

Influence of Attitude and Gender on Listening Comprehension of Senior Secondary School Students in Ondo State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Poor performance in comprehension has been an issue attracting the attention of researchers and language educators. Several factors have been adduced to be responsible for this trend. Chief among these are the students' attitude and gender. A total sample of one hundred and twenty participants were randomly selected and assigned to attitudinal groups. Questionnaires that contained attitude and Listening Comprehension tests were used to collect data which were tested at 0.05 level of significance. Results showed that Attitude to listening and gender significantly predicted listening comprehension as female performed better than male participants.

Keywords: attitudes, gender, listening performance and comprehension

Introduction

The major thing that distinguishes human beings from animals is basically our way to communicate with each other by using language. We have words for specific things, emotions, expressions and it appears as though we have words for everything when thinking about it. In each language; words are constructed in a certain way. When working with language, it is quite possible to determine whether a word belongs to one stem or another just by looking at it even if the person has no clue of the word's meaning which is quite fascinating. Through time, society has gone through great changes which have influenced our languages.

Despite the importance of English Language to students' academic advancement and success in the other school subjects, students' performance in the subject, especially in external examinations, has been very poor. Alaneme (2005) lamented the mass failure recorded annually by students in the subject and concluded that the poor performance of students in English examinations conducted by the West African Examinations Council and National Examinations Council is actually a true reflection of the low standard of education in Nigeria. The poor performance of students in English language was reaffirmed by West African Examinations Council (WAEC) *Chief Examiners' Reports* as evident in the analysis of West African Senior School Certificate Examination results 2000-2012.

Many factors have been identified as variables that may affect students' performance in the cognitive process of English comprehension; students' attitude and gender were the two factors this research seeks to investigate. Attitude has a scale of negative, moderate and positive. The negative attitude has been tagged ineffective attitude to listening. This is usually exhibited by the following behavior, inattention, which occurs usually by lack of ability to sustain attention while, lack of interest in listening to someone, lack of giving a close attention to details, forgetting things easily, inability to observe quietness, blurting out answer when a question has not been completed excessive talking, interrupting conversations, wandering thought, believing that you know it all, and wandering thoughts. The other side of the continuum is the positive attitude. This is usually signaled by attentiveness, sustained attention, selective, quietness, and avoidance of mental wandering (Colorado, 2012). A positive listening attitude, along with listening knowledge, is a critical ingredient of effective listening. Positive attitude is said to give the listener, a willingness to listen. Positive attitude is said to facilitate effective listening (Amuseghan, 2007). Very frequently, the listener sometimes tunes out with the excuse that the topic of interlocution is not interesting. A high level of attitude with an active listening are regarded as a responsible approach to listening (Carter and Nunan, 2001).

Gender factor is very strong in Learning and thus a determining factor of students' interest and achievement. There is the need to investigate if there will be difference in performance based on gender factor. The research on human cognitive abilities or intelligence many years ago showed the assumption of female intellectual inferiority (Dykstra, 2006) but some investigations produced scientific evidence that within the limits of experimental accuracy, gender did not significantly influence the level of science achievement while Osokoya (2006) found that in the Nigerian Primary and Secondary schools, girls were given less time to tasks than boys which no doubt hinders the performances of the female and girl-child and Chamber (2009) concluded in his research that gender based education can affect standardized test score for both positive and negative outcomes

Many studies have been carried out through the years. During the 1970's, vast sociolinguistic investigations were made and one focused mainly on syntactic, phonology and morphology variations. At first, gender was regarded as a sociolinguistic variable, just like social class, age, ethnicity and social status. It was not until the mid 70's when Robin Lakoff's essay *Language and Woman's Place* was released, science about gender and language was established (Nordenstam, 2003). The reason for the change according Heaton and Lawson can be

attributed to the changing attitude of boys and girls towards education, work or career, with boys falling behind in achievement and social policies aiding female achievement. The following provincial, national and international assessments have produced results that echo these assertions.

The Manitoba Standard Tests indicate that boys typically score lower than girls in standardized tests in the language arts. The results of the Senior English Language Arts Standards Test administered in January 2004 and June 2004 showed that boys do not perform as well as girls in reading and writing.

Again, the assessment report of the progress in International Reading Literacy Study (IRLS) conducted in 2001 revealed that girls performed better than boys in all thirty four (34) countries where the assessment was administered including Canada, where two Canadian provinces Ontario and Quebec, participated in the study (UK Department for Education and Skills).

In addition, the results of the Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA) conducted in 2000 showed that girls performed better than boys on the reading test in all countries. Results show that there are considerable gender differences among 15 years olds. In particular, female students were more interested in reading and perform better in reading and literacy across countries while males perform better in mathematics (PISA website).

