

SPECIFIC PROGRAMS TO DEVELOP LISTENING SKILLS IN CHILDREN IN SPECIAL EDUCATION SETTINGS

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Abstract

In recent years educators world-wide have noticed a decline in the development of childrens' listening skills - skills of attention, recall, and comprehension. For the child in a special education setting, lack of listening skills can be an identifying characteristic. In order to assess whether listening skills can be taught, learnt and developed, two specific programs were implemented over a period of thirty school term weeks in Junior Assessment Classes attached to four primary schools in the Australian Capital Territory with children ranging in age from 5 to 9 years; one program involved music and the other story-telling. Evidence from pre-, post- and post-post-testing, interviews and observations, indicates that the listening skills of the children improved through participation in the programs.

Listening often is assumed by educators to just happen. Such an assumption appears to be world-wide. It is not only in Australia but also in other countries that teachers are realising that unless they convey a message to a child in a few pertinent words, they often "lose" the attention of that child. In Sweden, during March and April 1989, the Government and Skolöverstyrelsen (Education Authorities) conducted for the first time, a nation-wide listening test in association with music. This test was administered to seven thousand children from three hundred and seventy three classes throughout Sweden. The children undertaking the test were 8 and 11 years old and in their 2nd and 5th years of schooling, respectively. Although the test findings are still being assessed, results indicate that teachers and children define listening in different ways (Sandberg,1990). When teachers and children were asked the same question about how often they listened, most children replied they often listened. The teachers replied that the children listened only sometimes. There appeared to be more agreement between the older children and

their teachers than the younger children and their teachers. Sandberg (1990), in a recent interview in Stockholm about the test, has suggested that perhaps the younger children see themselves as receivers of sound and equate listening more with simply sitting still.

So why are children not listening? In addressing this question recently in Sweden with colleagues and tertiary music students, the issue of children being continuously bombarded by sounds within our environment was raised. All around us there is a constant medley of noise for example, from traffic, television, radio, fluorescent lighting, air conditioning and of "musak" (piped music) in the home and in almost any community place. From the time they are conceived, children are continuously exposed and subjected to this adult consumption of sound. A student in her fourth and final year of a music degree at the Musikhögskolan in Stockholm, and who is blind, commented, "No sound is strange anymore; nothing fascinates. Noise just flows over you. You can hear anything".

Linzander, who was involved with the construction of the listening test in Sweden in 1989, distinguishes between hearing and listening when teaching music to school children in Sweden. There, children commence school at 7 years of age. At the beginning of a 2- to 3-year association involving music with these children, she asks them to distinguish between the concepts of hearing and listening. She feels it is useless to try to teach unless children are aware of and can recognise and understand that there is a distinction between these two concepts. Some examples of the response of children to the distinction between hearing and listening are - "When you listen you have to make sure you hear what you hear"; "To be able to listen you have to make an effort of hearing"; "You listen when you really want to hear what is said or told to you". In her teaching Linzander (1989) uses many different experiences and activities to develop childrens' listening skills. She finds that 7 and 8 year old children can easily become aware of how to use their ears properly and learn how to listen effectively. Children can be taught to listen to what sounds are, discuss associations with sounds, and use their imaginations to think about sounds. As the childrens' awareness of their own listening and associated listening skills develop, so too does their concentration and thinking. As a consequence many of the class musical activities develop into problem-solving exercises. An example would be the children working out how to make a particular sound previously listened to such as that of hazel nuts being rolled down a vertically placed xylophone.

Robinson and Deutsch Smith (1981) noted that although there is no widely accepted definition of listening, the act of listening is more than hearing and attending to sounds. These authors review three definitions which they have combined to describe the act of listening. The first definition is that of Barker (1971) who defined listening as selective processes concerned with attending to, hearing, understanding and remembering aural symbols. Alley and Deshler (1979), have extended this definition to include the attending to and comprehending of non-verbal messages such as voice intonation, visual communication and kinesic communication, along with verbal messages. The third definition, that of Barbara (1957), discusses the qualitative aspects of listening and differentiates between active and passive listening:

