

How can I help my students improve their listening and language skills through music, singing games, and other strategies?

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“Listening skills are crucial to learning! Students who listen well are able to follow directions and complete activities. Students cannot learn effectively if they cannot listen to and follow directions” (Carole Elckeles, 2003).

Biography



Tina is in her second year as a Special Education Teacher at the elementary level. Her previous careers have ranged from retail management, recreation, social services, brain injury rehabilitation, and health care. Her educational background consists of a Bachelor of Recreation and Leisure Services, Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, Master of Education, Multidiscipline Rehabilitation Certificate, and Bachelor of Education. Many of her professional roles have involved working with persons of different ages with a variety of special needs. Tina’s current assignment is working as a primary teacher (ages five to seven) with a small class of children who have special learning needs due to speech, language, and attentional difficulties.

Abstract

As the quote above states, listening skills are crucial to a child’s ability to learn. This paper describes the work of a teacher working with special needs students. The use of various techniques designed to improve their ability to listen and focus are described. Classroom observations and comments from colleagues provide the evidence.

Background and Rationale

“Hey mom; I think I’m going to drop out of school! Ok, hon. Just don’t forget that dinner is at seven tonight.” Doesn’t this sound familiar to you? Don’t we all do this at one time or another? We hear! We hear the voice! We hear the sound! But are we really listening? This is one of my greatest concerns about education. I believe that if you know how to listen, school and life, will be easier to handle. Listening skills are learned. They should not, however, be learned haphazardly. There should be a planned program to increase listening skill abilities, and it should be a significant part of elementary education (Elckeles, 2003).



Students and Educational Assistant

I noticed that several times during the school day, I was not certain that my students were listening to and/or understanding my instructions, even with visual cues provided as frequently as possible. As an important life skill and essential ability to be successful in any learning environment, I believe that all children need to develop some effective listening skills. Support for this viewpoint came to me when I read that Elckeles(2003) proclaims the

following: listening is basic for communication, learning, thinking and acquiring awareness of the world around you. Listening needs to be taught. Listening requires participation. Listening is an information-processing activity. Listening is more than just hearing; it's deciding what we listen to and how this can be done most effectively. Listening requires an active effort on the part of the student. It trains the child to select, remember and process sounds.

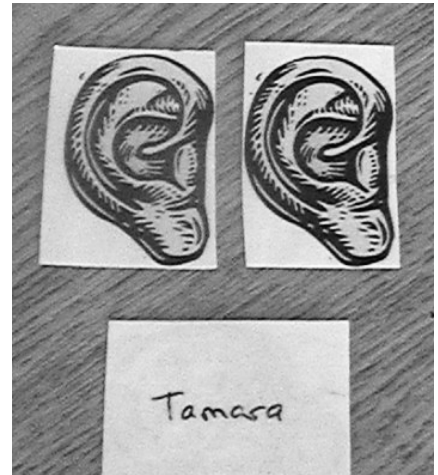
At the beginning of my research project, I wasn't sure what approach I was going to use to help my students improve their listening skills until I attended a music workshop for Kindergarten teachers at our Professional Development Day in October sponsored by the Grand Erie District School Board (GEDSB). At that time, I realized that my class would probably be able to benefit from learning through music because we learned a new song for each letter of the alphabet every week which we sang everyday beginning in September, along with other songs to learn how to spell the number words one to ten, and the students seemed to enjoy this practice.

At the music workshop, I was introduced to some simple singing and action songs which led me to believe that, since my class enjoyed singing and they were quite an active group, they would learn effective listening skills while having to listen to specific instructions provided with music to participate in some fun action songs. This practice would include the kinesthetic element of learning which I knew most of my students naturally used to interact with their world. I strongly believed as indicated by Meyers(1993) that learning is enhanced by actions that accompany an activity, such as in drama, finger-rhymes, songs, or real experiences. Kinetics(movement) provide a hook to help students remember what they've learned. The use of kinetics has a base in Piaget's maturational stages in cognition. From my perspective, since my students liked to keep moving while they learned and they enjoyed music/singing then they should be able to do well when required to listen closely to instructions given during a movement/dance activity to participate successfully in an action song. I was going to focus my research on this particular component of learning listening skills through music but I felt that was too limited. Also, as described by Meyers(1993), I agreed that musical activities complement an Integrated Language Learning Program because music encompasses a variety of skills—listening, speaking, singing, creating, movement, vocabulary development, reading and writing.

