

Influence of age on Listening Competencies in English of Teacher Trainees in Teacher Training Colleges in Kenya

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Abstract: English language in Kenya is important as it is the medium of instruction, among other things, from class four to higher institutions of learning (Revised Teacher Education Syllabus, 2006) Listening on the other hand is a key factor in facilitating language learning because it is the foundation of the other language skills. It is also the skill that facilitates the interaction of the instructor and the learner in any learning situation. Lack of listening competence in English therefore means poor language skills and poor performance in all the subjects taught in English. This paper presents the findings of a comparative study conducted in Teacher Training Colleges (TTC) in Kenya. The study sought to establish the influence of age on the levels of listening competencies in English of primary school teacher trainees in Teacher Training Colleges in Kenya. A sample of 30 male and 30 female trainees was used. Data were collected using three subtests namely dictation, cloze test and listening comprehension. Research findings showed that the younger trainees performed better than the older trainees in most of the tasks. However, generally the trainees lacked the desired competence levels in listening in English.

Introduction: Listening Competences in English

Key Words:

Listening- is used in this study to refer to the selective process of attending to, hearing, understanding and remembering oral symbols.

Competence -refers to having the skill, ability or power to do what is needed. It is used in this study synonymously with “sub skills”.

English -the medium of instruction from class four to higher institutions of learning

I. INTRODUCTION

Most people sincerely believe that they listen effectively. Consequently, they do not see the need to develop their listening skills (Bwire, 2007). However, listening effectively is something that very few of us do. It is not that listening effectively is difficult, but rather, most of us just never develop the skill (Wilkinson, 1974). Effective listening is a process that involves actively absorbing the information given by a speaker, showing that you are attentive and providing feedback to the speaker so that he/she knows that the message has been received. Effective listeners show speakers that they have been heard and understood by responding effectively (Barker, 1971).

There is a difference between listening and hearing. Whereas hearing is a physical activity, listening is a mental process (Adler & Brown, 2003). We do not learn how to hear but we must learn how to listen. As expressed by Wyatt and Roach (1999) “far from being a natural process, listening is a consciously purposive activity for which we need systematic training and supervision to learn to do well” (p. 197). This is because it involves psychological skills such as recognising words, parsing speech into constituent parts and processing the discourse in terms of cohesion, logic and relevant underlying skills. It also involves social skills such as giving back-channelling signals and making improvements when misunderstandings occur.

Gilman and Moody (1984) observe that adults spend 40 -50% of communication time listening but the importance of listening in language learning has only been recognised relatively recently as observed by Oxford (1993). Listening has been assuming greater and greater importance in language classrooms because of the development of second language acquisition research, which has given a major boost to listening by emphasising the role of comprehensible input (US-China Foreign Language, 1987). Krashen (1982) suggest that comprehensible input is an important factor in second language acquisition. Rost (1990) argues that unless listening is given priority at the right level, learning cannot begin because listening is the foundation of the other language skills. He further says one has to listen to be able to speak; one has to speak to be able to read, and one has to read to be able to write.

Apart from second language classroom contexts, the process of listening is of crucial importance in social interactions. Mark Twain observed, if we were supposed to talk more than we listen, we would have two tongues and one ear (Evans, 1999). Cheesebro, O’connor, and Rios (2009) write in *Communication Skills*, “people are fired, customers are lost and working relations are strained because of ineffective listening. Likewise, friendships suffer, marriages fail and families grow apart when individuals fail to listen with genuine concern” (Cheesebro et al; 2009:25).

The above observations show that listening is a crucial communication skill. Communication cannot successfully take place until what is spoken is understood. Importance of

listening skill is attached to both the classroom and social interactions.

Since 1974 Act of Parliament, English has been the official language in Kenya (The Kenya Constitution, 2010). The role of English in the Kenya school curriculum is of paramount importance. The acquisition of the four basic language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) is key to acquisition and total mastery of the second language. The student's performance in English and all other school subjects (except in Kiswahili and foreign languages) depends to a larger extent, on the efficiency of listening in English. Training both the learner and the instructor is needed to enhance the learning interactions especially in the Kenyan context where Mogaka (2001) reports that teachers dominated the interaction in Kenyan English language classroom with lecturing and question and answer methods dominating the lesson.

