

Listening as a Lifelong Learning Skill: What, Why, and How

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Abstract—Listening plays a significant role in learning. Speaking, reading and writing skills normally proceed listening. The importance of listening in formal educational contexts has resulted in much discussion on how students’ learning can be facilitated through effective listening practices. However, its place in informal learning contexts throughout life often goes unnoticed. As a result, its potential for lifelong learning is not utilized adequately. A clear understanding of listening as a process and different listening activities can help exploit listening skills in formal, non-formal and informal learning contexts throughout life.

Keywords— Listening, Lifelong learning, Informal learning, Active Listening.

I. INTRODUCTION

Learning is an integral, ineliminable part of life. Learning is an inborn ability enabling us not only to survive but also to make meaning out of our lives. There is in fact overwhelming evidence that learning starts as genes develop in the womb (Kolata, 1984; Hepper, 1989; Martens, 2013) indicating our potential to grow intellectually at all stages of life. It is also true that learning takes place in a variety of forms and ways. Multiple sensory organs, often used simultaneously, help learning occur. One primary sensory organ that enables learning is the ear through which we first receive auditory messages. It is argued that “All learning begins with the ear, not the eye” (Gordon, 2007, p. 29). It is in fact the ear that allows us to learn to speak. Lovinger, Brandell and Seestedt-Standord (1991) cited in Paul and Whitelaw (2011, p. 7) emphasize this by saying

[The ear] serves as the main feedback mechanism in the development and production of speech. Sound is received by the ear, [and it] is interpreted by the brain and a reaction is expressed by the use of words. Input of sound to the brain for storage, analysis, and association is done through the ear. Not to hear the human voice is not to develop the ability to speak.

Listening also precedes learning to read and write. Brown (1987) cited in Purdy (1997) underscores the significance of listening arguing “Of foremost importance is the role of listening in language acquisition, the basis of all subsequent communication, the foundation of all life-long reading, writing, speaking and listening activities” (p. 4).

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Considering these, it is hard to underestimate the importance of listening for learning to be effective. Despite this, our ability to listen is often taken for granted without concentrated efforts devoted to its use for learning throughout life. However, our inborn ability to learn formally and informally requires us to approach listening from the lifelong learning perspective, which potentially encompasses all forms of learning. It is, therefore, useful first to define ‘listening’ and ‘lifelong learning’, and then to describe the symbiotic relationship between the two. It is also important to identify how listening can be used to support individuals’ development as lifelong learners. This paper seeks to do these.

II. LISTENING

The Merriam-Webster dictionary (n.d.) provides three definitions of listening: “1) pay[ing] attention to sound, 2) hear[ing] something with thoughtful attention, 3) be[ing] alert to catch an expected sound.” A similar definition is given by Purdy (1997, p. 8): “the active and dynamic process of attending, perceiving, interpreting, and remembering, and responding to the express (verbal and nonverbal) needs, concerns, and information offered by other human beings.”

What is at the heart of these definitions is the fact that listening requires us to be attentive. In this sense, it differs from hearing, a simple definition of which in the Merriam-Webster dictionary (n.d.) is “to perceive or become aware of by the ear.” Rizvi (2005) notes that hearing is an automatic behavior since it takes place involuntarily in that it does not require the listener’s conscious involvement. Rizvi (2015, p. 60) provides the following table in which the two concepts are compared.

TABLE I. COMPARISON OF LISTENING AND HEARING

Listening	Hearing
voluntary	involuntary
requires conscious efforts	happens automatically
active process	passive process
the listener play a very active part	the listeners plays a passive part
a two-way interactive process engaging the speaker and the listener	a one-way process

Others argue that hearing is a physical act while listening is a mental act (Purdy, 1997). The former is because hearing is related to our physiological capacity to receive and process sounds. The latter, on the other hand, requires us to assign meaning to the stimuli received by the brain through the ear. Nevertheless, Purdy (1997) warns that not every listening is

effective. He identifies seven components of effective listening . First, we ought to want to listen. This is related to its feature of being voluntary. Second, we ought to focus our attention. Third, it is essential that we be perceptive as we listen. Fourth, we ought to be able to interpret both verbal and nonverbal cues. Fifth, we need to make a conscious effort to recall what we have

heard. Sixth, we need to provide feedback by responding. Last but not least, we should care about the relationship as we listen.