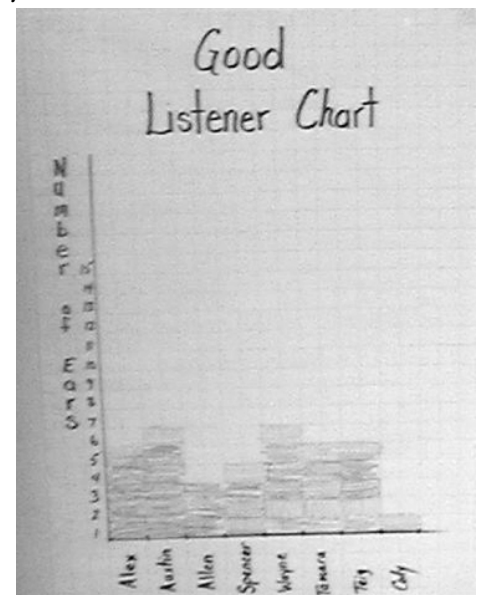
Due to the fact that my students have speech and language difficulties, I decided that it would be wise to broaden my focus and include other forms of musical programming. In addition, I was conscious of the fact that similar to information provided by Meyers(1993), certain students would have difficulty coping with the talk, movement, and individual and social demands of active learning in the classroom which would



Action Song



Good Listening Ticket



Good Listener Chart

occur with this type of instruction. Since many of my students have attentional and hyperactivity challenges, I thought it was necessary to provide a comprehensive listening skills teaching program which would allow all learning styles to be activated and accommodated. I believed that some of my children would have difficulty with too much stimulation if I didn't include a variety of strategies to accomplish my goal with this research project and their learning opportunities.

Other support in the literature for my idea about the value of using games in music was given by Elster(2002) who outlines the following benefits: (1) Social-build cooperation skills, develop teamwork, teach taking turns; (2) Intellectual-develop memory retention, develop listening skills, reinforce listening to and following directions; (3) Emotional-increase level of confidence, provide a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction, provide an opportunity to release energy and stress; and (4) Musical-combine singing and movement, combine speech and movement, and develop coordination.

Gathering Data

Consequently, I began to utilize music, singing games and other techniques to help my students improve their listening skills to assist them to prepare for progression into their new classes in the next academic year. I primarily used audio and videotapes along with some still photos to represent evidence of the progression of my research. I also wrote notes related to reflections on the three hours of videotape footage that I had recorded between January and March. In addition, I asked my students some simple survey questions about which activities they enjoyed the most and which ones they thought helped them to improve their listening skills the most. Finally I had the students watch the videos of themselves doing the activities and lessons within my research and asked them for feedback about how well they thought they were listening during the videos.

Some elements that I included in my project consisted of the following:

1. Singing some basic instructions to my students and having them sing answers to some questions I posed to them
2. Having the class listen to musical pieces which involved following specific instructions to produce different physical actions
3. Providing rewards to individual students who were able to answer specific questions about information given during morning announcements to encourage improved listening at the very beginning of the day
4. Distributing 'listening ear' symbol prize ballots to individual students each time they accurately repeated instructions given back to me after I had stated the directions to the class or demonstrated good listening skills and placing these tickets/ballots in a draw box for a weekly 'good listener' prize. I also created a weekly graph to provide a math visual tool to display the number of ballots earned by each student and the student(s) who acquired the most tickets at the end of each week also received a prize.



Fingerspelling by teacher



Fingerspelling by student



Elmo ears

5. Teaching the students some basic sign language symbols and how to fingerspell the American Sign Language alphabet
6. Playing some basic listening games where the students closed their eyes and listened to different recorded sounds or sounds made by myself in the classroom to determine their ability to accurately identify these particular sounds.
7. Having the class listen to some books on cassette as a whole group without any other stimuli such as the corresponding storybook to help them pay attention to only auditory rather than visual stimuli to prevent distraction
8. Teaching the students some monthly character trait songs with musical accompaniment and some action chants without music

Feedback From The Students After They Viewed Themselves On Video - Action Research Brief Student Survey and Summary of Responses (7 students)



Group listening

I asked the students the following brief survey questions after they watched the first video of themselves:

1. What do you like doing better? (Choose two things)

(a) singing songs (two students chose this answer)

(b) learning action songs (one student chose this answer)

