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Early Listening Development in Multisensory Classrooms

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ABSTRACT: Listening skills form a foundational component of early English language learning, supporting classroom participation and subsequent language development. Despite their importance, classroom-based evidence documenting listening skill development in early primary contexts remains limited, particularly where standardized assessment tools are impractical. This study examined observed changes in listening skills among Grade 1 learners participating in a structured multisensory English Language Teaching (ELT) programme. A quasi-experimental pre–post design was employed with a sample of 93 learners assigned to experimental and control groups. Listening performance was assessed using classroom-based observational rubrics encompassing auditory attention, sound discrimination, instruction following, and meaning response. Descriptive statistical analyses were used to examine patterns of listening performance across the instructional period. Results indicated incremental improvements in total listening scores for both groups. The experimental group demonstrated higher baseline listening performance and slightly greater consistency at post-test. Indicator-level analysis showed modest increases in auditory attention and meaning response, while instruction following remained stable and sound discrimination exhibited minimal variation. The magnitude of numerical change was constrained by high baseline scores and a compressed scoring scale. Rather than establishing causal effects, the findings provide descriptive evidence of listening skill stability and gradual development within a multisensory ELT context. The study highlights the feasibility of observational assessment for documenting early listening behaviours and offers pedagogically relevant insights for early primary English instruction.

KEYWORDS: listening skills, multisensory instruction, early English language teaching, Grade 1 learners, classroom-based assessment

I. INTRODUCTION

The ability to listen is prominent in the early aspects of learning the English language and especially in the early years of a formal education when students depend more on aural stimuli to follow the classroom lesson (Goh, 2000; Vandergrift, 2007). In Grade 1 classrooms, listening forms the basis of the capacity of learners to be attentive to teacher talk, instructions, sound discrimination, and meaning construction in the learning processes (Nation and Newton, 2009). Instead of being a passive receptive ability listening is an active attentional control, perceptual processing, and meaning-making process building up over time in early childhood (Field, 2008; Rost, 2011).

Although listening development is fundamental, even in early primary English Language Teaching (ELT) settings, its development is often presupposed, and instead, the development is often deduced through subsequent productive elements of the process, such as speaking or reading (Goh, 2000; Winke and Brunfaut, 2020). This tendency is partly attributable to methodological challenges associated with assessing listening in young learners, for whom standardised or test-based measures may be developmentally inappropriate or impractical in routine classroom settings (Murphy, 2014).

In recent years, multisensory instructional approaches have gained prominence in early ELT classrooms, emphasising the coordinated use of auditory, visual, and kinaesthetic inputs to support learner engagement and comprehension (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012; Kiany et al., 2018). Within such approaches, listening is not treated as a purely receptive process but as an active skill shaped by instructional design, interaction, and attentional support. However, much of the existing research on multisensory ELT has focused on broad learning outcomes, with comparatively limited attention to how specific receptive skills—particularly listening—develop within everyday classroom practice.

To address this gap, the present study adopts a classroom-based perspective to document observed changes in listening skills among Grade 1 learners participating in a structured multisensory ELT programme. Rather than attempting to isolate causal effects, the study prioritises descriptive patterns of listening performance as they unfold within an authentic instructional context. Attention is given to four listening dimensions commonly emphasised in early ELT classrooms: auditory attention, sound discrimination, instruction following, and meaning response. Through foregrounding observational assessment, which is in line

with ordinary teaching activities, the study will be valuable to contribute to ecologically valid evidence that can be applied by the classroom and in further research.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Listening Skills in Early English Language Learning

Listening is widely recognised as a foundational skill in early language acquisition, particularly during the first years of formal schooling when instructional input is predominantly oral (Goh, 2000; Vandergrift, 2007). In early ELT contexts, listening supports learners' ability to participate in classroom interaction, follow teacher guidance, and respond meaningfully to spoken language (Nation & Newton, 2009). Research in applied linguistics has consistently emphasised that listening involves complex cognitive and attentional processes, including perception, parsing, and interpretation, rather than passive reception (Field, 2008; Rost, 2011).

Although listening plays a critical role in early language development, it is often under-assessed in classroom research, with progress inferred indirectly through gains in speaking, reading, or writing (Winke & Brunfaut, 2020). Because of this underrepresentation, little is known about how listening skills develop in regular classroom environments, especially for younger students.

Multisensory Instruction in Early ELT

Multisensory teaching in early ELT is the teaching approach that specifically incorporates auditory, visual and kinaesthetic inputs in the learning process (Vandergrift and Goh, 2012). In the early primary classroom and such practices are common, concrete embodied experiences aid in the understanding and engagement of the learner (Kiany et al., 2018).

