

TEACHING LISTENING SKILLS IN SENIOR HIGH SCHOOLS IN GHANA: ISSUES AND DIRECTIONS

Kojo Fenyi

fenyigh@gmail.com

University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

Ivy Jones-Mensah

ivy.jones-mensah@upsamail.edu.gh

University of Professional Studies, Accra, Ghana

Michael Owusu Tabiri

mtabiri@gctu.edu.gh

Ghana Communication Technology University, Ghana

Emmanuel Owusu

emmanuelowusu@uew.edu.gh

University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

ABSTRACT

Listening skill is one of the four important language competencies. However, it has not received the needed scholarly attention, not only in classroom pedagogy and curriculum planning but also in studies and researches in Applied Linguistics and Teaching English as Second Language. This study therefore attempts an investigation into the teaching and learning of listening skills in the language classroom in Ghana. It focuses on three issues in English as Second Language (ESL) listening comprehension; i) the strategies/methods for teaching listening skills, ii) the challenges for learning listening skills and iii) the ways to overcome the challenges. This descriptive qualitative study, having used two major instruments for data collection; observation and open-ended questionnaire, engaged 200 students and 7 teachers as the sample from selected Senior High Schools in the Agona West Municipality. The analysis of data revealed that indeed clarity of speaker, speed of delivery, learning environments, etc posed challenges to the teaching and learning of listening skills. It was also revealed that combining listening with other skills, predictive and summative strategies were the strategies teachers employed in teaching listening. Then, finally, the solutions to listening comprehension challenges, as revealed in the data, were indicated as including planning, overt student participation, clarity of speaker, assessment strategies, etc.

Keywords: *Listening skill, issues, directions, high schools, classroom pedagogy*

INTRODUCTION

There are four macro language receptive skills while Speaking and skills- Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing are productive skills. These Writing. Listening and Reading are language skills are the bedrock for the

teaching, learning and comprehension of language (Bano, 2017). Of the four skills, Ismail & Aziz (2020) argued that listening is the most frequently used language skill in the daily communication life of the average human.

Many other scholars of Linguistics and ESL, in concurrence with Ismail & Aziz have also emphasised that listening remains the most commonly used language skill in every communicative activity in the life of the average human (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011; Rost, 2011). It must also be emphasised that listening is not only a 'mere' language skill but it also has an important role that it plays in the process of communication. Mendelson (1994) goes further to elaborate that listening takes the most time in communication, in that, whereas reading and writing take up 11-16% and 9% of the time spent in an average communication process respectively, speaking takes 25-30% while listening, the often underrated language skill in the ESL curriculum and classroom, takes 40-50%. In fact, this assertion implies that, in ones average communication life, one is likely to listen two times more than he speaks, four times more than he reads and five times more than he writes.

It is therefore a misnomer to label the skill of listening as a passive language

skill. Listening is indeed the active process of constructing and deciphering meaning from both non-verbal and verbal messages. The misunderstanding, and misnomer of assuming that listening is a passive language skill could obviously stem from the fact that, mostly, a listener is, superficially, as a matter of expectation and duty, seen to be only sitting quietly and attentively in the communication process, such as, for example, a pre-recorded conversation in the language lab and perhaps providing responses to some questions that are related to oral stimulus.

Gilakjani & Ahmadi (2011) who argues that, for a very long time, the conscious teaching and learning of listening skills have been, to a very large extent, a poorly taught and, in most settings, out-rightly neglected aspect of the Language curriculum, have also insinuated that, in many modern researches on Second Language Acquisition (SLA), and in the ESL curriculum and classroom generally, listening has received some appreciable scholarly attention.

Nunan (2002) believes that Second Language teachers and learners normally treat the receptive skills- Listening and Reading- as secondary skills- "means to other ends rather than ends in themselves" (p. 238). In modern researches and studies

in language studies, there seem to be the unanimous claim and recommendations that the teaching and learning of listening skills must be at the forefront of language teaching, and ESL teachers are also admonished to concentrate their own efforts in listening in order to have their teaching improved (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016; Vega, 2016).

Townsend (2014) indicated that the input and knowledge obtained from listening could have a significant impact on general language acquisition, and therefore, the design, development and implementation of effective listening strategies is imperative not only for oracy but equally for the general acquisition of new language and academic success.

The focus of this study is to investigate the views, perceptions and attitudes that Senior High School teachers and learners in the Agona West Municipality, Ghana, have towards the problems/challenges of teaching listening comprehension and the strategies for solving such issues. The researcher believes that such study is important because, many of the available literatures on listening skills, some of which have been discussed above, have tended to unanimously agree that the teaching and learning of listening skills is not given

maximum attention in the language curriculum and schools irrespective of the significance of listening in human communication. The study specifically focusses on three issues: the strategies/methods of teaching listening comprehension, the challenges of learning listening comprehension and the suggestions for overcoming the challenges.