The evidence of weaker reading and writing skills among boys by these and other assessments has been an issue of major concern, since poor literacy skills can have a profound effect on performance in other school subjects as well as on students' success throughout their lives. In addressing the needs of boys, it was suggested that the use of dialogue and the provision of class experiences that respond to the interests, needs and learning styles of all students should be explored (Smith and Wilhelm 2002). All the work cited above have demonstrated that gender can be a significant variable. However, few studies compared male and female learners' listening comprehension and attitude to listening.

Phillips, Lowe, Lurito, Dziedzic, and Mathews (2001) demonstrate that men and women bring some very real differences in attention styles and cognitive processing styles to the communicative interaction. As researchers explore more deeply the biological influence of the male and female genetic makeup, however, the social influence model continues to dominate our understanding of gender variables. Research reveals that men and women listen for different purposes and have different listening goals. The primary contrast appears in task versus interpersonal understanding: Males are said to pay much attention to facts while females are said to devote more attention to the mood of the communication (Booth-Butterfield, 2004). Dykstra (2006) also examines the role of gender in pragmatic listening. It is observed that gender differences occur in listening as female had a higher score than male in listening exercises.

There have been numerous attempts to describe listening comprehension in terms of taxonomies of sub-skills. This approach is based on the notion that these skills underlie the process and the act of listening, which consists of the application of various separate skills.

One of the first taxonomies is the division of listening into a two-stage process: the extraction of the basic linguistic information as the first step and the utilization of that information for the communicative purpose. This two-stage division occurs again and again in the literature with various modifications and under various terms: 'the recognition level' and 'the level of selection', 'construction process' and 'utilization process', 'micro-comprehension' and 'macro-comprehension'. Buck (2001, p.52) gives high credit to the two stage view of listening since scholars have worked out similar concepts and the different terminology suggests that they have arrived at these concepts more or less independently.

Buck (2001) warns, however, that the results should be treated with caution as the analysis is based on item characteristics, not abilities and there was no inter coder reliability study. Besides the assumption that there are identifiable listening skills, there seems to be agreement in the language testing literature that these skills can be arranged in a hierarchy from lower order (e.g. understanding utterances at the literal level) to higher order (e.g. inferencing and critical evaluation) (Buck, 2001). Some of the numerous graded taxonomies have been applied as a basis for identifying the comprehension operations to be sampled in the listening tests, such as understanding main ideas, listening for specific information, inferring meaning, etc.

However, scholars treat the skills-based approach of comprehension with caution. Alderson (2000) states that the existence of such skills is in some doubt, at least as far as it is possible separately to identify and test them. Buck (2001) goes even further by stressing that the empirical support for these taxonomies is usually lacking. Alderson (2000) disapproves that too many lists of skills have been theorized or speculated upon and argues that the key thing is not how many skills we can dream up, but how many can be shown to exist on tests. This suggests appropriate handling rather than discarding the sub-skills approach. This is underpinned by referring to valuable studies that investigate how many empirically separable skills are there; whether it can be distinguished which skills the items are testing, which skills contribute most to the performance, which skills are the easiest to test, which skills are the most important to test, etc. Buck (2001) declares that, although there is no evidence that these lists of sub-skills constitute a complete unified description of the listening process, there is no doubt that many of the components are of crucial importance in listening. He adds that collectively they are

useful because they tell us what scholars in the field have come to think is important in listening comprehension.

In addition to the physiological influences on listening, listeners may bring psychological variables to comprehension. The listener's attitudinal state may well be one of the most significant psychological influences on the listener's behaviour. Attitudes have three components which are the cognitive which has to do with the ways which a listener thinks about himself or herself, the listening environment and the context of listening. The second component is the way the listener feels about himself or herself, the purpose of listening, the speaker, and the goal of listening and so on. The way the listener thinks or feels conditions the way he or she behaves. The behavioral attitude of the listener is one of the components that constitute the attitude to listening. The research studied the influence of attitude and gender on students' listening comprehension in English language .

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were generated to guide the study:

H₀₁: Attitudes will not significantly influence students' performance in listening comprehension.

H₀₂: Gender will not significantly influence performance in listening comprehension.

METHOD

The population of the study included all public Senior Secondary School students in Ondo State. The target population was Senior Secondary School II students in Ofedepo High School, Okitipupa, Jubilee Grammar School, Ondo, and St. Patrick Grammar School, Oka- Akoko. The schools were chosen based on the following criteria: a second-generation public secondary school, having same year of establishment, offering similar curriculum, being a mixed school, being in a semi-urban environment and each being representative of the three zones of the state .The sample was 120 (one hundred and twenty) participants selected through multi-stage sampling techniques, which comprised purposive and simple random sampling techniques. Purposive sampling was used to select three schools based on the criteria of school location, type and grade. Purposive sampling was equally used to select an intact class each per school and 120 participants who were regular throughout the six week training. The participants had similar exposure to English Language learning. They all use their native dialects of Yoruba as media of communication in homes and in schools, while they reserve English for learning in the classroom.