As is indicated in these definitions, listening is a process which requires the use of multiple cognitive skills. As is seen in Figure 1 below, it has four main stages (Rizvi, 2005): sensing, encoding, evaluation, and response.

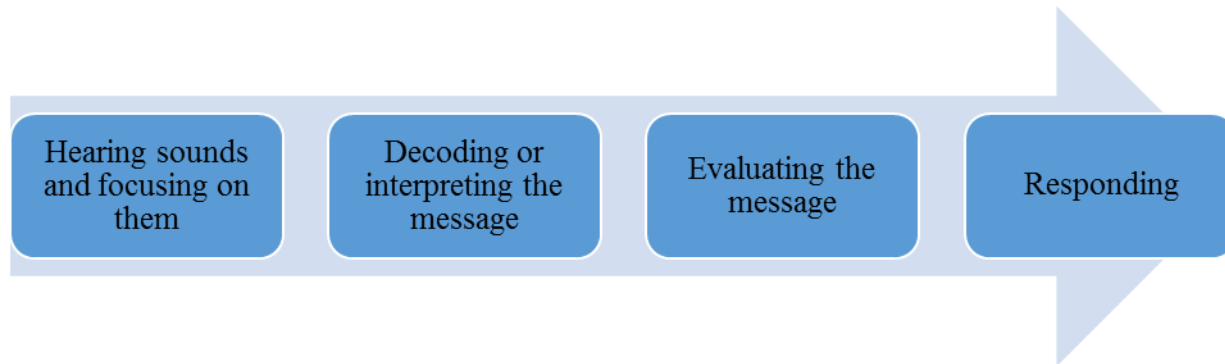


Fig. 1 The listening process (Adapted from Rizvi, 2005)

In the first stage, physical hearing of the message takes place. We hear sounds and concentrate on them so that we can receive the message. During this stage, we recognize unit boundaries phonologically. Recognition of sound patterns is followed by the second stage where we decode and interpret the message. This entails changing the coded message into information, which enables understanding of the message. If the message cannot be decoded or understood, communication fails. In the third stage, we evaluate the significance of the message and draw appropriate conclusions from it. For this to happen effectively, we need to be able to separate relevant information from irrelevant information, explicit information from implicit information, and facts from opinions. We ought to analyze and understand the speaker's intention and attitude successfully. To do this, it is essential that we be aware of our own prejudices and biases. This helps us avoid making wrong conclusions. During the final stage, we -as the listener- respond to the messages we have received. For our response to be appropriate, we need to have analyzed, interpreted and evaluated the message correctly in the previous stage. The fourth stage is particularly important since it is in this stage that we clarify the message and indicate to the speaker whether we have understood the message correctly.

Watson, Barker and Weaver (1995) identified four different types of listening. One of these is "discriminative listening." It normally occurs at the receiving stage of the listening process. It is a focused, and usually an instrumental type of listening. When engaged in this type of listening, we listen to scan and monitor our surroundings in order to isolate particular auditory or visual stimuli. The second type of listening is "informational listening," which is done with the goal of comprehending and retaining information. It is the most common in teaching and learning contexts. Good concentration and memory skills are necessary because retention and recall are important for informational listening. "Critical listening" is the third type. It involves listening with the goal of analyzing or evaluating a

message based on verbally presented information which can be inferred from context. Critical listeners evaluate a message in order to accept or reject it. Alternatively, they may choose to withhold judgment and seek more information before reaching a decision. The fourth type of listening is "emphatic listening" which takes place when we want to understand or experience what a speaker is thinking or feeling.

III. LISTENING IN FORMAL LEARNING CONTEXTS

Effective listening is "the primary channel of instruction at all levels" (Duck & McMahan, 2017, p. 85). There is empirical evidence showing a positive correlation between school children's listening behavior and arithmetic skills, language arts skills, work study skills as well as intelligence (Winter, 1966). Students' use of effective listening strategies allows them to obtain the information that is needed to respond effectively (Roth, 2010). Often times teachers give instructions about how students are supposed to conduct an experiment, write a paper, deliver a presentation etc. Unless they listen to these instructions effectively, students' response will result in inadequate performance.

