

IMPLICATIONS OF THE DEVELOPING LISTENING SKILLS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD PERIOD

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***Abstract:** Listening is one of the basic language skills and the most used skill in communication. Just as most human relations are based on listening, one of the main ways to obtain information, learn and understand is listening. Listening skill; Although it is as important as speaking, reading and writing skills, listening skill training is given less importance because it occurs spontaneously and does not require any other effort. In fact, without giving due importance to listening skills, development in other language skill areas cannot be expected. The way for children to correctly perceive the world and the environment they live in is through listening skills, and since babies begin to hear sounds from the seventh month of pregnancy, listening skills need to be developed from an early age. The role of family and education is important in developing listening skills.*

***Key Words:** Listening skill, language skills, early childhood, communication, early literacy*

1. INTRODUCTION

Listening, one of the fundamental language skills, is the most commonly used skill in daily communication. Listening is a multidimensional skill area with various achievements. Most human relationships are based on listening and speaking. One of the primary

ways to acquire knowledge, learn, and understand is through listening. Listening is one of the most important elements of speaking. Speaking and listening are skills that cannot be separated from each other. Good listening is essential for effective speaking. Just as the language skills of speaking, reading, and writing are important, listening skills are equally significant. According to Bachmann et al. (1991), one of the distinctive features of language skills is their intertwined nature. Listening and speaking skills are two skills that concern the oral language domain. Language users must continually fulfill the requirements of being a listener and a speaker in a cyclical and continuous manner. This requires the deployment of knowledge and skills such as managing interactive conversation, taking turns to speak, giving the floor, listening when necessary, and speaking when necessary.

Among these activities, there are children's literature products such as jokes (Kabadayı, 2005), riddles (Kabadayı, 2007), lullabies (Kabadayı, 2009), counting-out games (Kabadayı, 2014), finger games (Kabadayı, 2017) and it is extremely effective in the development of all their language capacity such as listening, speaking and writing. Listening is the most needed and utilized skill among the language skills of speaking, reading, and writing. However, the education of listening skills is often underestimated compared to speaking, reading, and writing. This is because listening is perceived as a spontaneous and passive process in which children are involved. Due to this misconception, the necessary attention is not given to listening skills and their education. Additionally, listening skills are often overlooked in comparison to other language skills because it is believed that children can already listen and speak when they start school, so there is no need to teach this skill in school. Teachers may assume that no additional effort is required for the development of listening skills since they believe it develops naturally. This lack of emphasis on listening skills can hinder children's overall development. Without proper attention to listening skills, progress in other skill areas cannot be expected. When the necessary importance is given to listening skills, it can, in turn, support the development of other skill areas. Listening skills should be seen as a coordinated and mutually supportive skill that works in conjunction with other skill areas. For individuals who want to convey their emotions, thoughts, and problems to others more effectively through their speaking skills, the ability to listen well and provide meaningful responses to what they hear is crucial in daily life. Therefore, the quality of listening skills plays a determining

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role in achieving the desired impact in any conversation. Similarly, the first of listening and reading skills requires the understanding and interpretation of sound, while the second requires the understanding and interpretation of written text. As a result, these skills necessitate the activation of shared knowledge and skills. In both cases, there is a need for the required knowledge and the activation and coordination of skills. Cihangir-Çankaya (2015) points out that listening is the most fundamental element in developing positive relationships, acquiring information from people, understanding others, and assisting them. While a child may have a certain level of listening skill from birth, its development can only be realized through education. Therefore, listening skills need to be systematically and methodically developed through activities from a very young age. Such education will help improve children's listening skills and prepare them for life.

