Listening in Primary School – The Connection Between Listening, Comprehension and Expressive Reading

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Abstract: Oral message reception is a basic component of oral communication. It has a significant importance in society, due to its traditional function as a means of learning. Not knowing how to listen is an obstacle not only for personal development and harmonious interpersonal relationships, but also one influencing the formation of other communication skills. There is a tendency to consider listening a "role" or skill already formed at the beginning of the school years. Nowadays, it is being explored as a process which includes cognitive, affective and behavioral aspects. M. Imhof (Imhof, 2008) analyzes quantitative and qualitative issues of listening tasks in primary school German education. The results show an average listening time of 27 minutes out of 45 minutes, duration of a class, which represents 60% of the time. As for the listening sources, these are: the teacher (53% of the listening time, i.e. 14.3 minutes), others classmates (41%, i.e. 11.1 minutes) and media sources (6%, i.e. 1.6 minutes).

The school curriculum for Communication in Romanian / Romanian language and literature within is organized in areas of communication (oral and written) and basic skills (text reception and production), making the study of Romanian compatible with that of foreign languages into the same curricular area. Textbooks and the teaching tools less reflect this organization, focusing on the reception of the written text on text production, ignoring the role of listening.

The main purpose of the paper derives from the obvious importance of the listening activities, in primary school, taking into consideration the current educational context and the concerns regarding the reduction the of functional illiteracy phenomenon. Listening activities can, in some circumstances, facilitate new vocabulary acquisition, support the formation of a consistent and complete mental scheme of the narrative text. They can also offer patterns of verbal, nonverbal and paraverbal expressions, to stir feelings of attachment towards reading and books.

The quality of listening depends on both the receiver and the sender, and in primary classes this double determination must be looked at very carefully. There are landmark studies that investigate listening in the native language at a young school age. This it is an aspect that encourages and generates knowledge development, and the present study incorporates what is already internationally known and offers better perspectives on the importance of listening in the Romanian primary classes.

Keywords: oral message reception competence, listening, comprehension, narrative text, expressive reading.

1. Introduction

The progress of technology, as a medium and resource in communication, has facilitated personal expression understood by modern people as a form of social freedom and modernity. More and more researchers have been reanalyzing the role of reception as part of the communication process. "Communicating is becoming more and more synonymous with expressing oneself, everyone looking above all not for dialogue, but for the opportunity to speak" (Wolton, 2012, p.62). The deficit of listening and understanding propagates in all social environments. In this context, training a competent receiver, from the earliest ages, will represent an important part of the future of empathic communities and democratic societies.

The arguments regarding the formation of the competence to receive the oral message can be found in the European educational policy documents. Thus, in the „Recommendation of the Council of the European Union” (European Comission, 2018), oral reception, as part of the literacy competence, supports the identification, understanding and interpretation of concepts, feelings or opinions, within direct verbal interactions or through auditory or audio-visual materials. In primary school, since the cycle of fundamental acquisitions, the problem of forming the competence to receive the oral message is a necessity, due to the indisputable relationships it has with:

- Development of skills and attitudes involved in communication and interpersonal relationships in different situations;
- Building the skills needed for literacy success.

The Curriculum for Communication into Romanian, for primary (basic acquisition) classes, includes the competence to receive the oral message as part of the mother language communication competence. Through the description of specific competences, the necessary premises have been created for the operationalization this competence into the pedagogical practice. However, the content area called “Oral communication” refers mainly to conversational listening, neglecting purpose listening and the comprehension of the message. Thinking about the life situations in which the students will use this competence, we notice that they have become more and more numerous: listening to instructions, social interaction, listening to audio messages, educational podcasts, audio books, stories recorded on websites. In the classrooms, compared to training reading-writing skills, listening is considered less important. This happens because it is assumed that at the beginning of the primary school children...
can listen and understand at a level that allows them to use this skill effectively.

In the PIRLS Encyclopedia (Mullis et.al., 2017, pp. 34-39) it is shown that there is a direct relationship between early literacy activities and the results obtained by 4th grade students in the reading comprehension test. The children who had been exposed since the preschool period listening to stories activities, visual storytelling and the retelling a story, got much better results in 2016 international testing. The same study also considers the way educational goals are addressed by school programmes relevant. Thus, a rigorous curriculum, which specifies the time required for the formation of a skill, the methods, the means of education, the ways of identifying students who may encounter difficulties, will result in better performance.

