

IMPROVING LISTENING SKILLS OF TERTIARY LEVEL STUDENTS FOR EFFECTIVE INFORMATION RETRIEVAL

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Listening is essential to the learning process. Students in tertiary institutions of learning need to acquire effective listening and note-taking skills in order to benefit from lectures. This paper focused on factors militating against effective listening during lectures such as poor rate of presentation, poor communication skills, attention faking, personal anxieties, judgemental spirit and use of ineffective note-taking strategy. Strategies of how effective listening skills can be developed and utilized by students were also discussed. These include fighting distractions, avoiding day-dreaming, identifying cues for listening and utilizing effective note-taking strategy. Recommendations were also made on how the lecturer/teacher can promote students' effective listening thereby enhancing students' retrieval of information.

INTRODUCTION

Lecturing is often used to impart knowledge and skills to students in higher institutions of learning such as Universities, Colleges of Education and Polytechnics. Students are expected to listen and take good notes during lectures and to review them in preparing for tests or examinations. Moreover, students need to retrieve learned information from memory in order to answer test questions effectively (Roediger, 2007). In line with this, Pauk (2001) posited that it is impossible to learn without listening. Listening skills are not acquired automatically. Developing effective listening skills require hard work and practice. This is essential in that effective listening paves way for effective note-taking. Many studies favoured the facilitating effect of note-taking on recall (Boyle, 2001; Bretzing & Kulhavy, 1979; Pepper & Mayer, 1986). However, the note-taking ability of the learner is largely dependent on his/her listening ability. This is because information not listened to, cannot be written down and neither can it be remembered when the need arises.

Listening and hearing are not the same. Often, an individual "listens" to a friend or teacher for some minutes and thereafter fails to remember what has been said. He hears the words but fails to actually listen. Poor assignments submitted by students sometimes indicate that they did not actually listen in the previous class. Listening goes beyond hearing. Hearing involves the use of one's ears (mainly to receive information) while listening involves the use of one's ears as well as the mind in receiving and processing information. Listening is a thinking action (Note taking at University, 2002). Listening is the art of hearing and thinking to understand what is said. Listening is vital to learning.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: MEMORY, LISTENING AND RETRIEVAL

Psychologists agree that memory is the encoding, storage and retrieval of information (Hill, 2008; Rodieger, 2007). Memory enables us to access past experiences and make use of them. The process of accessing stored memories is known as retrieval. Retrieval is the only way to measure memory (Rodieger, 2007). In other words, retrieval is the proof that learning has taken place.

However, for effective retrieval to take place, the information should have been encoded and stored previously. The 3-stage memory model (Atkinson & Shiffrin, 1971) emphasizes that information moves from Sensory Memory to Short-term Memory and Long-term Memory only if given necessary attention, properly encoded and rehearsed. Giving attention requires active listening and note-taking. These will aid encoding, storage and subsequent retrieval of such information. If not given attention, or not effectively listened to and properly encoded, the information is lost or forgotten. It is the encoded and stored information that is made available for subsequent retrieval. The need for tertiary institutions students to acquire and use effective listening skills that will enhance retrieval of information becomes apparent.

Listening is the first step in note-taking. According to May (2002), learners need to work on their listening abilities in order to improve their note-taking skills. Where active listening has not taken place, it is difficult to get effective note-taking. However, many factors militate against active listening- arising from the roles played by teachers and students in the learning process. Therefore, in order to improve students' listening skills, it is pertinent to first identify the factors militating against active listening so as to be able to propose appropriate strategies for improvement.

FACTORS MILITATING AGAINST ACTIVE LISTENING

Many factors militate against students' active listening. Some of these originate from the lecturer and some from the students. Lecturer behaviours that militate against students' active listening include the following.

POOR RATE OF PRESENTATION

A lecturer's poor rate of presentation is an obstacle to students' active listening. If the lecturer is too fast in his/her presentation, the learner tends to switch off or loses concentration. He/she may also stop taking notes. If the lecturer is too slow, the learner becomes irritated, bored and sleepy. Pauk (2001) corroborated this fact by postulating that a poor listener tends to daydream with low speakers.

POOR COMMUNICATION SKILLS

A lecturer's use of unfamiliar pronunciations and slangs inhibit active listening. Words and phrases that are not properly pronounced may register wrong meanings in the learner's mind. Also, use of abusive language by the lecturer may offend the learner. This makes the learner to lose concentration and stop listening.

USE OF INEFFECTIVE METHOD OF TEACHING

Ineffective teaching method also inhibits listening. For instance, a lecturer who reads out what is in a textbook or he tells too many irrelevant stories during lecture does not encourage or facilitate effective listening by the learners. Also, inability to teach abstract

concepts meaningfully by using examples and illustrations will hinder effective listening and retrieval of information.