Regarding pedagogy, multisensory instruction is based on the perception that learning is achieved by interaction with various sources of input in that they may facilitate attention regulation and meaning construction (Birulés-Muntané and Soto-Faraco, 2016). Existing research in the classroom suggests that there is a relationship between multisensory tasks and learner engagement in the initial stages of English Language Teaching (ELT) settings, although the degree to which particular language skills are sensitive to multisensory interventions has not been fully investigated.

Observational Assessment of Listening Skills

Methodological issues arise when listening skills are evaluated in early primary settings because young children may have difficulty with formal test-taking procedures. Consequently, observation and evaluation procedures based on rubrics are often used to record listening behaviours in a typical instructional setting (Murphy, 2014). The most important considerations include attention, reaction to verbal prompts, and the capacity to follow directions.

Although auxiliary research methods like observation provide high ecological validity, they are not often included in the literature, which means that limited research is available on the nature of listening skill manifestation and development in natural classroom settings (Winke & Brunfaut, 2020). This means more research needs to be conducted that focuses on the descriptive aspect of listening skill.

Rationale for the Present Study

Taken together, existing research highlights the importance of listening in early ELT, the increasing use of multisensory instructional practices, and the widespread reliance on observational assessment in classrooms. To investigate listening development as a separate skill domain in regular educational settings, empirical research that incorporates these components is still required. The present study responds to this need by documenting observed changes in listening skills among Grade 1 learners participating in a structured multisensory ELT programme.

III. METHOD

Research Design

The research design adopted was quasi-experiment, which concentrated on the pre-post descriptive design to measure the change in listening ability amongst the grade one learners during the structured multisensory ELT program adopted in the research setting. In the quasi-experiment design, the entire group in the research setting was considered the experimental and control group, and it was not possible to randomly assign the participants due to the available classroom constraints, which follows the conventional format of conducting research in classrooms (Andringa & Godfroid, 2020).

Participants

Ninety-three first-graders from a regular elementary school made up the sample. There were forty-six students in the experimental group and forty-seven in the control group. All participants followed the same school curriculum and were of comparable age and educational background. Written parental consent and institutional permission were obtained prior to data collection.

Instructional Context

Learners in the experimental group received instruction through a structured multisensory ELT programme incorporating auditory, visual, and kinaesthetic activities. The control group continued with regular English instruction aligned with the school curriculum.

Listening Skills Assessment Instrument

In terms of the listening skills, it was assessed through the use of "listening classroom observation rubric," which has four indicators: auditory attention, sound discrimination, following instructions, and meaning response, which are rated using a three-point scale, ranging from emerging, developing, to secure, corresponding to totals ranging from 4 to 12, as recommended by classroom observation (Murphy, 2014).

Procedure and Data Analysis

Listening tests were conducted by carrying out pre-test and post-test listening assessments within regular classroom activities. They were all conducted by a single rater who followed a scoring scheme. Descriptive statistics, in which means and standard deviations were used to test the trend of behaviour regarding listening.

IV. RESULT

LISTENING SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Here, the study observed changes in listening skills in Grade 1 learners based on the results of a multifaceted English Language Teaching program. The study measured listening skills in English using four criteria, namely, Auditory Attention, Sound Discrimination, Instruction Following, and Meaning Response, and results were obtained before and after the program for both experimental and control groups.

Descriptive Statistics for Listening Skills

Table 1 presents the mean and standard deviation of total listening scores for the experimental and control groups at pre-test and post-test.

Group	Test Phase	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Experimental	Pre-test	9.46	1.15
Experimental	Post-test	9.63	1.10
Control	Pre-test	6.17	1.15
Control	Post-test	6.53	1.18

Note. Scores represent aggregated performance across four listening indicators (range = 4–12).

Pre–Post Changes in Listening Performance

The experimental group had better mean listening scores than the control group at the baseline, which signifies better initial listening scores. After the course of instruction, the experimental group demonstrated a significant although minor improvement in the mean listening scores ($\Delta M = +0.17$). Conversely, the control group showed a small improvement ($\Delta M = +0.36$), which implies little improvement in time. In both groups, the numerical increase was relatively low, although the control group had slightly more, which indicated that the changes were not significant and transformed due to the natural development in the short period of teaching.

The standard deviation scores did not vary significantly between the testing stages of both groups implying that the overall variation in the listening performance did not differ significantly over the course of the study.

Indicator-Level Listening Skill Performance (Experimental Group)

Descriptive statistics were computed for each listening indicator in the experimental group in order to look more closely at listening development.

