

Skills of Teaching Active Listening in Younger School-Age Students

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Abstract.

Communication is the process of exchanging information, thoughts, ideas, feelings among people by applying verbal and nonverbal messages. The educational outcomes of modern teaching are achieved through communication between those who participate in the educational process. A prerequisite for achieving the goals of the teaching process is quality and two-way communication based on active listening. Active listening is the ability to accurately and precisely perceive what the other person (interlocutor) is experiencing and to offer feedback on what one has noticed, perceived. Encouraging and developing a culture of active listening is especially important in school because it influences the creation of a positive and motivating classroom atmosphere, the development of social competencies, the building of quality relationships and the promotion of understanding. The aim of this research is to establish the extent to which teachers actively listen to students during regular classes and extracurricular activities. A total of 171 students from 2nd to 4th grades of primary school (83 students and 88 girls) participated in the research. The results of the research indicate that students perceive that teachers listen to them extremely actively, as teachers greatly contribute to the development of students' communication skills.

Keywords: active listening; communication; students; teachers; teaching

1. Introduction

The school's educational activities are focused on the development of those competencies, skills and abilities that will help students function successfully in modern society. The primary prerequisite for achieving it is successful communication. Due to its complexity, communication is impossible to define unambiguously in terms of terminology. Authors (Jukić & Nadrljanski, 2015) define communication as a complex human activity that is the basis of human action, and includes an exchange message between one or more persons as the basic needs of human life. Communication for authors Žižak, Vizek-Vidović & Ajduković (2012) is the process through which the persons involved jointly build the meaning of the message they exchange and indirectly influence each other. If we look at modern teaching as an interaction process, we come to the conclusion that active listening is a communication skill that is crucial for achieving the set educational outcomes. National Framework Curriculum (2011) emphasizes social competencies and communication skills as significant competencies for lifelong learning that modern education strives for. The content of the document emphasizes communication skills within the language area, and refers to the

creation and reduction of information (productive skills) or to the receipt of information (receptive skills). Due to its importance for the overall understanding of human relationships between participants in the teaching process, the research is focused on the receptive communication skill of active listening.

2. Active listening

Active listening is a communication skill that is especially important during the teaching process because it maintains and builds relationships between students and teachers, and between students and students. Of particular importance is how students listen, but it is also important how teachers listen. Assuming that students and teachers have healthy hearing organs, they are able to physically receive a message or hear it, but they often lack listening skills. It is for this reason that listening as an active, sophisticated mental process, i.e. communication and social skills, differs from hearing or auditory listening as a fundamental communication process (Vodopija, 2007; Sladović & Franz, 2008).

The author Vodopija (2007), when talking about active listening, points out that true listening involves receiving basic information characterized by the intention to receive the sent information and to notice the feelings and backgrounds of the message content. Sladović Franz (2009) notes that active listening is listening for a reason when trying to understand the interlocutor in his context, identify his feelings and express his feedback on understanding the message. Rosenberg (2007) points out that active listening is a key element of successful communication process because it is aimed at raising awareness of the three levels of messages we receive: understanding the content, noticing the background feelings of what is being said, and recognizing the needs that are at their root. According to Hoppe (2007), active listening is an umbrella program that combines the communication skills of attention, non-judgment, reflection, clarification, summarization, and contribution to the solution.

3. Active listening in the teaching process

Observing teaching as a communication process, Buljubašić Kuzmanović (2021) does not attribute active listening only as a component of the teaching process, but views it as a key skill for the quality realization of what is expected from teaching. Namely, active listening to the basics is quality communication between teachers and students. In this way, both the recipient and the sender of the message are connected and actively participate. Some of the disruptive factors of active listening are the interruption of the interlocutor, the aggressive opposition to the opposite opinion, and the actions that direct the attention of the primary messages to something else. In contrast, it is characterized by approval, support and interest (Zrilić, 2010). Brust-Nemet (2015) emphasizes the need to transition from the concept of traditional teaching in which the main task is the transfer of knowledge, to a concept that encourages and develops the basic competencies of students. In order to be truly able to develop students' competence, it is important to develop the personal and social development of all teachers and individuals involved in the educational process on a daily basis.