(c) listening to stories on tape (four students chose this answer)

(d) getting good listening tickets (seven students chose this answer)

2. What activities do you think helped you best to learn listening skills?

(a) singing songs (two students chose this answer - the same two students who chose this answer for question one)

(b) leaning action songs (no students chose this answer)

(c) listening to stories on tape (three students chose this answer - two of the same students also chose this answer for question one)

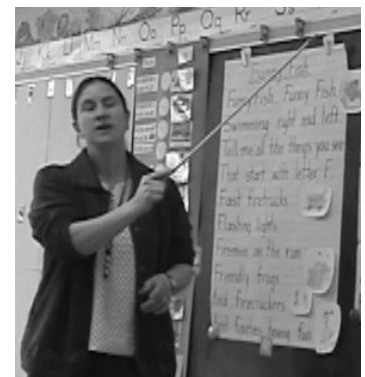
(d) getting good listening tickets (seven students chose this answer)

3. Do you think it looked like you were listening very well when you watched yourself on the videos? (Seven students said 'yes')

4. What other activities do you think we could do to help improve our listening skills?

(Reading books, doing work on paper, being nice to each other) (even when given simple explanations to assist in understanding this question most students didn't give an answer or still didn't comprehend the question)

5. Do you think that you were listening very well while watching yourself on the video today? (Six students said 'yes' and one student said 'no' which is a student



who usually listens well and acts appropriately but today while watching the video, he was being silly like his peers but he gave an honest answer to the question)

My Reflections about the Students' Survey Feedback and Listening Behaviour While they Watched the Video

I added Question five, as listed above, the day the class watched the video because I was quite surprised at how poorly they actually listened to the video. Initially, I had informed the class that if they enjoyed watching the first video of themselves and if they listened well, then we would schedule another afternoon for them to view the other video of us. Also, I reflected with my educational assistant as the students watched the video that I would like to have another camera which I could use to videotape them watching themselves on video. She indicated that when we watch the second video she could bring in her camera and tape the class. However, unfortunately, due to their poor listening behaviour during the viewing of the first video, we didn't finish watching that video and we didn't schedule time for them to see the other video.

I was surprised at the lack of attention and poor listening skills displayed by the students as they watched the video because they had been very interested in having the opportunity to see themselves on the television and prior to that they had been able to view some short segments on the video camera screen the day of some lessons. The class was quite noisy and unable to sit still. It was ironic because as we were viewing the video our school Learning Resource Teacher came into the classroom briefly to ask me a question and when she saw the students working on colouring sheets which I had given some of them to do to keep their hands busy while watching the video, she commented that they didn't seem to be on task. I explained to her that they were actually supposed to be watching themselves on the video as part of my action research project to give them some self-feedback but some of them were unable to do this activity without doing something with their hands and minds instead of being passive observers. She made the observation that it seemed as though they were acting the same in the classroom at that time as they were on the videos they were watching. I realized and acknowledged to her that she was correct and reflected upon this phenomenon. I concluded that my students that day were actually demonstrating the same inattentive and active behaviour in the classroom watching the video as they were and usually did during many of the lessons which we had videotaped.

What was this telling me? I wasn't quite sure because there were several different types of lessons on the video ranging from singing songs, learning action songs with music and without music, listening to stories on tape, etc., and it didn't matter what the students were watching themselves do they weren't able to quietly listen and look closely at how they were acting on the video. There were about two students who spent some time attentively watching the video for certain segments and they were children who usually don't demonstrate the ability to sit still and focus for consistent periods of time. I think this observation truly opens up another type of action research question related to self-feedback using videotapes for young children.

With respect to the responses given by the students when I asked them the survey questions after viewing themselves on video, I was surprised at some of the answers but some were quite expected. The fact that only one student indicated that he liked learning action songs and none of the students chose this answer related to what they thought helped them best to learn listening skills, was quite unexpected because my belief was that this would be the best strategy for them to acquire this skill. I thought more students would have liked singing songs and less students would prefer listening to stories on tape. I was not at all surprised by the fact that all of the students chose the answer related to getting good listening tickets for both the first and second question because such incentives often help to motivate children at this age. This external reward factor was disappointing to me but I know that it is a reality. Finally, I didn't really expect the children to have the maturity and insight to realize whether or not they

were showing good listening skills during the lessons they watched of themselves on the videos but I was curious to discover if anyone was able to see this when they weren't actually engaged in the activity of the lesson because they were having the chance to see themselves at a different time. I certainly didn't anticipate that my students were aware of the fact that they weren't listening or watching themselves attentively the day they viewed the video but I was hoping some of them would understand that they weren't doing the correct thing and at least my student who usually chooses to behave appropriately and isn't often influenced by his peers was able to let me know that he knew the difference between his behaviour when he was watching the video versus how he acted during the lessons that were recorded on the videos.