Effective listening is also essential for developing relationships between students and their instructors and between students and their academic advisors (Duck & McMahan, 2017). When teachers feel that their students have a genuine interest in what they have got to say, they will be more enthusiastic about the lesson and more committed to teaching their students. When students engage in informational listening type asking the teacher questions when and where relevant, their understanding of the subject matter will increase. Similarly, students' engagement in an effective dialogue with their academic advisors will allow them to make informed decisions about their educational and career goals. By listening to the information provided by their advisors on university policies, procedures and requirements, students can make an adequate use of the educational opportunities.

Effective, or attentive, listening is also a must for students to develop social skills necessary for a fulfilling college life. Students' use of attentive listening skills will enable them to understand each other's point of view, feelings and needs (Canter, 2006). This will surely help students address both academic and non-academic skills essential for success at university. By listening to others' concerns and/or failures, students can understand the underlying reasons for problems. This will help them come up with healthier solutions to problems. In addition to building solidarity between students, this will also give students the chance to refrain from potential problems themselves. In fact, it has been argued that

stories about other peoples' failures ... elicit a ... pronounced motivational response, such that people elaborate the content of failure stories more actively. As a consequence, the knowledge gained from failure stories will more likely be applied on a transfer task... this motivational response to failure stories and its benefits for learning [is expected] to be most pronounced for people who view failures as valuable learning opportunities (Bledow, Carette, Kuehnel & Pittig, 2017, p. 39)

Lending peers a listening ear in this fashion likely creates a better harmony among students, which has been identified as a factor contributing to retention at university (Deveci & Ayish, 2017).

A listening skill that improves academic performance is note-taking, which is particularly important at college. Students sit in countless lectures and presentations which often require them to listen carefully to be able to take notes. Recognizing its importance as well as how challenging it may be, many instructors now assist students in taking notes. One way in which they do is to provide guided note-taking sheets that students use for selective listening. Rost and Wilson (2013) note that, in comparison to full notes, guided-notes help students achieve better academic results. They also point out that full-notes affect attendance negatively. Gore (2010) states that guided-notes assist students in accessing and understanding knowledge because a) students are actively engaged and their attention is increased, b) their perception is increased, and c) their ability to discriminate between essential and nonessential information is increased.

IV. LISTENING AND LIFELONG LEARNING

Although lifelong learning is not a new concept, there has been a burgeoning interest in it since the 1990s partly because of shifts in educational philosophies towards a holistic view of development and the role of learning in achieving this. Seeing learning as a factor enabling individuals to meet their existential needs, Jarvis (2009) defines lifelong learning as "the process of transforming experience into knowledge and skills, etc., resulting in a changed person—one who has grown and developed as a result of the learning" (p. 11). What is at the heart of this definition is the role of experience and the

individual's ability to use it as a basis for knowledge generation and skills development. It is also important to note that this definition of lifelong learning points to growth as a result of engagement in the learning process. On the other hand, Titmus (1979) draws attention to the idea that

education is not a once-for-all experience that is confined to an initial cycle of continuous education commenced in childhood, but a process that should continue throughout life. Life itself is a continuous learning process, but each person needs specific opportunities for continuing, purposive and sequential learning in order that he or she may keep abreast of technical and social change, may equip himself or herself for changes in his or her own circumstances.

Central to Titmus' definition of lifelong learning is the idea that learning needs to be purposive, sequential and continuous. For this to happen, individuals ought to be provided with specific learning opportunities without leaving learning to chance. This, however, is not to undermine the importance of incidental learning –a subset of informal learning –, which is a significant aspect of lifelong learning.

Individuals ought to have a variety of skills in order to be effective lifelong learners. One of these is relative to information literacy. According to Duman (2007), people with literacy skills know what knowledge they need, and they can use a variety of ways to access it. They can evaluate the usefulness and accuracy of sources, and use the information they reach purposefully. In the same way, Gilton (2012) notes that "lifelong learners can informally educate themselves through self-teaching or consulting with experts, take advantage of institutions promoting formal learning, ... or pursue more formal education" (p.67).

Needham (2009) notes that the four skills (i.e. reading, writing, speaking, and listening) "are to information literacy what the fingers are to the hand. While fingers are important in their own right, they become more important when they function as part of the hand" (p. 38). As is suggested in this sentiment, listening is an integral part of information literacy. Effective use of it enables individuals to obtain richer information. As is also mentioned above, information literate people are able to question the validity and usefulness of information they have. To do this, they often search for evidence. According to Hepworth and Walton (2009, p. 20), this requires "a liberal approach to where [people] obtain sources of information and question the voice they are listening to," and this, they say, leads them to alternative sources of information and knowledge.

