THE ACCOLADE TO BEING ATTENTIVELY LISTENED TO

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THE ACCOLADE TO BEING ATTENTIVELY LISTENED TO

With the beginning of education, one is taught, requested, and expected to listen attentively most of the time when in class, and later in life at meetings and various types of gatherings.

Two of COED's definitions of the verb *listen* – important for this paper, are a) *to give one's attention to a sound* and b) *to make an effort to hear something,* as they navigate us to investigate the obstacles for the realization of the former and the reasons for making the effort to hear, stated in the latter.

In our research, we have discarded the physical obstacles as well as the obstacles due to reading and hearing deficiency or handicap. We turned to the obstacles disturbing the attention necessary when listening to loud reading of longer texts such as news articles, scripts of speeches, essays, and stories. The loud reading competences are not for language teachers and learners only but for all language users for there always comes a time when each of us has something to read or say before an audience: familial, educational, social, or peer one.

With the utterance competence tightly related to the reading introduced here, it must be pointed out that loud reading competences mastered with all its prosody and stylistic elements enable one to become a master of the speaking competences, as well, and thus confident and sure of being attentively listened to and understood.

In that sense the focus of our research was to analyze the loud reading competences of Foreign Language Teaching, Preschool Teaching and Class Teaching students.

The results of this research produced evidence that loud reading competences act as a primal prerequisite for the development of speaking competences appreciated for bestowing an attentive ear, i.e. improving all sorts of knowledge oral exchange, highly significant for future educators and any language users.

Keywords: reading – listening, attentive ear, audience, reading mistakes, prosodic and stylistic elements

INTRODUCTION

Education cannot exist without language nor teachers can teach without a read or spoken word, i.e. oral communication with the learners, whatever their age. It is a fact that a large number of the classes in all three cycles of education entail loud reading to students – either short sections or longer ones.

However, both as teachers and as citizens, we often come across learners who object to those elements of teachers' performance in class: a good number state that teachers speak either too fast or too slowly, at a very low voice or with a high-pitched voice, inaudibly or too loudly, with a monotonous speech intonation or with a disturbing one, etc. In addition, these objections, heard or rumoured quite frequently around – especially in social gatherings or in evaluation surveys, are stressed by learners themselves – when mocking the authority of the teachers, they comment that a good number of teachers do not stick to the standard language, but to their dialect, instead. Thus, many class attendants find it either difficult to understand some phrases or teachers' pronunciation and utterance distracting to follow attentively. Moreover, such comments are even used as arguments in favour of the causes of poor learners' achievements; a fact that educators cannot ignore.

The Faculty of Education – Bitola, as a HE institution preparing and training future pre-school teachers, schoolteachers, and foreign and native language teachers, encounter a serious task very tightly related to public speaking skills.

Therefore, within the very processes of teaching, lecturing, pedagogic practice, and oral examinations, the PFBT HE teaching staff regularly gain an insight into these reading and speaking competences of the future teachers. And no matter how hard they try to make future teachers, i.e. students, use the standard language, dialectal phrases, accents, intonations, and colloquialisms seem to be popping out of students' speech unexpectedly at most formal occasions. Bearing in mind the fact that dialectal phrases, idioms, and colloquialisms are often intentionally and purposefully used in public speeches for the sake of persuasiveness and attracting as many profiles of listeners as possible, our research starting point is not the usage of language for persuasive purposes. Instead, the euphony and comprehensibility of student-to-be-teacher's reading and speech are our starting point for it cannot be denied that they make the axis of a successful class, regardless of the subject/course taught.

REVIEWED LITERATURE ON THE STATED ISSUE

According to our search for available titles of publications tackling this problem, no corresponding studies have been found either on the Internet or in the University Libraries in R. Macedonia. In fact, most of the studies we have found elaborate either the problem of teaching *foreign language oral skills*, i.e. reading and speaking skills of a foreign language only, or the acquisition of the so called *public speaking skills* which in most cases are related to rhetoric and not to foreign language learning. What makes the issue in the focus of our research even more confusing is the fact that over the past decades, it has frequently been prompted under the title 'public speaking skills' and often overlapped with foreign language speaking skills or constituting the foreign language oral skills practice.

Therefore, distinction has to be made for 'public speaking skills' are offered as a distinctive module[1] and a different one from the native and foreign language learning programmes and modules at the universities worldwide.

However, before setting forth on this research, most of the literature that we reviewed along with the one referring to foreign language oral skills was related to those skills as well:

"The art of public speaking was practiced long before the Greeks wrote about it in their treatises more than 2,500 years ago. [I]t was a way of life, a way of being..."[2]

Today, public speaking skills are given a special attention and their utmost significance is clearly stated in many research papers and on many corresponding web sites. However, at this point, we would like to highlight a section of the explanation given on the web page of the Yale Centre for Teaching and Learning which says: *"... public speaking is something one practices on a daily basis: anytime we speak with another person, we are calling on (and honing) our speaking skills."* (*See footnote* 1.)

