Effective teaching of listening and speaking skills as a solution to students' pronunciation problems in Rwandan secondary schools

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Abstract
This study was carried out with the aim of investigating about how the effective teaching of listening and speaking in Rwandan secondary schools can be a way to solve students' pronunciation problems and achieve intelligible pronunciation. It tried to find out whether secondary school teachers and learners give deserved importance to listening and speaking skills. Moreover, it shows the relationship between listening and speaking, and pronunciation. Through the literature review, the study dealt with some definitions and the literature related to pronunciation and the teaching of listening and speaking skills. It presents data collection tools. Here the researcher used a questionnaire and classroom observations. Observation was carried out in some classes to kmow whether listening and speaking skills are taught in secondary schools and to detect students' pronunciation problems. For data analysis and presentation, the researcher used tables of frequencies. The results demonstrated that some secondary school teachers neither teach listening and speaking nor test them. Finally, the study suggested the conditions which can help teachers to teach listening and speaking in an effective way to help learners acquire intelligible pronunciation. Thus some recommendations to the stakeholders of education were given at the end of the study.

Keywords: listening, speaking, intelligible pronunciation

1. Introduction

Nowadays, English has become the most widely spoken language in the world. It is used internationally in everyday activities such as politics, diplomacy, technology, business and so on. Particularly in Rwanda, it has been given the status of an official language along with Kinyarwanda and French. Moreover, it is used as a medium of instruction from nursery education up to tertiary education. Therefore, it should be given greater importance in Rwanda teaching and learning context than ever before.

According to Revell (1983), the general objective of English teaching and learning should be to develop students' proficiency in using the language effectively in a variety of situations of day-to-day life through the four English skills, i.e listening, speaking, reading and writing to enable students to communicate easily and fluently in English.

For Rwandan secondary schools students to be able to understand and produce intelligible pronunciation, teachers should prepare and train them for this aim. Intelligible pronunciation is acquired through listening to spoken language and imitating the spoken language through speaking activities. Therefore, students should be taught listening and speaking.

There exists literature on integrating listening and speaking skills in other language skills. For example, Byrne (1976) carried out a study on the process of integrating English language skills and pointed out that integrated skills activities provide opportunities for using language naturally and students seem to learn better when they are engaged in activities which involve more than one type of language skills. Moreover, Hamouda (2013) stated that listening comprehension problems that most students face result in the fact that listening and speaking are not effectively taught. Poorhossein (2011) argued that listening comprehension problems can be solved by teaching students the phonological system of the language.

Bashir et al. (2011) said that in order to develop listening and speaking skills, teachers who are non-native speakers of English should look for opportunities to have native speakers in their classrooms to serve as models for students or use audio-visual materials in the contexts where it is not possible to get those guest speakers. In spite of all this literature, none of them has dealt with the relationship between effectively teaching oral skills and the acquisition of intelligible pronunciation. This study comes to fill this gap where much focus should be put on teaching listening using audio-visual materials from which students can listen to native speakers first and later on to other speakers of

English with different accents. The study also proposes that teachers should create real-life situations in their classrooms to help students develop their communicative competence.

This study aims at identifying students' pronunciation problems, making teachers more aware that those problems result from not teaching listening and speaking skills to their students or ineffective teaching of these skills. It also shows the link between the teaching of listening and speaking skills and intelligible pronunciation acquisition and demonstrates how listening and speaking should be taught for that aim.

1.1.Statement of the problem

The focus of English language learning and teaching in Rwandan secondary schools is mainly placed on grammatical structures and vocabulary. Listening and speaking are given little importance during class time. In addition, these aural and oral skills are only tested globally in very few different types of activities that take place during class time.

Students should learn to use English structures they learn in different real situations. On the contrary, class time is mostly used to deal with grammar and vocabulary whereby listening and speaking are neglected. The consequences of this neglect can be that secondary school students fail to get what the speakers of English say and they are unable to speak English well. Of course, as pointed out by Abbot and Wingard (1985), the objective of teaching English should not be to sound exactly like native speakers, but listening and speaking practice should help students to acquire intelligible pronunciation so that they can be understood and get other speakers.