In the given passage, listening is defined as a process that typically involves directing one's attention to indicators based on sound, speech, body language, and visual cues in order to comprehend and make meaning of them through the ear and eye (Özbay & Çetin, 2011). Taşer (2012) describes listening as a verbal language skill that begins in the mother's womb, continues to develop in the family environment, and further progresses in school and other social areas. Ergin (2012) defines listening as a process of being aware of sounds and images, focusing one's attention on them, identifying specific auditory signals, and interpreting them. Alperen (2001) considers listening as a verbal language skill that facilitates understanding of the conveyed spoken message by concentrating attention on the sounds. In short, listening is attentive hearing. Beebe et al. (2013) define listening as a psychological process that consists of sequential stages, starting with an individual noticing sound and speech, focusing their attention, recognizing transmitted signals, and remembering and comprehending them. Özbay (2009) describes listening as a process that requires higher cognitive skills, such as perceiving the code spoken by the other person, interpreting it to make sense, and predicting its meaning as an output.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING SKILLS

Listening is as crucial as learning to speak and is a skill that needs to be developed. Being a good listener is essential for effective communication. For communication to take place in a healthy manner, the listener should be active and engage in effective listening. It is clear that children who possess the skill of understanding what they hear in early

childhood will also be successful in understanding what they read after they learn to read. Therefore, emphasis should be placed on developing children's listening comprehension skills to enable them to understand what they read. According to Davis et al. (2015), through effective listening, people will better understand each other's needs. The pathway to accurately perceiving the world and one's environment lies in listening skills. According to the information-processing approach in cognitive development theories, knowledge is acquired by the human brain, stored, and utilized when needed (Hunt and Ellis, 1999). In this process, much like a computer, the human brain takes in information, processes it by performing various operations on its form and content, modifies it, and stores it in the mind. When necessary, it recalls and uses this information. In other words, this process involves collecting, processing, and reflecting on information. As long as children listen, they can internalize this information (Woolfolk et al., 2011). After children comprehend what they have heard, they question it in their minds. Following the process of questioning, they create new concepts, categorize, associate, and develop their thinking skills by drawing conclusions from what they have heard (Alperen, 2001).

Children develop their comprehension skills through listening before they are taught to read and write. Until they learn to read, they gain new knowledge through listening. The enrichment of a child's vocabulary also begins with listening and is further developed through reading. The ability of children to understand what they hear and read is directly proportional to their vocabulary. Those with a rich vocabulary have better comprehension skills. It is clear that without effective listening, there will be no acquisition of new words, and comprehension and understanding will be insufficient. Such a situation will negatively affect children's expressive and reading skills.

Considering the prevalence of listening in human life and the permanence and effectiveness of knowledge acquired through listening, the importance of listening in a child's life becomes clearer. At this stage, the most significant responsibility lies with the family. The listening education provided in the family affects the development of children's listening skills. If a child has experienced being listened to, has been exposed to listening to stories, following instructions, asking questions and receiving answers, and has been treated well, they will come to school having already learned how to listen (Göğüş, 1978).

3. CHILDREN'S LISTENING SKILLS

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Despite the belief of many that listening, like other skill areas, is not a subject of education and develops naturally, research shows that listening is indeed a subject of education and that the listening comprehension skills of children who receive training in this area can be improved (Yangin, 1999). Listening skills, which play a significant role in language development, should be supported from early childhood in both the family and school environments. Listening to a child not only encourages them to speak but also demonstrates respect for them. This approach contributes to the development of the child's self-concept and provides emotional and social support for the child. Listening is not simply about hearing sounds. It involves perceiving what is heard and making sense of it, and it is one of the fundamental elements of communication. According to studies in the field of neurolinguistics, listening skills are the earliest language skills to develop, beginning even before birth in the 7th month of pregnancy when babies start to hear sounds (Bee and Boyd, 2009).