This section clearly contributes to the definition of our focus in this research, i.e. that one's reading and speaking skills are an unavoidable daily practice, and if we want to be heard, we have to command these skills. Yet, our focus in the research is placed on the reading skills as an element of utmost significance for being attentively listened to and for developing the speaking skills eventually.

In addition, the list in the module offered on the Yale Centre for Teaching and Learning web page vividly depicts the significance of commanding public speaking skills by listing the spheres where they appear as most necessitated (*See Picture* 1.):

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[1] Yale Center for Teaching and learning; *Public Speaking for Teachers*: *Lecturing Without Fear*
http://ctl.yale.edu/teaching/ideas-teaching/public-speaking-teachers-i-lecturing-without-fear
[2] Peter A. DeCaro, Ph.D. University of Alaska, Fairbanks, AK, *Origins of Public Speaking*
http://www.publicspeakingproject.org/PDFS/chapter2.pdf

Picture 1. A print screen of the section of the Yale *Center for Teaching and Learning* page offering the *Public Speaking Skills* module

However, as the core of our research is the faculty of future-educator students to produce presentation in class so euphonic and comprehensible that would enhance students' attention to listen to it and motivate them to learn more on the topic , we can only add *Teaching* and *Education* (*See Picture 1.*).

METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

On the grounds of the fact that learners' motivation to attentively listen to the teacher's presentation depends on both the comprehensibility and the euphony of the teacher's reading/talk/presentation in class, we decided our research objective to be *testing and determining students' reading skills and their self-awareness of their own reading euphony and reading comprehensibility as two most significant factors to be attentively listened to*.

In accordance with the objective determined, we chose the technique '*learners' reading self recording'* as most adequate and applicable in the realization of the study programmes and modules offered at the Faculty of Education – Bitola (PFBT)[3]. In addition, we already had had experience with this technique, but had never organized our observations and results of its application. With this research we hoped to finally elaborate its usefulness and shed some more light on its effects on the students, i.e., whether it would spur them to strive to enhance their loud reading comprehensibility and euphony.

Thereby, we conducted the research at the Faculty of Education – Bitola, in the spring semester in 2016. By including the analysis of students' self-audio-recordings of their own reading, the research approach was primarily qualitative, but the quantitative one was also used to some extent.

The sample researched consisted of 20 students of *Pre-School Teacher* and *Class Teacher* study groups, and 20 *EFL* (English as a Foreign Language) students of the study group *English language and Literatur*e. The sample was selected from year 3 students, and divided into two groups: one researched for native language reading euphony and comprehensibility (in this case – the Macedonian language), and the other group was researched for foreign language reading euphony and comprehensibility (in this case – the English language).

The research was conducted in several carefully designed steps:

1. Selection of 4 different topics and 4 genres/sub-genres of reading materials
2. Deciding on the length of all 4 texts
3. Handing out a text on the first topic to the sample students

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[3] Faculty of Education – Bitola (PFBT) web page http://www.pfbt.uklo.edu.mk/index.php?lang=mk

4. Assigning the sample student with recording their own reading of the text
5. Collecting the MP3 audio recordings
6. Listening to each of the MP3 recordings and making record/comments for each
7. Analysis and categorization of the types of reading weaknesses identified in the records
8. Informing the students of the observed achievements and weaknesses
9. Repeating the steps from 3. - 8. three more times (only with the other three topics/genres)
10. Survey on students' opinion about the effects of the mode of practice
11. Sorting the findings and collected students' opinion and drawing overall conclusions

PROCEDURE, FINDINGS and DISCUSSION

When speaking about 'findings' one must be aware of the two-fold meaning of this notion. Namely, findings occur naturally – every day and in every segment of our life. Thus, it is the 'findings' we had already happened to come across in both our working environment and in the public life that had made us venture this research. The proposed and implemented technique in the research had already been used for 10 years as one of the practice techniques for improving the reading skills of the students attending EFL classes. As it had been a part of homework practice assignment, a point that they had been instructed to take care of was the proper reading and use of pauses[4] and to employ the necessary stress, intonation or pauses indicated by the punctuation marks. Thus, a variety of observations and findings had already been experienced, but never analyzed in an organized manner and with a designed approach like the one in this research.

Most of those unorganized observations and records of the results reflected students' overcoming their fear from public reading and speaking; students' becoming aware how they sound when they are being listened to; students' developing a faculty of discerning their own mistakes and poor pronunciation/accentuation/prosodic units intonation upon hearing the recording of their rendered reading, students' own decisions to delete the recording and start the whole procedure again or repeat the procedure until reaching the desired level of rendered reading/quality.