In the context of university studies, lifelong learning requires students to use a variety of information literacy skills. One of these is the skill in reflecting on and evaluating the outcomes of learning (Dunne, 1999). This entails thinking about the lecture they have been listening to, and doing something with what they have heard (Kaplowitz, 2014). In this way, their retention skills are improved. This helps them use effective information retrieval and selection skills, which are also among the abilities

university students require as lifelong learners (Dunne, 2009). These active listening skills are compatible with information literacy.

The first two key lifelong learning competences (i.e. communication in the mother tongue & communication in foreign languages) identified by the European Commission (2007) also point to the role of listening in addition to the other three skills. Regarding communication in the mother tongue, lifelong learners are expected to

have the skills to communicate both orally and in writing in a variety of communicative situations and to monitor and adapt their own communication to the requirements of the situation. This competence also includes the abilities to distinguish and use different types of texts, to search for, collect and process information, to use aids, and to formulate and express one's oral and written arguments in a convincing way appropriate to the context (the European Commission, 2007, p. 4)

The commission also points to the importance of having a positive attitude towards communication in the mother tongue through engagement in critical and constructive dialogue. Lifelong learners, according to the commission, also ought to be able to interact with others in a positive and socially responsible manner. Naturally, this requires them to use active listening skills.

With regards to the second competence, communication in foreign languages, the commission posits that lifelong learners need to have "the ability to understand, express and interpret concepts, thoughts, feelings, facts and opinions in both oral and written form ... in an appropriate range of societal and cultural contexts ... according to one's wants and needs" (p. 5). It is acknowledged that people are likely to have different proficiency levels in the four sub-skills. However, an important skill for a lifelong learner to have is being able to understand spoken messages. This is essential for him/her to "initiate, sustain and conclude conversations" (p. 5). Lifelong learners are also expected to have a positive attitude towards intercultural communication. This is only possible if individuals are open to cultural perspectives different from their own. The open attitude requires an ability to listen to what others have got to say. However, it also requires them to raise their awareness of their own listening styles as well as their communication partners' culturally different listening styles (Matveev, 2017).

Active listening during interaction with those from other cultures also plays a critical role in establishing mutual understanding when communicators' cultural backgrounds differ in terms of their orientation to tasks and how they deal with status differences (Brinkmann & Weerdenburg, 2014). Also, active listeners allow for error when they are interacting with people from a different culture (Arasaratnam, 2013). This is because active listeners know that messages can be interpreted differently on the basis of people's own understanding of cultural context.

Oral tradition plays a pivotal role in our lives as an educational tool. One way or another, every individual is engaged in oral tradition either as a storyteller or a listener. Leggett (2005) points out that "A story is a narrative which actively engages the listener's sense-making faculties. It helps the listener to make sense of what is being said and to make the right associations. It helps the listener to think widely by stimulating his or her imagination." Therefore, storytelling creates ample lifelong learning opportunities. In addition to its aim to entertain listeners, it teaches them a history of a culture, endows morals and principles on them, stimulates them intellectually, and inspires innovation and social change (Quora, n.d.). Listening without verbal or mental interruption is central to storytelling (James, 1998 cited in Atleo & James, 2000).

Listeners' engagement in the process provides educational experience helping them explore alternative ways of looking at the world and tackling real-life problems. Capitalizing on technological advances, some invest time and money in the utilization of digital story-telling as a means of promoting lifelong learning. Pesce et al. (2014, p. 197) note that digital storytelling is

a powerful approach to lifelong learning and civil participation ... Digital stories allow individuals, regardless their social or economical background, to give others an insight into their everyday lives, engaging participants and the entire community by having a cognitive and emotional impact

Taken together, these show that oral tradition in general, and storytelling in particular, can help listeners examine their beliefs and behaviors, renew and modify them as required throughout their lives. This points to the power of storytelling as a lifelong learning undertaking.