Başak et al. (2022) describe listening skills as occurring in three dimensions: processing, interaction, and comprehension. In the processing dimension, the individual goes through three processes: hearing, understanding, and structuring. The hearing process involves perceiving and transmitting sounds on a physical level to the brain. This process includes focusing on what is heard, making selections among them, processing them through mental processes, and assigning meaning to them. In the understanding process, the selected information is organized, classified, associated, arranged, questioned, and evaluated. Structuring occurs after the comprehension process. The second dimension of listening skills is the interaction dimension. In this dimension, two types of interactions occur. On one hand, there is physical interaction, which relates to aspects like the sound source, sound tone, speaking speed, selected words, syntactic structures, hand, arm, face, body posture, the environment where listening takes place, and variables in the environment, such as light, color, noise, and equipment. On the other hand, there is mental interaction, which involves the listener and the speaker creating a shared cognitive context throughout the process (Turhan, 2019). The third dimension of listening skills is the comprehension dimension. The listener's purpose, level of interest in the subject, and the psychological aspects of the environment are variables that affect comprehension (Çiftçi, 2001). There are four basic levels of comprehension in listening: basic comprehension, interpretive comprehension, critical comprehension, and creative comprehension (Güneş, 2017).

Basic comprehension is based on identifying what is explicitly expressed in what is heard. Interpretive comprehension involves making inferences and interpreting what is understood based on what is heard. Critical comprehension is built on thinking about what is heard, examining it, and evaluating the validity, consistency, and coherence of the message. Lastly, creative comprehension is related to structuring what is heard in one's mind and the application of what is learned from listening in daily life.

Gilbertson and Bramlett (1998) suggest that listening skills are an important predictor of the development of speaking skills. Listening is the process of perceiving and interpreting stimuli through the acoustic stimulation of the brain's auditory center, allowing individuals to comprehend and make sense of these stimuli. Infants understand the structure of speech sounds that make up language and create their own speech units. This process is referred to as phonological awareness. This skill developed through listening lays the foundation for reading and writing skills in later years. The development of listening skills in children occurs as follows: It begins with children becoming aware of the presence of sounds, continues with their ability to distinguish to whom or what these sounds belong, then proceeds to the analysis and identification of differences and rules within speech, and finally culminates in the perception and comprehension of the message (Demirtaş and Karabay, 2021). Listening skills are not solely about hearing; cognitive processes are also involved alongside hearing. Cognitive dimensions such as concentration, comprehension, and auditory discrimination play essential roles in listening skills. By establishing a connection between stimuli and cognitive processes, what is heard is grasped. When this process is considered as a whole, listening is both a physical and a mental process. Teaching listening skills should start from early childhood and should be supported in school as well. Listening to a child not only encourages them to speak but also serves as an indicator of respect towards them. This approach contributes to the development of a positive self-concept in the child. As a result, the child's social and emotional development will also be supported.

4. HEARING AND PERCEPTION IN INFANCY

Hearing begins in the womb, and by the 7th month, a baby responds with cardiac activity to loud external noises and the mother's voice. With hearing starting before birth, the baby becomes sensitive to the mother's voice after birth and can distinguish it from other

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sounds. This process, which begins before birth, enhances the bonding and interaction between the mother and the baby day by day (Querleu et al., 1988). The first sounds a baby hears are those from the mother's body. The baby can hear the mother's voice, the sounds within her body, and the beating of her heart. The baby can also hear external conversations, noises, and music. High-frequency external sounds, in particular, are more muted in the womb (Tallack, 2011). Babies can recognize music they heard in the womb after they are born (Levitin, 2008).

Listening is a comprehensive process that includes hearing. All sounds can be heard based on the capacity of the auditory organ, but for something to be considered as listened to, there needs to be a process of focus and comprehension. The skill that begins developing in the womb is hearing, not listening. Hearing, in its most basic sense, is the ability to discern sound elements, to receive sound. Listening, on the other hand, means comprehending the heard sounds (Özbay and Melanlıoğlu, 2012). Since babies start hearing in the womb and can distinguish their mother's voice, they are especially sensitive to human voices, particularly their mother's voice, and other sounds after birth (Berk, 2013). Babies begin to communicate through crying, and even before they utter their first words, they listen to the sounds in their surroundings. This situation forms the foundations of listening skills. Babies initially respond to the voices of others and cry in response to other babies crying. Babies aged 0-6 weeks during this period make cooing and sighing sounds. The responses parents give to the movements and sounds produced by babies, accompanied by smiling and talking, are considered the beginning of social interaction (Turan and Topçu, 2016).