INABILITY TO STIMULATE STUDENTS' INTEREST

A lecturer should be able to skillfully stimulate and sustain students' interest in a lecture. When this is lacking, the lecture becomes boring and students will not be able to listen actively. Sometimes, the lecturer him/herself lacks motivation or enthusiasm about the course he/she is lecturing. This is reflected in his/her voice, comportment, reaction to students' questions and answers. These may have adverse effect on listening and information retrieval.

Second, learner factors that militate against students' active listening include the following.

ATTENTION FAKING

A student's lack of interest in a lecture often makes him/her to fake attention in class or he begins to day-dream. According to Pauk (2001), a poor listener often fakes attention. A poor listener does not pay attention during lecture but hopes to get the information in a textbook later. Such a learner forgets that information given in a class may not be the same as in a textbook.

PERSONAL ANXIETIES

A student's personal worries and anxieties like lack of money, food, accommodation and fear of the unknown can affect his concentration and listening in class. A student who is weighed down emotionally will not listen in class to vital information passed by the teacher and classmates and so fail to retrieve such when necessary.

JUDGMENTAL SPIRIT

A student sometimes judges the lecturer before he is done with his point. Such a student argues and 'fights' the lecturer in class and stops listening.

DISTRACTIONS FROM FRIENDS

When friends sit together during lecture often times, listening will be inhibited. Silent discussions will bring about a lot of distractions.

POOR NOTE-TAKING STRATEGY USED

Active listening is also hindered by the use of poor note-taking strategy in taking note during lecture, such as verbatim note-taking. Literature (Pepper & Mayer, 1986; Shahid, 2010) suggest that verbatim note-taking interferes with active listening, in that it does not allow the learner to synthesize information received or analyze in-coming information. The fore-going suggests the need for acquisition of effective listening skills by students to enhance information retrieval.

STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE LISTENING SKILLS

Lecturers and students have vital roles to play in the development of effective listening skills. Strategies proposed for improving listening skills are two-fold: The first set relates to how the lecturer can help students to listen effectively and the second set relates to effective listening skills that students can employ.

Lecturers can imbibe these strategies in helping to improve students' listening during

lectures. First, lectures should be made interesting and appealing to arouse and sustain learner's desire to listen and learn. Use of varieties of teaching techniques and materials will aid lesson delivery and promote active listening. The rate of presentation of lectures should be moderate (neither too slow nor too fast). Lectures should also be delivered systematically, from simple to complex to promote listening and comprehension. Illustrations and relevant examples should also be used.

During lecture, the lecturer should pause occasionally to ask students questions to check whether they are paying attention or listening. Lecturers should also create time to teach students how to listen effectively in class and how to identify cues that signal important aspects of the lecture. This can be effectively done while introducing the lesson topic.

Students in tertiary institutions of learning should imbibe these strategies for effective listening during lectures. First, students can set a goal to be a better listener and determine to take active steps towards achieving the goal. They should have a positive mindset that the lecturer has important information to deliver and that you have to get something out of the lecture, no matter the method of presentation.

Students should also get to class on time, meaning before commencement of lecture to get a good sitting position that will aid active listening. They must fight all distractions. For instance, avoid discussing with a friend during lecture. A good listener fights distraction and focusses on what the speaker is saying.

Good listeners also identify cues given by the lecturer to signal important aspects of the lecture such as "For example"; "Therefore"; "Remember that"; and "Finally." Information following such cues should be noted.

Another good listening strategy is to avoid arguing with the speaker and so stop listening to other parts. Students should not jump into conclusions. An effective listener does not judge until comprehension is complete. Questions can be asked later. Good listeners also focus on the lecture content being presented rather than looking for what to criticize the speaker for, such as his/her voice, clothes or looks.

During lecture, students should refrain from day-dreaming or faking attention hoping to use a textbook later. A good listener will rather pay attention by reflecting on the speaker's message knowing that information given in class may not be the same as in a textbook.

Finally, students should jot down main points during lecture. They should avoid using verbatim note-taking style which interferes with listening and retrieval but instead use effective note-taking strategies like Outline, Cornell and Mind Maps that encourage recording of main points. This helps to promote active listening and information retrieval.

CONCLUSION

Effective listening skills are vital to learning. Teachers and students have significant roles to play in promoting students' active listening during lectures. Students should be trained in the acquisition of effective listening skills as discussed in this paper, in order to

overcome factors militating against active listening. Imbibing the recommended listening skills will help to improve students' retrieval of information.

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