Research Objectives

The general objective of this study is to comprehend the teaching and learning of listening skills. Specifically, the study sets out to:

- i. investigate strategies and methods of teaching listening comprehension
- ii. examine the challenges of learning listening comprehension
- iii. make suggestions for overcoming the challenges of listening comprehension

Research Questions

- i. What are the strategies and methods of teaching listening comprehension?
- ii. What are the challenges of learning listening comprehension?
- iii. How could the challenges of learning listening comprehension be overcome?

Significance of the Study

The study would have both pedagogical and theoretical implications. Theoretically, it adds, from a different perspective and context, to the existing literature and knowledge on the challenges and methods of teaching listening comprehension in the ESL classroom. The study also becomes a fertile foundation and reference for any further studies in the field of Applied Linguistics and TESL that seek to investigate issues related to listening comprehension and the four core language

skills in general. Pedagogically, the study would appraise language teachers on the challenges learners face in listening comprehension and inform, impact, influence and introduce them to varieties of effective methods and strategies of teaching listening comprehension. It is anticipated that the study's result would also inform curriculum planners and experts on the extent to which listening comprehension should feature in the language curriculum.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURES

Gilakjani & Sabouri (2016) explain listening comprehension as the dynamic and active process whereby a listener would be attentive and perceive what is being said, make sense of it or give some interpretations to it, remember and then respond or react, however silent, to the concerns, information and needs as being expressed, verbally or non-verbally, by a speaker.

Shen, Guizhou, Wichura, and Kiattichai (2007) explain that listening comprehension is a rather complex activity which requires active practice, effort and involvement. Every competent listener is

expected to have the ability to decipher the intentions of a speaker and must also possess some other abilities such as understanding the message being spoken without necessarily understanding every single word, process extra linguistic forms such as speech fillers and speech speed, recognise genre types and differences and cope with the 'discomfort' of listening (and not speaking) especially in an interactive session.

Quite a significant number of studies have proven that effective listening skills remains the most important of the four language skills and thus, its role in the

attainment of academic success, generally, and second language teaching and learning, specifically, cannot be overemphasised (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016; Tersta & Novianti, 2017). In fact, Assaf (2015)

Gilakjani & Sabouri (2016) and Bano (2017) emphasise that listening is key and must be highly upheld, especially, among EFL/ESL learners across the entire stages of their educational development and learning.

In studies on listening comprehension on language teaching and learning conducted by Hasan (2000), Bidabadi, & Yamat (2011) and Ismail & Aziz (2020), there is unanimity in their conclusions that listening is the most commonly and regularly used language skill in the language classroom. They are unshaken in their thinking that listening skills and comprehension lays the right foundations for language acquisition and provides the necessary conditions for the development of the three other language skills.

The outcome of the study conducted by Assaf (2015) equally reveal that both language instructors and learners alike acknowledge the significance of listening comprehension relative to

academic success and language learning. He asserts that listening is what learners do most of their time and that they listen more than they do read and write or speak. And, in fact, indicates that the success of teaching and learning of the other language skills- speaking, reading and writing, are dependent on the success of listening skills. More specifically, Gilbert (1988) indicates that, at all levels of the learning stages and educational development, learners are expected to apply listening about 60-94 percent of the time. He re-echoes the fact that listening remains the primary means of learning and instruction across all the levels of education.

Also, Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011), in being a bit more specific with detail, opine that while listening consumes about 40-50 percent time in the communication process, speaking takes 25-30 percent and reading and writing take up to 9 percent. This goes to emphasise the crucialness of listening in the lives of students. Because listening is the primary medium of instruction and learning a second language (Ismail & Aziz, 2020), it is admittedly clear it plays an unnegotiably significant role in the lives of students.

According to Krashen's (1982) input-based approach to the theory of

second language acquisition and learning, listening, which is a major input device, cannot be underrated in the teaching, learning and acquiring of English as a second language. Rost (2002) believes that, as an input device, listening should be given some more attention in the language classroom than the current situation. His justification is that, listening opens the door for second language learners to ‘take in’ understandable language inputs, which becomes the fountain of linguistic resource on which the learners depend on in the production of same, via speaking or writing.

The afore-discussed assertions point to the fact that the quality of one’s listening ability is directly proportional to the development of their spoken, written and reading language skills. Consequentially, it is argued that, when an L2 learner listens to the sounds of the L2, and later sees them in their written forms and symbols, he is able to integrate these sounds with the symbols into his schemata. The logic then is that, when the learner finds it easy to integrate the L2 sounds, he likely would then find it equally easy to understand the language and express himself in it, first through speaking and then through writing.

Listening is obviously the fundamental means through which students take in information and ideas. It is in this light that Gilbert (1988) indicates that, right from the kindergarten level to the high school level, learners are expected to spend 60-91 percent of their classroom learning activity on listening. Krashen who is particularly interested in the teaching, learning and acquisition of (second) language, also insists that language can only be acquired and effectively so if the student is given sufficient language ‘input’, and Rost (1994), in an attempt to clarify what ‘input’ implies, emphasised that, for learners, listening provides the input.