There are numerous signs that indicate that babies listen to others even before they utter their first words. They also show signs of understanding what is being said after listening to others. Many parents say that their babies can't talk yet but understand everything. For example, parents often mention that their babies do what they say. When a mother says to her baby, "Give me the toy," and the baby hands over the toy, or when she asks, "Where is the toy?" and the baby starts looking for the toy, it is clear from the baby's gestures and expressions that they understand what is being said.

Signs of Listening Skills in Infants (Selçuk, 2005; Yavuzer, 2012):

- Infants have the ability to hear just like adults right after birth.

- Starting from the first month, infants respond to their mother's speech by making cooing sounds.
- At three months, they can turn their heads toward the source of a sound and smile when spoken to or when their heads are gently moved.
- By the fourth month, infants establish eye contact with the person speaking to them.
- At six months, they can distinguish who the speaker is and show different responses to their mother's different tones. They turn toward the speaker and smile.
- Around the ninth month, infants can determine whether the sound is coming from the right or left side.
- By the twelfth month, they can even detect low-intensity sounds.
- At twenty-four months, children attentively listen when spoken to.

Estabrooks (1998) states that developing listening skills from infancy has a significant impact on imparting speech, reading, and writing skills to children. The development of children's listening skills involves stages of noticing, distinguishing, identifying, and comprehending. The noticing stage refers to infants being able to perceive the presence of sound. Babies learn to notice sounds, focus on them, and respond to them in the early stages of life. In the distinguishing stage, babies begin to differentiate which sounds in their environment belong to whom or what. During this stage, they can easily distinguish between long and short words but may have difficulty distinguishing words of the same length. The identifying stage is when children start to differentiate speech sounds from other sounds. In this stage, children begin to analyze the differences and rules within speech. The comprehending stage is the most complex and challenging part of listening. It is the result of the preceding stages, where children perceive and understand the message. Developing these listening skills in early childhood not only enhances the ability to understand spoken language but also lays a strong foundation for developing other language-related skills, such as speaking, reading, and writing.

To support the development of hearing and perceptual skills in infants, the following can be done:

- Show interest in and respond with love to the baby.
- Help the baby develop a sense of rhythm by singing songs with different rhythms.

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- Encourage the baby's vocalizations by responding to them, motivating them to continue making sounds and eventually start speaking.
- Talk to the baby as much as possible and imitate the sounds they make.
- Test whether the baby is following sounds by producing sounds with a rattle or another object close to the baby's ear, where they can't see it.
- Provide toys that make different sounds for the baby to play with.

5. THE CONDITIONS FOR BEING A GOOD LISTENER

Navaro (1987) outlined the conditions for being a good listener as looking into the eyes of the speaker, making eye contact, paying attention, and maintaining silence. Physically orienting toward the speaker and making eye contact with them is an important aspect of listening. It signifies that you are actively listening and interested in the speaker's words. This physical stance is crucial, especially when communicating with a child, as it motivates them to listen. When conversing with a child, it may be necessary to adjust their position or your own to establish eye contact. Sitting at their eye level, crouching, or positioning the child at a slightly higher place relative to your own sends the message that you are actively listening and interested. This is essential for communication and listening skills development. Being physically close and maintaining eye contact between the speaker and the listener establishes trust and motivation for listening. Otherwise, appearing preoccupied with other things while appearing to listen diminishes the speaker's desire to communicate and sets a poor example for children.

No one wants to talk in a noisy environment. When someone wants to be listened to, they expect others to pay attention to what they are saying and also to provide a suitable quiet environment for speaking. When there is silence, the speaker feels that they are being listened to. This not only allows the speaker to communicate successfully but also encourages active listening from the audience. While maintaining a quiet environment is important, a listener who shows no reaction at all can raise doubts. To avoid giving the impression that they are not really listening, the listener should provide some feedback. For example, nodding or responding with expressions like "yes, I'm listening, I understand" helps dispel doubts and shows that the listener is following the conversation. Yavuzer (2001) suggests that silence during listening conveys to the child the message, "I accept you, I'm listening, I want to hear your feelings." By giving similar non-verbal

signals, the child is motivated to speak, and they are provided with the opportunity to express their emotions and thoughts freely.

