

Listening: Can Ability Be Improved?

Dr. Doris L. Cost, Marketing, Metropolitan State College, Denver
Dr. Marcia H. Bishop, Interpersonal Communications, Metropolitan State College, Denver

Abstract

Listening is one of the most important communication skills that an organizational member can possess, but it is repeatedly identified as a weakness in employees. The authors determined that the listening abilities of 598 students who took a listening course in a nontraditional college improved significantly with no significant difference between the abilities of males and females. Therefore, students who complete a listening course could become more efficient and effective employees.

Introduction

Communication consists of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Werner (1975) claims that the average person spends 54.9 percent of communication time in listening. Rankin (1939) stated that the average person spends 45 percent of communication time in listening, 30 percent in speaking, 16 percent in reading, and 9 percent in writing. While reading and writing combined account for only 25 percent of total communication time, they are the two that are in stressed elementary and secondary schools.

Few students have received formal training in listening. Perhaps educators assumed that listening and hearing were synonymous. However, employers voice dissatisfaction with the listening abilities of employees; and some educational institutions and businesses have instituted listening courses to correct listening deficiencies.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to determine if a listening course improves the listening abilities of college students. Since Nichols (1957) "found that 95 out of 100 males were better listeners than females," another objective of this study was to determine if males were better listeners than females in this study. Also, since tests have shown that the average person remembers only about fifty percent of what he/she has heard (Nichols, 1947 and Hamilton and Kleiner, 1987) the last objective of this study was to determine if listeners with pretest scores of less than 50 percent have the same improvement as students

with pretest scores of 50 percent or higher.

Methodology

The hypothetical population was all students who enroll in a listening course. The sample consisted of 598 students who completed the course between Fall Semester 1984 and Fall Semester 1987. Of the 598 students, 386 were females and 212 were males. Class size ranged from 18 to 34 students in 23 sections.

The following statistical tests were conducted:

1. A t test for difference in means for correlated samples was performed to determine if there is a difference between the mean score of all students on the pretest and the mean score of all students on the post-test.
2. A t test for two samples was performed to determine if there is a difference between mean scores of males and females on the pretest.
3. A t test for two samples was performed to determine if there is a difference between mean scores of males and females on the post-test.
4. A t test for paired difference was performed to determine if there is a difference between the mean score on the pretest and the mean score on the post-test for students having a score less than 50 percent on the pretest.
5. A test for paired difference was performed to

determine if there is a difference between the mean score on the pretest and the mean score on the post-test for students having a score of 50 percent or higher on the pretest.

6. A t test for independent samples was performed to determine if there is a difference between the mean improvement of the students who scored less than 50 percent on the pretest and the students who scored 50 percent or higher on the pretest.

Limitations

All students in the sample were from one nontraditional college having approximately 17,000 students. No effort was made to correlate scores to ages of students or to time of day or evening of the course.

Review Of The Literature

What is listening, and how does one distinguish listening from hearing? Listening and hearing are both phases of a total process defined as aural assimilation. A person hears or apprehends a sound, and then the person attaches meaning and comprehension to the sound or aural symbol. (Nichols, 1947) Because the listener must organize these sounds or aural symbols into words, phrases, and sentences, ". . . listening is a spoken language perception problem that depends on the ability to decipher spoken code and segment it into meaningful parts." (Goss, 1982)

The simplest communication model consists of four parts: a sender, a message, a communication channel, and a receiver. This model is then expanded by adding the listener's feedback to the system. (Boone and Kurtz, 1987) Unless the feedback (either oral or nonverbal) indicates that the receiver understood the message as the sender intended, there is no communication.

