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may, 1972

## Listening and the Classroom Teacher

Nearly all studies of usage ratios between written and oral communication show listening to be the most important, in quantitative terms, of the four basic communication processes: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The average adult spends about 45% of his waking time in listening activities while talking, reading, and writing take 30%, 16% and 9% respectively. The two adult activities which are most used in daily living--speaking and listening--get very little systematic attention in school. Most speech experience is extra-curricular or given meagre attention in language arts or literature and writing courses. Listening education is even more scarce. Music teachers, language arts teachers, and the occasional teacher who is a model of good listening provide most of the listening instruction in schools. Dr. Harry Goldman concluded an impressive study at Columbia University with the remarks:

In our society, reading and listening constitute the basic tools of learning as well as the prime media of social intercourse.... In the fulfillment of these roles, the importance of reading has never been questioned. Recently, ...listening is receiving increased attention.

Why has listening received so little attention in formal education? Certain false assumptions which have been widely held in educational circles have operated to obscure the importance of listening training. Five of these false assumptions are:

1. Listening is largely a matter of intelligence. There is a relationship between listening and measures of intelligence. However, when language factors are controlled, the correlation is limited, to say the least. Listening score correlation coefficients range from .36 with the group intelligence scores down to .22 with the use of individual intelligence tests. Coefficients of this low order suggest a weak relationship between listening and academic intelligence. Further, it is not uncommon to find individuals of high intelligence with extremely poor listening skills.
2. Listening is based on hearing acuity. While a minimum of physiological hearing is necessary for listening, the facts are that only 3 to 6% of the school population suffers sufficient hearing loss to impair classroom learning. Low listening skills afflict about 95% of the school population.

3. We practice listening every day so that we don't need formal training in listening. Studies point out that we practice and reinforce faults in listening more than listening skills. Variation in listening comprehension in the school classroom is at least as variable as reading comprehension. Developing listening skills is a curriculum problem, a learning problem and a teaching problem.
4. By learning to read an individual also learns how to listen. The best way to learn a skill is direct practice in that skill. "Good listening habits are taught, not caught."
5. Learning to read is more important than learning to listen. This is a widely held assumption and probably the most significant and detrimental false assumption of the five I have listed. Virtually all interpersonal living--family living, friendships, work relationships, professional conduct such as teaching, social work, religion, and recreational activities are based primarily on listening. Further, important political actions such as voting are based on opinions derived from radio and television listening rather than reading. Children gain virtually all of their political, economic, and religious beliefs by listening to television and to the adults around them. Peer group psychology and adolescent development is based on person to person talking and listening.

Careful reading of the literature on listening tells us that many factors outside of intelligence determine listening performance; hearing acuity is just a minor one; that active listening is learned; listening can be directly taught; and that we are much more significantly influenced by what we listen to than what we say, read or write.

We might as well face the fact that every teacher is a teacher of listening. Many teachers teach more listening faults than listening skills. What teachers need is not blame for overlooking systematic teaching of helpful listening skills or blame for teaching faulty listening habits; they need training for themselves in the art and science of listening.

Probably the most effective method we have for the teaching of effective listening skills is to be good listeners ourselves. No teacher just naturally becomes a good listener--listening is learned. Just consider the act of asking a question of a child in the classroom. Do we really carefully listen to the child's answers--or do we just check to see if he gave us back what we wanted? A teacher rarely asks a question in the classroom for which she does not have an answer. This is precisely what she has been taught to do. Actually, the practice of asking children questions for which we have predetermined answers

is a method of showing the ignorance of the one being asked. Classroom listening behaviors of the teacher must recognize that communication is a two-way process. Careful classroom listeners are patient and they allow sufficient time to listen together.

A classroom listening atmosphere is free of emotional tensions, aggressiveness, and combines enthusiasm with an unhurriedness. Competitive activities reduce the possibilities for listening. Seats in rows are not conducive to listening--small groups are. Listening corners with materials children want to listen to, and discuss, are needed to encourage a listening-sharing-learning process.

Classroom listening experience should encompass a wide range of experiences. Children like to listen to distant sounds in the street, to footsteps in the hall, to sounds of their own bodies, to sounds made by various objects. They like to listen to improvised sounds. They listen to music, especially if they are allowed to listen to some music of their own choosing. They like listening to human voices--especially if they are given improvising, role-playing, or dramatic variations to play with in the realm of human voice.

Many children respond to speech listening activities such as reading and listening to one's own poetry, making speeches and reacting to speeches on the basis of what has been heard.

Basic tool for listening. A basic tool for listening is feedback. Feedback is the process of returning a person's message to him so that he knows that you understand (or don't). Feedback messages typically begin with such statements as: "What I hear you saying is...", "The message I'm getting from you is...", "What I understand is..." Feedback is not evaluation. Feedback does not judge. Feedback does not correct. Feedback does let the other person know a) that you are listening to him, and b) just what message you got from him.