Yalçın (2002) identifies several stages in the development of a child's listening skills from an early age and emphasizes the importance of paying attention to these stages. These stages include:

- At the earliest stage, children do not possess conscious listening skills, except for when they are directly addressed. They primarily pay attention to distinct and noticeable sounds.
- Children can easily lose interest in listening when external factors like sounds, light, movement, etc., distract their attention during a moment of focused listening.
- Children tend to be impatient when it comes to listening and often quickly shift to speaking and expressing their own thoughts. They are more preoccupied with themselves than with what is being said.
- Children make connections between what they hear and their existing knowledge and personal experiences through association during the listening process, actively participating in the conversation.
- Throughout the listening process, children become more active by asking questions and making comments.
- Emotions, mental activities, experiences, and prior knowledge also play a role in the practical aspects of listening and in the post-listening phase.

6. THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY IN DEVELOPING LISTENING SKILLS

The first prerequisite for effective listening is that the child's hearing function is intact. Listening is a process that depends on the initial step of hearing. While hearing alone is insufficient for understanding, children with hearing impairments face difficulties in comprehending, remembering, and using what they hear, which results in interpersonal communication problems. Inadequacies in hearing directly impact listening and restrict the information acquired through listening. Especially during the period before primary school and before learning to read and write, most of the understanding is achieved through listening. Children learn to pronounce and use words correctly through listening as they acquire their native language. This is why children with hearing loss need

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additional effort in their listening practices, and the absence of these practices negatively affects the child's speaking skills (Northern & Downs, 1991). According to Kadioglu (2004), when communicating with their children, parents must know how to listen to establish mutual understanding and exchange emotions and thoughts. To understand a child, it is essential to be a good observer, but it is not possible to understand without being a good listener. Mothers, during their communication with their children, adjust their speech to the child's learning style and level of understanding (Ozcan Eroglu, 1998). For instance, mothers attempt to make their conversations more pronounced and meaningful by showing the object they are talking about to their children. They speak to their children with high tones, emphasize, use simple sentences, and repeat syllables and words (Cakir, 2000).

Parents and preschool educators work on providing listening skills to children. In the past, there was a prevailing understanding that listening skills occurred spontaneously and unconsciously. However, scientific studies have revealed that this is not the case; teaching children what, why, how, and to what extent they should listen is essential. Families and preschool institutions are responsible for making these skills conscious. Families who are so concerned about the development of their children's speaking skills should also prioritize the development of listening skills with the same level of importance. Effective listening is crucial for healthy communication through speech. To ensure that listening takes place effectively, the appropriate type of listening must be determined based on the purpose. For instance, the type of listening a child uses when listening to a story will differ from the type of listening parents use when listening to their child. In such cases, the most critical aspect that the family should educate is to make the child realize that "listening is carried out with a purpose." Yalçın (2002) states that one of the primary difficulties encountered in communication is the lack of a habit of correct listening. It is emphasized that families have a significant role in instilling this habit (Calp, 2005). Therefore, it can be said that the listening education provided in the family forms the basis for the individual's lifelong listening skills. Furthermore, an individual's listening skills affect their cognitive development. All listening consists of the listener explaining what they have heard to themselves. The words spoken by the speaker are recorded by the listener with their own sentences and interpretations. In a sense, listening enhances the thinking process (İzin, 2005). A child with enhanced thinking and listening skills is unlikely to lag behind

in society. Individuals with these qualities are in a position to both express themselves and understand what is being expressed. It should not be forgotten that listening is a process that requires education, and this skill's educational needs should be met from a young age. One of the primary skills that parents should instill in their children is listening skills. Listening skills are so crucial for a child that they enable the child to communicate with society and socialize. In order for children to gain self-confidence, develop as individuals who can establish healthy relationships with themselves and their surroundings, it is essential for parents to pay attention to and place significant importance on teaching listening skills within the family. It should always be kept in mind that listening is a teachable and improvable skill. To enhance listening skills, activities and games should be incorporated into the child's daily life. Listening skills, which will form the basis of all of a child's learning and enhance their communication abilities, should be given the necessary importance.