The revised Primary Teacher Education syllabus re-emphasises the importance of English as the official language of communication in Kenya as well as the medium of instruction in schools, colleges and universities. It is also the pre-eminent language of interactional communication. The revised syllabus states consequently "those who master English reap many academic, social and professional benefits" (K.I.E, PTE Revised English Syllabus, 2006: 2).

In a study, Groenwegen (2008) came up with English Literacy Norms (ELNs). These are the bench marks or levels of competence in listening skills that are expected in a learner at finishing teacher training in a teacher training college. Groenwegen (2008) defined the Desired Competence Level (DCL) as 75% and above and the Minimum Competence Level (MCL) as between 50% and 74%. With MCL, one has limited ability in the skill and therefore one is not able to use the skill effectively.

Listening has been assuming greater and greater importance in language classrooms because of development of second language acquisition research which has emphasised the role of comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982). This is also evident in the new syllabus which has corrected the imbalance of emphasising reading and writing at the expense of listening and speaking by incorporating listening skills in the teaching and evaluation syllabus in national examinations.

It is on this emphasis on listening skill in general and listening skill in English in particular that this paper was pegged with a view to establishing the influence of age. Listening involves skills such as recognising words, parsing speech into constituent parts and processing the discourse in terms of cohesion, logic and back channelling signals. Listening competences include discriminating between sounds, recognising words, identifying stressed words, identifying functions in a conversation, connecting linguistic cues to non-linguistic cues in order to construct meaning, recalling important words, topics and ideas, giving appropriate feedback to the speaker and reformulating what the speaker has said. In this paper the researchers focused on

discriminating between sounds through dictation, recalling important words through cloze test and connecting linguistic and non-linguistic cues to construct meaning as well as using background knowledge and context to predict and confirm meaning in the listening comprehension.

II. INFLUENCE OF AGE ON LISTENING COMPETENCE

Degeest, Keppler and Corthals (2015) carried out a study on effect of age on listening effort. The research findings were that age is a significant determinant of listening effort, whereby listening effort increases with increasing age. Listening effort started to increase in the 4th decade of life.

Sommers (2011) did a research on listening comprehension across the adult lifespan. A total of 433 participants ranging 20-90 years listened to spoken passages and answered comprehension questions following each passage. The results of the study showed that auditory sensitivity declined from the age of 20-90 years but listening comprehension remained relatively unchanged until the approximately age 65-70.

Hyun, Dae Lee and Joong Lee carried out a study on relationship among hearing loss, cognition and balance ability in elderly individuals over 65 years of age. The participants were given a hearing test. The study found out that as elderly individuals get older, their hearing and cognition as well as their balance abilities deteriorate.

The above studies show that age influences listening abilities and so agrees with the present study.

III. METHODOLOGY AND MATERIALS¹

This study was conducted as a descriptive survey of listening competences of teacher trainees in teacher training colleges in Kenya. The study comprised of 60 teacher trainees in the second year of their training. 30 female trainees and 30 male trainees were sample for the study. Simple random sampling was used to sample the trainees since it gives unbiased representation of a group. The study used a listening test comprising three subtests namely: listening comprehension, cloze test and dictation (see appendix i). The test was used to determine the listening levels of the trainees. Listening comprehension tested the ability to: pick main ideas, follow topic development, guess meaning of words, predict outcomes, and recall from spoken discourse. Cloze test on the other hand tested the ability to use: context to construct meaning, vocabulary, critical thinking, semantic and syntactic cues to construct meaning. Dictation comprised of ten minimal pairs; five pairs of consonants, three pairs of vowels and two pairs of both vowels and consonants. The choice of

¹ The literature and materials in this paper borrows heavily from Dr. Lydia W. Wangungu's Phd Thesis 'Listening Competencies In English: A Descriptive Study of Primary School Teacher Trainees In Kenya, 2015, Kenyatta University

the sounds was guided by Brown (1995) who recommends use of sounds with high functional load.