In similar vein, still on the primacy of listening to the teaching and learning of language, Gilakjani & Ahmadi (2011) indicate that, the average College student spends 52.5 percent of his verbal communication time on listening, while spending 17.4 percent, 16.5 percent and 14.1 percent on reading, speaking and writing respectively.

From the afore-discussions, it could be fair to conclude that listening is very important in the language classroom. It is the bedrock for the teaching and learning of the other language skills and must therefore

be given some premium in the language curriculum and classroom.

Conceptual Framework

This study is founded on the bottom-up and top-down listening processes (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011; Tersta & Novianti, 2017). Gilakjani & Ahmadi (2011) assert that listening is not as passive as, for many years in the language teaching history, been touted to be because every effective listening activity involves quite a number of complex processes and roles to be played by the listener.

Tersta & Novianti (2017) think that the complex processes can be grouped into two- bottom-up and top-down processing. The bottom-up listening processing deals with the process of constructing and deciphering meaning and interpretations from the smallest unit to the largest unit of the spoken language in a linear mode. Therefore, the listener decodes, in his attempt to understand and make meaning of a spoken discourse, a number of sound units in order to form words. The word units are then linked to form phrasal units, which make up complete meaningful sentences. These sentences could also be linked and built into paragraphs, texts,

passages and other larger linguistic units where the listener is able to ‘extract’ the needed amount of meaning, interpretation and understanding.

It is important to understand that, beyond the above grammatical relationships established to be indispensable in the bottom-up processing of listening, supra-segmental linguistic units such as intonation, rhythm and stress are also equally substantial. In the ESL classroom situation and pedagogy, learners can be taught or trained to practise the bottom-up processing through, for instance, activities which would demand that they distinguish between rising and falling intonations or discriminate among two or more given sounds. On the other hand, the top-down processing refers to one’s ability to make meaning, interpretations and understand what a speaker communicates by means of the structures of background knowledge or schemata of the listener. The top-down processing view renders significant the role of background knowledge which a listener possesses about the speaker or the shared information in order to make sense or meaning of the information being received (Bano, 2017). The prior knowledge could facilitate the attempt to understand the

information being listened to, by relating the known or familiar with the new information, and when there is a complete lack of such knowledge, the efforts to understand a particular utterance could be significantly hampered.

A critical observation of the language classroom, however, reveals that, the teaching and learning of this rather complex language skill is often neglected and relegated to the background (Bress, 2006; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). The neglect does not necessarily mean language

teachers do not appreciate the relevance of listening skills, but obviously because it is oftentimes taken for granted that learners acquire it so automatically and naturally that they do not need any conscientious formal training in it. Therefore, practical language teaching, for many years, has placed less emphasis on listening skills. The conceptual framework for this study therefore, as expounded above, is the bottom-up and top-down processes for teaching and learning listening skills.

METHODS

Design and Philosophy

This study is qualitative, and adopts the case study design. The researchers' aim for adopting the qualitative case study approach is consistent with Quist & Eshun (2019) view about the aims of a qualitative research, where they indicated that it aims at exploring, understanding and discovering issues about the problem on hand, because very little is known about the problem. Also, the philosophy that underpins the study is the interpretivist philosophy or paradigm. This philosophy places emphasis on the contextual analysis of data (Reeves & Hedberg, 2003). It is

therefore concerned with interpreting, understanding and inferring or deducting meaning as it is from the subjective or lived experiences of the research participants. These orientations of the interpretivist philosophy are what the researchers adopted in carrying out the study.

Technique and Sampling

The research technique employed in the collection of data was the purposive sampling technique. The purposive sampling technique is a type of sampling where the researcher carefully and intentionally selects participants which he believes have sufficient information

relevant to the study (Dudovskiy, 2018). Through this technique, 200 students and 7 English teachers were selected for the study. These participants had come from Swedru School of Business (henceforth SWESBUS) and Fankobaa Senior High School (AFSEC), both located in the Agona West Municipality, Central region, Ghana. The purposive sampling technique was adopted because these participants from the two schools were most available and possessed sufficient information on the study objectives. This aligns with Quist & Eshun's (2019) argument that purposeful sampling is used when the researcher wishes to discover, understand and obtain some depth into a situation and therefore become obliged to select a sample which have the most information.

Instruments

The main instruments for the collection of data for this study were participant observation and open-ended questionnaire. Participant observation is when the researcher takes part of the activities under observation. Ferguson (2018) believes that participant observation is a very good practices because it affords the researcher a direct contact, experience,

context and greater understanding of the situation under study. These instruments were used in order to solicit sufficient information that could help to answer the questions of this study. It is argued that observation is an indispensable, and often, the most fundamental instrument every research, worth its salt, must employ (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Usually, a research is inspired by what has been observed to be prevalent to a specific group of people or context over a given period of time. The researcher observed that, at SWESBUS and AFSEC, which are the contexts for the study, the students and English tutors alike, often do not attach much seriousness to the teaching and learning of Listening (as would be revealed in the data analysis). It was therefore important to investigate such phenomenon and that is exactly what this study attempts.

