

# A HIERARCHICAL TYPOLOGY OF LISTENING SKILLS

*By*

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## **Abstract**

This paper proposes a model of the hierarchy of the skills of listening as a language (communicative) art. The place of listening is examined among the three other language arts of speaking, reading and writing, and some misconceptions and confusion clarified. An appraisal of existing taxonomic models is undertaken with a view to providing a rationale for the new typology which, apart being stratificational, employs for its postulation the parameters of physiological versus physio-affective foundation, mechanics versus comprehension and formal versus pragmatic competence. It is hoped that the model would be given the necessary practical (classroom) empirical and critical attention that can facilitate its improvement.

## ***Introduction***

No matter the number of definitions of language we may consider, language is fundamentally a medium for communicating ideas, thoughts, feelings, beliefs, opinions, and attitudes of mind. This implies that whenever any language, say English, is employed for communication there must be a message in the first *place*. In addition, there must be at least a sender (or encoder) of the message and a receiver (or decoder) of the same message. Since language can be in two major forms, the two corresponding channels of communication are Sound and print. The phonic channel (sound) makes a two-way communication Possible, apart from permitting a face-to-face interaction. The listener can thus interrupt the speaker's utterances, answer his questions and receive immediate replies. This underscores the interchange ability of roles in *oral* Communication as both users of language function simultaneously as .listener and speaker. The oral channel also subsumes the use of such para-linguistic devices as facial expressions, intonations and gestures to communicate nuances of meaning

(Lawal, 1990).

The four major communicative arts of language are listening, speaking, reading and writing in the order in which a child normally acquires his first language.

This sequence does not however imply that listening is a passive skill and less important than the other skills as is often misconceived. In fact in listening. Just as in reading, both of which are receptive or interpretive arts, the language user actively receives, interprets and reacts to a message.

The usual misconception about listening stems from its being confused with ordinary hearing which is a physiological function except in relatively few pathological cases. Hearing is only basic to listening; it does not constitute the whole of it. Both thus involve the proper functioning of the ears since a deaf person can neither hear nor listen. None of the two 'can also take place without the proper activation of the brain since both involve the basic perception of whatever is uttered.

The similarities end at the level of perception and we become aware of what remarkable feats of listening we achieve when we are spoken to in a strange language. We only hear the speaker's utterances but find it difficult even dividing them into words, let alone identifying them and at the same time interpreting the speaker's message and then preparing an appropriate reply. This explains why people everywhere believe that speakers of unfamiliar languages speak too fast.

Therefore, in addition to the perception of what is uttered, listening involves a personal reaction to the message. From perception to reaction, it is however a complex mental feat, which we tend to take for granted because of its spontaneity. Since listening can hardly occur without a determined effort on the listener's part, it involves positive or deliberate attention. The listener then identifies what is heard for the purpose of classification, for instance familiar or unfamiliar information, interesting or uninteresting. The more unfamiliar and interesting the information is, the more likely the sustenance of attention, although attention is not always, perfect or unbroken. This suggests that

reflection takes place during which the listener critically assesses or evaluates the 'speaker's utterance, and at the end of the process, additional information, knowledge or awareness is gained which may be applied to the immediate or even novel situations (Lawal, 1990).

All this explanation would imply that listening may entail immediate response, delayed response or no response at all depending on the quality of listening and the setting of communication. Therefore hierarchical and cumulative layers of listening can be conceived since listening is a qualitative activity, not an all-or-nothing process.

The purpose of this paper is to postulate a hierarchical taxonomy of listening skills which could be useful not only as a theoretical exploration of the nature and functions of listening as a communicative 'art but also in such crucial curricular decisions as the formulation of goals, and objectives, needs analysis, selection and organisation of learning activities and evaluation of listening competence.

### ***Appraisal of Existing Models***

Taxonomies have been identified by scholars as a viable asset for promoting teaching and learning (Bloom 1956, Sanders 1966, Aliyu 1985, Lawal, 1991). However, while there are several useful taxonomic models of reading comprehension skills, very few have been developed for listening although there are general theories, of listening behaviour. Anderson and Lynch (1989) proposed a systemic model of listening behaviour which identifies (a) the input (the words uttered by the speaker) (b) the listening process (the listener's application of various types of information available to him) and (c) the output (the response of the listener).

Despite the useful pragmatic consideration of this model, it is silent over the component skills of listening and the relations that hold among them. It is therefore of little pedagogic and curricular value.

There is a popular yet ill-informed view of the listener as a tape recorder. This tape recorder model stresses ability to reproduce a message heard as the essential skill of listening, thereby, assuming that perception, attention and recall are the crucial criteria for effective listening. The short-coming of this model is

that it fails to capture the very essence of listening which is comprehension. Listening may actually comprehend the essence of a spoken message without being able to recall the speakers' utterances, while conversely some listeners' may be able to reproduce uttered messages without actually understanding them. For instance, the *fact* that a primary school child can reproduce "The dinosaur is extinct" after hearing it does not imply that comprehension has taken place. Nursery rhymes are rich source of further examples among kindergarten children.

A more pragmatic and useful model of listening behaviour views the listener as an active model builder. The term 'mental model' has been used by Johnson-Laird (1980) to refer to the listener's 'coherent interpretation', and to emphasize the constructive and personal nature of successful listening. This model stresses the division between hearing what is said (speech perception) and understanding what is meant (speech interpretation) as a way of properly understanding the listening process. It also highlights the three principal sources of information which the listener consults in the process of comprehension. Widdowson (1983) referred to them as (a) systemic or linguistic knowledge (knowledge of phonological, syntactic and semantic components of the language system) (b) contextual knowledge (knowledge of situation and co-text) and (c) schematic or background knowledge (factual, socio-cultural and procedural knowledge).

