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ABSTRACT

Although teacher education programs spend very little time on the development of listening skills, the importance of listening to communicative effectiveness can hardly be exaggerated. As good listeners, teachers: (1) establish a classroom environment conducive to learning; (2) make better pedagogical decisions based on good listening skills; and (3) model good listening behavior for students. The Speech Communication Association Committee on Assessment and Testing Subcommittee Report makes clear that the communication competencies of sending and receiving informative, affective, imaginative, ritualistic, and persuasive messages are important in being an effective teacher. The Steil model is helpful in understanding what happens during listening. The model is comprised of Sensing, Interpreting, Evaluating, and Responding to verbal and non-verbal cues. Teachers who wish to become better listeners, and foster a classroom environment where student interaction is encouraged should include speech courses and courses in instructional communication in their teacher education training. Practicing teachers may take such courses as part of their continuing education, or learn effective listening skills as part of inservice programs. Every facet of the educational process will benefit from attention to this important teaching strategy. (Eighteen notes are included.) (JC)

TEACHERS AS LISTENERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

A paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Annual Convention

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TEACHERS AS LISTENERS

"Real teachers," according to the Pennsylvania State Education Association, "can't think without clutching a pencil, never sit down without first checking the seat of the chair, whoop for joy when April 1 does not fall on a school day, (and are) never too busy to listen."[1]

The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of teacher as listener. It is written against a background of teacher education programs which spend a great deal of time on topics such as lesson planning and evaluation, and very little time on the development of listening skills. More specifically, a common strategy studied is the asking of questions; an uncommon one is how to listen to the answers. Trubowitz in "The Listening Teacher" concluded, "No one . . . gives much attention to helping teachers become better listeners."[2]

The paper is divided into four parts: (1) the importance of listening for teaching, (2) the process of listening. (3) strategies for effective listening by teachers, and (4) suggestions for improving the listening ability of teachers.

The Importance of Listening

One of the major roles of teaching is communicating. The importance of listening to communicative effectiveness can scarcely be exaggerated. In the order of frequency of usage, listening is the most used (45%) form of communication, speaking second most (30%), reading third (16%), and writing least frequent (9%).[3] Based on study results such as these,

Steil concluded, "Without question, listening has been found to be central to the personal, social, educational, and professional success of every individual."[4]

Green and Weade point out the complex and dynamic nature of classroom communication and conclude:

> . . . several factors . . . contribute to the complexity of tasks facing teachers and students as they interact to construct everyday teaching-learning events in classrooms. If participants are to gain access to lesson information, take part in activities, and communicate in academically and socially appropriate ways, they must observe and interpret a vast array of simultaneously occurring verbal and nonverbal clues.[5]

The necessity of using available verbal and nonverbal clues in addition to being a competent speaker is made clear by Dedmond when he describes teaching in the following terms:

> The heart of the teaching transaction is skilled oral communication. Teachers must consistently practice these skills and encourage the practice of them by their students. The good teacher is both a good speaker and a good listener. The latter may, indeed be more important than the former. Why this conclusion should be so difficult for so many to arrive at never ceases to fascinate me, for evidence of this truth is all about us.[6]

Interesting evidence for the importance of teacher listening comes from a survey of terms used to describe "excellent teachers."[7] The twelve characteristics most often cited as those possessed by excellent teachers were divided into three categories: motivation, cognitive skills, and interpersonal skills. Under interpersonal skills were: objectivity, active listening, rapport, and empathy. Not only was listening one of the four qualities, but the other three are descriptive of effective listening.

There are three ways in which teachers use listening which are worthy of special attention: establishment of classroom environment,

making pedagogical decisions, and modeling effective listening behavior. One of the primary concerns of teaching is providing an appropriate learning environment. This environment is one in which children feel safe and respected; one in which their contributions are welcomed and encouraged. Wells and Wells stress that:

> A. children . . . will learn most effectively when there are frequent opportunities for collaborative talk with teachers and with fellow pupils. . . (R)eal understanding, which must be the basis of all true progress, requires opportunities for conversation in which there is an effort to achieve a meeting of minds through the shared construction and negotiation of meaning.[8]