Most of us believe we communicate clearly. We assume that if we speak the same language we will understand each other. Good communication, however, is neither commonplace nor simple. It occurs only when a receiver understands a message as it was sent. (Faulkner, 1988)

Importance of Listening

Listening is one of the most important communications skills that an organization member can possess. (Smeltzer and Watson, 1985) "Men and women in business have repeatedly identified listening as a weakness in employees and called for improved training." (Lewis and Reinsch, 1988) A survey of business executives indicated that speaking and listening skills were perceived as important requirements for successful employment. (Junge, Daniels and Karmos, 1984) In addition, communication-related abilities have been regarded as strong predictors of individual upward mobility within an organization. There is a direct correlation between effective listening and advancement within the organizational hierarchy. (Sypher and Zorn, 1986) John Kello, a Davidson College psychology professor, believes that listening is "the fundamental skill required of managers. . . from that ability, all the rest derives." (Kiechel, 1987)

Communication skills are qualities CPA firms look for in applicants (LaFevre, 1987-88), and listening ability is part of communication. "The importance of communication to the accounting function is great. The objectives of the accounting tool is, after all, communication. Accountants can make facts obscure or confusing. . ." (Andrews and Sigband, 1984)

Other recent studies conclude that "listening in the work environment occurs within a concrete context including time pressures, interruptions, and ongoing relationships." (Lewis and Reinsch, 1988)

Difficulties in Listening

Listening is not as simple as might be expected. Tests have shown that after a 10-minute speech, only about 50 percent of the message is retained. After 48 hours, this retention rate falls to about 25 percent. (Hamilton and Kleiner, 1987) Part of the bad listening results from the differential between speech speed and thought speed.

Experts say that the brain can process up to 500 words per minute, but that a speaker can deliver only about 250 words per minute. This allows you plenty of time to daydream. While your mind wanders, you may miss important points, and you may have difficulty picking up on the train of thought. (Varner, 1987)

People do not "realize that effective listening is hard work. . . the heartbeat rate increases and blood pressure rises when a person is really listening." (Boyd, 1985) A high degree of concentration is necessary for keeping your mind on the speaker and his message. (Boyd, 1985) Also, people fail to understand the consequences of not utilizing the right listening attitude: poor negotiating ability, poor job performance, failure at crisis management, and difficulty communicating with family and friends. (Kiechel, 1987)

Nichols and Stevens (1957) identified the ten worst listening habits and recommended ways to change these bad habits into effective listening strategies. "Faking attention" is one of the worst listening habits. Nonverbal behaviors indicate when listeners have stopped listening. "Don't let your eyes wander or your head turn aimlessly about." (Hamilton and Kleiner, 1987)

"Getting overstimulated" and "letting emotionally laden words throw us out of tune with the speaker" are two of Nichols' worst listening habits. Other researchers agree that these are bad habits. "Misinterpreting and mis-evaluating messages are most common listening errors," according to Summerfield (1987) and "The worst enemy of every person attempting to succeed by better listening is prejudice," according to Adams (1987).

Ways to Improve Listening Ability

Nichols' taped listening courses (1971, 1985) stress that listening can be improved by developing four central listening abilities: overcoming distractions, detecting central ideas by identifying the pattern of the speech, controlling emotions, and evaluating the message. He also stresses that to effectively use the differential between speech speed and thought speed, the listener should recapitulate what was said, anticipate what will be said next, and identify the building blocks the speaker is using to make points.

Most experts recommend restating the substance of what the listener has heard in addition to asking questions to clarify the message. "To obtain the goal you want, you must become competent in the art of asking questions, as well as the art of intense and total listening." (Adams, 1987)

Summerfield (1987) agrees with Nichols that it is important to recognize and understand the speaker's organizational pattern, and to use the organization to grasp the substance of the message.

Many experts stress the importance of responsiveness during conversations. "Let the speaker know you are interested." (Hamilton and Kleiner, 1987) Feedback techniques have been proven to improve understanding. "Knowing that you are going to give specific feedback will make you listen better." (Boyd, 1985)

Kiechel (1987) believes that feedback in business settings requires the listener to not only give feedback, but also "do something, even if it isn't exactly what your partner in conversation had in mind."

Lewis and Reinsch (1988) believe that in business settings, listening involves "attentiveness, nonverbal behavior, verbal behavior, perceived attitudes, memory, and behavioral responses."