In order to achieve intelligible pronunciation in English in Rwandan secondary schools, a certain number of things should be done. First, teachers of English should take into consideration the importance of integrating listening and speaking in other language skills. Second, teachers should create real life situations for their students to practice the language through listening and speaking. As a result, students will be able to understand the speakers of English and talk to them with intelligible pronunciation.

1.2.Research questions

The questions that guided this research are the following:

1. What are the major causes of secondary school students' listening and pronunciation problems?
2. What is the importance of intelligible pronunciation?

3. Which importance do teachers of English in secondary schools give to listening and speaking skills during their teaching and testing activities?
4. What is the relationship between the effective teaching of listening and speaking and intelligible pronunciation?

2. Literature Review

2.1.Introduction

As Brown (1977:5) pointed out, "language is a series of sounds usually strung together in groups which convey meaning to listeners". He further defined a language as "a system of arbitrary signs or vocal symbols which permit all people in a given culture or other people who have learnt the system of that culture to communicate or to interact". Every language, be in spoken or written form, operates within its own system and different languages have different vocal symbols.

People in all societies have their own languages. As Chastain (1976) stated, language is universal and all human beings in a community carry out every activity of human life mostly using spoken language because some of these people cannot read. Spoken language is primary because it existed as soon as man existed. It is also considered primary because people learn to speak their native language several years before they learn to read and write it. In addition, Revell (1983) says that we usually do more speaking than writing in our everyday life. He continues saying that we always think first of how we would say what we are putting down on paper. That is why writing is said to be a secondary system which takes place after the spoken language.

Two language skills, listening and speaking, are involved in the spoken language. This is because the spoken language engages at least one speaker and one or more hearers or listeners. When someone involved in a conversation says something, the hearer / listener understands and speaks as reaction. In this situation, the listener becomes the speaker and the former speaker becomes the listener.

Abbot and Wingard (1985) reveal that learners of English should be exposed to a certain number of varieties of pronunciation for listening practice. According to these authors, the language we hear from English speaking people acts as a model for the spoken language to follow because no one can speak English or another language without first of all hearing it. Therefore, English teachers should teach listening and encourage students to speak by correctly pronouncing the English language sounds.

2.2.Theoretical framework

This study will be guided by interactional theory (interactionism). Interactional theory is a theory that views language as a means through which human relationships, exchanges and performances are created. According to Richards and Rodgers (1998, p. 17), one acquires a second or foreign language with exposure to that language in the environment. According to this theory, English language learners develop their language skills out of the desire to communicate with the world around them. Language emerges and is dependent upon the interaction of the language learner with people in the environment where English is spoken.

2.3.Definition of key terms

In order to fully understand the significance of this topic, a number of key terms must be defined. In the following lines, the concern is to define 'aural' and 'oral' English skills and 'intelligible' pronunciation.

2.3.1. Listening skills

Morrow (1981: 79) defines listening "an active process of perceiving and constructing a message from a stream of sound. This process depends on what one knows about the phonological, grammatical, lexical and cultural system of a language". In addition, a shared knowledge of the real world or context between the speaker and the listener determines the level of comprehension of the message.

2.3.2. Speaking skills

According to Richards and Renandya (2002:201), speaking skills are productive skills that we need when "we engage in discussion with someone about something, to give clarifications of information, to describe things, to complain about people's behaviour, to make polite requests or to entertain people with jokes and anecdotes". MacMillan English Dictionary (2002) defines speaking as a process of talking to somebody about something or the ability to talk in a particular language in order to express your ideas, thoughts or opinions about something. As such, its development is undertaken after the receptive skills of listening comprehension, and is always somewhat behind that of the receptive skills. That is why, as Chastain (1976: 334) argues, "In many cases, listening should naturally lead on to speaking. This can be particularly so at the phonological level where it is essential to develop an ability to recognise a sound before success in producing it is possible".

2.3.3. Intelligible pronunciation

Pronunciation can be defined as an act of uttering a sound or a word in a certain way. Chastain (1976) says, "Perfect pronunciation of all sounds is not necessary in order to communicate". He says that when someone is communicating, "the goal should be the ability to talk successfully with a native and not have a native accent". He also argues that in order to be understood, the speaker should acquire a pronunciation which can be understood with little or no conscious effort on the part of the listener. Such a kind of pronunciation that is clear or simple enough to understand is labelled as 'intelligible pronunciation'.

