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AUTHOR Erway, Ella Anderson
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ABSTRACT

Scholars agree that listening is an active rather than a passive process. The listening which makes people achieve higher scores on current listening tests is "second speaker" listening or active participation in the encoding of the message. Most of the instructional suggestions in listening curriculum guides are based on this concept. In terms of a communication model, instead of a process in which one member of a system passively decodes the message while the other encodes, "second speaker" listening refers to both members encoding the same message at the same time. Thus, the process of effective listening has been properly called decoding. Becoming the "second speaker" requires background information about the subject listened to, motivation to listen, and organizational skill. A direct approach to teaching decoding has not yet been developed, although instruction in several dimensions of decoding has proved helpful. Improvement in listening instruction requires innovative strategies and rigorous research for results. Until these developments occur, listening will continue as a neglected area of the communication curriculum. (EE)

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listening the second speaker

by Ella Anderson Erway

One meaning of communication is the delivery of an idea; the term is used for the "transfer of wealth". The modern popular connotation of the word suggests the wrapping up of a message in tissue paper with a ribbon of words and vocalization. With more sophistication, the theorist sees communication as a two-way gift exchange; when I talk to you, you also give me a message of facial expression or bodily tension called "feedback". In communication theory we study both members of a dyad as active senders of messages but we have not carefully analyzed their roles as simultaneous receivers of messages. Is the task to simply receive and unwrap, or is effective listening a more complex behavior?

The decoding process (or listening to messages) has been the subject of research since Rankin's study of the communication habits of the white collar worker.¹ Nichols and numerous other investigators discovered that people are not very efficient at opening the package of the message.² College students complained to the President's Commission on Campus Unrest that nobody listened to them.³ Only 25% of the college students tested by Irwin were able to accurately determine the main points of an informational lecture they heard.⁴ Although we are judged to be poor listeners by this research, our lives are built on decoding. CBS estimates that Americans acquire over 90% of their current events knowledge by listening or in the reception of oral messages.⁵

The importance of listening was recognized in the schools before the vogue of calling it "decoding". Elementary teachers taught children to follow directions by playing "Simon Says". Stories were read and children answered questions on the content. College speech courses list "listening improvement" as a major objective of instruction.⁶

However, the instructional approaches to improving listening have resulted in contradictory effects.

In the last ten years there has been strong interest in developing instructional efficiency. We seek to discover measurable changes in behavior resulting from formal instruction. Although instruction in listening is popular, it has been difficult to measure valid change in behavior because we have not yet decided what listening is. In fact, while instruction increases there is less research published now on the result of training than in the 1950's.

How does a child learn to decode? The five year old comes to kindergarten with an oral symbolic linguistic code. Since he has developed this system with little formal training we do not know what factors contribute to his success or failure in learning. By comparison, the encoding and decoding of the written message is taught in the classroom where comparative strategies of instruction can be observed and evaluated.

There are two major theories as to infant development of decoding capacity. The behaviorists claim that by a process of conditioning the child has associated verbal sounds and messages with contingencies of positive reinforcement. For example, Mowrer points out that the sound of the adult voice is associated early in life with food.⁷ Theorists agree that the child responds at an early stage to the intonation and inflection of voices around him. On the other hand, the maturing child understands increasingly complex sentence structures without direct shaping of his behavior. Lenneberg suggests that the structuring of language is a biological trait of the human being which develops as a correlate of motor proficiency rather than conditioned learning.⁸ The child matures into a capacity for decoding the message he hears. Proponents of both behavioristic and biological theories



agree that the child's decoding skill is advanced over his encoding skill as evidenced by his understanding of the sentences he does not use in his own speaking performance. Whether learned or inherited the young child's decoding is an active process resulting in the fatigue of his attention span. This fatigue is characteristic of the perception of sensory input of any kind. By the time the child comes to school the decoding process is automatic -- in fact, so well established that a new pattern must be presented against the interference of the automatic linguistic code in the fashion of teaching a foreign language.