Table 2 Mean Scores by Listening Indicator (Experimental Group)

Listening Indicator	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean
Auditory Attention	2.22	2.41
Sound Discrimination	2.41	2.37
Instruction Following	2.43	2.43
Meaning Response	2.39	2.41

Note. Scores were rated using a three-point observational rubric (1 = emerging, 2 = developing, 3 = secure). Values represent mean scores for the experimental group only.

Indicator-level analysis showed slight gains in Auditory Attention and Meaning Response but stability in Instruction Following across the two phases. Changes in Sound Discrimination scores were limited, indicating that the development of this skill could require longer instructional exposure in order for clinical-level change to become evident in the classroom.

Summary of Listening Results

Overall, the information would support the interpretation that there are incremental advances in the listening ability from the outset to the end of the instructional block, and that the experimental group had a more consistent pattern in listening. The information would imply that early exposure to multisensory approaches in the classroom setting facilitates a level of consistency in listening engagement for early primary school students.

V. RESULT

The present study examined observed changes in listening skills among Grade 1 learners participating in a structured multisensory English Language Teaching (ELT) programme. Rather than evaluating instructional effectiveness, the study adopted a classroom-based descriptive approach to document patterns of listening performance as they unfolded within an authentic instructional context. The discussion therefore focuses on interpreting patterns of stability, variation, and modest change in listening behaviours, with reference to established research on early listening development and classroom instruction.

Patterns of Stability and Modest Change in Early Listening Skills

Across the instructional period, both experimental and control groups demonstrated relatively modest numerical changes in overall listening scores. This trend supports the idea that the early learning process in the classroom setting can be defined not so much by arching, but by fairly stable skill acquisition than by quick, quantitative learning within short teaching periods. These results are in line with the findings reported that receptive language abilities, especially listening, are not prone to large changes in the short-term when evaluated using a classroom-based evaluation (Goh, 2000; Vandergrift, 2007).

These patterns are further put into perspective by the fact that the baseline listening scores were higher amongst the experimental group. When learners move into instruction with comparatively advanced listening skills the possibilities of measurable improvement can be limited by ceiling effects inherent in compressed rating scales. In this context, the stability in the performance should not be taken as the lack of learning but as the sign of the constant attention and the constant involvement in the classroom. Previous studies have also warned against the need to equate the limited score movement with limited development at the early stages of language acquisition especially in situations that involve the utilization of observation or rubric-enhanced tools (Winke and Brunfaut, 2020).

Differential Responsiveness of Listening Subskills

Analysis at the level of indicators showed that there was variation in the dimensions of listening. Minor improvements in auditory attention and meaning response were found but instruction following did not change and sound discrimination showed little change. This tendency represents the differentiated character of the subskills of listening and is consistent with cognitive explanations of listening which distinguish between attentional-interpretive and low-level perceptual skills (Field, 2008; Rost, 2011).

Auditory attention and meaning response is directly connected with the ability of the learners to maintain focus and act as a listener of the teaching materials and to incorporate context related information. These factors of listening can be especially vulnerable to instructional design solutions that include multimodal input, gesture-supported explanation, and interactive routines that are popular in multisensory classrooms. Sound discrimination, in contrast, entails a more fine-grained type of perceptual processing that can be built up after a lengthy period of exposure and repeated practice and may last longer than a brief intervention in a classroom (Cauldwell, 2019).

The consistency in instruction-following behaviour can also indicate the previous knowledge of the classroom routines and teacher language by learners. In early primary contexts, instruction following often reaches functional adequacy early in the school year, resulting in limited observable change over subsequent instructional periods. This interpretation is consistent with classroom-based studies showing that some receptive skills stabilise earlier than others, particularly when instruction emphasises routine participation rather than targeted perceptual training (Goh & Taib, 2006).

Multisensory Instruction as a Context for Listening Engagement

Crucially, however, these results must be considered in the context of the role of multisensory instruction rather than as evidence of its impact. The increased consistency of listening performance in the experimental group would appear to indicate that systematic multisensory activities may provide a facilitating environment for the maintenance of attentional engagement with listening tasks. Such an interpretation aligns with pedagogical research emphasising multisensory instruction as a means of scaffolding participation and sustaining learner involvement, rather than accelerating discrete skill acquisition (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012; Kiany et al., 2018).

From this viewpoint, the role of a multisensory instruction becomes that of an enabling factor for listening engagement, which enhances the ability of the learners to remain receptive during the interaction. This does not imply any causal links, simply the

possibility for a particular pedagogical value associated with the specific aspects of an instructional design that account for the needs of the young learners.

