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LISTENING : AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

A listening program geared to the interests of rural Aboriginal children was prepared and sent out to two Year 3 classes in the north-west of New South Wales. The class, with 19 Aborigines and 4 whites showed measurable gains in listening comprehension at the end of the program. The Experimental Class with one Aboriginal girl and 10 white children did not show improvements in listening until the Aboriginally oriented listening program was terminated. The significance of these results, particularly for minority groups in a classroom, are discussed.

Teachers are sensitive to children with poor listening habits in their classes. Sometimes these children will assume the habit of careful listening but their thoughts are far away (Nichols and Stevens 1957:105). It is relatively easy to teach children courteous manners to present to a speaker, but quite another matter to teach them to listen for the meaning of what the speaker is saying. Listening is a voluntary activity. It is the listener who must respond to what he hears and relate it to his own experiences.

Aboriginal children in Australia have been observed to be very good listeners when instructed by their elders (Berndt, 1973; Hart, 1974). At a very early age these children learned the importance of listening if they were to survive and grow in the tribe. Yet, in the state schools, Aboriginal children are frequently very poor listeners. All too often their teachers, most of whom have been educated in an urban society, find it very difficult to present ideas, events and materials that hold high interest for them.

In his study of *Remembering*, Bartlett (1967) noted that a person's past operated as an organizing mass for accommodating new ideas. Problems arise if the listener can perceive nothing recognizable in what he hears. But if the speaker can relate what he wishes to convey to the apperceptive mass of the listener and then extend his apperception, real learning would occur through listening. It was therefore hypothesized that if Aboriginal and white Australian

children in a rural area were given an opportunity to listen to stories in the classroom which related to their environment and interests, then their listening skills would show measurable improvement.

PROCEDURE

In order to select suitable listening materials for rural Aboriginal and white children, a number of Aboriginal legends, children's stories, poems and word games were put on cassettes and sent to teachers in two rural schools who had expressed willingness to participate in a listening experiment. The teachers were sent blank cassettes on which to record the comments made by the children after listening to the stories. From these recorded discussions it became clear that the children preferred real life stories about Aboriginal children to the Aboriginal legends, and that they relished the opportunity of participating in the word games.

Utilizing the suggestions made by the children, a series of four cassettes, each 30 to 40 minutes in length, were prepared.¹ The stories by and about Aboriginal children and Australian animals varied in length, but none required more than ten minutes of listening time. After each story some comprehension questions were asked, or other activity suggested to encourage the teacher and pupils to switch off the cassette and discuss what they had heard. Bending (1970:77) has pointed out the value of a period of discussion so that the various listening experiences of the group could be used to evolve a mutual interpretation of what was heard. It was suggested to the teachers that the children listen to a cassette for a short period each day and that they be encouraged to listen to a story, particularly one they liked, a number of times. Unfortunately no control could be exercised over the listening program once the cassettes had been sent out to the schools. However, the blank cassettes included in the kit did help to foster discussion periods, as well as providing the investigator with some valuable additional data.

The two Year 3 classes which participated in the experiment were very different, although both were in the rural areas of the north-west of New South Wales, as were the Year 3 Control Classes. In Experimental School 1, the 23 children in Year 3 comprised 19 Aboriginals and 4 whites, while the children in Experimental School 2, Year 3, contained only one Aboriginal girl and 10 white children. Pupils

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1. *The writer wishes to acknowledge the work of Mr Harvey Mendham, who kindly made the cassette recordings used in the experiment.*

in Experimental School 2 were taught by the same young woman teacher during Year 2 and Year 3, while the children in Experimental School 1 had a young woman teacher in Year 2 and the deputy headmaster in Year 3.

Because one of the Control Schools was very small, with only 5 white children in Year 3, numbers in the Control Schools were combined to give a total of 21 present for all testing sessions, 3 Aboriginal and 18 white children. All pupils in the Control Group had been taught by women in Year 2 and were taught by men in Year 3. Both male teachers held positions of responsibility in the respective schools.

The PAT Listening Comprehension, (Part 1, Form B), was given to all pupils during the first week in December when the children were completing Year 2. At the beginning of Year 3, the first cassettes were posted to the Experimental Schools, together with several printed copies of the materials recorded on the cassettes for the benefit of the teachers and any pupils who might be interested to try and follow the printed word while they listened. At monthly intervals fresh cassettes were posted to the schools together with blank cassettes to record discussions. At the end of five months, the experimenter visited the schools, gathered up the cassettes in the Experimental Classes, and administered the PAT Listening Comprehension, (Part 2, Form B), in both the Control and Experimental Schools. At the end of the school year the investigator again visited each of the four schools and administered the PAT Listening Comprehension, (Part 2, Form A). This final test was given to check on listening progress five months after the experiment had concluded. Table 1 sets out the design of the study.