Attempts have been made to discover the components of decoding behavior by factorial analysis. From this research three basic elements are now accepted as the basis of listening behavior. First, the listener has linguistic competence for the code and structure of the message. The child whose code does not include a means of expressing the "if-then" relationship will not comprehend that kind of message. Secondly, the listener has a background of understanding and experience which may not be purely linguistic but is necessary to interpret the message. The contemporary college student who hears a recording of Franklin Roosevelt's Fireside Chats lacks the background of daily life in a depressed economy which explains the appeal of the President in 1936. Finally, the listener has control of the variables of interest and motivation. Nichols discovered that one characteristic of the ineffective listener was a refusal to expose himself to difficult listening experiences or a lack of motivation to try.¹¹

The construction of measures of these three factors has proved to be a difficult task. Instead, tests of other behaviors have been devised. The two best-known tests are the Brown-Carlson test and STEP test.¹² The Brown-Carlson test measures the behaviors of immediate recall, following directions, recognizing transitions, recognizing word meanings and lecture comprehension. The STEP test purportedly measures identifying main ideas, remembering details, understanding word meanings, understanding implications of main ideas and details, interrelationships among ideas, and connotative meaning of words. In addition, the behavior

of evaluation and application of messages is measured in judging validity of ideas, distinguishing fact from fancy, and noting contradictions. As John Carroll points out -- no provision is made in these tests for diagnosing the nature of the problem "whether the individual's deficiency in listening is due to a lack of basic linguistic competence, a lack of background knowledge, or an inability to mobilize his competence through proper processes of attention and response."¹³ The young child whose normal language is "Black English" may lack competency in school language, background information, and lack of motivation on one test and yet score highly on another test that reflects his linguistic and social environment. In addition, the two above mentioned tests are subject to wide variation in administrative procedure and unsubstantiated equivalency between the forms of the tests.

Scores on these or similar tests have been presented as evidence of the value of instruction in listening. However, no major long term research has been done to show that gains from instruction are preserved nor have the test scores shown reliability. In spite of the lack of evidence there is strong conviction among English and Speech teachers that instruction in listening improves decoding skill.¹⁴ The most impressive evidence comes not from research studies but from the prejudiced reports of students who have experienced instruction and from the observations of instructors. After this discouraging view of listening instruction there are still some guidelines for the development of methods. These are based on the premise that listening takes as much or more effort than speaking.

Sam Duker in a recent interview with one of the author's students (Dec. 1970) said that the good listener is an "active listener". He explained "What I mean when I use the term is that you can't listen without doing it." He goes on to say that you must set your mind to pay attention rather than scan the environment for all available stimuli. Other researchers discovered that certain children were far more capable than others of active decoding and that the factor of difference was in the ability to empathize with the speaker's encoding process.¹⁵

Empathy is illustrated in the communication pattern of the long-married couple. My husband was brought up on string beans cooked with pork. I do most of the cooking; since my childhood beans were cooked with butter, that is the mode in which they most often appear. However, I can predict exactly what will be said each time they are served without the pork. This kind of empathy takes little active effort because it is highly predictable. Decoding is more active, perhaps even forced empathy. Most of the instructional suggestions in listening curriculum guides are based on decoding by active empathy. The listener does not just receive the package of the message; he works at helping the speaker encode the message. He identifies beyond decoding by becoming a "second speaker". Instead of a model of communication in which one member of the system is decoding a message while the other *encodes*, both members encode the *same* message at the *same* time. Decoding is actually encoding.

Becoming "the second speaker" depends on three factors: First, it is the result of a pre-set of attitude to give the speaker a fair hearing. When we arrive with the stated goal of finding the weakness in the speaker's argument we are not ready to encode his message --- only our own. When we come to a message without active interest in the topic to be discussed, we do not expend the effort to encode the thinking of the speaker. When we dislike the speaker, we do not want to say what he is saying; and so the child who hates his teacher will refuse to encode the teacher's message.

A second factor is listenability --- or the ease with which the second speaker can encode the message at the same time as the speaker. The monotonous voice of the speaker results in a sensory fatigue in the listener which demands super-human effort by the receiver who seeks to identify with this unattractive element. Code choices which are unknown to the listener can distract him from the task of encoding the basic message. Noises in the communication system can distort the message beyond the integrative powers of the listener.

A third factor is the thinking skill of the listener. In every list of suggestions for improving listening, students are told to use the thinking time provided by the speaker's

rate of delivery to look for the central idea, the main divisions of the speech, and a pattern of organization. In case the speaker does not provide these, the receiver of the message should encode them for the speaker. Hence, any kind of instruction which improves organizational skill should result in improved listening. Students are more effective in listening as measured by the ability to find and retain the central idea after a course in public speaking, even though there is no direct instruction in listening.

