

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 480 895

CS 512 430

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TITLE Skills Students Use When Speaking and Listening. ERIC Topical Bibliography and Commentary.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY Institute of Education Sciences (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO TBC-030016
PUB DATE 2003-09-00
NOTE 5p.
CONTRACT ED-99-CO-0028
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English and Communication, 2805 E. 10th St., #140, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698. Web site: <http://eric.indiana.edu>.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- ERIC Publications (071) -- Reference Materials - Bibliographies (131)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Bibliographies; *Communication Skills; Elementary Secondary Education; *Listening Skills; Literature Reviews; Postsecondary Education; Public Speaking; *Skill Development; *Speech Skills; *Student Needs
IDENTIFIERS Research Summaries

ABSTRACT

Students develop skills from learning to listen and from having someone listen to them. While most educators assume that listening is a matter of choice, not ability, listening is actually something students have to be taught to do well. This topical bibliography and commentary summarizes several research studies which provide insight into skills students use when engaged in speaking and listening activities. The bibliography/commentary also explores the importance of teaching speaking and listening skills and integrating speaking and listening skills into traditionally taught content areas. It concludes that while speaking and listening are essential skills, many other important skills are learned when a student masters the ability to speak and listen, and as students mature, they are expected to achieve a higher level of thinking and listening. It also notes that most research finds that neither listening skills nor speaking skills are being taught in the classroom. Lists 6 Internet resources and 11 references. (NKA)



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Skills Students Use When Speaking and Listening

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Introduction

Students develop skills from learning to listen and from having someone listen to them. Yet, listening is not a skill that is commonly taught in school. "Teachers feel they have to set priorities, and meet curricular demands first" (Wilson, 1997, p. 6). Most educators assume that listening is a matter of choice, not ability, however listening is something students have to be taught to do well. The following summaries provide some insight into skills students use when engaged in speaking and listening activities. This paper will also explore the importance of teaching speaking and listening skills and integrating speaking and listening skills into traditionally taught content areas.

Importance of Listening Skills

The most important skill a student uses when listening is the skill of being able to learn. "Those who listen learn. Those who do not or cannot listen find the classroom frustrating" (Swanson, 1997, p. 3). In an action research project Barr, Dittmar, Roberts, and Sheraden (2002) determined that students' academic performance could be linked to the quality listening skills and that when students were provided direct inputs to strengthen their listening skills, they were able to improve their academic performance as well as make positive changes in their social interaction.

One of the strongest skills gained from attentive listening is having better interpersonal skills. Students who are attentive listeners have the ability to change the attitude of the speaker. Clark (1999) asked his students to identify how they feel when they know someone is listening to them. Students responded that they felt, "respected, important, intelligent, confident, liked, and valuable" (p. 2). These are valuable esteem builders for students. However, studies have shown that "most teachers do not listen" (Swanson, 1997, p. 10). It has been found that when "teachers listen to students' questions, the student need to know is discovered. Listening in conversations with students also provides students with valuable experiences in effective social interaction that is different from peer interactions" (Swanson, 1997, p. 11).

Problems with Teachers and Listening

According to Rega (2000, p.1) "people absorb only about one-tenth to one fourth of what they hear" and Swanson (1997, p.13) estimates most adults have only a third grade listening level. Yet, students listening skills appear to be taken for granted in most classrooms as teachers tend to "outtalk their entire class of students in a ratio of 3 to 1. Most of this talk was lecturing and less than 1 percent required some kind of open response involving student opinion" (Wilson, 1997, p. 7). Swanson explains one widely believed misconception concerning students, teachers, and the ability to listen:

The study of any skill, especially listening, is confounded often by the attribute of *automaticity* in which the use of a skill occurs without thought. Such obscurity causes some persons to assume that very generalized statements about a skill constitutes instruction. That assumption causes some persons to assume that simple directiveness such as; "pay attention" or "listen carefully" suffice as instruction. Implicit in such directives is the belief that everyone knows what to do and how to do it. A dangerous assumption, listening, like every thinking skill, requires very specific instruction and practice (Swanson, 1997, pp. 3-4).