Abbot and Wingard (1985) argue that in order to develop students' English pronunciation, the English language teacher's aim should be to help students acquire intelligible pronunciation. This is achieved through two steps. The first step is to teach them to pronounce the sounds to the best of their ability. The second step is to create real-life situations whereby the students to can practice those learnt sounds.

2.4.Teaching listening and speaking skills

Chastain (1976) explains that the phonological system of a language is acquired through listening, and speaking skills are impossible to acquire without listening skills that are developed. As mentioned, listening serves as the basis for the development of speaking. As such, the teaching of listening should precede the teaching of speaking. Clearly, as stated by Broughton et al. (1980: 36), "it is not possible to expect a student to produce a sound which does not exist in his mother tongue or a natural sentence using the stress, rhythm and intonation of a native speaker of the foreign language without providing them, at the first instance, with a model of the form they are to produce". It is not possible for any foreign or second language learners to satisfactorily produce what they have not heard. Then, the learner's ability to listen is the logical first step in attempting to achieve oral fluency or accuracy.

2.4.1. Teaching listening

As Rivers and Temperly (1978: 62) explain, "listening is decoding of a message which calls for active participation in the communication between the participants. However, as they say, listening comprehension might well be called the forgotten skill in second or foreign language learning". Even though listening is at least as important as any of other skills, perhaps more so, it has been neglected

by a considerable number of teachers. Nevertheless, the phonological system of the language is acquired through listening.

2.4.2. Teaching speaking

According to Chastain (1978), learning to talk in the FL is often considered to be one of the most difficult aspects of language learning for the teacher to help the students with. While speaking, the speakers need someone to listen to them speaking and to respond to them. Therefore, the practical problems are obvious since it will not be easy at all for students to speak individually. What makes this difficult is usually a large number of students in one classroom and a limited number of hours allotted to English lessons in a week.

2.5.The relationship between listening and speaking skills and pronunciation

As stated in the introduction of this chapter, pronunciation is mainly developed through listening and speaking skills. According to Broughton et al. (1980: 46), "pronunciation deals with two interrelated skills which are recognition or understanding the flow of speech (listening) and production or fluency in spoken language". We are able to distinguish one message, i.e. one bit of meaning from another according to how the sounds are pronounced (Chastain, 1976).

Wright (1984: 15) says that "along with listening activities, opportunities for speaking practice should be provided. The teacher can design extensions of listening activities, such as creation of pair dialogues, role-playing, or group work and problem-solving". When opportunities to communicate with the language they have available to them are provided, it is possible for students to match the assumption they have gained during listening with practice. They then pronounce English sounds trying to imitate what they have heard. It seems logical that teaching speaking skill must begin after the teaching of listening. And the teaching of listening and speaking skills helps students to develop pronunciation.

2.6.Integrating listening and speaking skills with other language skills

The process of integrating language skills involves linking them together in such a way that what has been learnt and practised, through the exercise of one skill, is reinforced and perhaps extended through further language activities which bring one or more of the other skills into use. We need to see why integrated skills activities are important. According to Byrne (1976:130), integrated skills are important. First of all, they provide opportunities for using language naturally. Second, students seem to learn better when they are engaged in activities which involve different language skills.

When listening and speaking are integrated in other language skills, it helps students to effectively acquire the language. For example, if students have learnt grammatical structure, they will listen to a listening passage where the structures are used. According to Dobson (1974), a piece of spoken language in the form of a dialogue will be followed by related reading and/or writing activities. This way of learning will enable students not only to write the language but also use it in everyday life situations.

As a conclusion, teachers should devise their own materials for integrated skills. They may have to be content with a more simple approach providing a nexus of activities which bring different skills into play. Another alternative for finding the materials can be to adapt existing teaching materials for this purpose.

3. Research Methodology

3.1.Introduction

The section about methodology must be included in every research project because it indicates methods and techniques that were used in carrying out the research. The objective of the section is to show procedures to follow during the process of data collection and to describe data analysis tools.