My Reflections of the Key Lessons and Listening Behaviours Displayed After I Watched the Two Videos of the Students

January 5

This videotape displayed the class at their desks reviewing the "Respect" (Russell, 2000) song which we learned in October for the monthly character trait of Respect because the trait for January was Self-Respect. We also stood in front of the desks to review the action songs/chants by Sonja Dunn (1999) called "Crackers and Crumbs" and "Saying Hello is Easy" which don't involve music. Some of the students participated for the whole video segment listening very well while others were inattentive and somewhat disruptive, doing things such as yawning, moving desks, singing loudly, refusing to cooperate, or acting silly. I reviewed the classroom management technique of "Give Me 5" with the class to reinforce that practice to have them be more attentive. This was the first time we actually used the video camera with our educational assistant recording the lesson so the students were distracted and excited by this fact, as well as due to the snow falling outside the classroom window.



Crackers and Crumbs Chant

January 8

During this video, the students sat on the carpet listening to the story called "The Mitten" (Brett, 1989) followed by some simple comprehension questions asked by our educational assistant using the book and pictures in the story. The class generally demonstrated good listening with a little bit of laughing, fidgeting and chattering. They were basically able to answer the questions quite well but sometimes interrupted each other answering questions which were addressed to other classmates. This activity was conducive to good listening by the students which was actually a surprise to me because I believed that it would be difficult for them to sit still and remain focussed on an audio-tape



Group wearing Elmo Ears

without any visual stimuli or interaction during the story portion of the lesson. They also very obviously enjoyed the experience.

January 13

For this lesson, the students each wore some ‘Elmo the Elephant Good Listening Ears’ made from construction paper. The task was for the students to listen to different sounds of things they would hear in their community as recorded on a CD and they were to say what each sound was as they recognized it. I also made different noises in the classroom for the students to guess with their eyes closed. The students guessed most of the sounds accurately and they listened carefully during this exercise.

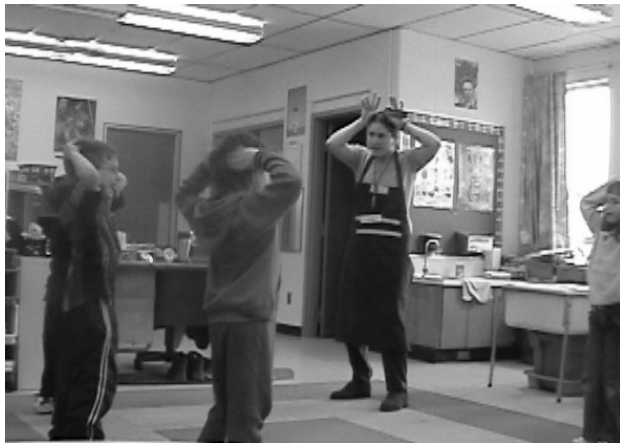
January 21

On this date we tried a completely different type of exercise than anything we had done before in the class. When I attended the professional development day in the fall, the instructor began the session by playing the song by Louis Armstrong (1999) called “What a Wonderful World” as she showed us the picture book of “What a Wonderful World”(Weiss & Thiele, 1995) turning each page which corresponded with the words of the song. I did this same activity with my class on this date and they sat still on the carpet listening better than they had done all year for any other lesson despite the fact that just prior



What a Wonderful World

to this they were not listening very well but once the song began, they quickly became calm and attentive. The class enjoyed the activity so well that we did it a second time and they participated very well again. Also, on this date, I



Down in the Valley Standing Action

attempted to teach the class an action song called “Down in the Valley”(Davis, Amidon & Amidon, 2000). I demonstrated the song initially without the music and then we practiced with the music doing the actions. The students had difficulty listening to the instructions given and they began to act silly. I modified the format and we tried it a second time which did produce somewhat improved listening but I decided to re-visit this song at a later date. The class responded differently to the music lessons today than I had anticipated because the two different activities had the opposite results from what I expected. I predicted that my students would have difficulty listening quietly to the “What a Wonderful World”(Armstrong, 1999) song and they would have had greater success learning the action song. However,

the outcome was quite contradictory to my original thoughts.

