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The "Good/Poor" Listener: What Representations for the Learner and the Teacher?

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Abstract

The perceptions of students and teachers regarding the good/poor listener have an impact on language teaching/learning, particularly on listening comprehension skills and the execution of listening tasks. Success or failure in learning depends on these perceptions, which reflect the causes of failure or the reasons for success, and this can either facilitate or hinder learning. In language didactics, great importance is given to these perceptions as they are linked to the beliefs and attitudes of learners and teachers, and they play a significant role in language teaching/learning.

The aim of our study is to understand the perceptions of students and teachers regarding listening comprehension tasks and their views on the good/poor listener, and to show how these perceptions influence the teaching/learning of listening comprehension skills. It is through these perceptions that students can categorize themselves as either a good or a poor listener. The good listener is perceived as someone with positive qualities, while the poor listener is seen as having only faults. The first category can motivate learners to engage in their learning, while the second may push them to abandon it.

Our analysis of these perceptions allowed us to present images that could influence teachers' behavior in their teaching practices and students' behavior in their learning.

Keywords: Perception, listener, good/poor, listening, teachers, students.

1. Introduction

How can we study representations for better awareness and more effective learning?

The concept of representation comes from sociology and psychology. It has gained significant theoretical status as it is found in several fields of human and social sciences, particularly in sociolinguistics and language didactics (Boyer 2002). It is important to note that research in social psychology on representations developed following the work of Moscovici.

According to Moscovici's work on representations in psychoanalysis, two main research axes stand out: a qualitative one, which deals with the content of representation through surveys, and an experimental one, which focuses on how representations are constructed and modified (Boyer 2002). Moscovici developed a theory of the "central core" and its systems, central and peripheral. For him:

"The central core (...) considers that the constitutive traits of a social representation, called 'cognemes,' are distributed into two sets: a central system, which provides the representation with stability and fundamental semantic content, and a peripheral system, which is open and where associated, contextual traits allow adaptation to diverse situations but are, in contrast, unstable" (Boyer 2002:12).

The notion of representation remains ambiguous due to the nuances that connect it to other concepts such as opinion, ideology, stereotype, and attitude. According to Abric (2001:19), representation consists of a set of information, beliefs, opinions, and attitudes about a given object. Regarding our topic, it is the representation as a

mental image that interests us. We will attempt to show how students' and teachers' representations of the "good" and "poor" listener can impact the teaching/learning of listening comprehension. How can they influence students' learning process and teachers' practices?

Representations reflect the causes of failure or the reasons for success, which can either facilitate or hinder learning. We have tried, on the one hand, to identify the characteristics of the good listener, considered a person who succeeds in completing the listening task, as opposed to the poor listener who does not succeed. On the other hand, to better manage our students' difficulties with listening tasks, we have tried to determine which category our students fall into.

During our doctoral research, we conducted a survey with a group of first-year PEP students from ENS de Bouzareah and a group of French teachers from all four educational levels: primary, middle school, high school, and university. To carry out our survey, we used a questionnaire as a data collection method, through which respondents could freely express their experiences and representations concerning listening comprehension and the good/poor listener.

The aim of our questionnaire was to understand students' and teachers' representations of the listening comprehension task and their perceptions of the good/poor listener. We analyzed the questions related to representations by drawing inspiration from the multifocal model of Billiez and Millet (2001:42-49), which is based on thematic and itematic analysis. This analysis allowed us to classify the representational field into central elements that are common to both groups (the core of the representation) and peripheral elements specific to each group. Certainly, we cannot explain all the results of our research in this article; however, we will try to explore some of our survey's findings and explain how students and teachers perceive the "good" and "poor" listener.

Before determining the representations of the good/poor listener, it seems important to first explain the functions and transformations of the concept of representation, and then address the role of representations in language teaching/learning, particularly in completing listening tasks.