The test was administered at 8A.M. This was deemed good time as the trainees would not be fatigued by the day’s activities. The classrooms were used for the exercise. Physical conditions such as good ventilation and comfortable sitting were ensured. The trainees were briefed on the purpose of the study. The different listening tasks and their formats were explained to the trainees and the pre-taped verbal instructions repeated for clarity. Trainees’ hearing ability was ensured before the exercise began by asking questions from different locations of the classroom. The volume of recording was tested to ensure it was well balanced and loud enough for all to hear. The answer sheets were provided before trainees listened to the taped scripts. The question and answer sheets were collected from the trainees at the end of each subtest.

The data collected was subjected to independent t –tests to test the significance between the means of the scores of the group below 25 years and the group 25 years and above. The study found t- test effective as it is a hypothesis tool that allows testing of an assumption applicable to a population, This study was testing an assumption that age influences listening abilities in English among teacher trainees in Kenya and hence the statistical tool appropriate.

IV. KEY FINDINGS

Age is among the learner characteristics that influence language behavior. Variables such as attention span, influence listening, for instance, young children are said to have a much shorter attention span than young adults (Baker, 1971, p.46). Age was a variable of scrutiny in the current study. The trainees were divided into two age groups; trainees aged 25 years and above and trainees below the age of 25 years. Descriptive statistics yielded the findings tabulated in table below.

Age in years		Subtest 1	Subtest 2	Subtest 3	Test total
25 and above	Mean	60.3846	31.5385	64.8077	52.6154
	N	26	26	26	26
	Std. Deviation	29.32313	19.32714	16.79766	14.35849
Below 25	Mean	69.4118	35.8824	64.9412	56.8235
	N	34	34	34	34
	Std. Deviation	27.51762	18.44199	16.68594	16.21909
Total	Mean	65.5000	34.0000	64.8833	55.0000
	N	60	60	60	60
	Std. Deviation	28.42922	18.79416	16.59190	15.45688

From table, it is evident that in subtest 1 the trainees below the age of 25 years performed better than the trainees aged 25 years and above. They attained a mean score of 69.4% and 60.4% respectively. The two groups attained the MCL but

failed to achieve the DCL in subtest 1. The same findings were obtained in subtest 2 where the trainees below the age of 25 years performed better than their counterparts of 25 years and above. While those below 25 years attained a mean score of 35.8%, those of 25 years and above attained a mean score of 31.5%. The two groups neither attained the DCL nor the MCL.

In subtest 3 however, the two groups almost registered the same performance. The trainees aged below 25 years achieved a mean score of 64.9% while the trainees aged 25 years and above achieved a mean score of 64.8%. Though the two groups attained the MCL, they failed to attain the DCL. In the test total, the trainees aged below 25 years attained a mean score of 56.8% while the trainees aged 25 years and above attained a mean score of 52.6%. The two groups attained the MCL but failed to achieve the DCL in the test total.

Descriptive statistics indicate that the trainees in the two age groups did not attain the DCL in the listening tasks. However, they attained the MCL in all the listening tasks except in subtest 2. The general conclusion drawn from the results is that the trainees who were below 25 years performed better than the trainees who were 25 years and above in all the listening tasks. Linguists argue that a child is born with a Language Acquisition Device (LAD) which assists the child in language learning. The LAD however is said to atrophy with age especially after thirteen years of age.

Buck (1991) seems to agree with the workings of the LAD. He studied the influence of age on listening comprehension as a separate trait among EFL/ESL speakers. Results showed considerable diversity between listeners in their mental ages in favour of the younger listeners. However, a study by Remark (1990) gave different findings. He aimed at determining whether or not listening skills training improved university resident assistants’ ability to actively listen and whether age affected this ability to listen actively. The findings were that age had no significant effect on the ability to listen actively.