Jokić (2017) looks at the eight key competences for lifelong learning recommended by the European Commission, which have been adopted by national curricula. Namely, among the eight accepted competencies are social competencies. Social competencies, he points out, imply the ability to communicate in a socially acceptable way. Social competencies imply

certain communication skills of an individual. The development of communication skills is the goal of all educational outcomes. Jurčić (2010) analyses the social competencies of teachers as a mediator of the choice of appropriate behaviour in the teaching process and as a mediator of the success of teaching.

Since active listening is the foundation of quality teaching, it is necessary to consider how it is really realized in teaching and how it is developed. Jindra et al. (2010) state that active listening skills can be learned within the community. Such teachings are reflected in mutual listening between students and teachers and in listening between students, but also to co-workers within the school and parents outside the school. Establishing relationships with students and parents is the main task of teachers even before teaching. The quality of communication between students and the teacher will be reflected in the mutual communication of students with each other. Teaching communication, which is to be achieved by modern approaches to teaching, also constitutes the culture of teaching (Peko et al., 2014). Huerta-Wong & Schoech (2010) support previous research and point out that learning active listening is more effective through experiential learning than attending lectures on active listening. Cheon & Grant (2009) present research that shows that face-to-face learning is not necessary and that it can be adopted using computer programs. Varga & Tokić (2015) state two approaches - indirect learning and direct instruction, i.e. exercises for acquiring the skill of active listening. For direct instruction and skill training McNaughton et al. (2007) propose the LAFF model. LAFF consists of four steps: L refers to *listening*, understanding and acceptance. A stands for *asking questions* and taking notes. F refers to the recognition of problems, i.e. *focusing on the issues*, feelings and needs, and F as a contribution to the solution in a direct or indirect way, from the expression *to find a first step*.

4. What is achieved by active listening?

Listening skills are divided into passive and active listening. Passive listening means listening to the interlocutor, but without cognitive engagement and understanding (Gordon, 1996). The interaction between the two interlocutors is accompanied by a desire to express their own views, thoughts and feelings, i.e. a desire for the recipient of the message to truly receive the message of the sender (Schulz von Thun, 2001). The same goal applies to students who send a message to a teacher or peers, and to a teacher who sends a message to his students. It is precisely by doing so that active listening is realized in which one engages consciously and cognitively. Reardon (1998) highlights several key segments of quality communication: the prevalence of verbal and nonverbal behaviour; spontaneous, rehearsed and planned behaviour; developmental, not static; direct feedback, interaction, and coherence; taking place in accordance with some internal and external rules; activity; persuasion. McNaughton et al. (2007) divide active listening into several stages, in order to better understand the interlocutor. Similarly, Hoppe (2007) presents active listening as a concept that includes attention, non-judgment, reflection, clarification, summarization, and contribution to the solution.

Although active listening has almost always been recognized as important in the educational process, Pastuović (2012) points out that this skill is quite neglected within the teaching process. Pasutouvić's assumption is supported by the research of the author Peko, Munjiza & Borić (2003) which shows that class communication is mostly asymmetrical. Since asymmetrical communication is mentioned, it is important to explain in what direction

it takes place. Namely, research shows that teachers dominate most of the class time, while students mostly listen passively or answer some questions. On the other hand, teachers are often not interested in topics that are not necessarily related to the teaching content, but are important to students. It is extremely important that teachers listen to their students. Vodopija (2007) lists several characteristics of teachers who actively listen; they are open to new ideas, motivate and encourage their students more... However, such teachers serve as a model for their students and pass on such behaviours to them as well. The teacher is a direct model of learning student behaviour, so it is important to constantly develop and nurture their ability to communicate, control behaviour, tolerance and cooperation, and thus students will develop positive social behaviour in which they can express their emotions and attitudes, but also listen other students and associates (Zrilić, 2010). Furthermore, active listening develops students' self-confidence and encourages school success, but also ensures satisfactory social relationships.

5. Methodology

5.1 Research goal

The aim of this research is to establish the extent to which teachers actively listen to students during regular classes and extracurricular activities.

The specific objective is to establish the extent to which primary school teachers teach communication skills.