A key factor in encouraging participative learning is the communication environment, an environment determined largely by the teacher's listening behavior. Liebling stressed that the communicative contexts which teachers create "influence the extent to which children are willing to share personal experience with others."[9] The Beginning Teacher Evaluation Study adds, "Direct interaction between a student and a teacher about academic content is associated with increased engaged time and higher achievement."[10]

O'Keefe describes the typical and ideal environment when she states:

> Teachers tend to talk for about 70 percent of classroom time. Besides lecturing, teachers ask questions about things they already know and expect short, predictable answers. Students do learn under these conditions, but they learn at the lowest common denominator--passive recall. Shifting the focus to student speech does not negate the value of the teacher. It does however, place a responsibility on the teacher to design an environment in which speaking is given equal weight with writing, reading, and listening.[11]

When students share personal experience and teacher and student interact, the teacher is performing the role of listener. How this role is performed is crucial to the accruement of the above benefits.

An additional aspect of communication environment is classroom management. The use of appropriate and successful management strategies is tied to listening and observing. Doyle points out:

> . . . a teacher's success in classroom management, defined in terms of high levels of student work and involvement and low levels of disruption, depended on his or her ability to monitor and guide a complex classroom system.[12]

A second way in which teachers use listening is to help make pedagogical decisions. A great deal of information on which to make decisions is obtained by listening to students--to their answers, their questions, and their comments. Listening to students can help ascertain readiness, comprehension, and remediation required. In addition, it is an essential component of problem solving.

A final way in which teachers use listening is to model effective listening for students. Ever since Title II of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act called for the teaching of listening as a basic skill in the K-12 classroom, the role of teachers as models of listening has become crucial.[13] Teacher Caryl Morton encourages adults to teach children listening skills by listening.

> . . . Learning to listen is a key element in good communication and conversation. But the most effective way to teach your children how to listen is to listen to <u>them</u> first.[14]

By understanding the importance of listening, the process of listening, and explicitly and implicitly modeling listening skills, teachers can contribute both to their own success and to the learning of students.

The importance of listening for teachers is made clear in the Speech Communication Association Committee on Assessment and Testing Subcommittee Report.[15] The report lists teacher communication competencies including

both sending and receiving of informative, affective, imaginative, ritualistic, and persuasive messages. Specifically, they include:

COMPETENCIES

I. Informative Messages: Teachers should demonstrate competencies in sending and receiving informative messages (i.e., messages that are used to obtain or give information).

A. Send informative messages.

B. Receive informative messages effectively.

1. Identify the main point of informative messages.
2. Identify structural patterns and problems in informative messages.
3. Evaluate the adequacy of verbal and audio-visual supporting materials.
4. Formulate questions that probe for the informative contents of messages.
5. Differentiate between messages which are delivered in an animated and interesting manner and those which are not.

II. Affective Messages: Teachers should demonstrate competence in sending and receiving affective messages (i.e., messages that express or respond to feelings).

A. Send affective messages effectively.

B. Receive affective messages effectively.

1. Recognize verbal and nonverbal cues concerning student feelings.
2. Invite students to express feelings.
3. Be non-judgmental in responding to student feelings.
4. Ask open-ended questions in response to student expressions of feelings.
5. If necessary, offer advice tactfully.

III. Imaginative Messages: Teachers should demonstrate competence in sending and receiving imaginative messages (i.e., messages that speculate, theorize, or include fantasy).

A. Send imaginative messages effectively.

B. Receive imaginative messages effectively.

1. Respond to imaginative messages enthusiastically.
2. Be nondirective when encouraging student creativity.

IV. Ritualistic Messages: Teachers should demonstrate competence in sending and receiving ritualistic messages (i.e., messages that serve to maintain and facilitate social interaction).

A. Send ritualistic messages effectively.

B. Receive ritualistic messages effectively.

1. Recognize when students perform everyday speech acts appropriately.
2. Recognize appropriate and inappropriate performances of social amenities.
3. Recognize competence and incompetence when students participate in interviews, conversations, problem-solving groups, legislative groups, and public ceremonies.

V. Persuasive Messages: Teachers should demonstrate competence in sending and receiving persuasive messages (i.e., messages that seek to convince).

A. Send persuasive messages effectively.

B. Receive persuasive messages effectively.

1. Recognize own bias in responding to ideas.
2. Question the adequacy of reasons and evidence given.
3. Evaluate evidence and reasons presented.
4. Recognize underlying assumptions in arguments of others.

