message. His prejudice makes him distort information to achieve his aim. Otagburuagu (n.d., p.18) states that such listeners “hear what they want to hear rather than what a speaker says”. In other words, their reactions are based on the opinion and personal grudge against the person of the speaker, thus they always seek to hurt him.

4.4 Non-Reciprocal Listening/Listener

This presents a situation where the listener listens but he is not expected to contribute or react to the message. This is different from passive listening because there is listening with concentration, but like it, there is no reaction to the message heard. The peculiarity of their different listening contexts also accounts for their difference. A non-reciprocal listening context includes sermon in churches, news bulletin/news talk on the radio, court proceedings,

eavesdropping, monologues, orations, rectors’/vice chancellors’ speeches during matriculation/convocation, etc. For these listening contexts, there is concentration but no expected response to the message. Meanwhile, passive listening context involves listening to music, especially for relaxation, and there is lack of concentration and non-reaction to the message.

4.5 Critical Listening/Listener

Listening with a questioning attitude is the hallmark of critical listening. Critical listening, just like active and academic listening, entails listening with mental alertness. A critical listener looks out for inconsistencies, illogicalities, facts and opinions in the speaker’s message. This type of listening involves listening to criticize the message received; however, the criticisms are for a better understanding and clarification of facts. The listener is objective in criticizing the illogicalities, bias and prejudice discovered in the speech. He does not target the speaker/teacher as a person, but rather the message, with the aim of clarifying and substantiating the facts contained therein. The critical listener also tries to understand the speaker’s motive and the validity of his message. He is also concerned with the authenticity

of what the speaker presents. In other words, critical listening is objective rather than subjective in approach.

The critical listener possesses the following qualities:

- (a) He listens with rapt attention
- (b) He interprets the message intelligently to arrive at the intended logic and meaning of the message.
- (c) His listening is purposeful and he is always ready to listen.
- (d) His interest is sustained from the beginning of the message to the end of it.
- (e) He does not distract nor interrupt the speaker with irrelevant questions.
- (f) He makes a jotting of important points
- (g) He is patient with the speaker and slow at passing unsubstantiated judgment.
- (h) He has a questioning attitude and tries to understand the speaker's motive and the validity of his presentation.

4.6 Appreciative Listening/Listener

This listener seeks to appreciate the speaker's prowess in the choice and use of words, clarity and quality of voice, mode of rendition, rhyming of sounds or emotions expressed, manner of presentation/body language. In other words, an appreciative listener does not listen for irregularities or flaws but for the beauty in the presentation technique. This can be found in the act of poem rendition, the lyrics or sound of music, speech of an orator or a political manifesto, etc.

4.7 Transactional Listening/Listener

The aim of transactional listening is to receive instruction from a person after which the demands of the message are met. The instruction can be from a boss in an office to his subordinate or from a colleague to another, from parents to children, etc. It can also take place in negotiations of products to buy or sell.

4.8 Mute Listening/ Listener

The mute listener is often a slow learner. He is intellectually handicapped because of his inability to quickly concentrate and understand a message and immediately give a required feedback. He should avoid distractions in class and always read ahead of the syllabus or course outline.

5 Factors that Affect Listening Efficiency

Many factors account for inefficiency in listening, especially in academic listening. Some of them are attributed to the speaker and the listener while others relate to the message or the

environment of the speech situation. Whichever way it is, they all contribute to the poor listening ability of students.

5.1 The Listener Related Factors

(a) The Listener's State of being

There are conditions relating to the well-being of the listeners that could mar their listening efficiency. They include emotional and psychological imbalance, unstable health conditions, tiredness/fatigue, etc. However, when these factors are positive, they facilitate listening efficiency.

(b) The Personality Traits of the Listener

Poor listening efficiency can be traced to the poor Intelligence Quotient (IQ) of the listener which regulates his speed of understanding of the language and style of discourse. Also a listener who is pessimistic or narrow-minded often misses out in the thought process of the speaker.

(c) Lack of Interest in the Subject of Discourse

A listener sometimes has no interest in the subject being discussed or taught. This could be as a result of the difficult subject/topic, prejudice towards the speaker or the subject, or the boring technique of the teaching. A student needs to develop interest in the subject/topic being taught by studying the course outline so as to anticipate the lecturer.