5.2 Hypotheses

Based on the objectives of the research, the following hypotheses arise:

H1 - Attitudes of primary school students about active listening to their teachers are high.

H2 - Teachers greatly contribute to the development of students' communication skills.

5.3 Participants

The sample of this research consisted of 171 students of 2nd - 4th grade of primary school. 83 male and 88 female students participated in the study. In addition to gender, respondents were divided according to the grade they attend: 2nd grade had 53 students, 3rd grade had 63 students and 4th grade had 55 students. The third category was the general success of the previously completed class: 5 students were graded with 3 (2.9%), 30 students with 4 (17.5%) and 136 students with 5 (78.9%).

5.4 Procedure and instrument

The questionnaire was conducted anonymously and transversely with the written consent of the parents, the personal consent of the students and the permission of the school principal. Data were processed using *SPSS Statistics v21 for Windows*.

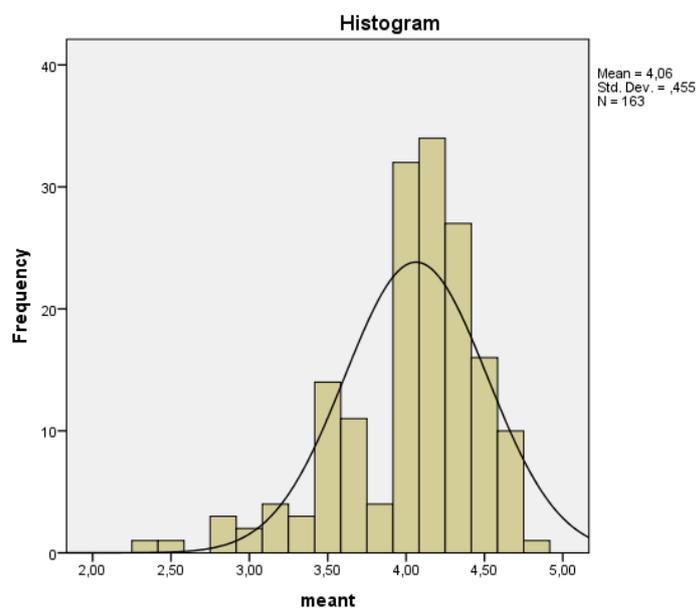
Data were collected by the Questionnaire on the quality of communication (Šejtanić, 2018) with linguistic adaptation to the norms of the Croatian language. The questionnaire consists of a total of 24 questions divided into 2 parts of 12 questions with answers on the Likert scale 1-5. The final variant of the scale has a distribution that deviates significantly from the normal, as evidenced by the Smirnov-Kolmogorov test, where $D = .082$, $df = 200$, $p = .002$, or Shapiro's Wilk test where $D = .958$, $df = 200$, $p = .167$ (Šejtanić, 2018, 335).

6. Results and discussion

6.1 Descriptive results

The results of the questionnaire were determined according to the total mean value of students' attitudes on the Likert scale from 1 to 5. The total number of students with complete answers ($N = 163$, missing 8). The mean value of student attitudes is (mean = 4.06), which is a high result, and it is confirmed by other values: median = 4.17; $SD = 0.45$; skew = -1.09; kurt = 1.37; min = 2.33; max = 4.83 (Figure 1). These results confirm hypothesis H1 that the attitudes of primary school students about active listening to their teachers are high. The lower standard deviation also confirms the rather high homogeneity of students' attitudes.

Figure 1: Histogram of descriptive results



The results of our research show that teachers are aware of how important it is not only to listen, but to really actively listen to students as they speak to us and how active listening affects certain aspects of children's development. A teacher who actively listens also serves as an example to students, so they can learn to actively listen according to the model. Active listening involves a mental process that requires an active and conscious effort of the brain and sensory organs, and is manifested by reflection and interpretation of words addressed to