Again, the relevance of questionnaire for a research work cannot be overlooked. Shneiderman and Plaisant (2005) argue that open-ended questionnaire, which is a written interview, is very productive since the researcher is able to focus on specific issues of concern which could lead to constructive suggestions. Again, the study adopted the

open-ended questionnaire system because it normally does not need a lot of participants before one is able to gather solid and comprehensive information (ibid).

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection processes officially started during the second term/semester of the 2019/2020 academic year. It therefore spanned a period of four months, from April-July, 2020. During the period, twenty-one (21) lessons, three each from

the seven English tutors, were observed. Both the students and the teachers were observed. The researchers joined, sat through and recorded, through audio and note taking, the activities that took place during the teaching and learning process. During the third and last visit to each class, the questionnaires were presented to the students and tutors to answer, voluntarily. The recorded activities and responses to the questionnaires were later studied critically and analysed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data from the observation and questionnaire have been used as basis for the analysis of the findings. Data from these instruments-observation and questionnaire were carefully, manually and painstakingly analysed into themes taking into consideration significant statements, common patterns and repetitive ideas, as well as the commonalities and, on few occasions, the disparities in the themes (Abdalhamid, 2012; Hasan & Tan, 2012; Kurita, 2012). The observation data were also analysed using summative content analysis. The findings as presented, analysed

and discussed below are in relation to the research questions of the study.

Results and Discussion of Research

Question 1.

This enquiry was directed mainly at the teachers. It sought to understand from the tutors how they are able to teach listening comprehension and the various teaching strategies and methods they adopt to make their lessons understandable. Not only were the teachers asked this question (even though they are the main targets), the students were equally asked same. This action is consistent with Ghoneim's (2013)

assertion that both teachers and students are key players in the classroom and therefore, any action or research that affects one automatically affects the other. The anticipation was that, the students would be able to come out with, from their understanding and observations over the period, strategies and methods their teachers often adopt during the listening comprehension lessons.

It was revealed by both the tutors and students that, quite a number of different strategies are adopted in teaching listening comprehension (Hamouda, 2013; Al-Alwan, Asassfeh & Al-Shboul, 2013; Ismail & Aziz, 2020). These varied strategies and methods are often adopted relative to the contextual factors and pedagogical needs of the learners at the specific time. These strategies have been thematised and discussed.

Combining listening with other Language skills

One of the methods teachers adopted in teaching listening is combining it with the three other language skills and treating them as one whole. Indeed, bringing out the inter-relatedness, the interdependence and the connectedness of concepts is often viewed by many scholars as ideal and a good method of teaching (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011). It

enables learners to view aspects as significant without which the other aspects would not be fully appreciated and comprehended. When students are conscientised to understand that, listening, reading, speaking and writing, are related and interdependent and therefore, one would not be able to fully develop his reading skills, speaking and writing skills without listening skills, they are enticed to take the lessons seriously (Lim, 2013). Two major types of activities are done to enforce this strategy (Gilakjani, & Ahmadi, 2011; Vega, 2016; Tersta & Novianti, 2017). These are; *Listening-Speaking activity*, where the teacher reads or speaks while learners listen attentively and read/speak after him, and *Listening-Writing activities*, where the teacher reads/speaks while students listen carefully and write down what they hear. This listening teaching strategy is designed to build both listening and writing skills (Gilakjani, & Ahmadi, 2011). A teacher recounted that

Listening has not be given enough space in the curriculum. Therefore, we, the teachers, are not able to teach it as a stand-alone topic. It is embedded in oral skills lessons. Hence, it is during oral skills that we train the students on listening. Personally, I do model reading while my students read after me. By this, they are compelled to listen carefully and attentively.

Another teacher also indicated that

Anytime I want to teach listening, I attach it to reading skills. Students normally feel listening is natural and develops automatically. Therefore, to them, there is no need to 'waste' time to consciously teach it. The first time I went to class to teach listening, the students laughed at me. They found it strange that of all the complexities of the English Language, a teacher would spend time to teach what they consider as the easiest. But, when you ask them to read after you, they are forced to listen even without noticing.

A student, who has observed his teacher's listening skills teaching strategies over the period, also noted that

We have not be taken through listening comprehension as an independent topic before. But, I don't blame the teachers. The syllabus, which directs what they do, does not make enough provisions for it. I have gone through the syllabus but I don't find anything seriously on listening. I have however observed that during oral skills lessons, listening comprehension is made to be a part of it. Therefore, in most cases, we are told to listen, and read or speak after the teacher.