How have these factors been approached in the classroom? From the elementary through the college level we seek to develop an attitude of interest in listening --- a pre-set. Young children are asked to note the noises around them. College students are given a lecture on the values of careful listening. While these exercises serve to develop a vocabulary of listening terms, there is no means to measure the objective. We test the listening behavior of a student in speech class but the professor in another area claims that it does not matter to him where the student gets his information --- from the text or the lecture as long as he can answer the test questions. The instructor can ask the sixth grade class to listen to an evening Presidential address on television but cannot evaluate the response. There is no control of the variables of the home listening situation. The only valid instructional approach to developing an attitude of wanting to listen has been the motivation provided by an announcement that a student will have to answer questions after a specific listening assignment. This produces significant improvement in listening with no other training. Since instructors have many papers to grade, this strategy is not used extensively.

Not only do we as instructors have difficulty in motivating interest in active listening but also in developing organizational skills. We cannot define the response we want. I have presented samples of public speaking, seven minutes long, to one hundred students who stated what they considered to be the central idea. Five experienced instructors (all with doctor degrees in public speaking) graded the student answers on a five point scale from inadequate to excellent. The instructors who had the script in written form used the entire range

of the grading scale to mark the same student answers. There is no "right answer" for the organizational skills and no means of reinforcement in learning this behavior.

Other variables are difficult to control. For example, a student listens to six speeches in his class and writes down the central idea of each speech. All of the speeches are on a topic of immediate campus concern — the visiting hours in the dormitory; all of the speeches are informal, employ humor, and show simple organizational patterns. The student scores high on the listening assignment but this is no indication of transfer of the skill to economics class or listening to a sophisticated politician. The student is not ready for language or argument beyond that of his peers.

The task of training "second speakers" has barely begun. We know that students are better listeners at the age of ten than at the age of five, and that increasing maturity results in increased skills. Perhaps the results of early instruction would happen without our efforts. We also know that much of what has been claimed for our present methods of improving listening skills cannot be substantiated. Present decoding instruction seems to be only the motivation of an expected test or a by-product of training in organization.

Yet, the plea from both technical and popular sources is to produce better listeners. There should be a renewed interest in

experimentation with innovative approaches to teaching listening and development of valid measures of the results. I suggest the following: adaptation of the strategies of training actors and sensitivity groups to focus attention and empathy, studying the listening comprehension and behavioral response to speeded speech, using self-instructional program at many levels of difficulty and motivational appeal, contrasting listening to varied materials with different goals, changing listening environments especially with media, correlating listening and reading, exploring auditory perceptual response, and applying methods used for the hearing impaired.

In summary, there is agreement that listening is an active process, far more active than our common sense dictates. The listening which makes people score higher on our current listening tests is "second speaker" listening — active participation in the encoding of the message. Such encoding demands background, motivation, and organizational skill.

We have not yet found a direct approach to teaching decoding although instruction in several dimensions has proved helpful. Improvement in listening instruction calls for innovative strategies and rigorous research as to their results. Until these developments, listening will continue as the neglected area of the communication curriculum.

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PROFILE OF ELLA ANDERSON ERWAY



Ella Anderson Erway is presently Associate Professor at Southern Connecticut State College. She received her B.A. in Speech from Wheaton College, her M.A. in Speech Therapy from Teacher's College, Columbia University, and her Ed.D. in Speech Education from Teacher's College.

Professor Erway also did additional work at the Summer Institute of Linguistics, University of Oklahoma. She has previously taught at the following Colleges: Northwestern College; Whitworth College; Hunter College; Ithaca College; Teacher's College; and is now a member of the faculty at Southern Connecticut State College.

Dr. Erway holds membership in the following professional organizations: Speech Communications Association of America; Eastern State Speech Association; Connecticut Speech and Hearing Association; and the Speech Association of Connecticut, where she has served previously in the position of Dinner Chairman and Hospitality Chairman during their past annual conventions. She has also served as College Coordinator with the Connecticut Teachers of English to Speakers of other Languages. Dr. Erway has published: *Listening: A Programmed Approach* with McGraw-Hill Company, 1969 and has also co-authored with Margaret Clark and Lee Beltzer, *The Learning Encounter: The Classroom as a Communication Workshop* by Random House in 1970.

Professor Erway was Director of the Communications Workshop for Teachers of Spanish Speaking Children in the Summer of 1970. This workshop was funded under Title I of the Higher Education Act of 1965, Commission on Aid to Higher Education, Hartford, Connecticut.