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Abstract

This article outlines a metacognitive strategy that can be employed as either a Tier I or Tier II instructional practice. The strategy is designed to enhance learning skills in public school students who are included in the general education classroom. The strategy is reflective of the ongoing research agenda related to improving the academic performance of both at risk and inclusion students who make up a major portion of today's academically diverse classrooms. A research foundation for the strategy, an outline of the strategy's components, and suggestions for implementation are provided.

Listening plays a significant role in successful classroom performance. Research (Sanders, 1965; Rabbitt, 1966; Katz & Illmer, 1972; Kerr, 1973; Gilbert, 1984) indicates that up to 90% of the activities in today's public school classrooms involve the ability to listen effectively and respond appropriately to what is heard. By the time students graduate from high school, they will have been engage in activities that primarily involve listening skills at a rate 3 times greater than activities that involve reading skills (Bolton, 1986). An examination of the classroom environment and its constituents indicates that listening is an "assumed skill," that teachers assume all persons inherently know how to listen effectively. This assumption is constantly demonstrated to be erroneous in actual practice.

Unfortunately, many students do not arrive at school understanding the listening requirements embedded in the instructional setting. Such students often view their listening skills as adequate, while their teachers report that these skills are generally inadequate for instructional task demands (Thomas and Hoffman, 1987). The authors further report that teachers feel that students are generally not capable of identifying main ideas or important details included in class discussions. Listening is a skill that generates a great deal of discussion, but is seldom addressed in classroom settings and receives much less emphasis than any of the other communication skills (Bolton, 1986). In essence, effective listening and its components is seldom understood by either students or their teachers.

In the current classroom environment, the academically diverse nature of the student population has resulted in significant challenges for teachers. Instructional time has remained constant, yet the volume of increasingly complex content and the demand for improved student performance on state mandated tests have become critical issues in public education (Sacks, 1999). Teachers are often faced with simply "covering the content" and "practicing for the tests" rather than actually "teaching all students" (Urdan & Paris, 1994).

Students identified as "at risk for academic failure" or possessing a "learning disability" tend to be similar in terms of their academically related skills and abilities. These skills and abilities (including the skills and abilities associated with listening) tend to be either attenuated in nature or completely absent from the student's behavioral repertoire

(Deshler, Ellis, & Lenz, 1996; Carlson & Alley, 1981; Deshler, Shumaker, Warner, Alley, & Clark, 1980).

Given these factors, the need for targeted training of specific strategies to enhance listening skills is apparent. Brown (1975), Flavell (1973), Ellis & Lenz (1987), Kavale & Forness (1987), Blackbourn & Fllingim (2005), and The National Council on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education (2000) all provide support for the contention that strategies to enhance learning can be taught to both individuals and groups of students. Indeed, the Strategic Instruction Model (Deshler, Ellis, & Lenz, 1996) has over 30 years of research support as a set of evidence based, metacognitive techniques (Hock & Mellard, 2011; Shumaker & Deshler, 2006; Harris, Shumaker, & Deshler, 2011). This approach focuses on employing the academic content presented in a classroom as the vehicle for the training specific strategies to aid in the processing, storing, and retrieving that content. Essentially, teachers must approach the training of listening skills in a manner with the intensity identical to the training of other academic skills. According to Deshler & Shumaker (1988), this requires a reorientation to the entire instructional philosophy and practice of instruction. They state:

> "This new vision incorporates the adoption of a strategic teaching process in which the classroom teacher takes the central role as both the planner and the mediator of learning. Within this new vision, the teacher teaches not only the content, but the strategies required to make learning the content meaningful, integrated, and transferable" (p. 101).

This article propose one approach within a range of possible alternative approaches within the scope of this vision. The proposed approach is designed to help students enhance their ability to identify the salient elements, process, store, and retrieve information contained in oral communication. This strategy is represented by the mnemonic device "**EARS"** and is described below.

Establish Eye Contact

Establishing eye contact with the speaker is the initial phase of the listening process. Listening, while primarily an individual, internal process, also possesses a collaborative interactive element. Eye contact forces the student to focus on and track the teacher as they are speaking, but also signals to the instructor an interest on the part of the student. This nonverbal signal serves as a reinforce to the teacher as it indicates "attention" to the task of listening. In essence, this first step opens up both the teacher and the student to the act of "listening".

Activate Your Thinking

Once eye contact has been established and the reciprocal process of listening has begun, the student must bring the aspect of "focus" to bear in the process. However, without a focal point understanding of the verbal instruction will not occur. Therefore, the teacher must provide students with some type of graphic organizer, frame, or concept map as the foundation of the lecture for focus and self-questioning. As gaining information is the primary goal of the listening process in the classroom, such an organizer can aid the student in drawing connections between the elements of a lecture, differentiating between irrelevant and salient elements, or identifying how secondary ideas can be collected within a main topic. This is essentially a means of supporting the student in activating their thinking processes.

Respond

An additional requirement of effective listening is periodic and appropriate response to the speaker, whether by answering questions or via non-verbal cues. As stated above listening, like all other communicative process, is reciprocal. Therefore, timely, appropriate responses serve as reinforcers for the speaker for the speaker validating the connection between them and the student. Student responses also elicit important information from the teacher, including the opportunity for the teacher to expand and refine elements of the content being presented or provide the student with corrective feedback. Further, responding to teacher questions, asking questions of the teacher, or relating to teacher or peer comments allows students to manipulate the content both intellectually and verbally infusing personal contextual information in the process and aiding retention.

Seek more information

An additional critical component of effective listening is the process of student self-questioning. This component allows students to clarify information presented in a lecture, determine what is understood, what is absent or attenuated, and delineate those areas of inadequacy for future study. This component serves as the foundation for additional responses to teacher presentations and can lead to self-initiated, teacher directed, or group mediated activities designed to provide additional information and address content based learner deficiencies.

Simply presenting the steps in this learning strategy is not sufficient to ensure that students will be capable of employing it to enhance their ability to listen in the classroom. Teachers must provide direct instructional support to students in relation to the specific learning strategy utilizing the course content as the instructional vehicle. This support would initially involve describing and modeling the strategy and providing several examples of its various applications to the students (Alley & Blackbourn, 1980). By thinking aloud while describing and modeling the strategy, teachers provide an example of how the thinking process should work and how to separate salient fact from irrelevant their thinking while listening. In addition, controlled activities in which the students could practice the specific strategy must be provided. Gradually these activities could be structured in more lengthy, complex manners to help students refine the strategy that they have been taught (Alley & Deshler, 1979; Deshler, Ellis, & Lenz, 1996). Such a process allows students to both organize and reflect upon that information presented, its relation to the overall content, and the primary purpose of instruction. Once the strategy is taught to mastery, the teacher must provide opportunities and examples of how the strategy can be used in other classes and with different content. Generalization of the strategy to new environments, with different content, and in novel manners is the key to its successful use (Blackbourn, 1989).

Summary

EARS is a strategy that can be effectively with any content and in any classroom in which “lecture” is the primary instructional method. As this mode of instruction increases in use from the early grades to higher education, the ability to listen effectively becomes more critical. Therefore, listening as a communication skill should receive the same degree of emphasis as any other type of literacy/communication skill such as reading or writing. The teaching of listening skills should be approached with the same level

of intensity and integrity. EARS provides a template and a process to accomplish this task.

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