In the former (active listening), the individual listens with more or less his total self - including his special senses, attitudes, beliefs, feelings and intuitions. In the latter (passive listening), the listener becomes an organ for the passive reception of sound, with little self-perception, personal involvement, gestalt discrimination or alive curiosity.
(cited Robinson & Deutsch Smith, 1981, p.2)

Listening has been viewed by Anderson and Lynch (1988) as a reciprocal skill. They consider the skills of listening to be as important as those of speaking and reciprocal listening as an opportunity for the roles of listener and speaker to be exchanged. Listening is seen to have some purpose such as social or to acquire information. For these purposes additional non-linguistic skills are required by the listener, for example judging the mood of the speaker so as to make an appropriate response. Anderson and Lynch (1988) also discuss what constitutes successful listening - where the listener successfully hears, understands, constructs and interprets a message. They describe the successful listener as an active one:

Understanding is not something that happens because of what a speaker says: the listener has a crucial part to play in the process, by activating various types of knowledge, and by applying what he knows to what he hears and trying to understand what the speaker means.
(Anderson & Lynch, 1988, p.6)

Thus it would seem that the act of listening requires the active use of skills - skills of attention, of recall and of comprehension both in a social and in an information acquisition situation.

Musical experiences and activities for children in special education settings often are negative, non-existent or seldom. Reasons for this can be due to children being integrated into musical situations beyond their understanding and participation levels, to behavioural problems associated with the children, to a lack of musical experience on the part of the teacher or to a combination of these. The teaching of music to children in various special education settings has led to this author's observations that participation in a music program can significantly improve the development of such children. In this context, development is taken to mean the acquisition of knowledge skills - cognitive, psycho-motor, and affective; of social skills and of a positive self-concept (Bygrave, 1984, 1985, 1988, 1990b). A doctoral research study was commenced in 1988 in order to substantiate these personal observations. The study has focussed in particular upon the development of listening skills in children with learning difficulties. It has been hypothesised that through the development of listening skills, thinking and cognitive skills in the children should also develop - how a child learns to know, to comprehend, to analyse, synthesise and evaluate knowledge. In exploring this hypothesis, two specific programs were considered as possible investigative "tools" - a music program and a story-telling program.

During 1988 a pilot study was undertaken in a Junior Assessment Class, attached to a primary school in the Australian Capital Territory (A.C.T.) with children ranging in age from 5 to 9 years. The purpose of this study was two-fold:

1. To identify whether a non-specialist music teacher could initiate a music program with children in a Junior Assessment Class. In a different context, Ward (1976) in England had found that non-specialist music teachers could initiate excellent music activities with slow-learning children.

2. To identify an activity in a music program which could be measurable as a cognitive processing skill. The activities in a music program of a regular school usually include singing, movement, the playing of musical instruments, creating and listening. Listening has been identified as a cognitive strategy and skill in studies related to music (Heller & Cambell, 1982; Fiske, 1985; Sloboda, 1985).

The pilot study demonstrated that a teacher with no previous music learning or teaching experience could implement a carefully

selected music program with 5- to 9-year old children in a Junior Assessment Class. It showed also that listening, as one activity in a music program, could be a possible means for monitoring and measuring the development of listening skills.

For the purposes of monitoring and measuring the development of listening skills, the identification techniques of the National Acoustic Laboratory Test of Auditory Language Learning Capabilities in Kindergarten Children (NALTALLCK), (Dermody, Kehoe and Bochner, 1989), have been used to measure the effects before and after the implementation of the music program and the story-telling program.

The more detailed research study involving the music and story-telling programs was undertaken in 1989. Various musical activities involving singing, moving, the playing of musical instruments, creating and listening, were selected from the music program "Upbeat" (Leask & Thomas, 1988). The musical components of beat, pitch, tempo, and dynamics, associated with these musical activities, were taught through their related concepts. For example, the concepts of long and short, and of heavy and light, were taught through the beat component. The story-telling program "Learning to Listen and Remember" (Field & Walsh, 1989), is designed for use with children who are poor listeners. It teaches children to listen for and remember six facts - what, how, which, where, when and who - in a story being read to them. As it is not the concern of this paper to discuss these programs in detail, it will suffice to say that both programs are recent Australian publications that required no special training or expertise on the part of the teacher to implement, and have identified the development of listening skills in their programs.