TABLE 1 - DESIGN OF STUDY

		Experimental 1 N=23	Experimental 2 N=11	Control N=21
Year 2	July to Nov.	Trial of Listening themes		
	December	Listening Test, Pt 1	Listening Test, Pt 1	Listening Test, Pt 1
Year 3	Feb. to June	Listening Program	Listening Program	---
	July	Listening Test, Pt 2, B	Listening Test, Pt 2, B	Listening Test, Pt 2, B
	Aug. to Nov.	---	---	---
	December	Listening Test, Pt 2, A	Listening Test, Pt 2, A	Listening Test, Pt 2, A

RESULTS

TABLE 2
MEAN SCORES ON THE PAT LISTENING COMPREHENSION

	Exp.1	Exp.2	Control	F Ratio
Year 2 Dec. Pt 1,B	17.87#	22.455#	24.286	5.06**
Year 3 July Pt 2,B	16.957##	17.545##	20.619	3.18*
Year 3 Dec. Pt 2,A	20.087	26.273	26.286	9.386**

* Significant beyond the .05 level

** Significant beyond the .01 level

Experimental 1 and Control significant beyond the .01 level, F 15.958; Experimental 2 and Control not significant F 0.639.

Experimental 1 and Control significant beyond the .01 level, F 7.311; Experimental 2 and Control not significant F 2.055.

An inspection of Table 2 shows that at the end of Year 2, pupils in Experimental School 1 were significantly below Experimental School 2 and the Control Group in listening comprehension. However, by July of the next year, Experimental School 1 pupils were performing almost as well as the pupils in Experimental School 2, though their mean score was still significantly below that of the Control Group. Because of the discrepancy in performance, analyses of co-variance were carried out between the Control Group and Experimental School 1, to allow for the better listening performance of the Control Group before the listening experiment commenced. Adjusted Mean Scores are set out in Table 3:

TABLE 3

ANALYSES OF CO-VARIANCE: LISTENING TESTS GIVEN BEFORE THE CRITERION ARE USED TO ADJUST CRITERION MEAN SCORES.

Adjusted Mean Scores			
	Exp. 1	Control	F. Ratio
Year 3 Listening, July with 1 control	18.099	19.368	0.80
Year 3 Listening, Dec. with 2 controls	21.859	24.345	3.26

From these results it would seem that listening to stories about Aboriginal children did transfer to listening comprehension of a more general nature. Even five months after the listening program had concluded, there were still no significant differences when mean scores were adjusted for listening performance before the experiment started and for results obtained in July at the end of the listening program.

A study of recordings made by the children in Experimental School 1 at the beginning of Year 3 indicated that after listening to a story that really gripped them, their discussion became more coherent and their use of standard English was far more fluent than when relating personal experiences. Below are examples of some of the stories the children told about the severe floods of January, 1974, which they had lived through. Remember they are attempting to communicate their personal experiences in the floods to a stranger in Sydney.

"Me and my sister went for a swim and we flood and went under the bridge for a swim then went home and we were wet."

"The floods mmm two people got drowneded went to some people went swimming in the floods."

"One day we went in the floods and we pushed the bike and tidied the house."

"We flew from Dubbo to Walgett we couldn't leave because the flood was bad and the sandflies were bad."

Only a few days later, after listening to *The Firemaker*, by Frank and Betty Few, the following comments were recorded by the same children:

"This girl named Alinga broke her basin and her grandfather couldn't fix it and so he made another one for her and Yirri he watched his grandfather making it so he could make his own."

"When the little boy went looking for weeds twigs he saw a goanna and he grabbed it then he went back excited and he thought he might be a good hunter."

"I would not like to eat a goanna I haven't tasted one before I would like a basket like that girl's."

"I thought the best part was when the old man started to make a fire he got an old log he told the children to gather some leaves to make a fire."

Many of the children in Experimental School 1 had not had the opportunity to listen to stories told in "school" English. Neither had they been encouraged to express their ideas about what they had experienced. Yet listening and talking about what they have heard is fundamental for comprehending the spoken and written word.

Although oral expression and listening comprehension showed measurable improvement among the children in Experimental School 1, reading tests indicated no advancement in their reading skills. While the printed stories had been included in the kits sent out to the schools, the children found these too difficult to follow. It would have been better if picture books had been prepared with simple captions below each picture. If this had been done while the children listened to a story in a listening corner, they could have followed the theme in the appropriate picture book. In this way they would gain experience in handling books and be encouraged to decipher the captions below the pictures.

The children in Experimental School 2 did not progress in listening comprehension until after the listening experiment ended. According to their teacher, the children became tired of stories about Australian Aborigines and Australian animals. As most of these children lived on farms, stories about wombats and brolgas would not have the same appeal as a story about a faithful sheep dog. After the listening program concluded, the teacher continued to use cassettes, but the stories were those that had high interest for the white rural children. It was interesting to note, however, that the Aboriginal girl seemed to gain some benefit from listening to stories about Aboriginal children.

CONCLUSIONS

From the results of the study, it would appear that listening to cassettes, followed by group discussions about the material, does improve listening comprehension for children with less well developed listening habits. However, the experiment highlighted the importance of selecting stories which are based on the interests and experiences of the children. Stories chosen for their appeal to pupils in Experimental School 1 proved to be unsatisfactory for most of the pupils in Experimental School 2. But in Experimental School 2 there was one Aboriginal who appeared to benefit from listening to cassettes oriented to Aboriginal interests.

Where Aboriginal children form a small minority in a class, listening programs geared entirely to their Aboriginal interests are not going to be favoured by other groups in the room. However, a teacher can make an effort to include the interests of minority groups from time to time. In this way the listening experiences of the dominant group can be broadened and the children from different backgrounds can feel that the teacher does have some interest in their concerns.

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