Recent research defines listening as a multidimensional construct (Worthington & Bodie, 2017, p.3) which incorporates cognitive processes (such as literal and critical understanding of a message), behavioral processes (listener behavior including the verbal and nonverbal response to the message) and affective processes (motivation, willingness to listen, empathy).

On an individual level, listening plays an important role in developing one’s vocabulary, memory and attention, assimilating knowledge and developing the ability to make connections between ideas. Socially, building good listening skills and attitudes contributes to the success of interpersonal communication. However, despite the multiple benefits of listening to personal development and interpersonal relationships, very little is said about listening in curriculum documents on mother tongue teaching in primary school. School textbooks and teaching aids in primary school contain insufficient listening tasks and sequences. Teachers are not trained to organize listening activities, and assessment of oral comprehension is rarely practiced.

This work is the result of the documentation process for PhD research on the formation of the competence to receive the oral message at a young school age. This research is based on theoretical-praxiological approaches that investigate:

- The role and importance of listening in the building of communication skills in one’s mother tongue (Biemiller, 1999; Buck, 2001; Crâciun, 2020; Dinu, 2014; Hobjilă, 2008; Imhoff, 2008; Mucchielli, 2015; Worthington & Bodie 2017);

- The listening and comprehension relationship and the need to rehabilitate listening and text comprehension activities, given that oral decoding skills predict later reading text decoding skills (Cain, 2012; Hutton et al, 2017; Kendeou et al., 2009; Mullis et al, 2017; Paris & Paris, 2013).
2. Listening at early school age, the theoretical context

At early school age, listening is important because of its central role in learning and socialization. During this period, children spend a large part of their time listening. M. Imhoff (2008) analyzes the time dedicated to listening during a typical school day. The result indicates an average of 60% of the teaching time, i.e. 27 minutes, distributed as follows: the main source is the teacher, 53% of the time dedicated to listening, i.e. 14.3 min.; other students, 41%, i.e. 11.1 min.; average listening, 6%, i.e. 1.6 min. The researcher shows that in a modern classroom, listening opportunities can be diversified by:

- interactions within cooperative learning groups;
- the use of audio-visual resources stored on various sites;
- listening to people other than teachers invited to speak to students (local personalities, writers, actors).

In the classroom, the student is gets different roles from one communicative context to another. A. Hobjilă (2008, p.179) highlights these parts and emphasizes the importance of learning and practicing listening for the success of the communication process:

- Encoding a message - includes at preschool and early school age the capitalization of a code that is being assimilated, the listened model being important for acquiring the correct pronunciation and enriching the vocabulary.

- Transmitting a message - considers the development of speech, but also the use of nonverbal and paraverbal means to communicate effectively.

- Receiving a message - is based on the perceptive capabilities of the child, but the responsibility of the adult sender will determine the success or failure of the communication. Thus, the grammatical correctness of the message, diction, intonation, sound intensity, rhythm, tone and even vocal timbre are aspects that influence reception. Listening and understanding are influenced by the professionalism with which the teacher constructs and communicates the message.

- Decoding and interpreting a message - involves reporting to the common code, presupposing, first of all, the literal understanding of the speech heard, but also the critical understanding. Literal understanding ensures the identification from the context of the meaning of the words, of the main and detailed ideas, of the causal relations. Critical understanding involves identifying the speaker's purpose, affective state, and interpreting the message as a sum of logical, affective, nonverbal, and paraverbal inputs.
Attending at the communication performance refers to educating the child as a person who attends a communication situation without having the role of speaker or interlocutor. In such a situation, the response of the person attending is delayed, but it will occur later, in another place. The communication situation that the child has witnessed will generate future behaviors dependent on how he listened, understood and interpreted the message.

Researchers in the field have shown that through listening, the child acquires relevant vocabulary not only quantitatively, but especially qualitatively, and will develop oral comprehension skills (Biemiller, 1999, p.4). The comprehension implies complex operations such as: generating inferences, integrating information, making predictions and monitoring them, making causal connections, identifying main ideas, summarizing. Comprehension skills developed early by using aurally or audiovisually presented texts „predict decoding skills in beginners, from the 2nd grade” (Kendeou et al., 2009, p.774). Since we are talking about common skills for the understanding the two opposite types of discourse (oral and written), “skills key comprehension can be stimulated when kids listen to a text or even when watching movies, or cartoons, before you start teaching reading” (Cain, 2012, p.160).