Methodological Considerations in Interpreting Listening Development

The observed patterns must also be interpreted in light of the methodological characteristics of the study. The use of a three-point observational rubric prioritised feasibility and ecological validity but inherently constrained sensitivity to small-scale change. As noted in prior research, classroom-based observational tools often capture functional listening behaviour rather than fine-grained developmental progression, particularly over short time frames (Murphy, 2014).

Additionally, reliance on a single rater and the absence of formal reliability analysis necessitate cautious interpretation. While consistent scoring procedures were applied, future research would benefit from incorporating multiple raters or complementary measures to triangulate listening behaviour. Nevertheless, the present findings demonstrate that observational assessment can yield meaningful descriptive insights when aligned with routine instructional practice.

Implications for Understanding Early Listening Development

Taken together, the findings contribute to a growing body of research emphasising listening as an active, context-sensitive skill in early ELT classrooms. Contrary to viewing listening development strictly in terms of improvement scores, the current study highlights the importance of stability, consistency, and engagement as meaningful indicators of early listening development. This approach is consistent with current views of listening as a dynamic process influenced by attentional control, instructional interaction, and the classroom context (Field, 2019; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012).

Through the documentation of listening behaviors in a natural classroom environment, the study highlights the importance of descriptive research that is ecologically valid in understanding the development of receptive skills in the everyday classroom. Through the emphasis on the realities of the classroom, this study improves experimental and assessment research.

CONCLUSIONS

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of the present study. These restrictions highlight the descriptive and exploratory character of the study and represent the difficulties of doing classroom-based research with young students. Initially, a classroom-based observational rubric was used to evaluate listening skills instead of standardized or test-based tools. While this method did help to increase the ecological validity and alignment with typical instruction, it did come with the cost of limiting the precision of detection for fine-grained changes in listening skills. Specifically, the three-point rating scale may not have been sensitive to small but important changes, particularly among those with higher levels of performance. As a result, modest numerical change should be interpreted cautiously and in relation to the functional stability of listening behaviours rather than as an absence of development. Second, all observations were conducted by a single rater, and formal inter-rater reliability analysis was not undertaken. Although systematic scoring procedures and rubric descriptors were used consistently across observation points, the lack of multiple raters precludes the degree to which scoring reliability can be confirmed independently. Third, the study was carried out in a single institutional setting with intact classrooms. Although this represents a common limitation in school-based research and helps maintain the integrity of the classroom environment, it precludes generalization of the results to other educational settings or populations. The current study does not explore the potential effects of variations in classroom environments, learner characteristics, and instructional approaches on listening development. Fourth, the duration of the teaching period was rather brief. Listening skills, especially perceptual aspects such as sound discrimination, are known to develop slowly through prolonged exposure. Therefore, the program's short length might have limited the amount of noticeable change, especially for subskills that call for repeated input and prolonged practice. Lastly, the study concentrated on descriptive trends of listening performance and lacked the use of inferential statistical results and following longitudinally. As much as this meets the objectives of the study, it constrains the conclusions about the longer-term development paths or connection between listening and other language abilities. Collectively these constraints point out the importance of careful interpretation as well as emphasizing the importance of classroom-based descriptive research as a supplement to experimental and test-based research.

Despite these limitations, the study offers several practical implications for early ELT contexts. Structured multisensory activities may help stabilise listening engagement, particularly auditory attention and meaning response. Classroom-based rubrics can serve as feasible tools for monitoring skill development in contexts where formal testing is impractical. Teachers may benefit from focusing not only on skill gains but also on consistency and responsiveness as indicators of listening development. This study provides a classroom-based descriptive account of early listening development among Grade 1 learners participating in a structured multisensory English Language Teaching programme. By focusing on observable listening behaviours rather than standardised outcomes, the study foregrounds listening as an active, context-embedded skill shaped by instructional interaction and classroom engagement. The findings indicate that listening development during short instructional periods may be characterised more by stability and consolidation than by large numerical gains. While there were modest changes noted in auditory attention and meaning response, stability was maintained in instruction following and sound discrimination, suggesting

differential sensitivity to instruction across listening subskills. It is important to note, however, that these findings highlight the need for early listening results to be considered within the context of baseline performance and instructional duration. Instead of claiming the effectiveness of instruction, the current study offers ecologically valid information about the development and maintenance of listening skills within the classroom environment. The assessment methodology used in the current study illustrates the potential for early listening behaviours to be documented within settings that are not conducive to formal testing, providing information that is directly relevant to early primary ELT contexts. Employing a conservative and descriptive approach, this study serves as a complement to existing experimental research on early listening development by underscoring the importance of examining listening development as it occurs within the context of the classroom. Future studies employing longer instructional periods, alternative forms of assessment, and a wider participant base may help shed light on the developmental path of listening skills in early language acquisition.

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