The Process of Listening

Listening is a dynamic and complex process. The use of the Steil model is helpful in understanding what happens when we listen.[16] The model divides listening into four steps:

S Sensing
I Interpreting
E Evaluating
R Responding

The steps normally occur sequentially, but may overlap.

Sensing is the physiological component; it includes hearing and seeing. While hearing is the primary sense used in listening, seeing is also an important sense which helps to determine the meaning of a message. It is sometimes called observing or "listening with your eyes."

Interpreting involves the assignment of meaning to perceived symbols. Both verbal and nonverbal symbols are decoded to determine what the speaker (more accurately the source, since the person may not actually speak) means--what is the message? How a message is interpreted depends upon numerous and complex factors such as personal experience, vocabulary, emotions, mood, context, timing, previous messages and interactions, etc.

Evaluating, the third component, includes judgments of what was perceived and interpreted. The judgment made is dependent upon the listener's background and purpose. If I'm listening to two different versions of a student altercation, I will judge the believability of each student. If I'm listening to a convention presenter describe a new teaching strategy, I will decide whether it sounds workable for me.

The final component is the response segment which results from the first three steps. The appropriateness of the response is judged by the achievement of the listener's purpose. If I am trying to resolve a student conflict, the quality of my critical listening is determined by my response. Did I solve the problem? Are both students satisfied? Will future conflicts be avoided? Do I still have the respect of both students?

Let's use a teacher-student example to relate the listening process to teaching. The teacher (Mrs. B) is teaching a lesson on using the library. She notices a student (Chris) frowning. Mrs. B looks at Chris and pauses, thus encouraging him to ask, "Does the card catalogue look like the Sears catalogue?" She perceives his question orally (hears it), but also observes him as he asks. Her interpretation

includes the words (Sounds like he's confused and needs a clearer description of the card catalogue), his nonverbal communication (His smile and cocked head indicate he's putting me on), and his voice or paralanguage (His voice sounds like he's teasing). Mrs. B interprets the message using all these factors (and more, such as the question Chris asked yesterday) and decides Chris is probably pulling her leg. She must now judge the message. The judgment can be of many types. Is this appropriate classroom behavior? Is it funny? If so, how funny?

After making relevant judgments Mrs. B responds. Her response will be guided by the interpretation and evaluation decisions she made. The appropriateness of her response is determined by her goals. If she laughs and says, "The only difference is the card catalogue doesn't come in the mail!", and her purpose is to maintain a friendly class atmosphere, she's probably a winner.

Strategies for Effective Teacher Listening

After discussing the importance of listening to teachers and the nature of the listening process, let's examine more closely the teacher as listener. What listening strategies are necessary for effective teaching? It is not within the scope of this paper to present all the specific skills necessary to successful listening. Rather, two general approaches will be presented. The fleshing out of the approaches must occur over time in an academic setting under knowledgeable guidance.

Augsburger described listening as a willingness to hear. He offers a six-step approach:

1. A willingness to be truly present and available
2. An openness to attend to the other's communication
3. An interest in perceiving as another sees

4. A readiness to suspend judgment or evaluation
5. A patience to wait for the other's expression of his or her own thoughts and feelings
6. A commitment to work toward dialogue that enriches both [16]

Trubowitz more specifically relates his suggestions to teachers and suggests these additional behaviors:

1. Learn to value silence
2. Evaluate yourself as a listener
   The following questions are recommended:
   - Do I listen more than I talk?
   - Have I developed a classroom atmosphere in which children feel free to express themselves?
   - Am I aware when I stop listening?
   - Do I know what gets in the way of my listening better?
   - Have I learned to hear the messages that are communicated underneath words and beneath facial and body expressions?
   - Do I listen as accurately, carefuly, sensitively as I am able?
3. Become aware of how a room has impact
4. Create a responsive environment
5. Use paraprofessionals to give listening time to children
6. Schedule problem solving sessions
7. Learn how informal situations encourage children to talk more freely[17]

Improving the Listening Ability of Teachers

In light of the importance of listening for teachers, steps should be taken to find ways in which to assure the development of teacher listening competencies as well as administrative support for the development and use of those competencies. One implication of the "listening teacher" is the "talking student." Classrooms where student talk is encouraged are by definition less quiet than those where the teacher talks and students listen. Silberman describes the situation often found in education and the role of administrators, supervisors, and fellow colleagues in supporting an interactive class environment.