A teacher, in agreement with the students, said

I don't teach listening in isolation. Actually, the syllabus does not even make provision for that. So what I do is embed the listening lessons into my writing lessons. This way, the students don't even feel that they are

learning listening. They would think they are learning writing. I normally start the lesson with dictation. I produce words, phrases and the students write what they heard. They are expected to listen attentively before they can hear what is produced.

Predictive and Summative Strategies

Two key elements or skills required for effective communication is the ability to predict, with respect to the appropriate context, what the speaker is about to say and to summarise or locate the main ideas in what the speaker has said. These two important skills are often subconsciously a continuum- while one is done at the beginning of the interaction, the other is done at the end. Predictive and summative abilities are two extremely important micro skills of listening (Holden, 2004; Al-Alwan, Asassfeh & Al-Shboul, 2013; Bano, 2017). Without them, it will be difficult for any listener to make meaning of what is being said. In regular communications, interactants continually make predictions, sometimes unconsciously, about what the speaker will say.

Prediction

Predictions are not done in isolation or just for the sake of it. They are done based on the listener's knowledge regarding the context of communication. In the ESL classroom,

the language teacher guides his students to make some predictions on the lesson to be taught (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011). He does this by asking students some pre-lesson questions or brainstorming. Some of them also give students the needed background or context of the lesson for them to be able to have a clear recognition and understanding of what the lesson is about. With the predictive strategy, a teacher indicates that

The few occasions that I've had to teach listening comprehension, I start by soliciting predictions from the students. I introduce the topic briefly and ask them to predict what the lesson or content will be about. Their guesses help to know their minds with respect to the lesson in question and that becomes the foundation on which I build the lesson. This indeed helps to get their attention, which is very important in every listening activity.

Some other teachers equally believe that prediction is very needful in listening comprehension. One of them indicated

I normally start my listening comprehension lesson with brainstorming. With this, I manage to, after introducing the topic for the day, get the students to make guesses and predictions on what the topic is likely going to be about. Some of the give guesses close to the lesson and others away from it. however, these guesses, irrespective of how close or away it is, help me to know where to start the lesson from.

Summative Strategy

Not only is predictive ability, which is often required at the beginning of the lesson, important in listening comprehension lesson. Summative skill, which is often required at the end of the lesson, is equally important. This skill normally requires the students to point out the salient points or issues discussed during the lesson. And, before any student is able to do this, he must have been a very attentive listener. There are two important listening skills that are needed in this strategy. These are the **Intensive listening** where a student is required to listen and pay attention to every single word or sentence. They are expected to understand the meaning of every single word or sentence used in each discourse to be able to summarise same, and, **extensive listening** which does not necessarily require that the learner understands every word, sentence or paragraph. Instead, they are encouraged to understand the general message, import or meaning of the text. The main focus here is to have the students understand the content.

Some of the teachers had this to say

When I finish teaching listening, I ask the students to summarise some portions of the lesson, either orally or through writing. I do this to ascertain whether they were able to understand and can therefore sort out the most important information from the less important ones.

One teacher also indicated that

In teaching most of the aspects of English, I normally summarise the lesson myself. At this stage, I cap everything to make it easy for the students to remember. But, when it comes to listening comprehension lesson, I leave the summary to the students. In listening, summary is not only a teaching strategy, I consider it to be actually an integral part of the entire listening process.

Some teachers remarked

I use the summary strategy to determine if the students paid attention during the teaching of the lesson. My belief is that, only the students who paid attention can summarise effectively. As in, one can only summarise what they have listened to and absorbed.

Results and Discussion of Research Question 2.

With this research enquiry, the researcher attempts at understanding, predominantly from the perspective of the learners, the problems or challenges they (the learners) face in learning listening comprehension. Information gathered and analysed in this session seek to update and bring to the awareness of ESL teachers and curriculum planners the listening needs of their learners so that appropriate solutions could be made for them (Azmi, Celik, Yidliz, and Tugrul, 2014). This will go a long way to inform, impart and influence the way they handle

listening comprehension lessons. The challenges of listening comprehension, as elaborated by the learners, have been put into six broad themes.

Speed of Delivery

For many ESL learners, their inability to control how quickly a speaker speaks is the greatest challenge with listening comprehension, especially, in circumstances where listeners are not given the opportunity to have those utterances repeated. In the language classroom, this is a grave challenge to the students since the decision to repeat or replay (depending on whether the spoken discourse is the voice of the teacher or a audio tape recording) does not lie with them but the teacher. Teachers decide when and what to repeat, and in many occasions, they don't even repeat at all because, most times, the speed is considered to be part of the listening lesson. This finding is consistent with the claim of Underwood (1989), when he sought to explain that most L2 learners have serious challenges comprehending what L2 speakers say partly due to the speed with which they speak. A student had this to say

My greatest challenge is the speed with which the speaking is done. Sometimes, I wish some words or sessions of the entire passage be repeated but I don't get the

opportunity. This makes listening comprehension quite difficult especially also because one needs to hear and understand the preceding texts to be able to grasp the succeeding ones hence the inability to get the former makes it difficult to follow the entire text.