During the classroom interactions the child develops the vocabulary. The new vocabulary sources are the classmates and the teachers. Not being an experienced reader, the sources oral are the prevailing ones. G. Buck (2001, pp.10-11) summarizes the differences between oral and written discourse, considering them the same for any language, although his analysis focuses on English:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spoken language</th>
<th>Written language</th>
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<tr>
<td>- short idea units, with simple syntax;</td>
<td>- units of dense ideas, complex syntax, subordinate clauses;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- chained ideas especially through coordinating conjunctions (and, or, but, etc.);</td>
<td>- complex ways of chaining ideas;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- unplanned, spontaneous speech, with hesitations and repetitions, corrections and thoughts that later complete the ideas;</td>
<td>- planned speech, processed text, presenting lexical and semantic variety;</td>
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<tr>
<td>- informal, presenting forms specific to territorial dialects, slang and colloquialisms;</td>
<td>- formal, conservative and correct.</td>
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<td>- personal, with emotional involvement and less precision.</td>
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This exposition of the characteristics of the two diametrically opposed forms of communication allows us to formulate an important conclusion for our purpose: oral language cannot be considered a rich and valuable source of vocabulary.

A. Biemiller (1999) shows that in general, the vocabulary can develop just through interactions with people and texts introducing new words, concepts and language structures. In the first primary classes this development is not based on reading because children can't read texts as advanced as their spoken language. Many of them encounter difficulties in the deciphering and the understanding of written texts, continuing to be more advanced in listening, even and in the first years of middle school. Listening to the literary text, read aloud by the teacher, must continue systematically even in the first primary grades, being an important source of vocabulary, but also a resource for practicing oral communication and developing comprehension.

3. The argument of the paper

This paper aims to highlight the importance of the formation of listening skills in children in the years of fundamental acquisitions. This purpose must be given an important place in primary school because listening, at this age, influences school success to a greater extent than reading or writing. We will detail the connection between listening, the quality of reading and comprehension. Listening to narrative text activities should prevail in mother tongue communication classes in the fundamental acquisition cycle, providing the basis for reading comprehension. Moreover, we will highlight the importance of the way the teacher approaches reading aloud in the development of comprehension.

The paper reveals theoretical aspects regarding listening and comprehension, carrying out a critical analysis of the way listening is approached during the first grades.

4. Listening to native text, approaches and arguments

Literature has the power to sensitize thinking, to educate by shaping consciousness. It offers models of communication, of expressing feelings, of relating, and the interpretation of a role is a means of practicing communication through verbal, nonverbal and paraverbal means. Stories, tales, myths or fables are a means of intellectual, affective and behavioral education with a unique efficiency. The writers have created a background of
characters and actions in which the existential questions about justice, truth, compassions, the meaning of work, are current and always open new perspectives of understanding and interpretation. In this way, a real window of opportunities is foreshadowed, but this window does not become fully transparent until the moment when the child can read and re-read by himself, building his understanding and personal interpretation, turning reading into a tool for intellectual work. That is why the cycle of fundamental acquisitions is centered on learning to read correctly and consciously, but also on cognitive processing for the purpose of comprehension.

A study coordinated by J. Hutton et al., in 2017 analyzed by functional MRI (Magnetic resonance imaging) the activity of the brain of a preschool child (4 years) while the mother read to him and involved him in reading comprehension through dialogue. The researcher shows that reading, due to its status as a new skill in human evolution, does not present specific areas or networks in the brain. Mindful reading works by integrating neural networks adapted for language, visual imagery, attention. The mother's expressive reading activated those areas in the child's brain that support literacy skills by preparing future connections. The study also found that narrative comprehension also depends on the quality of reading.