> If teachers are obsessed with silence and lack of movement . . . it is in large part because it is the chief means

> by which their competence is judged. A teacher will rarely, if ever, be called on the carpet or denied tenure because his students have not learned anything; he most certainly will be rebuked if his students are talking or moving about the classroom or--even worse--found outside the room, and he may even earn the censure of his colleagues as well. Nor will teachers receive suggestions from supervisors as to how to improve their teaching methods and materials; they will receive suggestions for improving "discipline." Thus, the vows of silence and stillness are often imposed on teachers who might prefer a more open, lively classroom .[18]

There are two groups who require training, future teachers and practicing teachers. The methods of delivery need to adapted to each.

Students in teacher education should have included in their curriculum a basic speech course (the type found in most general education programs) and a more specific course which treats communication topics as they specifically relate to education. Such a course is often called Communication in Education or Instructional Communication and is taught by most speech communication departments. Ideally, teacher candidates would also take a listening course.

Practicing teachers can be reached in two ways. Since most continue their education by taking graduate courses, they should be encouraged to take courses such as Communication in Education and Listening. If such courses are not presently available, they could be requested of speech communication departments. It would be rare that a department would not offer an evening or summer school course for which there was adequate demand.

Teachers can also be reached through in-service programs. Some states, like Illinois, have state communication education programs. Most university and college speech departments have educators who are interested in offering such programs. Topics can be tailored to fit

the limited time available and perhaps sequenced so as to cover several important concepts. The names of qualified individuals in your state can be obtained by writing:

Director of Educational Services
Speech Communication Association
Suite 7
5105 Backlick Road
Annandale, VA 22003

Another approach to reaching teachers is the use of a communication consultant. Often, speech educators serve as advisors to schools or districts concerned with listening. They can be used for diagnosing specific problems, setting up educational programs and conferences, and as in-service speakers.

Listening has been shown to be critical to educational, social, and professional success. Teaching is a profession requiring mastery level skill. This can be facilitated by teacher educational curricula which include communication studies in general and listening in particular, and by the use of communication specialists as consultants and in-service presenters. Every facet of the educational process will benefit from attention to this important teaching strategy.

Notes

[1]Iowa State Education Association/National Education Association, Communique, December/January 1986, 4.

[2]Sidney Trubowitz, "The Listening Teacher," Childhood Education, April/May 1975, 319.

[3]Paul Rankin, "Listening Ability," Proceedings of the Ohio State Educational Conference's Ninth Annual Session, 1929, quoted in Effective Listening. Steil et al. 1983.

[4]Lyman Steil et al., Effective Listening (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley), 1983.

[5]Judith Green and Regina Weade, "Reading Between The Words: Social Cues to Lesson Participation," Theory into Practice, Winter 1985, 1.

[6]Donald Dedmon, "Education: Confirming What We Know," Vital Speeches, October 15, 1983, 14-20.

[7]John Roueche and George Baker, Profiling Excellence in America's Schools (Arlington, VA: The American Association of School Administrators), 1986.

[8]Gordon Wells and Jan Wells, "Learning to Talk and Talking to Learn," Theory into Practice, Summer 1985, 196.

[9]Cheryl Liebling, "Creating the Classroom Communicative Context," Theory into Practice, Summer 1984, 238.

[10]National Institute of Education, Research and Development Report 2, Fall 1979.

[11]Virginia O'Keefe, Affecting Critical Thinking Through Speech (Urbana, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills), 1987.

[12]Walter Doyle, "Recent Research on Classroom Management: Implications for Teacher Preparation," Journal of Teacher Education, May/June 1985, 31.

[13]Title II of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Public Law 95-561, November 1, 1978.

[14]Caryl Morton, "The Best Way to Talk to Kids," Parents, October, 1985, 91.

[15]Pam Cooper, Communication Competencies for Teachers: A CAT Subcommittee Report, November 1986, 2-4.

[16]David Augsburger, Caring Enough to Hear and Be Heard (Ventura, CA: Regal Books), 1982, 40.

[17]Trubowitz, 322.

[18]Charles Silberman, The Remaking of American Education (New York: Random House), 1970, 144.