Inability to identify transitional markers

Transitional signals are markers which are used to tell when and where a speaker moves from one point, paragraph to another, one example to another or even repeating himself. In writing and formal contexts, these signals, examples of which are “therefore”, “furthermore”, “since”, etc, are easily recognisable. However, in spontaneous interactions, the markers could be quite vague as in gestures, pauses, pitch changes, rise and fall of tones and general loudness. Less proficient listeners are likely to miss these signals. A student commented that

For me, the challenge with speed is the ability to recognise transitional markers. These signals will help us to identify when the teacher is moving to another paragraph or giving more examples. But most of us are not able to identify the markers and therefore everything becomes jammed up in our ears. It then becomes difficult to identify the main points and summarise them when the need be.

Limited Vocabulary

Another challenge with listening compre-

-hension, as gathered from the interview and observation, is the use of words or expressions which are strange or unknown to the listeners. Most times, when listeners encounter a *strange* word, they pause listening and ruminate about the meaning of that expression. By the time they are done thinking about the meaning of the word, the next line (s) of the speech would have passed.

This is not consistent with the argument of Townsend (2014). To him, limited vocabulary in itself is not a real challenge in listening since one does not need to understand every single word to make meaning of an entire text, rather, the problem comes when the listener “forces” himself to understand every single word thereby pausing in listening and missing the next parts of the speech. However, Huang (2004) who’s assertion is consistent with the claim that limited vocabulary creates listening comprehension problem goes further to identify some linguistic sources which could make a word *strange* to a listener. These include

1. The use of contracted forms e.g. shan’t, he’s, etc
2. Idiosyncratic pronunciation or accent
3. Slang and colloquial expressions
4. Prosodic features of English

From the questionnaire and observations, the students (listeners) argued that strange words make it difficult for them to understand what they listen. Some of them opined that

Sometimes I don't know the meaning of the words the teacher uses. This makes me confused and by the time I finish thinking to myself of the meanings, he would have read one or two lines of the passage. This makes listening comprehension very challenging.

I remember once our teacher brought a recorded audio to class. We were to answer some questions while the tape was playing. In the process, a word was mentioned- "emulation"- and I didn't understand so I turned to ask a friend who sat by me. By the time I came back, about 5 sentences had been read and I missed them.

Lack of Contextual Knowledge

When a listener shares mutual knowledge, common context and content with the speaker, it makes communication and understanding relatively easier. Different cultures, settings and contexts have unique interpretations to different concepts. Therefore, if the listener does not share a similar context, misinterpretations, which hampers listening comprehension, are likely to happen (Pourhosein, & Ahmadi, 2011; Tavakoli, Shahraki, & Rezazadeh, 2012; Abdalhamid, 2012; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). For example, different cultures could

have different interpretations for particular facial expressions, tone of voice, gestures, nods, etc. A student indicated that

In one of the listening comprehension tests we did, the text was about Eskimos. As a Ghanaian, and from the village, I didn't who or what they were. In fact, I had not heard the word before. This made the entire text strange to me hindering me from understanding it.

Clarity of Speaker

Apart from the listener and the text, the speaker is also one of the most important materials which facilitates listening comprehension. Hamouda (2013) opines that one of the major cause of difficulties in listening comprehension is unclear pronunciation. In this context, unclear pronunciation could occur as a result of

- i. varied accents- where the teacher's/speaker's accent is different from that of the listener/student,
- ii. loudness- where the voice to listen to is not loud enough, and
- iii. wrong pronunciation- where the speaker pronounces the text wrongly or he speaks the standard/most correct form when the listeners know and are used to a wrong form.

In this regard, some of the students had these comments to give

My challenge with listening comprehension is the audibility of the speaker's voice. Most of the times, I don't hear the speakers clearly. Sometimes, they are so interested in speaking the standard form of the language that their over-concentration on the standard makes them speak weirdly. This creates a lot of confusion and makes listening comprehension very difficult.

There was a day that the speaker, in pronouncing the sound /g/, pronounced it as /k/. I remember clearly that the word was 'gas' but it sounded like 'cars'. Almost all the students had the word wrong. It was during the correction session that we realised that it was 'gas' and not 'cars'. I'm sure a lot of the students are cognisant of the two words but unclear pronunciation caused everyone to get it wrongly.

Learning Environment

The fact that listening comprehension requires a serene learning environment and extremely minimal external distractions cannot be disputed (Hasan & Tan, 2012). It is difficult to focus on the lesson and gain sufficient comprehension when the learning environment is noisy, and ridden with too many frisky activities.