3.2.Data collection techniques

According to Grinnell and Williams (1990), data are information which serves as a basis for discussion and decision making. In collecting the data of this study two techniques were used: the questionnaire and observation. The questionnaire was given to secondary school English teachers. The observation was carried out in classrooms during the lessons of English to see if students are taught listening and speaking skills and the pronunciation problems they have.

3.2.1. Research questionnaire

The questionnaire that this study used was designed for secondary school English language teachers in lower level. It was written in English, their language of instruction. Before distributing the questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted. I carried out a pilot study to reduce errors. This pilot study was very helpful because the respondents' reactions and suggestions from the pilot study helped a lot in modifying some questions.

The questionnaire that was used in this research consisted of three parts. The first part aimed at collecting data about the respondents' identification. The second part was about teachers' perceptions

about the teaching of English language skills whereas the third part consisted of a number of both open and closed questions on how listening and speaking are taught in Rwandan secondary schools.

3.2.2. Observation

Observation was another way of data collection. This was carried out in order to see how English is taught. It also aimed at detecting students' pronunciation problems. Observation was held on three schools out of ten schools that were sampled.

3.3.Sampling technique and sample population

According to Eisenberg (1997), it is important to know something about the process of selecting people to take part in our research study. This process is called sampling and the people picked up make a sample. According to Grinnell and Williams (1990: 118), a population can be defined as "the totality of persons or objects which a study is concerned with". The sample population that was used in this study included teachers of English from 10 secondary schools in Nyamagabe District. To select these schools, I used purposive sampling, which purposely selects individuals for a survey. After selecting the schools, I used simple random sampling to get classes where observation was conducted. On each selected school, all the forms (first, second and third) of ordinary level had equal chances of being selected and only one form was sampled.

3.4.Techniques of analysing the data

The analysis of the data that were collected from the questionnaire and focus group discussions consisted in counting choices of each answer given. The frequency of each answer was taken into account in the interpretation of the data. Here tables of frequencies were provided. The analysis of the data that were collected from observation consisted of comparing the way English skills are taught in the classrooms that were observed and the one in which they should be taught.

4. Analysis and Interpretation of Findings

The data used in this chapter were collected through two techniques already mentioned: the questionnaire given to teachers of English and observation carried out during English lessons. The research design was mixed methods. There were quantitative and qualitative data. The data were analyzed using frequency tables.

4.1.The teaching of English language skills in Rwandan secondary schools

The table below indicates the language skills that secondary school teachers emphasise on in their teaching.

Table 1: The emphasis laid on the language skills during teaching activities

Language skills	**Number of teachers who put the most emphasis on the skill**	**Percentage (%)**
Vocabulary	5	22.8 %
Grammar	7	31.8 %
Writing	4	18.2 %
Reading	3	13.6 %
Speaking	2	9.1 %
Listening	1	4.5 %
Total	**n = 22**	**100** %

Source: Primary data, January 2020

The table shows that a great number of the respondents put more emphasis on teaching grammar and vocabulary (54.6%). The other language skills are somehow neglected. Among 22 respondents, only two teachers (9.1% of all respondents) emphasize on speaking and only 1 teacher (4.5% of the respondents) emphasizes on listening.

English language methodologists such as Chastain (1976) and Byrne (1976) have advocated the natural sequence in learning an SL or FL: listening, speaking, reading and writing. In Rwanda however, listening and speaking are allotted very little importance in classroom teaching. A big number of teachers put a great emphasis on teaching grammar. Listening and speaking skills seem to be neglected.

4.2.Language skills integration

I asked a question to know if teachers have ever integrated at least two language skills during their teaching. The answers given to the question revealed the following:

Table 2: Integration of at least two language skills during English language teaching

At least two language skills integration during teaching activities	Number of respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	8	36.4
No	14	63.6
Total	**22**	**100**

Source: Primary data, January 2020

This table shows that only 36.4 % of all respondents have ever integrated at least two language skills during their teaching activities. There is then another group of teachers who have never integrated language skills. This means that they teach them in isolation. They represent 63.6 % of the respondents.