(d) Language of Instruction

Problems of comprehension arise when the language of instruction is other than the listener's mother tongue (MT) or when his level of proficiency in the language is low. There is the problem of understanding the phonological features of the words as most times they conflict with that of the MT. This problem is peculiar with most African Countries where the English language is used as a second language (L2), or the official language or both. Therefore, to overcome this phonological interference, the listener should put more effort to learn the correct speech sounds of the target language, in this case, English.

In addition to the phonological interference from the mother tongue, there is also the problem of understanding the prosodic features of the target language. These features include stress and intonation. For native speakers of the language, stress and intonation signal differences in meaning and word class of particular words.

The vocabulary and syntax of the second or foreign language also affect listening efficiency. Here, listeners should employ techniques that will help them improve in this area. Such

techniques include the use of sense cues and the dictionary to understand the forms of words and decipher their meanings.

Worthy of note here is the fact that both listeners and speakers/teachers are culprits to varying degrees in this non-expertise in the use of the language of instruction. Therefore, they should endeavour to study hard to improve their vocabulary, grammar as well as phonology of the target language.

5.2 The Speaker/Teacher Related Factors

(a) The Speaker's Accent, Mannerism or Pattern of Presentation

There are mannerisms peculiar to teachers/speakers which constitute **noise** (an unwanted and/or unintended “signal or interference” in the communication process which makes it difficult for the listener to understand the message being communicated by the speaker). These include such things as the teacher's rate of speaking, his fluency in the language of communication, the method of presentation and mastery of the subject, his audibility, foreign or self-imposed accent (idiolect), speech defect, (stammering), etc. Another factor could be the speaker's use of a microphone which does not produce the speech clearly. These factors distract the listener and mar his listening efficiency.

(b) Verbosity in Language Use or Unfamiliar Words

Using high sounding or too many words in expressing one's thoughts does not indicate intelligence; rather it acts as a source of confusion to the listener. There must be intelligibility in language use to aid communication. The choice of words could make or mar communication; therefore, proper use of language should be the hallmark of an effective speaker. However, for better comprehension, students should always note the new words, ask questions or look them up in the dictionary.

(c) The Speaker's Non-verbal Communication Acts

Despite the use of words, there is also the incorporation of body language to further elucidate communication. Such include the gesticulations of the speaker, his facial expression, etc. These are also referred to as paralinguistic features. However, too much use of them may constitute noise in the communication process and render its goal unrealizable.

5.3 The Environment Related Factors

(a) The Background Noise

A noisy lecture hall affects listening. In such a situation, despite the pitch of the voice of the speaker or the use of microphone, the noise impairs the listening ability of the listener and, by extension, comprehension of the message.

(b) Poorly ventilated Lecture Halls/Rooms

Poor ventilation in lecture halls keeps the students uncomfortable and, thus distracts them during learning. A lecture room should be well-ventilated and should accommodate the required number of students/listeners.

(c) The Seating Arrangement

Sometimes there may be less number of seats than the number of listeners/students. Some of these seats may be in bad shape such that the listeners/students have to battle with discomfort throughout the lecture period. This will lead to loss of concentration. The environment is a key factor to consider when it comes to increasing listening effectiveness since it can facilitate or mar the goal of listening.

5.4 The Message Related Factors

(a) The Quality of the Message

The quality of a message as perceived by a listener can contribute to loss of concentration. Intellectuals decipher between messages that are of good quality and those that have lower quality. In such situations, the level of exposure of the listener, as well as his intelligence, comes to play in the understanding and classification of such message. The content of a message may be graded differently in terms of quality by different listeners. However, a message should be well-researched so as to be of good quality that will hold the attention of the listeners.

(b) Message Appeal/Subject Matter

Individuals listen attentively to messages or subject matter they feel drawn to. Generally, messages with emotional appeal capture the attention of listeners. Messages on religion, politics, sports, as well as sex related matters, have different appeals to different listeners. In essence, listeners always get attuned to the subject matters they feel drawn to.

(c) Organization of the Message

Poorly organized and boring messages affect the listener negatively. Consequently, the choice of subject matter, logic in presentation, appropriateness of the topic, lexis, and terminologies should be taken cognizance of in the message delivery or teaching.