2. The Functions of Representations

The works of Moscovici, Abric, and Doise have helped explain how representations function and influence human behavior. According to Abric (2001:13), social representation:

"Works as a system for interpreting reality, managing individuals' relationships with their physical and social environment, and determining their behaviors and practices. It guides actions and social relations; it is a pre-coding system of reality, as it determines a set of anticipations and expectations."

From this explanation, we can identify three essential functions of representation as cited by Abric:

The first function is the knowledge function, which is an interpretive function of reality. The simplified content and formulation of the representation make it easier to grasp a new or complex reality. The function of representation can be summarized as the simplification of knowledge and the explanation of a new phenomenon in society.

The second function is the identity function, which classifies people according to groups, attributing them characteristics in social representations, often constructing stigmatizing representations for other groups.

The third function of representation is the justificatory function, which manifests after an individual or group action to provide legitimacy for their act. This function can appear, for example, in situations of academic failure, where a learner uses their representations to justify their failure by saying, among other things: "It's pointless to study; those with degrees end up unemployed anyway," thus creating representations to ease their conscience.

The final function is the orientation function. According to Flament (in Abric 2001:38), representation impacts behavior. The knowledge conveyed in representations guides and determines human behavior. This behavior is realized through a mental process that anticipates and organizes action. A person who is about to complete a task already has an idea of the approach to adopt, and they reproduce the cognitive patterns they possess through their actions. Secca (2001:70) highlights that in some cases, "representations are prescriptive of educational behaviors. They end up producing behavior that did not exist initially."

3. The Transformations of Representations

According to Abric (2001), representation derives its stability from the rigidity of the central core and the flexibility of the peripheral system, which protects it. However, representations can be transformed, meaning they can be affected at their central core by social practices. In cases where social practices modify representation, two scenarios can occur:

- In the first case, the change is reversible, meaning the individual is temporarily forced to change their representation due to circumstances that compel them to act against their values and norms. In this scenario, according to Flament (2001), the central core remains unaffected by the change, and only the peripheral system undergoes alteration.

- In the second case, the individual is forced to adapt to a new situation. Here, the constraining circumstances force them to adopt behavior contrary to their value system and norms, leading to a change in their representation to align it with their new behavior. However, not all social practices necessarily lead to a change in representation. It is evident that when an individual behaves in a way that contradicts their values and norms, it creates tension and imbalance, which forces them to change either their representation or their behavior. Most often, the individual opts

to change their behavior to preserve and defend what Nuttin (1980:283) calls "internal consistency," which is "the tendency to maintain one's identity and remain oneself."

When social practices force an individual to change their representation, it is the elements of the central core that change. This change can occur through three transformation modalities: resistant transformation, progressive transformation, and abrupt transformation (Flament, cited by Abric 2001a: 236).

- Resistant transformation occurs when social practices clash with the representation, leading to the appearance of "strange schemata" in the peripheral system (Flament 1999:232). The peripheral system tries to mitigate the shock these schemata create on the central core, but if these schemata are numerous and recurrent, they lead to a transformation of the representation, with the central core gradually changing as these schemata emerge.
- In the case of progressive transformation, social practices are not rejected by the representation but rather adopted slowly, eventually leading to a change in the representation. This transformation modality occurs when "reality simply leads to a modification in the activity of peripheral schemata" (Flament 2001:238). These schemata do not conflict with the central core, and their frequent occurrence leads to a gradual change in the representation.
- As for the abrupt transformation of representation, it can occur when social practices are entirely contradictory to the value and norm system, to the point where they cannot even be tolerated by the peripheral system. The peripheral system can no longer protect the central core, which is directly attacked by the new practice, resulting in the direct and complete transformation of the central core and the entire representation (in Abric 1994:236).

4. Representations and Language Teaching/Learning

In language didactics, great importance is given to representations as they are connected to the beliefs and attitudes of learners and teachers, playing a significant role in language teaching/learning. Learners' and teachers' representations constitute a favored field of study in didactics because everyday discourse or language conveys metaphors that reflect our thinking, our perception of others, and our experience of the world.