As Johnson and Morrow (1986: 108) said, language learning is made easier when "what has been learnt and practiced through the exercise of one skill is reinforced and extended through the exercise of other skills. For example, if students have learnt listening skills; those skills should be reinforced by language activities which bring speaking or writing into use"

I have also asked the question to know if teachers specifically integrate listening and/or speaking in other language skills. The following table indicates the results of the research.

Table 3: Integration of listening or speaking in other language skills

Integration of listening and/or speaking in other language skills	**Number of respondents**	**Percentage (%)**
Teachers who integrate listening and/or speaking in other language skills	15	37.5
Teachers who never integrate listening and/or speaking in other language skills	25	62.5
Total	**40**	**100**

Source: Primary data, January 2020

Teachers who integrate listening and/or speaking in other language skills represent 37.5% of all respondents. Teachers who never integrate listening and/or speaking in other language skills represent 62.5% of all respondents. Through my questionnaire, I asked them a question to find out why they do not integrate them in other language skills. They gave me two main reasons. One group of the respondents said that they do not integrate listening and/or speaking in other language skills because they do not know how to do it. Another group of respondents is made of teachers who never teach listening and/or speaking and consequently, do not integrate them in other language skills.

Most teachers do not understand the importance of language skills integration. They do not know that students learn better when what has been learnt in one skill is reinforced through other language skills. They should be aware that their students cannot achieve develop their language fluency if language skills are never integrated.

4.3.The testing of English language skills

A question was put to know how Rwandan secondary school teachers test English language skills. It was found out that they put emphasis on some language skills as it is illustrated by the table below.

Table 4: Emphasis in testing English language skills

Skill emphasised on in testing	**Number of Respondents n = 22**	**Percentage (%)**
Listening	0	0
Speaking	1	4.5
Reading	4	18.2
Writing	3	13.6
Grammar	8	36.4
Vocabulary	6	27.3
Total	**22**	**100**

Source: Primary data, January 2020

This table indicates that a large number of the respondents are the teachers who mostly emphasise on Grammar and Vocabulary in their testing. They represent 63.7% of all the respondents of whom 36.4% emphasize on Grammar and 27.3% on Vocabulary. Another group is about teachers who do not emphasise on Grammar or on vocabulary of whom 13.6% emphasise on writing, 4.5% on speaking, 18.2% on reading and no one emphasizes on listening. This focus on grammar and vocabulary during the teachers' testing explained the emphasis laid on grammatical structures and vocabulary during classroom teaching.

According to Harris (1969), testing is very important in any learning and teaching experience. English language tests help both a teacher and students to know the areas which need more improvement. However, as Abbott and Wingard (1985) say, listening and speaking are under-emphasized in testing and that is the very reason why these skills continue to be under-emphasized in teaching.

Classroom observation was held to know how listening and speaking were taught. Moreover, this observation aimed at detecting students' pronunciation problems. As revealed by this observation, listening and speaking were not effectively taught. Concerning the teaching of the listening skills, most teachers were doing no more than reading written texts to students and afterwards students were asked questions about the texts to answer either orally or by writing. This way of teaching listening was ineffective because teachers were not giving a good pronunciation model to students. The other problem is that those written texts were not authentic listening materials because written texts lack features of the spoken language.

The most important pronunciation problems students had were about the consonant sounds that are given by pronouncing '*th'*, and the short vowel sounds like in 'thin', 'big', etc. without forgetting the diphthongs such as in 'fire', flour, 'power', etc. Students were pronouncing them trying to near them to Kinyarwanda vowel and consonant sounds.

5. Conclusion

This research has proved that the teaching of listening and speaking is given little importance in Rwandan secondary school classrooms. It has shown the relationship between listening and speaking skills, and pronunciation. It has also shown that when these two interrelated skills are not effectively taught, students cannot achieve intelligible pronunciation. Therefore, this study has explained how listening and speaking skills should be taught in Rwandan secondary schools in order to help students to improve their pronunciation.

In order to help students solve their pronunciation problems, some conditions should be fulfilled. First, listening and speaking should be taught in a communicative approach. Second, listening and speaking should be integrated with other language skills. Next, listening and speaking should also be tested. Finally, schools should provide their teachers with appropriate teaching materials including audio-visual ones to enable them teach and test listening and speaking.

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