Naturally, similar observations were expected with the organized research but with additional aspects placed for analysis and data processing. We hereby present them with each of the chronological steps that have already been mentioned above:

Selection of 4 different topics and genres of reading materials

It was decided to choose four different topics (ecology; geography; health; scientific advances) and four genres to appeal to students' different interests because of the presumption that a different topic and genre may have influence on students' mood and zeal when reading the text. Upon the fact that those students would be teachers in-service one day, favourable results would be those which do not reveal preferences of a topic/genre but equal zest. In line with that, the genres/sub-genres that we chose were a biographic text which contained dialogues, a travelling destinations chronicle, a text with tips on health care, and a newspaper article on public opinion about Google glasses and personal experiences.

Deciding on the length of all 4 texts

In accordance with the time that the text takes to read i.e. 4 to 5 minutes, the length of the texts was decided to be 550 to 850 words. This way we were able to check whether the quality of students' comprehensibility and euphony was declining by the end of the reading.

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[4] Michael Erard in his "*An Uh, Er, Um Essay In Praise of Verbal Stumbles* mentions":
"… *Martin Corley and Robert J. Hartsuiker reported that listeners' recognition benefits from any delay before a word, whether it s a silent pause, a filled pause, or a musical tone. The delay 'attunes the attention.'* …"
http://www.slate.com/articles/life/the_good_word/2011/07/an_uh_er_um_essay.html

Handing out a text on the first topic to the sample students

This step is tightly connected with the next one, i.e. with step 4. – **assigning the students** to read it at home as many times as they like and then to record themselves while reading it aloud (without making any breaks/interruptions when recording), and to send the recording to us within a week via e-mail – step 5. (**collecting the audio recordings**).

Listening to each of the MP3 recordings and making record/comments for each

This was probably the most laborious part of the research because we had to hear 160 recordings, i.e. audio material long between 640 and 800 minutes, i.e. 10 to 13 hours listening. Comments were made for each recording and for each student. And above all – for each reading weakness in the audio recording.

Analysis and categorization of the types of reading weaknesses identified in the records

With the comments inserted for each of the audio recording, the analysis provided us with several types of identified reading weaknesses as well as with the frequency of their occurrence and the number of students that they were discovered with – either as prevailing or non-occurring ones:
improper pronunciation of words; improper accentuation of words; improper prosodic units utterance; improper intonation; inadequate pauses; inadequate pace; inadequate loudness; verbal stumbles; frequent self-correction

Informing the students on the observed achievements and weaknesses

With all the comments that were being made simultaneously with the listening of the students' recordings, it was easy to inform them of the insight gained. This step was designed with two purposes on mind: the first one was to spur a discussion with the students and hear and record their opinions about the performance of the task and the experiences they went through while working on it; the second was to use it as the basis upon which we would be able to check and measure any improvements strived for in the other three topics that were to be rendered.

Repeating the steps from 3. - 8. three more times (only with the other three topics/genres)

The very task of reading three more texts/genres entails following the same steps from 3.-8., i.e. repeating them. This is a step designed to check four aspects:
– whether students' zest oscillated when reading a text of another topic/genre
– whether providing them with information on their first text reading achievements spurred them to improve their reading skills
– whether the opportunity to return to the MP3 recording of their reading and hear it again and again whenever they wanted to – both before and after submitting the MP3, i.e. before and after being provided with the achievement results, actually did make them want to improve and try even harder
– whether they understood the significance of attracting listeners' attention and the benefits of being attentively listened to

Survey on students' opinion about the effects of the mode of practice

The step which entailed providing students with information on their first rendered reading achievements, naturally and quite spontaneously, led to a feed-back from students, especially on the basis

that the achievement results were reported personally and in private, which means in the ***face-to-face interview*** at the *meeting-and-consulting hours* with each of the students sampled for the research. Thus, our research was easily enriched with additional and valuable data, i.e. with students' opinion on the usefulness and efficacy of the technique '*learners' reading self recording'* as well as with their personal experiences of the self-recording procedure.

Sorting the findings and collected students' opinion, and drawing overall conclusions

With regards to this step, we had four different types of findings to sort out from the collected research data i.e. materials:
1. sorting out the findings of the rendered audio recordings of reading texts in a foreign language
2. sorting out the findings of the rendered audio recordings of reading texts in a native language
3. sorting out *EFL* students' opinion on the task performed for the purpose of the research
4. sorting out *Pres-School Teacher* and *Class Teacher* students' opinion on the task performed for the purpose of the research