6 How to Cultivate Good Listening Habits

- a. Discover the purpose for and use of your listening. With the purpose in mind, develop interest in the topic/subject being discussed.
- b. Always be disciplined to listen attentively to what the lecturer is teaching and discover the way and manner of presentation peculiar to each lecturer/teacher.
- c. Do not allow your bias for/against the teacher to becloud your sense of judgment and understanding of the message. Judge only the content of the lesson/speech and not the speaker's/teacher's mannerisms or personality.
- d. Be in a good mental, physical, psychological and healthy state at every lecture.
- e. Never evaluate the content of the lectures hastily. Listen to the whole message so you can make an objective assessment.
- f. Never dismiss a message as being too simple or too difficult, unimportant or irrelevant.
- g. Listen with concentration. Have a good mental picture of the topic for better assimilation. You can use cue words and sense signals to decipher the direction of meaning.
- h. Task your brain on the meaning of those unfamiliar words by taking note of how they are used in the context.
- i. Take note of the use of sentence connectors and linking words to follow the speaker's thought process.
- j. Listening is incomplete without taking notes, thus always write down important points so as to aid your revision.
- k. Listen in-between the lines of the sentences so as to separate facts from opinion. That is, listen critically.
- l. Read ahead of the lecturer to get acquainted with the topic and thus follow the lecturer/teacher's lead.
- m. Always adopt the qualities of a critical listener, etc.

7 Strategic Ways of Sustaining Interest and Participating During Listening

Listeners can devise various means of participating and sustaining their interest in the speaker's/teacher's message. Such ways serve as a form of encouragement to the speaker as well as keep the listener active. Nunan (as quoted in Otagburuagu, n.d., p.14), describes 'back channel' to mean "a special form of listener feedback which serves as a type of encouragement and morale booster to the speaker". It can be referred to as what listeners do to show their understanding and participation in the oral discourse/speaker's message.

They include:

(a) **An Overt Meaningful Statement:** e.g:-

Teacher/Speaker: I spoke with your course adviser today

Student/Listener: You did Sir!

Or

Really, Sir, what did he say!

(b) **Empty Words:**

E.g. Hmm, Hem, Om, Hai, etc.

(c) **Non Verbal Forms** such as the listener's facial expression, a nod of the head, a thumb up sign, etc. Re-iterating this, Otagburuagu quoted Huebsch as asserting that these non-linguistic forms motivate the speaker to carry on with his message. However, care should be taken to avoid over usage which could serve as distraction or lead to omission of vital points by the speaker.

(d) **Clarification Request:** This is a situation where the listener draws the attention of the speaker to the area he needs clarity on. It can come in the form of a question which is aimed at getting a better comprehension of the message. This type of request is also referred to as the request strategy.

E.g. Speaker: Did you see how the judge resolved the case?

It is so amazing how he used a sledge hammer on the matter as small as an ant!

Listener: Wait a minute! Did you say sledge hammer?

What does it mean?

(e) **Recapitulation Request:** This is a strategy that is used to call the attention of the speaker to repeat what he has said or summarize the previous points made. The recap request comes handy in lecture halls during academic listening. Sometimes you get to hear students use such expressions as = 'rewind', 'part two', 'come again', etc.

(f) **Probing or Elicitation Request:** This is a good strategy in listening for it helps the speaker/teacher touch on areas which were left out in the teaching. It comes in form of questions which help the teacher to give a better explanation of a subject matter. However, the questions should be relevant to the situation and should not come as a form of test on the preparedness and expertise of the teacher in the subject.

8 Conclusion

Listening is a skill that requires the same attention as the other language skills. A cursory look at the on-going discourse proves that it is not as simple as it has been perceived; rather it requires its own degree of focus and concentration, an ability to transform an input into an intake. Listening goes beyond hearing; it means paying attention to the use of language. The understanding of the language use of a speaker also helps the student to improve on his writing skill. As noted earlier, it involves anticipating the message of the speaker; understanding his use of words especially through context; following the use of linking expressions such as *furthermore*, *subsequently*, *next*, *however*, *finally*, etc; understanding his thought process and pattern of presentation; separating facts from opinion; and looking out for relevant points, etc.

Listening is key to effective learning in school. Apart from being a skill necessary in the learning of a language, it is also needed in the learning of content area courses. Therefore, for maximum benefit, a student listener should be attentive and prepare to listen to the message so as to avoid distraction. He should listen for ideas and important points. While doing this, he should empathize with the speaker. Every action should put the teacher/speaker at ease. A good listener should be objective in judgment and seek clarification for better understanding. In conclusion, effective listening is a key to the academic success of a student in school, as well as success in all his life's endeavours.