The performances in the different listening tasks were correlated with the social variable of age using independent t-tests and the findings tabulated in table below:

Correlations by Age

		Age Range	Subtest 1	Subtest 2	Subtest 3	Test total
Spearman’s rho Age	Correlation Coefficient	1	.160	.041	-.052	.094
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.221	.754	.693	.475
	N	60	60	60	60	60
Subtest 1	Correlation Coefficient	.160	1	.390**	.218	.827**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.221		.002	.095	.000
	N	60	60	60	60	60
Subtest 2	Correlation Coefficient	.041	.390**	1	.331**	.743**

	Sig. (2-tailed)	.754	.002		.010	.000
	N	60	60	60	60	60
Subtest 3	Correlation Coefficient	-.052	.218	.331**	1	.609**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.693	.095	.010		.000
	N	60	60	60	60	60
Test total	Correlation Coefficient	.094	.827**	.743**	.609**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.475	.000	.000	.000	
	N	60	60	60	60	60
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).						

According to the above table, the social variable of age had no correlation with the performances in all the subtests and in the test total. We then conclude that age did not influence performance of trainees in the subtests and in the test total.

The performances in the different listening tasks were also correlated. The performance in subtest 1 did not correlate with the performance in subtest 3 at any confidence level. On the other hand, the performance in subtest 1 correlated with the performance in subtest 2 and the performance in the test total at 0.01 significance level. The findings imply that if a trainee above or below 25 years of age performed well in subtest 1, he or she did the same in subtest 2 and in the test total but not in subtest 3. The performances of subtest 1, subtest 2 and the test total were dependent on each other while performance in subtest 3 was independent of the other performances.

The performance in subtest 2 was correlated with the performances in the other listening tasks. The results showed that the performance correlated with the performance in subtest 1, subtest 3 and in the test total at 0.01 significance level. This implies that if trainees of any of the two age groups performed well in subtest 2 they performed well in subtest 1, 3 and in the test total as the performances of the these tasks are correlated.

The performance in subtest 3 correlated with the performances in subtest 2 and the test total at 0.01 significance level. It did not correlate with the performance in subtest 1 as indicated in the table above. This implies that if a trainee in a given age group performed well in subtest 3, he or she performed well in subtest 2 and in the test total but not necessarily in subtest 1. We therefore conclude that the trainees in any of the age group had their listening skills used to perform subtests 1, 2 and the test total (recall, inferring meaning, predicting outcomes, use of context, knowledge of vocabulary, semantic and syntactic knowledge of the language) dependent on each other but were independent of skills needed to perform subtest 3 (discrimination of sounds, recognizing word segments, grammatical knowledge of language).

The performance in the test total was found to correlate with the performances in the three subtests. This means that in

performing the test total, trainees in a given age group depended on the skills needed to perform all the subtests.

In conclusion, the younger trainees performed better than the older trainees in the present study, the differences in performances of the age groups were not statistically significant. The differences in performances were by chance. The findings of this study agree with a study aimed at determining whether or not listening skill training improved university resident assistants' ability to actively listen and to determine the effects of age. Remark (1990) found that age had no significant effect on the ability to listen. However, Silvina (1997) reports a study on the listening acquisition of Dutch by English speakers. The study showed that relatively impaired in old age is memory performance that requires the information of new connections, for example, recall and sustaining new facts while highly preserved in old age is memory performance involving highly practised skills. Silvina (1997) further reports that these skills are impaired in old age. The study also argues that highly preserved in old age is memory performance involving highly practised skills. Craik (1994) says that brain volume peaks in the early 20s and gradually declines for the rest of life. In 40s the cortex starts to shrink. Given that blood flow drops the most in the front cortex, people experience declines in verbal fluency or ability to find words they want. Craik's findings seem to justify the better performance recorded by the younger trainees in the present study.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

. The younger trainees in both colleges performed better than the older trainees in most of the tasks. However, in none of the listening tasks did trainees acquire the Desired Competence Levels. In fact, in listening task 2, they neither acquired the Desired Levels of Competence nor Minimum Competence Levels. This calls for all the stakeholders to implement the suggested strategies to enhance these abilities

Strategies by Teacher Trainees

Among the strategies recommended for learners were right attitude, eye contact, awareness of instructor's mannerisms, tone of voice and other body language, do creative listening, avoid intellectual despair, use memorising words, repeat what the instructor says, do a lot of practice, avoid translating what you hear, be patient and use varieties of knowledge to process information.