Four primary schools with attached Junior Assessment Classes were selected in the A.C.T. to undertake the programs. The children in these classes were aged from 5 to 9 years and came from diverse areas throughout the A.C.T. The programs were randomly assigned to three of the schools with one undertaking the music program, another the story-telling program and the third a combination of the music and story-telling programs. The fourth school acted as a control with no program assigned to it. A younger group of children aged from 4 to 5 years in a special class in a school in New South Wales, also acted as a control. The classes participated in the study over a period of thirty weeks. Prior to the implementation of the programs, a total of forty three children in the five classes were tested for listening skills. The same tests (post-tests) were administered at the conclusion of the

intervention period of twenty three weeks (two school terms) and post-post-tests administered some weeks later. During the intervention period, interviews were conducted with each of the teachers in the four Junior Assessment Classes and observations undertaken of the lessons taking place in the classes.

Some fundamental questions have been considered with regard to the implementation of the music and story-telling programs, the teaching and developing of childrens' listening skills and the child in a special education setting:

1. Can listening skills be taught to children in special education settings, in particular a Junior Assessment Class through a music program and a story-telling program?
2. Can listening skills be learnt and developed through participation in such programs?
3. Does a child's understanding of sound concepts, for example long and short, high and low, loud and soft, which can be related to language (Kalmár,1982;1989; McMahon,1982), develop through participation in a music program in a special education setting?
4. Can a theoretical model for developing cognitive processes be constructed and implemented in a practical way through using music as an activity?

In this paper the first three questions only will be discussed. In a paper presented at the Second International Congress of Research into Activity Theory, Finland, May 1990, it has been proposed that a theoretical model can be constructed and implemented using music as a cognitive developing activity (Bygrave, 1990a).

1. Listening skills can be taught through a music program and a story-telling program to children in a Junior Assessment Class who are experiencing learning difficulties. The teachers of the classes who taught these programs had had no specific training or expertise, particularly in music, prior to implementing the programs and were able to successfully teach a daily lesson over a twenty three week period. Further, at the conclusion of the twenty three week intervention period, each of the three teachers involved wanted to continue teaching the programs. This led to a variation of the original research study having to be negotiated and implemented.

2. It would appear that listening skills can be learnt and developed through participation in a music program and story-telling program. Comparisons between pre-test and post-test results indicate that listening skills can be learnt. Also, results of the post-post-test results indicate that the listening skills of the children continued to improve and develop after the intervention period of twenty three weeks. A standardised mathematical test also was administered with the pre-, post-, and post-post-tests to monitor that the effects of the intervention period were specific to the listening programs (Bryant & Bradley, 1985).

3. The results from an aural music test constructed to assess whether children knew certain sound concepts by listening to sounds, for example, long sounds, short sounds, would suggest that a child's understanding of these concepts does improve through participation in a music program. Results from a Basic Concepts Test also administered to all of the children at the pre-, post- and post-post-tests indicated that most of the children, apart from the younger age group, could recognise the same concepts visually.

While considering the implications of such data it is important to recognise that other developments also resulted from the implementation of these specific programs. In particular, the music program provided both a social and a knowledge-acquiring environment necessary for the development of active listening skills. Many of the children acquired a more positive self-concept and their social skills developed as they learnt to interact with one another and to work independently during musical experiences and activities. These developments also began to manifest themselves in other curriculum areas, such as mathematics, in the classroom. Class performances at school assemblies were positively acknowledged and provided a social identity within the school community. The teachers in the Junior Assessment Classes discovered that they too could provide musical experiences and teach musical activities without prior musical knowledge or background. Teacher-directed instruction developed into a more guiding and facilitative role over the intervention period.

The purpose of the research study has been to investigate whether the listening skills of children in special education settings can be developed. The empirical evidence from the research assessed so far, supported by observations and interviews, indicates that through the application of specific programs such as a music program and a story-telling program,

children in settings such as Junior Assessment Classes, can be taught, can learn and can develop active listening skills. These children can successfully learn the strategies and skills of attention, recall and comprehension which are essential for the development of active listening.

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