The narrative text represents the ideal context for the formation of listening skills in young schoolchildren, because "it is the most familiar genre for young children" (Cain, 2012, p.150), and "narrative is important for communication between adults and children" (Paris & Paris, 2003, p. 39). "A disciplinary decontextualized content, which is out from the situation, may hardly arouse the student's interest. Because, taken out from the situation, it is somewhat out from the game. This content presents a minor interest for the student who doesn't succeed to assign any sense to a decontextualized object" (Jonnaert, 2010, p.104). To be formed and developed, listening requires a context to which children feel attached.

We believe that the listening of a narrative text is the first step for the development of comprehension skills and the prevention of functional illiteracy. The texts adapted to the beginning reader, from the 2nd grade, are short texts that do not cause comprehension difficulties, most of them being narratives with few causal connections and simple syntactic structure. The simplification of the text, even if it is necessary for the young schoolchild, also has negative effects: it leads to the loss of artistic value, to the diminution of the lexical richness, to the impossibility of building and understanding the structure of the narrative text. Comprehension means "building a coherent mental representation of the text" (Kendeou et al.,
2009, p.766). In this narrative mind map, the listener connects ideas and statements based on the text and their prior knowledge. Understanding is the result of several skills: making inferences, reasoning and causal connections. The causal mental structure favors the recall of events, but also the understanding of similar texts. Narrative texts are structured similarly: setting (time, place and characters), plot (the problem the main character faces), plot episodes (the successive events in which the character tries to achieve his goal), and a denouement where the problem is resolved. When the narrative text is adapted for the beginning reader, up to the size of 120 words, its narrative structure is reduced to 1-2 causal connections. Extensive listening beyond the level at which the child can read independently is necessary for the optimal development of literal and critical comprehension. These practiced skills will later transfer to reading comprehension.

By listening to full stories, tales, legends, fables we achieve a number of important targets in primary school:

- We facilitate the acquisition of new vocabulary (most new words are understood from the context, through inferences);
- We support the formation of a coherent and complete mental scheme of the narrative text;
- We offer models of verbal, nonverbal and paraverbal expression;
- We explore the educational values of the text;
- We form feelings of attachment to reading and books.

The actions towards the formation of the competence to receive the oral message by listening to the narrative text become relevant to the extent that the teacher is concerned with the meticulous approach to the activities, aiming to build a thorough didactic approach, based on the study of scientific research in the field.

The first step, choosing the narrative text to be listened to, raises questions of both form and content. Choosing the narrative text also means critically answering a series of questions:

- Does the text meet the students' interests?
- What new lexical or grammatical elements will be introduced?
- What are the communicative functions (social conventions, information exchange, expressing attitudes and feelings, influencing actions, reparative acts) that they can exercise?
- How does the text contribute to the cognitive, affective and behavioral development of children?
- What transdisciplinary openings does the text offer?

The text used in communication lessons should contain appropriate linguistic material and cultural references. This text has literary value,
representing a model of expression. A text chosen according to current methodological-scientific criteria will provide the ideal context for the formation of key skills. The aspect most often analyzed in the context of training the competence of oral or written reception of the text is comprehension. The quality of reading aloud is a factor that influences attention, which in turn is related to comprehension. A quality reading is characterized by the following features: correctness, coherence, diction, rhythm, volume and expressiveness. A. Șpuntov (Crăciun, 2020, p.81) identifies the ways in which expressiveness is built: tone of speech, rhythm, volume, logical accents, gestures and mimicry.

The direct relationship between the expressiveness of the reading for listeners and comprehension has been less studied.

As M. Dinu (2014, p.389) points out, "the graphic fixation of teaching is what impoverishes and simplifies it by losing the multitude of connotations and nuances that only orality is able to convey." The purpose of punctuation is to enliven the text. They do this only partially, with more than one meaning possible in an utterance. The author’s additional indications sometimes compensate for this shortcoming. The teacher, as an experienced reader, is the translator not so much of information, but especially of feelings, attitudes and behaviors. To do this translation he uses a series of tools, belonging to the three types of language: verbal, nonverbal and para-verbal.

A first element that contributes to the success of reading aloud is diction. It represents the correct and clear pronunciation of sounds, syllables and words "so that each word is heard and understood perfectly, in all its complexity, by the interlocutor" (Ivanov, 2013, p.15). A good diction, based on knowledge of phonetics, vocabulary, syntax, spelling and punctuation, will support reading that favors comprehensive processes.