To develop listening skills in the family, the following steps should be taken:

- Parents should determine if their children have any hearing problems, and if so, seek professional help.
- When a baby initiates communication, they should be listened to calmly, and a verbal response should be given in a loving tone.
- Face-to-face communication should be established, and eye contact should be emphasized.
- To support their children's cognitive development, parents can use games or activities to extend the child's attention span. This will encourage the child to focus their attention on the person, material, or activity during the listening process. To extend a child's attention span during listening, memory-strengthening games and activities should be organized.
- Parents should monitor whether their children comprehend the content of what they are listening to and tailor their responses accordingly.
- Parents should not rely solely on head nods or approving sounds when communicating with their children.

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- Listening education begins in the family. Children should be made aware that listening is not the same as hearing. The family should serve as a good model for the child to acquire listening skills.
- Children who grow up listening to lullabies, stories, riddles, songs, and lullabies develop their listening skills effectively. The child's interest should be determined, and listening materials tailored to the child should be used.
- Literary genres like lullabies, stories, etc., that enrich the aesthetic and enjoyment of the native language in the pre-school period should be used as listening materials. Activities that involve both listening and watching, such as children's theater, should be utilized.
- Children should be questioned about their understanding of the content of what they have listened to.
- Parents should not leave their children's questions unanswered.
- Children should be involved in the listening process within the family and should be encouraged to actively participate in the process. At the same time, children should be made aware of their own listening process.
- To make the child an active participant in listening, the family should guide the child. During this guidance process, parents should be good listeners themselves. Moreover, body language can be used to send some messages to the speaking child, such as "tell me, I am listening." (Tutar et al., 2014).
- Forcing children to listen without making any sounds in a coercive environment makes the listening process ineffective and leads to negative attitudes towards listening in school.
- To establish effective communication with children, parents need to listen actively. This includes observing the reactions of the other person while speaking, sometimes interrupting the conversation to allow the other person to speak, not starting to speak before the other person has finished, listening to the child without judging them, maintaining eye contact, and asking short questions that show that you are listening.
- Parents should provide their children with an effective listening model. According to AÇEV (2020), when parents are good role models in listening and children are appropriately listened to, children experience the following positive effects: They learn to listen, they do not become hostile and aggressive, their vocabulary expands,

their speaking skills improve, they gain self-confidence, and when they have any problems, they trust their parents and share their problems with them.

- Effective listening should be promoted in order to understand what the child is saying. To achieve this, sufficient time should be allocated to the child. A child who is listened to by the family can behave in a similar way. A child raised in this way is more likely to use their listening skills effectively.
- The messages coming from the child should be listened to with the aim of understanding, going beyond preconceptions, and continuing the listening process, aiming to understand what the child wants to say. To achieve this, questions such as who, what, why, and when should be used.
- For active listening to take place, the person needs to be able to express their feelings and thoughts comfortably. During active listening, parents should provide feedback to the child, indicating that they understood the child's message. However, these feedback should not include evaluation, suggestions, opinions, or questions. They should solely indicate what the parents understood from the child's message, and the feelings and thoughts should remain with the child (Gordon, 2004).
- Parents should actively participate in the listening process and ensure that the child actively participates in the process. Passive listening can lead to selective listening first, which can eventually turn into non-listening and ignoring the spoken content (Umagan, 2007). In passive listening, parents should listen only by giving approval responses that show they understand the child's message, without expressing their own opinions, and by not interrupting the child's speech (Dönmezer, 2009). However, in passive listening, silence should not be maintained for a long time. Especially during pauses in the conversation, it is appropriate to provide verbal and non-verbal cues indicating that the child's words and feelings are understood (Gordon, 2004; Yavuzer, 2001).

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