The findings of the rendered audio recordings of reading the first foreign language text assigned revealed that the weaknesses researched varied. Thus, in the first rendered audio self-recording *improper pronunciation and improper accentuation of one word at least were found with 95% of the students, but improper pronunciation and improper accentuation of more than ten words with 25% of the EFL sample; improper prosodic units utterance and improper intonation with 20%; whereas inadequate pauses; inadequate pace; inadequate loudness; verbal stumbles and frequent self-correction were found with some 40% of the EFL sample.*
However, **the findings of the rendered audio recordings of reading the other three foreign language texts assigned** showed significant improvements were recorded: *improper pronunciation and improper accentuation of one word at least were found with 75% of the students, but improper pronunciation and improper accentuation of more than ten words with 15% of the EFL sample; improper prosodic units utterance and improper intonation with 10 %; whereas inadequate pauses; inadequate pace; inadequate loudness; verbal stumbles and frequent self-correction were found with some 20% of the EFL sample.*

The findings of the rendered audio recordings of reading the first native language text assigned revealed that the weaknesses researched varied. Thus, in the first rendered audio self-recording *improper pronunciation and improper accentuation of one word at least were found with 95% of the students, but improper pronunciation and improper accentuation of more than ten words with 1% of the Pre-School Teachers and Class Teachers sample; improper prosodic units utterance and improper intonation with 20 %; whereas inadequate pauses; inadequate pace; inadequate loudness; verbal stumbles and frequent self-correction were found with some 30% of the Pre-School Teachers and Class Teachers sample.*
However, **the findings of the rendered audio recordings of reading the other three native language texts assigned** showed significant improvements were recorded: *improper pronunciation and improper accentuation of one word at least were found with 50% of the students, but improper pronunciation and improper accentuation of more than ten words with 1% of the Pre-School Teachers and Class Teachers sample; improper prosodic units utterance and improper intonation with 10 %; whereas inadequate pauses; inadequate pace; inadequate loudness; verbal stumbles and frequent self-correction were found with some 10% of the Pre-School Teachers and Class Teachers sample.*
With regard to the ***types of weaknesses*** identified, we must point out that the weaknesses hardest to uproot appeared to be *improper prosodic units utterance and improper intonation; inadequate pauses; inadequate pace; inadequate loudness; verbal stumbles and frequent self-correction.*

As for **students' opinion** on the task performed for the purpose of the research, *all* students of the sample, consisting of *English Language and Literature* students and *Pre-School Teacher* and *Class Teacher* students, stated that the technique helped them to a large extent:

- they did feel embarrassed while recording their own reading
- they did find out about the faculty of discerning/detecting one's own mistakes when listening to the recording before submitting it
- they did persist on more attempts to render the best version possible
- they greatly did overcome the so called 'stage fright' experienced when reading and speaking before an audience i.e. in class
- they did become aware of the prime of the reading and speaking skills as well as of the managing to attract an attentive ear

CONCLUSIONS

Education cannot exist without language nor teachers can teach without a read or spoken word, i.e. oral communication with the learners, whatever their age. In that sense the focus of our research was to analyze the loud reading competences of Foreign Language Teaching, Preschool Teaching and Class Teaching students.

The results of this research produced evidence that loud reading competences act as a primal prerequisite for future educators to be attentively listened to as well as for the development of speaking competences appreciated for bestowing an attentive ear. Accordingly, much of the analysis was placed on the euphony and comprehensibility of the recordings of students' loud reading. Students were instructed to record themselves when reading the assigned text, and to submit the recording to us within a week.

As our research was not meant for determining the number of students with reading weaknesses in their reading i.e. lacking euphony and comprehensibility, in this conclusion we want to put an accent on the type of weaknesses that appeared most frequent and hardest to get rid over the 4-week-period designed for the weekly reading and recording assignments. Thus, improper *prosodic units utterance and improper intonation; inadequate pauses; inadequate pace; inadequate loudness; verbal stumbles and frequent self-correction* are found to be the elements which make the reading insufficiently euphonic and comprehensible, and consequently affecting students' attention when listening.

The objective of repeating the procedure three more time with texts of different topic and genre/ subgenre was set to cast some light over four aspects: *oscillation of zest when reading a text of different topic/genre*; *motivation for improving the reading skills*; *persistence in attempting to do better*; *understanding the significance of attracting listeners' attention and the benefits of being attentively listened to*. In line with that, the results obtained showed that all four aspects did play a significant role: students did show different zest for reading different topics/genres, which influenced their reading achievements; students did feel motivated for improving their reading skills, which was obvious from the improvements gradually or quickly made in the reading of the other three texts; student did make many-fold attempts to render the best quality reading they could; students did become aware of the significance o the reading euphony and comprehensibility by listening to their own readings before submitting them.

In closing this section, we would like to add that our research has also observed the fact that students' confidence and reading performance in class increased by the end of the research. Even more, their confidence and speaking performance also improved. Therefore, we propose the technique implemented in our research as an exceptionally useful and applicable for enhancing future teachers' reading and speaking competences.

We also regard this research as a firm standpoint for further research and research focused on the prosodic aspects of the reading and speaking competences as one of the most significant elements for being attentively listened to.

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