Feedback example:

During gym, a boy refused to jump into the water. "The water is too cold, and I don't feel well."

Teacher feedback reply: "You don't feel well and the water seems cold. You wish you didn't have to jump into the water today."

Non-feedback reply: "The water is fine. You are the one who is all wet. You've just got cold feet--next thing you'll probably be crying like a baby. Around here the rule is in the pool or down to the principal's office."

The feedback reply communicates respect and acceptance of the message. Resistance is diminished. The boy's message is taken seriously and he is not blamed nor attacked.

An example of request for feedback:

Teacher: OK, Bluebirds, please open your notebooks to exercise 24 and do part two on a piece of scrap paper--check with me before going to part three. Susan, I'd like you to tell me what you heard me say."

In this example the teacher is asking for feedback. She is asking Susan to give back her message on instructions.

In the classroom, a teacher can take a number of steps to promote listening by using feedback herself and teaching children to use feedback.

- Step 1. Let children know that you want feedback. Unless this can be conveyed in a genuine way children will not respond. A teacher who requests feedback on her performance, on her own communication, even on her person, must be prepared for children's responses. For a child to give feedback he must know that he will not be criticized, debated with, attacked or ridiculed for giving feedback.
- Step 2. Identify what you want feedback on. Receiving feedback on instructions is one thing. Getting feedback on how your voice sounds is another. Indiscriminate feedback often deteriorates into complaining, personal grievance-giving or idle talk.
- Step 3. General classroom feedback sessions should be planned. Impulsive group feedback sessions which involve many or all of the children in a classroom are not as effective as sessions which are regularly scheduled and prepared for. Both children and teacher need to agree on which main aspects of classroom activity are to receive feedback. Feedback is always from person to person. However, in a classroom many children may want to give (and receive) feedback on the same topic.
- Step 4. Encourage feedback by using silence and by using verbal encouragement. If a teacher wants a child to react she must be willing to show patience and remain silent. Sometimes gentle, encouraging words such as "yes," "have you other thoughts," etc., will encourage the other person to react with feedback.

- Step 5: A skilled feedback user pays close attention to non-verbal replies. "He smiled with his teeth but not with his eyes." We often react to another's messages with gesture, posture and movement.
- Step 6. Ask open-ended and clarifying questions while avoiding "fact" oriented questions and "Perry Mason" quizzing. Stop asking "Why?". "Why" questions put the other person on the defensive--they lead to justification, explanations and rationalization. They do not elicit feedback. Instead try to use "What?" questions: "What are your thoughts?" "What I understand is....Is that what you mean?" and "How?" questions, "How do you mean", "How does that work?", "How I hear that is...."
- Step 7. Use statements that encourage feedback. "Can you say more about that?", "You feel that ...", "What I understand is...."
- Step 8. Reward feedback. Express your appreciation. Point out how feedback helps you. Give feedback to individual children--this tells each child that you are listening to him, that you value understanding, and that you are involved in what has importance to him. Accurate feedback promotes active listening.

Listening serves two fundamental purposes. The first is to secure information. Listening tells us what is going on, how something is happening. It is estimated that 98% of our information comes to us through our ears and our eyes. When we listen to a person, we usually also look at him. Thus intense listening includes looking. A great deal of classroom listening is the receiving of information.

The second primary goal of listening is that listening provides emotional health and well-being. To be really listened to is to be healed. Almost all therapeutic practice rests on deep listening. 4400 years ago Ptahhopet, a pharaoh, instructed his staff thusly:

An official who must listen to the pleas of his clients should listen patiently and without rancor, because a petitioner wants attention to what he says even more than the accomplishing of that for which he came.

Modern workers in human relations know that when an individual has one friend who will patiently and non-judgingly listen to him say just what it is that concerns, puzzles or troubles him, then his whole outlook on the world can find relief and take a turn towards health.

The children of a classroom (and the teachers in a school) are social beings. Their daily lives are influenced by emotional conflict, misunderstanding, fears, hopes and needs to be loved and accepted. Therefore therapeutic listening should not be missing in a school. Moreover both children and staff benefit from careful, non-evaluative listening. A few guidelines which help us in therapeutic listening are:

1. Be quick to spot a "troubled" person. Unusual quietness, loud laughing, tears, unruliness, looks of deep sadness, behaving in distracted fashion, inability to respond--all are signs that careful listening is called for. \*Our first thought here is to provide an open and empathetic ear.
2. Pay attention. Listen to the person, look at the person, try to hear completely and accurately just what he is saying. Don't allow yourself to become "infected" with strong emotions such as anger, sadness, bitterness, but let them flow by and catch the message of the other person.
3. Confine yourself to three types of response:
  - a. encouraging sounds such as "yes," "I see," "Uh-huh," "oh"
  - b. silence and head-nodding--try patient silence, "thoughtful head nods," keeping a receptive posture and attentive face and gaze
  - c. feed-back to the person what you hear him saying. By paraphrasing or reflecting, give the person back the message which you get from him.
4. Do not quiz or probe for more facts. Therapeutic listening is not aimed at getting additional information. It is aimed at accepting feelings, clarifying and understanding. Inquisitive questions communicate to the other person that "I am curious." What is needed is the communication that, "I am listening and understanding," not "I am curious."
5. Refrain from evaluating what the speaker says. No matter how peculiar or unfitting the speaker's words seem to you, it is imperative that you as listener suspend your judgment and keep from passing a moral evaluation. In no case should the listener give advice even when advice is asked for. In the case where a listener feels compelled to give his opinion, every effort should be made to make clear that is is just that: his opinion. One person's opinion does not necessarily fit any other person's frame of mind or predicament.

6. Finally, the therapeutic listener keeps faith in the speaker's ability to solve his own problem. By listening one person provides another person with personal working space within which he can gain perspectives, wrestle with his dilemmas, and grow toward solutions. It is extremely important to remember that the listener provides listening. Careful, patient listening is the core of human caring, responsiveness, healing and respect.

I have done a bit of informal research into what characteristics school children find most distasteful in their adult listeners. Briefly, these are:

1. Condescension. The teacher talks and listens "down" to the student. "The teacher hears my first few sentences and tells me what is wrong with what I think or what I'm doing."  
"Makes me feel that I'm the stupidest kid in the world."  
"Tells me I'll know better when I'm older."
2. Interruptions. "The teacher asks me what I think--just as soon as I get started she interrupts me." "I want to be listened to, not lectured to."
3. Substitutions. The teacher, rather than listening to the child tells him that he should be thinking or doing something else. "When I get into the communication game with my teacher, I feel like he sends in the substitute team every time I get started. I never get to follow up what I really want to talk about. I end up having to follow his lead." "He is always telling me about his own experiences."
4. Conditional receptivity. "My teacher is pleasant and listens until I bring up something he hasn't thought of or doesn't want to talk about. Then he switches on the nasties--our conversation can flip from pleasant to unpleasant just like that." "If I'm not going to buy his product then his listening switches right off."
5. Phony attitude. "When my teacher is listening, if I start talking about something he doesn't know much about, he pretends to know all about it. Right then I know that he isn't listening --he's just on a status trip." "Often in class a kid is talking and the teacher is listening. Suddenly the teacher breaks in and corrects or tops the kid--she is always pretending to know more than she really does."

On the other hand there are certain characteristics of the teacher-listener that many children and adolescents like:

1. The teacher recognizes that I have a problem, and is eager to listen even if he can't do anything about my problem;
2. He remembers me and recognizes me as a person--not just one of those knotheads.
3. He listens--he doesn't pressure me--he isn't always on the run, looking at his watch, shuffling papers, being impatient;
4. He is friendly, seems glad to see me--he will listen to me just talk without giving me advice or correcting me;
5. He asks me questions that help me think about things I hadn't thought about before. I don't feel quizzed by his questions--he actually seems interested in me.

In conclusion. My experience of fifteen years in education and therapy has taught me that listening is the closest thing to magic which we humans have. Many of us have not learned effective listening skills. For this deficiency we should not be blamed, rather we should be trained. I truly believe that the teacher who learns to use the basic tool of feedback both in informational and therapeutic communication will have taken a great step toward listening effectiveness.

To be sure there are many sub-skills which together constitute careful listening. To learn these we need supervised practice. I am in the business of educating for listening. I have little faith that what I write or what others write about listening will bring on any great changes in listening behavior. I believe that teachers, principals, parents who actively participate in Workshop or "doing" learning can radically improve their listening skills. To develop listening skill means both to unlearn faulty habits and to acquire new, effective behaviors. To do this we need the help (feedback, mainly) of like-minded persons who are receptive to learning by doing.

To me one of the greatest benefits to be gained by improving ones own listening skills is that one becomes a healthy model for young, imitative

learners. In this sense, ones life becomes a constant source of healing and growth for others. I will close with an actual poem written by a student who appreciated his teacher-listener:

A POEM TO A TEACHER\*

By M. G.

I cannot write poetry, yet how else  
can I tell.  
How tell of this man among men--  
not tall, not fair;  
Bringing no gifts, speaking no harsh  
words.  
How tell of the miracle he wrought:  
the loosening of the cords binding  
my soul, the cutting of the  
strings which draw tight the  
shutters of my mind.  
How else can I tell you of his  
listening heart.

\*Taken from: Ginott, H. Teacher and Child, New York: The Macmillan Co.,  
1972, p. 316.