the listener. In contrast, superficial listening results in unwanted difficulties that can often lead interlocutors to certain problems, and often results in misunderstanding, loss of important information, embarrassment or frustration of one of the interlocutors (Đurišević, 2017). Adults, parents or educators, who interrupt the child in speech, who turn their backs while the child is speaking, send a message to the child that they do not care about him and what he is saying. Such behaviour of the educator has very negative consequences on the child's development and can seriously impair the child's ability to listen. Children who have been victims of such parental behaviour show a low level of self-confidence in adulthood (Vodopija, 2007). The developed skill of active listening to the teacher is the starting point for listening to the student's needs and experiences and forms the basis for the co-construction of the curriculum (Rinaldi, 2006). It is very important to point out that the teaching and / or educational vocation requires daily and lifelong improvement of one's own abilities and competencies, as well as lifelong personal growth and development. Consequently, the fact that listening skills can also be improved and developed should not be left out. Đurišević (2017) points out that the first step towards developing the ability to actively listen to others is to actively listen to oneself. He also points out that there are behaviours that encourage the interlocutor to actively listen, and some of them are looking in the eyes, body language, meeting the speaker, giving feedback and the like.

Today's modern teaching focuses on achieving educational learning outcomes, and the skill of active listening with its orientation belongs to the educational component due to which it is often neglected (Pastuović, 2012). The research of the authors Peko, Munjiza & Borić (2003) indicates that teachers verbally dominate in as much as two thirds of the lesson, i.e. it was noticed that student speech is mostly not self-initiated but refers to answering questions. This finding of research points us to the fact that teachers are not inclined to listen to students, especially not in the case of topics that are important to students and are not necessarily oriented to the teaching content.

6.2 Correlations by categories - attitude about active listening of teachers

A one-way analysis of ANOVA variance ($F = 2.55$; $p > 0.05$) was used to examine the correlation between the variables of participants' gender and the total mean value of the results of the questionnaire (mean) of students' attitudes, which proved that there is no positive correlation between these two variables and that there are no statistically significant differences in attitudes between male and female students.

To examine the correlation between the variables class of participants and the total mean value of the results of the questionnaire (mean) student attitudes, the Pearsons correlation test was used and the results show a very weak positive correlation of 0.117 and > 0.05 , but without statistically significant differences. However, it should be mentioned that for the sake of a positive correlation indicator, Kruskal-Wallis was also conducted, which shows a slight increase in the mean value of students' attitudes as grades grow: 2nd grade has a mean score of 75.55; 3rd grade has 78.74; while in 4th grade a higher increase is seen with a rank of 91.06 (Chi square = 3.19; $p > 0.05$).

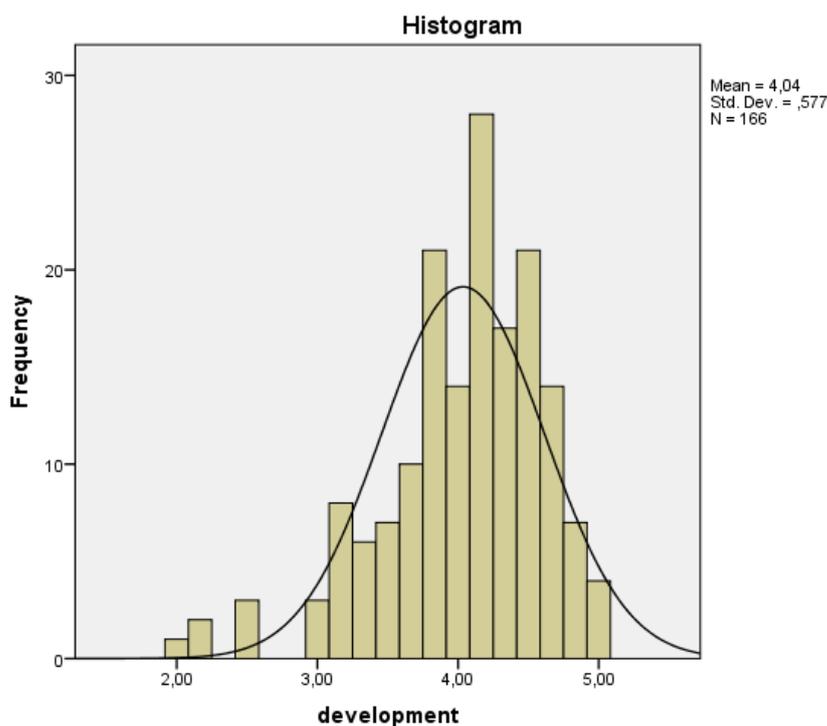
To examine differences in attitude with respect to the overall grade of the previous grade, only students in two groups were observed, those who achieved a general grade of 4 and those with 5. Since only 5 students passed with a grade of 3, they do not constitute a representative

group. To compare the attitudes between the two observed groups, a T-test ($t = -0.43$; $F = 0.068$; $p > 0.05$) was performed, from which it can be seen that there are no statistically significant differences in students' attitudes with regard to general success.