Comprehensive as the mental model discussed above is, it is not of much curricular use since it views "speech interpretation" as a feat that is monolithic but not stratifiable.

In what looks like the first major attempt at a hierarchical; classification of listening skills, Barket (1971) proposed the attentive, retentive, reflective and reactive levels as possible targets of classroom teaching. This taxonomy is of high pedagogic 'relevance,' but its problem lies in the identification of the attentive stage as part of comprehension, in stead of the 'path' to speech interpretation which is the essence of listening. It also fails to acknowledge the *fact* already stated that retention (the second level of the mode may not imply

comprehension.

COMPREHENSION OR POST MECHANICAL	APPLICATION To 1.Extralinguistic task 2.Language leaning	SOCIAL LINGUISTIC OR PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE
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The model proposed in this paper is to serve both theoretical and educational purposes. It therefore attempts to integrate, harmoniously the strengths of earlier views and avoid their pit- fall. More importantly it identifies certain inter-related and inter-dependent layers through which learners have to pass to be L come effective and efficient listeners. This typology thus

### The Proposed Model

	<p>INTEPRETATION</p> <p>1.critical/ reactive</p> <p>2.inferential</p> <p>3.Literal</p>								
	<p>RECALL</p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td>A</td> <td>B</td> </tr> <tr> <td>1.Delay</td> <td>1.Partial</td> </tr> <tr> <td>vs.</td> <td>vs.</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2. Spontaneous</td> <td>2.Total</td> </tr> </table>		A	B	1.Delay	1.Partial	vs.	vs.	2. Spontaneous
A	B								
1.Delay	1.Partial								
vs.	vs.								
2. Spontaneous	2.Total								
		LINGUISTIC OR FORMAL COMPETENCE							
MECHANICAL OR PRE-CMPREHENSION SKILL	DISCREMINATION IDENTIFICATION								
PHYSIO-AFFECTIVE FOUNDATIONS	ATTENTION/PERSONAL EFFORT	PHYSIO-AFFECTIVE FOUNDATIONS							
BIOLOGICAL FOUNDATION	PERCEPTION /HEARING	BIOLOGICAL FOUNDATION							

Figure 1: A hierarchical taxonomy of Listening Skills

attempts to distinguish between the requisite and foundational conditions for listening and the actual skills of comprehension. It also relates these skills to relevant pragmatic and educational considerations. The hierarchical typology presented in figure one contains five strata or levels. Apart from the basal level of perception or hearing, each level subsumes the level(s) below it and this suggests that the layers are cumulative and not mutually exclusive. Speech perception or hearing constitutes the fundamental biological or physiological

foundation, which is a necessary but not sufficient condition for listening as a communicative art.

The second stratum of attention involves the requisite personal effort of the listener and this stage is a path towards listening, not a skill of listening itself. Attention, determination and personal effort constitute the physio-affective foundations which, are closely related to the listener's physical and affective dispositions of fatigue, hunger, boredom, hyperactiveness, underactiveness, motivation, interests and attitudes. Directly above the level of attention is the stage of discrimination and identification when the listener is only expected to categorise and differentiate between utterances, for instance according to their sources and phonological (but not semantic) qualities. Listening at this stage may be for the identification and discrimination of sound units as in the case of minimal pairs or even sounds of the same or different languages.

The fourth level is recall which can be with or without comprehension. Because of this dual quality of recall it marks the transition from the mechanical or re-comprehension stages described above and the penultimate and ultimate strata of interpretation and application respectively which constitute the post mechanical or comprehension stage. Recall may also be delayed or spontaneous in one way, and partial or total in another, depending on the nature of the listening task and the listener's purpose.

Interpretation itself is not monolithic but graduated. The lowest interpretive substratum is the literal level at which listeners only grasp a superficial meaning of utterances. Next is the inferential substratum at which the listener is expected to deploy schematic, contextual and linguistic knowledge to arrive at a deeper comprehension, and finally the critical sublevel where the same pragmatic strategies are employed to react to speech and pass personal judgement on its worth. This is the stage at which listening can either be 'transactional' or 'interactional' (Brown and Yule 1983a).

The ultimate stratum of application shows the usefulness of listening as a learning tool. All the other background skills are deployed beyond the spoken message to solve novel problems which can be either linguistic or non-linguistic.

For instance after listening transactionally or interactionally it is possible for a listener to undertake such physical tasks as getting to unknown places, preparing certain dishes and operating certain gadgets, among others.

Apart from the parameter of comprehension versus mechanics *which* had been used to explain the hierarchical taxonomy, competence is another criterion which is of high educational relevance. The two intermediate levels of discrimination/identification and recall (without comprehension) demand of the listener only 'linguistic competence' which is the knowledge of the forms and structures of the language medium (without the crucial functional knowledge while the highest strata of interpretation and application incorporate formal competence into a broader and more functional or communicative type of competence tagged pragmatic or socio-linguistic competence.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper the crucial role of listening in language learning and other types of learning has been established. The need to devise a hierarchical taxonomy of listening skills as both a pedagogic and curricular necessity has been highlighted. Although attempt has been made here to minimise if not totally avoid the short-comings of earlier models and possibly maximise their potentials, the present model cannot pretend to be sacrosanct. It is thus hoped that language curriculum experts, applied linguists, communication experts and classroom teachers would put it to trial with a view to spotting its merits and demerits and improving upon it.

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