Another important element is stress. Sentence stress refers to the emphatic pronunciation of a word. The stressed word is the most important, through it the speaker indicates a certain idea, the most important in the sentence. The same sentence can be uttered by changing the stress from one word to another: In the end, the squirrel caught the thief. / Eventually the squirrel caught the thief.

Intonation is the variation in the pitch of the voice. Declarative sentences end with a falling intonation, and interrogative ones have a rising intonation. Rising, falling or linear intonation changes the meaning of the message. Researchers attribute a number of important functions to intonation (Buck, 2001, p.38):
The emotional function is manifested in the expression of the speaker's attitude. Feelings or attitudes can be expressed with the help of intonation, such as: optimism, joy, trust, enthusiasm, but also sadness, disappointment, fear.

Grammatical function is used to mark the grammatical structure, coordinating or subordinating relations, in the sentence or the phrase, in the absence of punctuation.

The informative function is used to indicate those important parts of the speech. With the help of intonation, the accent is marked in the sentence and key words are highlighted.

The textual function is used to delimit or integrate some parts of the speech so that they are coherent or contrasting. The narrator's words or indirect speech are uttered with the same intonation throughout the reading, while the characters are assigned an intonation in accordance with the reader's attitude towards them.

The psychological function of intonation is fulfilled in situations where it intervenes to group certain information in order to approach them more easily. For example, saying with a certain intonation the lines or multiplication operations up to 100, with the aim of memorizing them.

The function of identifying a certain category of people due to the similar way of intonation. Intonation differentiates certain professional categories from other people: priests, news presenters, actors, sports commentators.

The reader's voice, through its inflections, tone, rhythm and accent, conveys the emotions of the characters, but it can also change the meaning of the written message, adding personal mood or feelings to the story. Children are sensitive to paralanguage, but also to nonverbal language. By reading them, the teacher leaves his own linguistic register and moves into that of the characters in order to become believable. Through the words, voice and gestures of the adult reader, the child knows and understands an imaginary world that helps him develop. A. Mehrabian, in 1967, showed (Ivanov, 2013, p.26) that each of the three types of language contributes to the achievement of the communication process: 7% verbal language, 38% paraverbal language and 55% nonverbal language.

Body position and movements, gaze, gestures and facial expressions also support children's understanding of the story. Nonverbal communication can emphasize, complement, contradict, repeat or substitute words, facilitating the understanding of the narrative text.

A. Mucchielli (2015, p. 77) states that "in a communication, there are always two communications: the one that happens at the level of intellect..."
and the one that happens at the level of feeling.” This second one level of feeling, is harder accessible for the child. The inner expressive language, activated when the experienced reader independently goes through the text, is not formed in the young schoolchildren. Listening in its entirety to the text read expressively by adults compensates for this shortcoming, at the same time forming empathetic receptors.

The activities of listening to the narrative text provide the opportunity to practice and follow the development of the competence of receiving the oral message in all its aspects: cognitive, affective and behavioral. After listening, dramatization, theater games and role plays are activities in which students engage enthusiastically. They offer the opportunity to practice the listening skill in all its dimensions.

5. Conclusions

The competence to receive the oral message plays an important role in cognitive, affective and behavioral development, favoring literacy and social integration. "We need to speak and be listened to." (Wolton, 2012, p.62) The quality of listening depends on both the receiver and the sender, and in primary grades this double determination must be looked at very carefully both in the designing of the school curriculum and in the pedagogical practice.

It is necessary for students to listen as much as possible to stories, tales, legends, fables until they become experienced readers. For most children, reading pace and reading comprehension will outstrip listening performance starting in third grade. Others need to continue listening well into the development cycle.

Digital textbooks, for grades 1 and 2, must include listening sequences of the literary text in its entirety, if the size of the text makes this possible. As recorded stories are offered for free by various sites, an important criterion for choosing the text to be listened to is the quality of the reading: correctness, coherence, diction, rhythm, volume and expressiveness, because quality reading supports comprehension.

Reading activities, carried out after listening activities, are challenging for children. They enter the universe of the text much more confidently, and reading becomes expressive.

Those who read to children should practice accurate and expressive reading, using verbal, nonverbal, and paraverbal to optimize comprehension. That is why diction and drama courses should not be left apart from the teacher training program for preschool and primary education.
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