In a country such as Ghana where most of the Senior High Schools are situated in and around cities, the roadside, markets and villages where the chirping and crying of birds and animals are almost inevitable, listening comprehension, which needs some

absolute concentration, becomes extremely challenging. It was therefore not surprising to have gathered from the research participants, both teachers and learners alike, that one of their major problems had to do with the learning environment. This finding is consistent with the argument of Bidabadi, & Yamat (2011) who strongly believe that a serene learning environment enhances listening comprehension while a noisy one disrupts it.

As indicated in the comments below, the teachers cited instances where their listening comprehension lessons were distracted due to activities in the environment.

In one of my listening lessons, a goat, which was obviously chased by some rascals, speedily run to pass through the class amid gloating. Since there are no walls around the school, anything and anybody is able to enter or pass by the school at anytime. This causes a lot of distraction. I've personally had to postpone my listening lessons on two occasions.

The distractions are very pathetic. In this school, it is almost impossible to have 30 minutes of silence without any disturbance. The market centre is just a stone throw away so you can just imagine. The noise from there is uncontrollable. I have taught listening comprehension only once, and even with that, we (myself and the students) were

compelled to come on Sunday, the only day the market is closed.

It is not only the teachers who had challenges with the learning environment as being an impediment to the listening comprehension lessons. The learners equally had tough time concentrating on the lesson due to the distractive environment. They expressed their displeasure at the volumes of noise, the hawking, activities of animals and other activities in and around the school environment, which were distractive. A student recounts an unfortunate activity that took place during a listening comprehension lesson.

Our only listening lesson for the term was cut short by the fight between two farmers who have pitched camps behind the primary school class. Their fight, which drew attention of the entire neighbourhood interrupted our class and the teacher had to call it off. Any attempt to do listening comprehension has been disrupted by one event or the other. This is very worrying.

Results and Discussion of Research Question 3.

Having got some grasp and understanding of the challenges of the learners in listening comprehension, it was important that an attempt be made at solving these challenges or problems. The study's attempt at discussing solutions, after delving into the

problems in the earlier session, is in line with the long-standing hypothesis that, ideally, once problems are identified and discussed, solutions to the problems become the next subject matter (Mohseny, & Raeisi, 2009). It is never enough to merely discuss problems and leave them unsolved. It must be understood that some of the problems discussed earlier, cannot be directly solved, with ease. Some are actually the status quo, and the only solution to them is to have the learners adapt to them. For example, in terms of speed of delivery, sometimes, the speed is meant to achieve a particular purpose and therefore it cannot be slowed to the convenience of the students, especially, in cases where the listening is done over a recorded audio or video tape where it cannot be paused (as in the case of oral English in the West Africa Secondary School Certificate Examination).

The solutions to overcoming the challenges of listening comprehension, as revealed in the data, are thematised and analysed below.

Planning

Like many other subjects or topics, and in contrast with what pertains currently in the language curriculum, listening comprehension must be treated as a holistic

whole or a stand-alone subject. Its teaching and learning must be carefully, intentionally and strategically planned with carefully stated definite goals (Bloomfield et al., 2010). It must feature independently in the broad scheme of teaching and learning, and both the teachers and students must be made aware of the intents of the programme.

Lessons on listening comprehension must be constructed with a some appreciable step by step thinking and planning. In other words, listening comprehension should not happen accidentally or at the discretion of teachers. Learners must be exposed to listening tasks ranging from simple to complex depending on their language/listening proficiency. They must be consciously trained on what to listen, how to listen, when to listen, what to listen for and where to listen. Some teachers had this to say

I think listening comprehension deserves equal attention as the other aspects of English- grammar, reading comprehension, writing, etc. Most of the time, it is treated as though it's an afterthought and that is not good.

Lessons on listening comprehension have to be planned and carefully strategised. Good efforts must be put into its pedagogy as is done to the other aspects of English and the

curriculum must make sufficient provision for that.

Overt student participation

Listening is, generally, a covert activity. A listener is expected to be quiet, still, attentive and silent while a speaker speaks. On few occasions, they are expected to give some body gestures to signal that they are following what is said. It is therefore extremely difficult to tell if a listener is following the text or not, especially when he chooses not to do any of these body languages. It is on such premise that the language teacher must structure his lesson such that it would solicit overt active student participation. Underwood (1989) believes that written feedback on the listening comprehension text is the most overt student participation. To him, such immediate response keeps the motivation and interest of the students in the lesson at high levels. A teacher indicated

One of the most effective ways I use to ensure that students participate in the listening class is giving them tasks. I give them the tasks at the beginning of the lesson and therefore as the lesson progresses, they listen attentively to finish out the responses. Those who listen well are able to complete the tasks.

Another teacher said that

I intersperse my listening lessons with questions. So, after reading about 10

sentences, a question is asked. These intermittent questions can only be answered correctly by those who listen attentively. From the feedback, I am able to tell which of the students followed what I read from those who didn't.