V. TEACHING LISTENING FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

It seems that listening is not covered adequately in curriculum despite the fact that 55% of our lives is spent listening (Costa & Kallick, 2019 cited in Pearse & Dunwoody, 2013). Pearse and Dunwoody (2013) posit that active listening skills have to be an integral part of the learning environment to help students become lifelong learners. They suggest generating a definition of active listening with students. To this end, the following steps are listed: 1) Generate discussion on what active listening looks like, sounds like, and feels like. 2) Create a wall-sized poster to refer to and use whenever the importance of active listening needs to be reinforced and reminded to students. 3) Use probing questions to encourage students to reflect on the importance of active listening. Among these questions are "What makes a persona an effective listener?", "Why is it important to listen actively?", and "What are barriers to effective listener?"

Pearse and Dunwoody (2013) also recommend the use of paraphrasing exercises to teach and practice active listening skills. However, more importantly, teachers need to role-model active listening. To this end, it is first essential for teachers to

understand their own personal communication styles (Gravells & Simpson, 2010). If they are aware of how students see and hear messages, they will be more able to modify their communication style to suit students' learning styles. This approach will create a lasting impression upon their students.

Dictation could also be a good activity to teach active listening skills. In Deveci and Ayish (2018), we discuss that dictation is traditionally perceived as a passive activity where the teacher reads aloud a text while students write down verbatim what they hear. Because of this, more often students and teachers alike find it boring. However, if used as a collaborative activity in the form of dictogloss, it can support the social constructivist nature of learning. Wajnryb (1990, p. 6) lists the stages of dictogloss as follows: 1) Read a short, dense text to learners at normal speed, and ask students to jot down familiar words and phrases. 2) Have students work in small groups to compare notes and reconstruct a version of the text from their shared resource. 3) Ask each group of students to produce their own reconstructed version. The aim is to achieve grammatical accuracy and textual cohesion, but not replicate the original text. 4) Have open-class discussion analyzing and comparing student outputs, and ask students to refine their own texts in light of the shared scrutiny and discussion.

Another dictation activity is mutual dictation developed by Davis and Rinvoluceri (1988). Mutual dictation requires students to combine two-part texts into one continuous piece. The steps are: 1) Prepare copies of gapped text A and gapped text B opposite. 2) Sit the students facing each others in pairs. Give person A in each pair a version A sheet and person B a version B sheet. 3) Tell the students each has half the text. Without look at each other's sheets, A dictates and B writes, then B dictates and A writes. 4) Have the students show each other their sheets to check for accuracy (Davis & Rinvolucrim 1988, p. 70).

Advances in technology are such that it has penetrated into all parts of our lives, and education has not been immune to this. Broadband internet connection and Wi-Fi in particular have significant implications for lifelong learning. This is particularly because they enable learning to take place without physical boundaries. Among the many learning sources available on the Internet are podcasts. Podcasts are defined as "are audio files, usually in mp3 format, that can be downloaded from the Internet" (McBride, 2009, p. 154). When listeners subscribe to a published podcast series, they are notified every time a new audio file is added to the series. They can even automatically receive a downloaded copy of the newly published episode. This feature of podcasts makes them readily available. They provide such a lot of information that people can use it to enhance their knowledge and increase their productivity. Demirdirek and Ozgirin (2013) note that podcasts improve students' academic listening while enhancing their general knowledge of world events and understanding of content topics in university courses. They also emphasize that podcasts cater for different student needs and abilities. Their use for self-study purposes also allows learning to continue outside class time. As a result, they are more likely to create intrinsic motivation for

learning, which is a must for lifelong learning.

VI. CONCLUSION

As the eminent educational theorist Peter Jarvis puts it, "Learning isn't just something which is tugged on to life; it's life itself... there can[not] be any real living without learning, and ... any human living without learning, and so ... learning is at the heart of living itself" (Rabusicova & Nehyba, 2015: 112). Jarvis (2006) also notes that we experience the world throughout our lives using our five senses individually or in any combination of them. Therefore, we can talk of learning as a way of different senses, one of the most significant is learning as a way of hearing. Although learning in this way can take place subconsciously, therefore incidentally, for it to be an efficient lifelong learning attribute, we ought to be able to listen actively. As the European Commission (2007) also noted, effective listening contributes to the development of key lifelong learning competences in communication in the mother tongue as well as in foreign languages. It is often through these competences that our knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, and beliefs are built upon, modified, or changed, the result of which is individuals who have become more experienced or changed (Jarvis, 2006). This is learning and life itself. In order for us to have more fulfilling lives, then, it is essential to train the ear, which is argued to initiate all learning (Gordon, 2007). All in all, how we start will determine where we will end up!

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