February 11

We began today’s lesson by learning a new song called “I Say What I Mean” (Russell, 2000) related to the monthly character trait and we did Sonja Dunn’s (1999) chant “Crackers and Crumbs” again. Both of these activi-



Students fingerspelling

about how to show good listening skills. I read a very short story paragraph and then asked the class some easy factual comprehension questions. Then I read a picture book aloud to the class while they remained sitting on the carpet listening and we completed some echo reading of the repeated pattern lines in the story. The students were very attentive for this lesson, seemed to enjoy themselves and were able to listen while also giving correct answers to questions related to the stories that were read aloud to them. At the end of the session, to have each student get their lunch and go to their lunchroom classes, I used the American Sign Language alphabet to fingerspell their names individually while the whole class said each letter aloud to spell the name of the person. This part of the lesson was also completed with good attention and listening.

March 8

This was the last lesson that I videotaped and it contained a variety of activities which produced good listening and participation. Initially, to have each student individually go to sit at their desks after sitting on the carpet, I had them take turns fingerspelling their own name with my assistance as needed. While sitting at their desks we learned the “Loyalty”(Russell, 2000) song related to the character trait of the month. The class did very well with this task, participating, paying attention, and singing nicely. We also did Sonja Dunn’s(1999) two chants: “Crackers and Crumbs” and “Saying Hello is Easy” along with the action song called “Down in the Valley”(Davis, Amidon & Amidon. 2000). Generally, the students displayed good listening skills and positive behaviour during each aspect of this lesson. This was the fourth time we practiced the action song “Down in the Valley”(Davis, Amidon & Amidon, 2000) and the students seemed more confident and were less silly than during previous sessions. Perhaps

ties produced good listening but when we practiced the action song called “Down in the Valley” (Davis, Amidon & Amidon, 2000), the students became overactive, silly and unable to listen to the instructions. This same type of behaviour occurred the first time we learned and tried this new action song.

February 17

During the lesson today, we completed the same tasks as described above for February 11, but the students performed and listened better for all the elements of the lesson. Perhaps, the class felt more confident and familiar with the activities today after completing them the previous week which allowed them to participate more successfully.

February 26

On the video for today, the students were sitting on the carpet wearing their ‘Elmo Elephant Good Listening Ears’ to participate in a structured listening skills lesson. The children sat quietly while I gave them instructions

this action song was difficult for them to understand for the first three lessons and they were confused rather than choosing to be overactive.

Conclusions

This was my first, but certainly not my last, action research project and I found it to be a very enlightening and rewarding learning experience. Prior to the initiation of this research endeavour, I strongly believed in the lifelong and holistic value for children to develop good listening skills to ensure that they become successful learners. My conviction about this phenomenon has been reinforced after I searched through some of the related literature and conducted this research study. I certainly discovered some surprising results with respect to what types of activities were most effective to developing good listening skills for my students. It seemed that several of the exercises that I expected to be less successful with my students, such as, listening to books on audio-tape and sitting quietly listening to the song “What a Wonderful World” (Armstrong, 1999) while being shown the picture book of the song, were actually the lessons in which the class demonstrated the best listening skills. Similarly, I anticipated that the students would perform best while learning and participating in action songs but this was not what occurred because my particular class appeared to have the greatest difficulty paying attention and listening during these lessons. It is very interesting that I found the class to exhibit better listening behaviours during the types of activities that they indicated were their preference when I asked them the brief survey questions at the end of the project. This provides valuable input about how to best ensure successful lessons by listening to our students in addition to planning activities that we believe would be most effective. Perhaps, due to the fact that my class has certain speech, language, attentional and other learning problems such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), they get very excited and confused with too much stimulation when there is movement, music and singing involved. In general, I did obtain affirmation about the importance of focusing upon and specifically incorporating structured lessons to teach listening skills within the elementary classroom which is an area that can easily be overlooked due to our rigorous curriculum. We need to use our creativity and skills in multi-tasking to ensure that we consciously include a variety of opportunities for our students to explicitly learn how to become effective listeners on their journey to developing into future generations of mature citizens within our global society.



Some students in my class

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