Drawing on the theory of the sociology of knowledge, which deals with common people's popular knowledge, its field of application includes two discursive domains: political, sociological, and scientific discourse, and everyday discourse. Alfred Schutz (1899-1959), cited by Riley (1989), emphasizes that in all oral interactive discourse, information changes based on the cultural and individual representations of the participants in the communicative event, their respective roles, and the social and sociolinguistic rules specific to the enunciation situation. Culture is the manifestation of representations conveyed by language. Individuals construct their discourse based on the representations of the people they are addressing (Riley 1989). There is a social reality that allows each individual, who carries an image of their society, to draw from their repertoire and construct their reality based on the representations they use to craft a discourse or face a specific situation (Riley 1989).

To elucidate learners' representations, Bruner (1991:31) opts for an approach that:

"Relies (and must rely) not only on what people actually do, but also on what they say they do, and on what they say about the reasons that led them to do what they did (...) above all, it must be interested in what people say about the world in which they live."

In the educational context, Trocme-Fabre (1999) addresses the issue of representation by explaining three original approaches:

- A qualitative survey focusing on the definition of concepts such as "understanding is..." and "learning is..."
- Metaphorical representations, where learners are invited to complete sentences like: "The qualities of a good listener are: '...' or "Autonomy is like '...'"
- Graphic representations that are created and discussed in small groups to reveal learner and teacher attitudes.

The representations that seem most important and relevant to us in the teaching and learning of languages, particularly in terms of their impact on the behaviors of learners and teachers in the classroom and the outcomes of their teaching and learning, fall into several distinct categories. One key area is the learner's representation of the teacher, which is significant because it helps students engage in classroom work. These representations correspond to the personal traits and status of the teacher. A teacher can be perceived by students as either likable or unlikable, and these perceptions lead to different behaviors among students, which can either foster or hinder classroom interaction.

Learners' representations of their teacher's competence also play a role in shaping their attitudes toward tasks. Students may take tasks more or less seriously depending on their judgment of the teacher's competence. Additionally, learners can form representations of their peers, which may influence their own performance in school tasks. A student's perception of their classmates' abilities can either motivate them to work harder to catch up or, conversely, make them feel too far behind, prompting them to neglect or abandon their learning.

The interaction between representations and behaviors plays an essential role for both students and teachers in a learning situation. Representation influences and guides human behavior. Abric (1994a:223) explains that individuals, when faced with various life situations, adapt their behavior to the context governed by everyday, sociocultural, political, and religious constraints, among others.

The way an individual perceives a situation, themselves, and others influences the nature of their behavior and determines how they act. The representation an individual has of a given situation impacts their behavior insofar as it drives them to engage in actions they might not have taken without that particular perception. In a learning situation, the representation a learner has of themselves, their ability or inability to accomplish a task, determines their actions, either encouraging them to make the necessary effort or not. In other words, their perception of the ease or difficulty of the task, as well as the conditions under which it is carried out, can influence the learner's behavior and shape the context in which their actions unfold by assessing the consequences of those actions. The representation of the task to be completed triggers a cognitive schema in the learner, guiding them on the approach to take. This approach may stem from personal experience or prior learning.

5. Representations and the Listening Task

Another important aspect in a learning situation is the representation of the context, which involves understanding the conditions under which learning takes place. In other words, depending on whether you take the learner's or the teacher's perspective, the perceptions that learners and teachers have of the learning situation—in this case, oral comprehension—differ.

Learners rely on their school experiences and everyday life experiences to form their view of the learning situation. When they realize that the goal of their learning is evaluation rather than genuine learning, they tend to focus on passing the assessment and being rewarded, rather than developing real skills. Learners need to view the learning situation as one that helps them build skills, not just measure their performance. It is also important that learning objectives align with the real needs of learners; otherwise, they may lose interest in the content. Therefore, it is crucial to clarify the objectives of activities. Learners must understand why they are completing a task and what they are supposed to gain from it.