Developing Concentration

Listening requires high level concentration. In fact, effective concentration is a prerequisite for effective listening. One can only remember, recall, repeat and rethink what they have listened only when they have concentrated adequately on what they listen (Hasan & Tan, 2012; Townsend, 2014). As an important element of listening, therefore, concentration is a skill which ESL teachers are interested in building in their students. Different methods and strategies are employed by the teachers to train the students in concentration. Some of the teachers indicated

The first time I stepped in the class to teach listening comprehension, I asked all the students to close their eyes and listen for any sound in the environment. After about 2 minutes, they opened their eyes and recounted the things they heard. This strategy was to help develop the skill of concentration, where they are able to 'close their eyes' to unwanted information and rather focus on the needful ones.

Concentration is key to listening comprehension. That is why for the entire term, all I have been doing is build my

students' capacity to concentrate and I've used quite a number of strategies to do that. One of them is 'say as I say', where students mention everything they hear me mention and 'write as I say' where students write everything they hear me say.

Provision of sufficient contextual background

Understanding a text or discourse goes beyond the individual words, sentences and paragraphs that make up the text. Though those are fundamental to comprehension, equally significant is some background information on what or who the text is about. During the gathering of data on the problems of the learners in listening comprehension, the students indicated that their lack of sufficient contextual knowledge on texts pose great challenge to them.

It is in this light that the teacher has, within his task, to let the learners in on relevant background information and linguistic knowledge to each text. It has always been argued that comprehension is not only about understanding individual words, but also about understanding the import of the text as a whole, sometimes, even without understanding some of the words. And, this can be possible when the student understands the cultural background, emotional state, psychological position, social orientation and the educational

implications of the text. Some of the students relayed their concerns as shown in the comment boxes below

As I student, I feel that sometimes our teachers to explain the background of the texts before they read or give them to us to listen. It is very boring to listen to a passage whose cultural context is totally different from yours. Sometimes, we are even forced to stop listening because there is no point in listening to what one cannot understand.

We have had two listening tests in this term. I had 3/10 in one and 8/10 in another. In the first one, the teacher read the text and asked us to listen summarise the key points. With the second one, the teacher explained the text's background before he started reading. Because of that, I was able to summarise the key points with ease and I scored high marks too. This is clear indication that background information is very important in the overall practise of listening

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In this study, an attempt has been made to investigate, explore, analyse and understand some significant issues related to the teaching and learning of listening comprehension in the Ghanaian ESL classroom, both from the perspectives of the students and the teachers. The study focussed on three major issues;

- i. strategies and methods of teaching listening comprehension
- ii. challenges of learning listening comprehension
- iii. suggestions for overcoming the challenges of listening comprehension

Relative to the strategies and methods of teaching listening comprehension, the findings have revealed

that teachers employ various strategies and methods in the classroom. Firstly, it was realised that they combined listening with the other language skills. This became important because of the general assertion that the conscious teaching and learning of listening was not important. It therefore became necessary that the other language skills such as speaking, reading and writing, which were deemed “necessary” be linked to listening for the learners to know its importance. Predictive and Summative strategies were also employed as strategies in teaching listening.

The second focus of the study was to investigate the challenges of learning listening comprehension. The findings revealed that apart from limited vocabulary

of learners and speed of delivery of speakers/teachers which students cannot control and thus poses great challenge to them in listening comprehension, lack of contextual knowledge of the subject matter and the (un) clarity of the speaker equally pose challenge to the learners. Again, the learning environment, when it is not conducive and has external distractions, can make listening comprehension lessons very difficult to carry out.

Also, in the study's attempt to discuss some of the means through which the challenges of listening comprehension can be overcome, factors such as planning, encouraging overt student participation, developing concentration (even amid distractions) and the provision of sufficient contextual background information about texts, prominently came to the fore.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and outcomes of the study, it is recommended for;

a. curriculum planners,

- i. That the setting of the overall education goals and objectives prominently features listening skills.

- ii. that enough space, time and attention be given to listening comprehension as a significant strand of the English Language subject.
- iii. that clear cut directions and instructions on listening skills be sufficiently spelt out in the language curriculum for teachers to follow.

b. teachers,

- i. That they improve on their accent and clarity of speech so that students would not have to struggle or strain their ears in order to hear them.
- ii. that they establish sufficient backgrounds and contexts of reading texts/passages to aid learners' understanding.
- iii. that they teach the students the significance of language prosodies such as stress, intonation, rhythm, pitch, etc and their impact on meaning.

c. students,

- i. That they practice listening even beyond the school setting. They can do this by listening to news items read on TV/radio, listening to debates, engaging native speakers of English more often, among others.

- ii. that they do not see listening as a less important skill to the other language skills
- d. *researchers*,
 - i. that more researches be conducted on Listening comprehension so that the results could inform curriculum planners on what to do.
 - ii. that future and further studies on listening make use of large sample than what this study covered. A larger sample will make it easier to generalise the findings.

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