Listening is an active process where the individual selects and interprets information by using the auditory and visual clues that are available (Grognet, & Van-Duzer, 2002) and environmental factors often actively influence students listening and comprehension (Armstrong & Rentz, 2002). Consequently, improving students listening

ED 480 895

CS 5/2 430

skills involves multiple levels of intervention. An important first step is to identify common traits that characterize an attentive listener. These included: “consistent eye communication, attentive silence, minimal encouragers; including head nods and occasional, relevant questions; a posture of involvement, such as leaning forward in an open position at relatively close proximity; and a non distracting environment” (Clark, 1999, p. 2). Using these cues, teachers can monitor their student’s listening as well the effectiveness of their own teaching strategies in keeping students in active listening. In order to support students in becoming good listeners, teachers can use pre-listening activities to assist them in activating background knowledge and vocabulary that would be useful in interpreting new information; teach students self-monitoring skills they can use when engaged in listening to others; as well as conduct review activities to help students consolidate what they have learned (Barr, Dittmar, Roberts, & Sheraden, 2002).

Practice in Listening Skills

Studies have also found that as students move through higher-grade levels, the amount of time devoted to listening development drops. Some of this stems from the fact that there are few materials available to teach listening skills. However, there are teaching strategies and resources that can be used to improve students’ listening skills as well as their motivation to learn (Armstrong & Rentz, 2002). Listed below are four lessons for teaching listening:

- Direct the child’s attention to the communicative interchange and the nature of listening.
- Suggest a strategy that the child can take to eliminate his or her confusion.
- Explain instructions to the child.
- Intervene to solve the problem for the child (Swanson, 1997, p. 13).

Middle school programs have also been developed to increase listening skills:

1. Before teaching or lecturing, establish a listening environment for the learners in your classroom.
2. Pace your message so that the listener can process the information.
3. Enumerate and prioritize the important points of the message for the listener.
4. Repeat and define critical parts of the message for the listener.
5. Paint a picture of the message so the listener can visualize what is said.
6. Encourage students to keep an open mind when listening to avoid over-reacting to trigger words and phrases.
7. Recognize and reward good listening skills on a regular basis.
8. Use graphic aids such as charts and overhead transparencies to supplement lecture.
9. Evaluate students for physical or emotional problems which deter listening.
10. Summarize your lecture causing students to use several listening skills (Swanson, 1997, p. 14).

Importance of Speaking Skills

Although not a set curriculum in most schools, speaking skills have been found to be a fundamental skill necessary for a child’s success in life. “Children who can translate their thoughts and ideas into words are more likely to be successful in school. Students who do not develop good listening and speaking skills will have lifelong consequences because of their deficit” (Wilson, 1997, p. 4).

Speaking skills cover a wide-range, from engaging in simple conversation to formal public speaking. At the elementary level, “learning begins in conversation” and children’s speech activities should not be limited to those with pre-determined ends (Doddington, 2001). As Wilson (1997) argues “talk can be used to connect with others, explore and understand the world, make sense of the world, and reveal oneself. Talk contains many components for different audiences. Children must learn to talk to themselves, hold conversations, interviews, small group discussions, talk to teachers, parents, peers, and members of the community (p. 9).” In addition, Wilson outlines four roles that must be learned for successful talking: “ability to demonstrate skills, demonstrate knowledge, socially appropriate talk, and talk that is appropriate for a given situation” (p. 9).

Integrating Speech into the Classroom

Wilson points out in his summary that speaking skills do not need to be taught as a separate subject. These skills can easily be integrated into other subject matter. This is because, “students learn by talking, clarify thoughts by talking, comprehend better with discussion of reading, write better after talking during writing conferences, develop confidence by speaking in front of peers, and provide a window to their own thinking through their talk” (Wilson, 1997, p. 10). Thus writing plays an important role in improving speaking, and activities as well as games can utilize argumentation, personal experience, visualization, and projection can do a lot to support the development of students’ speaking skills (Kaye & Matson, 2000).

All subject areas can be used to strengthen speaking skills. Some suggestions by Wilson include:

Oral reports, class discussion, interviews, role plays, brainstorming, recitations, debates, and dialogue groups. Teachers can read riddles, play twenty questions, have students listen for inside and outside sounds, provide show and tell time, and read stories to children involving any unit. Teachers can model, question, read and discuss literature, discuss writing, use drama, and create and encourage social experiences (Wilson, 1997, p. 10).

Literature is one of the biggest areas strengthened by oral communication. Wilson points out that “expression in oral language development is a precursor to learning how to read” (Wilson, 1997, p. 14). When students are able to discuss literature in a meaningful manner they are more likely to use other skills such as “hypothesizing, interpreting, verifying, and critiquing” (Wilson, 1997, p. 15). Wordless stories were also found to be valuable tools in strengthening oral communication skills. “Wordless books provide the opportunity for children to demonstrate their creativity and knowledge of story structure while speaking to peers” (Wilson, 1997, p. 17).