The research instruments were listening attitude questionnaire (LAQ) and Listening comprehension test (LCT). The questionnaire covered attributes of inefficient listener, such as un-teachable attitude, in-attention, wandering thought, decay or forgetfulness, inability to transit from perceptual skill to cognitive skill, inability to activate previous knowledge, inability to discriminate speech sounds, inability to transcode auditory perception and inability to comprehend. The scale consisted 30 items rated on a modified 4-point likert scale (1 = strongly agree; 2= agree, 3 = disagree and 4 = strongly disagree). The total score obtainable was 103. The scores within the range of 46-59 was regarded as low, 60- 80 was regarded as average and 81-94 was regarded as high attitude at the pre-test; while the scores within the range of 49-66 was low, 67-93 was regarded as average and 94-103 was regarded as high attitude at the post-test. This instrument was subjected to face and content validity by giving copies to experts in educational evaluation and language education with bias in English language education. These experts were asked to determine its suitability in terms of clarity, breadth and language. Only the 30 items that were found suitable were used. The test was administered on sampled 50 SSII students in a school outside the ones to be used for the study using Cronbach Alpha and the reliability coefficient determined was 0.75.

The instrument was made up of two sections, namely sections A and B. Section A consists of the personal data of the subjects, including their gender, name of school and class. Section B comprises 20 multiple test items on listening comprehension. Students will be required to pick the option in line with their views on each item. All questions are in objective form with alternatives A to D. Students are to pick the correct answer out of the alternatives provided in each item. Each of the objective questions carried 2 marks, making a total of 40 marks. A score within the range of 1 - 13 was regarded as low listening comprehension; 14-26 was regarded as average listening comprehension, while scores within the range of 27 – 40 was regarded as high listening comprehension.

The instrument was subjected to face and content validity by giving copies to experts in educational evaluation and language education with bias in English language education. These experts were asked to determine its suitability in terms of clarity, breadth and language. Only the 20 items that were found suitable were used. The test was administered on sampled 50 SSII students in a school outside the ones to be used for the study using KR-20 and the reliability coefficient determined was 0.86.

The study was divided into two phases: Phase one – Pre-test, Phase two-- post-test stages. Intact class was chosen per school for the training. After the class had been selected, a questionnaire on attitude to listening was administered on the class. This was followed immediately by a listening comprehension test. Phase Two was the post treatment stage. All the participants were asked to respond to the same instruments which they had earlier responded to in phase one, which were listening attitude questionnaire and listening comprehension tests.

Data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics of frequency counts, mean and standard deviation. Inferential statistics of Analysis of Covariance (ANOVA) and simple Regression analysis were used to test all the hypotheses. All hypotheses would be tested at 0.05 level of significance.

RESULTS

Hypothesis 1: Students' Attitude will not significantly predict performance in listening comprehension

The simple Regression analysis was used to treat the data collected for the study. The results of the Regression analysis are presented in the table 1 below.

Table 1: Simple Regression Analysis of Listening Comprehension and Attitude to Listening.

Variables	B	T	P	R	R ²	Df	F	P
Attitude to listening	.601	8.170	< .05	.601	.361	(1, 118)	66.744	< .05

The data in table above show that there is a positive relationship between attitude to listening and listening comprehension. The coefficient of correlation is 0.61, while the coefficient of determination is .361. In other words, about 36% of the variance in listening performance is accounted for by attitude to listening. The relationship is statistically significant [$F(1, 118) = 66.74, p < 0.05$]. Therefore, hypothesis 1 was rejected.

Hypothesis 2: Gender will not be a significant factor in listening comprehension.

The mean and standard deviation scores on Gender and listening comprehension were used to derive the table below:

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation Scores on Gender and Listening Comprehension.

	Gender		
		X	SD
Attitude to Listening.	Female	93.48	7.89
	Male	92.00	8.23
Listening Comprehension	Female	33.35	3.01
	Male	32.06	4.01

The results indicated that female students had a better performance in listening comprehension with a mean score of 33.35 compared to their male counterparts with a mean score of 32.06.

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation Listening Comprehension Scores of Male and Female Subjects with Different Attitudes to Listening.