As for teachers' perceptions of the learning situation, these play an important role in the success of learning, since it is based on these perceptions that they design activities aimed at developing the targeted skills. In other words, when teachers have a clearer understanding of their teaching goals, they can choose activities that are more suitable for their learners. This also makes them more tolerant when tasks are being completed, fostering a supportive and encouraging environment both for the teachers in their practice and for the learners in their studies. Teachers must also be aware of their students' perceptions of the skill being taught, take a step back from the task, and better manage challenges to provide effective teaching.

Learners' perceptions of learning oral comprehension involve both how they view the listening process and the strategies needed to acquire this skill, as well as their sense of how difficult or easy they find the oral comprehension task. The perception of the usefulness of this skill in the language learning process can help motivate learners by giving meaning to their learning, driving them to do their best to succeed. Conversely, a teacher who has a good understanding of the listening process can choose the most suitable methods and select the most effective activities to help students develop their oral comprehension skills. Furthermore, a teacher's perspective on listening—whether as a final objective or as a tool for enhancing other competencies like written or verbal expression—is likely influenced by their personal experiences and educational background, which may prioritize specific skills over others.

Every learner has a set of values and beliefs that they have developed in an organized way, which forms their identity as a learner. How do learners see themselves as listeners of a foreign language? What are their desires and prejudices regarding French as a Foreign Language (FLE)? What do they prioritize in learning and mastering this language?

It is important to mention the concept of “representational baggage,” which according to (Sallaberry 1996; Narcy 1990; Trocmé-Fabre 1999) encompasses all the conscious or unconscious, inherited or constructed mental frameworks that an individual possesses at a given moment of their cognitive activity, and how these representations evolve during the learning process. It's important to understand that individuals are not always aware of this representational baggage, as social psychology has shown experimentally. As Chennouf (2004:3) states: “a significant portion of mental activity is non-conscious in the strict sense, meaning it is inaccessible to subjective consciousness.”

However, the French curriculum across the three levels of education in Algeria typically focuses on written skills, while university offers a mixed learning setup. This can cause a break in learners' mental frameworks, prompting them to question their initial representations and potentially modify their representational baggage. This transformation is essential for learners. One could say that representation is a personal and evolving object that contributes to the structuring of learning. It is therefore important to understand the representations of students and teachers, observe how they align, and see how an appropriate pedagogy can transform or align these representations with the educational program.

Analyzing these representations will help us design a learning approach by providing insight into the real needs of students in mastering oral comprehension skills.

6. Representations of a Good/Poor listener

What representations do the adjectives "good" or "poor" convey to better qualify learners in an oral comprehension learning situation?

The expression "good student" or "poor student" allows us, on one hand, to value one and devalue the other. These labels are applied to learners who possess a profile that predisposes them to either succeed or fail in their learning. The representations of the "good/poor" student carry meanings that both learners and teachers can rely on—learners to learn and teachers to teach. That is to say, the representations of the "good student" correspond to the cognitive and metacognitive qualities of learners who manage their learning better.

As for the representations of the "poor student," they project an image of failure and obstacles that prevent learners from progressing in their learning. Taking the subject of our study, which is the acquisition/learning of oral comprehension, as an example, we can say that if a learner has a clear idea of what a "good" or "poor" listener is, they will have the advantage of knowing what behavior to adopt and which strategies to use during listening, which will help them acquire the skill in question. However, a learner who believes that a "good listener" is someone who must understand every word of the listened document is deceiving themselves by setting too high a threshold for success in a learning situation.

Through the analysis of questionnaires, we were able to identify themes that appeared frequently in the responses of both teachers and students regarding the characteristics of a good/poor listener. We identified 92 lexical units in the corpus of students and teachers. We then grouped these units by affinity of meaning, which gave us a number of semantic fields that make up the representational framework of our respondents. Based on the collected units, we can identify the good listener as follows:

- A person with good hearing: listens attentively, has a good ear, grasps information well, understands on the first try, only needs to listen once to understand everything, has no problem with the speed of the message.
- A person with good perception: distinguishes different accents, deciphers words, decodes any information, and is capable of interpreting the message.
- A person who understands what they hear: grasps the general meaning and essential ideas, absorbs the context, and answers questions.
- An autonomous person: tries to understand on their own, does not need help, and is confident.
- A motivated person: wants to work, shows interest, and enjoys the foreign language.
- A person with knowledge: has a good background, a broad general culture, mobilizes their basic knowledge to solve problems, and uses new vocabulary or personal phrases.
- A person with linguistic skills: masters the language, grammar, has a rich vocabulary, can reformulate orally, communicates in the foreign language, is brave enough to speak in public, participates, and shares their point of view.
- A person with cognitive skills: intelligent, attentive, focused, able to memorize information, summarize for others, guess the meaning, analyze, and has strong interpretative abilities.
- A person accustomed to listening: regularly listens to the radio or audio documents.
- A person with good qualities: serious, patient, organized, disciplined, dynamic, active, gifted, curious, sharp, attentive, and calm.
- A person who controls their emotions: remains calm, doesn't panic, continues listening even if they don't understand everything, doesn't give up easily, stays on track, and adapts.
- An organized person: takes notes of ideas and difficult words with a pencil and notebook, and consults a dictionary.

It is worth noting that in the corpus concerning the "poor listener," the negative adverbs identified are more numerous than those in the corpus of the "good listener." The high number of negative adverbs makes the poor listener seem like someone who "is not" or "cannot." We grouped the lexical units of the "poor listener" into the following semantic fields:

- A demotivated person: doesn't follow along, makes no effort to understand, isn't interested in listening, doesn't want to work, shows no interest, doesn't value listening, refuses to learn, demonstrates no interest in classes and tutorials, and doesn't try to understand, remaining indifferent.
- A lazy person: doesn't prepare, makes no effort, doesn't want to work, and remains passive.
- A person without cognitive skills: lacks concentration, isn't attentive, doesn't understand, can't grasp the general meaning or essential ideas, pays no attention to details, doesn't assimilate oral messages, and is unable to interpret the content.
- A person without language skills: lacks knowledge, has a poor vocabulary, doesn't respect norms, can't decipher words, lacks a foundation, doesn't understand French, and can't reformulate orally.
- A person with many flaws: shy, negative, disruptive, talkative, easily distracted, noisy, mocks others, absent-minded, weak.
- A person who doesn't use learning strategies: never uses a dictionary, can't take notes, can't memorize information, doesn't want or can't use prior knowledge.

- A person who lacks self-confidence: hesitates to make guesses, gets lost, loses focus, and gives up when faced with difficulty.
- A person who dislikes listening to the radio.
- A person who can't answer questions.

7. Conclusion

Understanding the representations of students and teachers regarding the good/poor listener helps explain the influence of these representations on the acquisition/learning of oral comprehension skills. It's important to note that representations serve a function that justifies an individual's actions and behaviors, even when these go against their norms or values. Our survey revealed that students who consider themselves poor listeners often attribute their difficulties to the nature of the audio/visual material, such as the document being too long, too noisy, or the speech being too fast.

By using these representations, students can place themselves in one of the categories of either a good or poor listener. The good listener is perceived as someone possessing desirable qualities, while the poor listener is seen as having only flaws. The first category can motivate learners to engage more in their learning, whereas the second category may push them to give up.

It's also important to note that the representations of a good/poor listener differ between students and teachers. For example, understanding the general meaning of a text is seen by teachers as a quality of a good listener, while students believe that a good listener is someone who understands every single word of the audio/visual material. Students perceive the poor listener as someone who lacks cognitive abilities, is unable to assimilate oral messages, gives no importance to listening, and makes no effort to understand. Teachers, on the other hand, see the poor listener as someone with poor hearing, lacking cognitive abilities—specifically attention and concentration—and who understands nothing orally. They view the poor listener as someone completely demotivated and uninterested in listening.

A vague representation can confuse both teachers and learners in understanding their teaching/learning objectives, especially since the goal for both is to succeed. A vague representation can also undermine students' motivation, which is another key concept in language teaching and learning.

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