Formal Speech Evaluation

As students become proficient speakers, they are ready to expand their skills to speaking publicly. This might include a small challenge such as an oral book report in front of the class, or it may be a much bigger task such as addressing the entire school while running for class president. When students are ready to speak publicly, they begin using skills such as arguing persuasively, displaying leadership skills, and strengthening writing skills. When public speaking is assessed, the student must master many skills in order to be successful. Anderson (1997, p. 7) advises the following skills be assessed when focusing on public speaking:

Eye contact with audience	Accuracy and presentation of facts, details, research
Gestures and body language	Organization (sequence) of content and creativity)
Energy level (projected) and enthusiasm	Effectiveness of opening and closing
Length of presentation and adherence to time limits	Memory/recall
Timing and pacing plus transition to segments	Speaker “comfort” with audience
Use of audio/visual resources	Audience reaction
Use of cue cards or notes	Self analysis (strengths and needs)

Speakers as Critical Thinkers

The most developed public speakers become skilled as critical thinkers. Dr. O’Neill, a professor of Communication and Theater at Youngstown State University, argues that students are not accomplished public speakers until they are accomplished critical thinkers. He states, “When a student engages in critical thinking, she demonstrates that she can rationally reflect on problems and their possible outcomes and their possible resolution. That she is capable of speculative and/or deliberative reflection” (O’Neill, 1994, p. 4). He further states that “students who are critical thinkers are clear, ordered, and specific in language as expression of thought” (O’Neill, 1994, p. 4).

At this level, the high school to post-secondary level, students must use their critical thinking skills to achieve success at public speaking. Dr. O’Neill expects his students to master such skills as:

1. Make appropriate logical inferences based on a body of information.
2. Logically analyze an argument and determine its relative strength.
3. Identify and weigh the quantity and quality of evidence which supports a proposition or claim.
4. Engage in generating and testing hypotheses.
5. Read, listen, write, and speak critically and demonstrate logical command of subject matter.
6. Be familiar with appropriate research strategies helpful to exploration of a question or issue.
7. Understand and demonstrate the process of inductive and deductive reasoning and be able to distinguish between truth and validity.
8. Be able to identify and analyze common fallacies of argument.
9. Know how to argue either from certain premises or from probability claims.
10. Analyze common language to eliminate ambiguity and equivocation.
11. Recognize and evaluate common forms of reasoning.
12. Refute weak arguments of others and logically defend one’s own arguments.
13. Demonstrate higher order thinking capability by being able to apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information.
14. Think reflectively about problems individually or collaboratively (O’Neill, 1994, pp. 4-5).

Conclusion

The summaries provided in this essay touched on the development of listening and speaking skills of students at all grade levels. While speaking and listening are essential skills, many other important skills are learned when a student masters the ability to speak and listen. As students mature, they are expected to achieve a higher level of thinking and listening.

While everyone agrees these skills need to be mastered, most also agree that neither listening skills nor speaking skills are being taught enough in the classroom. And without spending time incorporating language skills into the curriculum, most agree that leaves students at a disadvantage for mastering other skills. Anderson sums this up best by saying:

Each and every day youngsters as well as adults must face the prospect of talking in a public forum of some type. The question is whether one will be adequately prepared for the rigors of this fact of life. We need to merge our collective energies and talents in this pedagogical endeavor if we are to best serve the young people entrusted to our care (Anderson, 1997, p. 5).

Internet Resources

*Strategies to Succeed in Public Speaking

<http://www.school-for-champions.com/speaking.htm#Goals>

*Improving Adult English Language Learners' Speaking Skills (ERIC Digest). The guidelines provided in this digest will also be useful to native speakers of English

<http://www.cal.org/nclie/digests/Speak.htm>

*Practicing Listening Skills: A list of strategies on how to improve personal listening skills

<http://www.va.gov/adr/listen.html>

*Speaking & Listening Skills: Some general guidelines for students

<http://www.infoplease.com/homework/speaklisten.html>

*Activities That Can Help Children Develop Their Listening Skills

http://www.ivillage.co.uk/parenting/skill/articles/0,,528703_528715,00.html

*A Listening Skills Rubric for an Elementary Classroom

<http://www.storyarts.org/classroom/usestories/listenrubric.html>

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ERIC TBC #030016 was published by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English and Communication, 2805 E. 10th St., #140, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698, Tel. 1-800-759-4723. Full text at: <http://eric.indiana.edu>. ERIC Topical Bibliography and Commentary summaries are in the public domain and may be freely reproduced. This project is funded at least in part with Federal funds from the US Department of Education under contract ED-99-CO-0028. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views of the US Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the US Government.



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