Content Of A Listening Course

The listening course is based on Nichols' *Successful Listening* tapes released by Telstar Inc. which uses a pretest/post-test format and includes taped tests on the four central listening abilities: overcoming distractions, detecting central ideas, maintaining emotional control, and evaluating the message. The *Successful Listening* workbook also contains information on note taking and the ten worst listening habits, as well as other readings.

Additionally, units have been developed on right-left brain, communication style, lifestyle, foresight-hindsight, empathic listening, and nonverbal behavior. These units help the students understand who they are, why they behave and listen as they do, how to recognize why the speakers are acting and talking as they do, and to recognize that attention must be given not only to what was said, but also to what was not said, how was it said, and why was it said.

Data Analysis

The null hypotheses and results of the statistical tests follow:

Ho 1: There is no difference in the mean scores on the pretest and post-test for all students.

A t test for difference in means for correlated samples was conducted. The mean on the pretest was 57.22, with a range of 35 percent to 74 percent. The mean on the post-test was 70.84, with a range from 38 percent to 90 percent. The mean difference was +13.63 percent, with a range from a nine percent decrease to a 44 percent increase. The p value = less than 0.001; reject the null hypothesis. There is a difference in the mean score of all students on the pretest and the mean score of all students on the post-test.

Ho 2: There is no difference between mean scores of females and males on the pretest.

A t test for difference in means for two samples was conducted. The mean for females was 57.42 percent, with a range from 35 to 74 percent; the mean for males was 56.84 percent, with a range from 35 to 73 percent. The p value was 0.32; do not reject the null hypothesis. There is no difference between the mean score of males and the mean score of females on the pretest.

Ho 3: There is no difference between mean scores of females and males on the post-test.

A t test for difference in means for two samples was conducted. The mean for females was 70.82 percent, with a range from 43 to 90 percent; the mean for males was 70.90 percent, with a range of 38 to 89 percent. The p value was 0.91; do not reject the null hypothesis. There is no difference between the mean score of males and the mean score of females on the post-test.

Ho 4: There is no difference between mean scores on the pretest and the post-test for students who scored less than 50 percent on the pretest.

A t test for paired difference was conducted on the scores of the 80 students who scored less than 50 percent on the pretest. The mean improvement was 19.80 percent. The p value was less than 0.001; reject the null hypothesis; there is a significant difference in the scores of the pretest and post-test. The students listening

abilities did improve.

Ho 5: There is no difference between mean scores on the pretest and the post-test for students who scored 50 percent or higher on the pretest.

A t test for paired difference was conducted on the scores of the 518 students who scored 50 percent or higher on the pretest. The mean improvement was 12.68 percent. The p value was less than 0.001; reject the null hypothesis; there is a significant difference in the scores of the pretest and post-test. The students listening abilities did improve.

Ho 6: There is no difference between the mean improvement of the students who scored less than 50 percent on the pretest and those who scored 50 percent or higher on the pretest.

A t test for independent samples was conducted on the mean improvement for the two groups. The p value was less than 0.001; reject the null hypothesis; there is a significant difference in the improvement of the two groups. The students who had scores less than 50 percent on the pretest improved more.

Conclusions

Bases on the findings of this study, the following conclusions can be made:

1. The listening abilities of students taking the listening course improve significantly, regardless of whether they were below average, average, or above-average listeners at the beginning of the course.
2. There is no difference in the listening abilities of males and females on the pretest or post-test.
3. Students who are below-average listeners improved more than students who were average or above.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendation can be made:

1. All students should be encouraged to take a listening course to improve their listening abilities.

Further research should be conducted as follows:

1. A statistical analysis of the scores of the students on the four tests of central listening abilities (overcoming distractions, detecting central ideas, maintaining emotional control, and evaluating the message) should be completed to determine which areas improve significantly with instruction.
2. Based on the findings of the statistical analysis of the central listening abilities, improved methods of instruction should be researched to improve students' abilities in any areas of weakness.
3. Research should be conducted at other schools that have listening courses to determine if there is a difference between the listening abilities of males and females.

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