6.3 Development of communication skills

The results of the questionnaire were determined according to the total mean value of students' answers on the Likert scale from 1 to 5 to questions that checked how much teachers contribute to the development of students' communication skills. Total number of students with complete answers ($N = 166$, missing 5). The mean value of student attitudes is (mean = 4.04), which, along with other results (median = 4.17; $SD = 0.577$; skew = -1; kurt = 1.37; min = 2; max = 5 (Figure 2)), is an indicator of high results and thus confirmed H2 that teachers greatly contribute to the development of students' communication skills.

Figure 2: Development of communication skills



The finding of this research, how teachers greatly contribute to the development of students' communication skills, especially to the active listening skills, can be based on research by Huert - Wong & Schoech (2010) who found that active listening can be taught and improved. Their research has shown that the process of teaching active listening is more effective if it is based on experiential learning than the classical (frontal) way of teaching. The results of research conducted with preschool children also contribute to the impact on the development of communication skills. During the multi-day workshop, it was monitored how much communication skills are related to active listening and how much they can be influenced to improve. The results showed that the development of communication skills can be influenced and that such workshops are an excellent tool for improving communication

and the development of communication skills in school age. It should be emphasized that children are not aware of how much active listening affects interpersonal relationships, and actively learn to listen according to the model and visual perception, and this is one of the basic tasks of today's teaching (Bajsić, 2015).

6.4 Correlations by categories - contribution to the development of communication skills

A one-way analysis of ANOVA variance ($F = 1.55$; $p > 0.05$) was used to examine the correlation between the variables of gender of participants and the total mean value of the results of the part of the questionnaire (mean) on the contribution of teachers to the development of students' communication skills which proved that there is no positive correlation between these two variables and that there are no statistically significant differences in attitudes between male and female students.

To examine the correlation between the variables class of participants and the total mean value of the results of the questionnaire (mean) student attitudes, the Pearsons correlation test was used and the results show a very weak positive correlation of 0.019 and > 0.05 , from which it is concluded that there is a very weak positive correlation, without statistically significant differences.

To examine differences in attitude with respect to the overall grade or success of the previous grade, only students in two groups were observed, those who achieved a general grade of 4 and those who achieved 5. Since only 5 students passed with a grade of 3, they do not constitute a representative group. To compare the attitudes between the two observed groups, a T-test ($t = -0.16$; $F = 0.19$; $p > 0.05$) was performed, which shows that there are no statistically significant differences in the attitudes of students with regard to overall success.

7. Conclusion

Active listening is a dynamic and active process in which we decode the content and meaning of the interlocutor's message and give him feedback on how we experienced and understood the message. Communication during the teaching process, which is based on active listening, is a prerequisite for creating a positive classroom atmosphere that will result in the achievement of set educational outcomes. We considered the extent to which teachers actively listen to students during regular classes and extracurricular activities. The paper found that students feel that teachers listen to them extremely actively and that teachers greatly contribute to improving students' communication skills. Active listening is a communication skill that is multiplied to learn and improve, so it is the task of all those who share the responsibility for upbringing and education to systematically encourage and develop a culture of active listening. Although not enough attention is yet systematically paid to active listening exercises during classes and extracurricular activities, a step towards this is noticeable. The presented results in scientific terms will contribute to a better understanding of the importance and significance of the systematic development and encouragement of active listening in teaching communication. We are aware of the methodological limitations of this research because the data were obtained only from teachers. More complete data would be obtained by examining the teachers, who are the organizers of the teaching process, but also the parents with whom the children began their process of socialization development.

This research can serve as a kind of basis for further research that recognizes the importance of a culture of active listening in the teaching process, but also in everyday life situations.

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