Strategies by Instructors

The instructors should give learners confidence, tell learners the purpose for listening, teach intelligent guess work, divide a listening task into three stages: pre-listening stage, actual listening and post telling, keep sentences short and grammatically simple, use exaggerated intonation, emphasise key words, show empathy, minimise both internal and external distractions, choose familiar and interesting topics and frequently repeat and paraphrase.

Strategies by Curriculum Developers

In supporting trainees' and instructor's efforts, the curriculum developers should: involve instructors in syllabus design and examination preparation, come up with learning materials that attract trainees, vary teaching methods, organise pre-service and in-service training for instructors and promote the spirit of integration of all language skills.

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APPENDIX I: LISTENING TEST

Name: Sex:
Age: KCSE English Grade:
KCSE Mean Grade:

Sub-test I: Listening Comprehension

a. Listen to the following passage which will be read to you twice and answer the questions that follow:

Being an only child Nyakio knew no lack. She had grown in plenty. Her parents worked very hard to ensure that their daughter had the very best. However, Nyakio seemed not to reciprocate her parents' kindness. This was especially so after she joined secondary school. She got into a gang of drug abusers.

The principal of the school being a mother herself decided to help Nyakio by talking to her on the dangers of drug abuse. When she could not give an ear to her advice she enlisted the help of the school counselor. Though the school counselor devoted her time in helping Nyakio, her efforts were not rewarded as Nyakio kept the vice.

When the school principal could not take it any more, Nyakio was sent home with all her belongings. Out of fear, Nyakio decided not to go back home but rather to look for some casual employment in the nearby town. It was while looking for employment that Nyakio met this young man who made her believe that he was desperately looking for a young woman like Nyakio to marry. Nyakio gave in to the offer.

No sooner had Nyakio started living with this man than she realized how brutal he was. She could always have him hit her, bang her head against the wall or even threaten to cut her into pieces. To make matters worse her health started to deteriorate. Being left with few options, Nyakio decided to go back home and seek forgiveness as the prodigal son of the Bible.

Though her parents accepted her back, it was too late to salvage everything as she had already contracted HIV/AIDS. It was then that Nyakio confirmed that bad company ruins good morals.

Questions

- 1) Give a possible title to the passage that you have just listened to. (2 mks)
- 2) What is the meaning of the phrase "not to reciprocate her parents' kindness" (2 mks)
- 3) What other measure would the school principal have taken to help Nyakio out of her problem? (2 mks)
- 4) Which offer did Nyakio give in to? (2 mks)
- 5) What is the meaning of the word "deteriorate" as used in the passage? (2 mks)

Sub-test II: Cloze Test

a) Listen carefully to this passage. It will be read twice. In the first reading, no word will be omitted but in the second reading, some words will be omitted. Supply the missing words to complete the passage:

Growing up on the slopes of Aberdare Ranges was fun. The day began with being served with a cup of porridge. Breakfast had to be taken within a short time to give way to the daily chores. These ranged from grazing, fetching water and shamba work.

Although these were the assigned chores we had our crafty way of coming up with our own defined chores.

Sub-test III: Dictation

Write the following pairs of words. Each pair will be read to you twice.

- | | |
|----|-------------|
| a) | fine, vine |
| b) | root, loot |
| c) | bush, push |
| d) | hall, all |
| e) | lose, loose |
| f) | pale, bale |
| g) | very, ferry |
| h) | cot, court |
| i) | ear, hear |
| j) | keen, kin |