Gender	Listening Comprehension					
	Low Attitude		Average Attitude		High Attitude	
	X	SD	X	SD	X	SD
Female	23.80	6.140	25.84	5.951	33.13	3.482
Male	20.94	2.623	24.00	5.952	30.67	5.831

The data show that female students with high attitude to listening performed best in listening comprehension with a mean score of 33.13. This was followed by their male counterparts who had a mean score of 30.67. Next on the rank in performance in listening comprehension are female students with average attitude to listening had a mean score of 25.84 whose was performed better than male students with average attitude to listening who had a mean score of 24.0. The least group in terms of performance in listening comprehension are both male and female students with low attitude to listening. Female students with low attitude to listening performed better in listening comprehension with a mean score of 23.80 when compared to male students with low attitude to listening that had a mean score of 20.94.

Discussion

The study examined whether students' attitude would not predict performance in listening comprehension. The findings revealed that attitude to listening correlated with listening comprehension performance of students. This finding partly confirmed the views of Butler (1983), O. Malley, Chamot and Kupper (1988), Aneiro (1989) and Funjita (1994) who identified components of attitude such as attention, self-confidence and apprehension as what could affect listening comprehension performance of students.

The findings indicated that female students had a higher listening comprehension than male students. This finding is, however, contrary to the finding of Dang (2010) who found no significant relationship between the students' listening comprehension, performance and gender. But the findings of this study agreed with Sankarakumar, Chandrakanthi and Malathy (2012) who found a significant difference in the performance of male and female students in reading comprehension tests as female performed better than male reading comprehension. It also confirms Jie and Fenglan (2003) that found that female performed better than male in listening comprehension.

The study also established that gender has a significant relationship with students' attitude to listening. It

confirmed the view of Shobein, Omidvar and Prahallada (2006) that female gender has a positive attitude to listening. Concerning the influence of gender on attitude to listening, the finding revealed that gender had influence on attitude to listening, as female gender had a better attitude to listening than male. This is contrary to the findings of Hughes and Tuch (2003) that found that gender played only a significant role in racial attitude formation. It also disagreed with the findings of Richard and Do-Yeong (2006) who found no gender difference at individual level. It also contradicted Richard and Do-Yeong who found that male would show a stronger pro-risk position than female. The finding confirmed Hatoon and Mahmood (2011) who found that females hold more comfort, confidence and more positive attitude towards computer than males. It also confirmed Selim's (2006) finding that gender had slightly significant influence as female subjects revealed a more positive attitude to non-native gender accents.

This also confirmed Anders and Berg (2005) who found that positive attitude change resulted from motivated behaviour, like training, while negative attitude change resulted from less motivated behaviour of no training. The finding also aligned with that of Barbara and Colette (2006) who found that cognitive intervention resulted in greater attitude change.

Conclusion

This study investigated the influence of students' attitude and gender on listening comprehension of Secondary School Students in Ondo State, Nigeria. The study indicated that attitude to listening imparted on listening comprehension. The implication of this is that attitude is the entry point to instruction in listening comprehension. Teachers should devote much efforts to remediating observed negative attitudes that can discourage effective listening.

Gender has a unique influence on listening comprehension. Therefore, gender should be kept as a constant factor in any training on listening comprehension. There is the need to promote activities that will encourage male and female to listening without distractions whatsoever.

The results gathered from this study could be of importance to some significant stakeholders like teachers of English, curriculum planners, teacher trainers and parents. On the basis of the findings, the following recommendations are suggested to different stakeholders:

The teacher of English should take into cognizance the significant role of a language teacher as a teacher of all language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). He/ she should, therefore, see the language skills as integral parts of English Language. This study should be an eye opener to those English language teachers who assumed that listening is a skill that does not necessarily require instruction. The teacher should partner curriculum developers as well as parents towards bringing their attention to the importance of the chronological first language skill that is acquired by every human being.

Curriculum planners are to be fully aware that listening skill can no longer be neglected on the school curriculum if it is truly to be regarded as the first of the language skills acquired by every child. It should therefore be given equal attention like other language skills on the curriculum. The attention should go beyond the usual passing one given to such ones that would touch on the process of perceptual skill to the cognitive process of interpreting and responding to the speech perception appropriately. Listening should not be seen as a mere perception of sounds alone. It should be seen holistically in terms of what an individual does with the speech sounds that are perceived, how they are interpreted and how appropriate the response to the discourse.

The Colleges of Education and Universities of Education might see the dire need through this study for an equal emphasis on the language skills. The pre-service teacher's attitude to listening skills begins from school. If the pre-service student teachers are made to attach equal importance to listening skills, this would go a long way in changing the general orientation to listening.

Parents should be encouraged through this study to enhance the general listening behavior of students. They should encourage listening skills by finding time to listen to their wards and children. They should desist from behaviour that kills tendency to develop a good listening skills by reinforcing children that have good attitude to listen, especially children that listen without cutting in during interpersonal communication. The home is the foundation of what the school builds upon. When the culture of listening is not inculcated at home, there is little the teacher could do in the school.

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