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Examining the use of best practices and challenges in teaching listening comprehension in Swaziland

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Abstract

The teaching of listening comprehension in Swaziland is marred by unsystematic practices, largely characterized by individual teacher's preferred instructional practice, leading to students' compromised performance in English language, mainly in listening comprehension. This intrinsic case-study examined the use of best practices in teaching of listening comprehension at senior secondary schools in Swaziland. The main objective of the study was to unearth teachers' prevalent instructional practices, currently impacting students' performance in listening comprehension. Twenty participants from twenty schools were selected for this study. Simple random sampling (EPSEM) of schools and purposive sampling of participants was used. Data were collected using two methods: observation and standardized open-ended interviews. The constant comparative method and the Three-C model were used to analyse data. The study revealed inconsistencies in teaching of listening comprehension and lack of books and other supportive teaching materials. Creative synthesis and vignettes are used to present the results. The findings of this study have implications for improving teaching of listening comprehension in Swaziland, including improving students' performance in listening comprehension.

Keywords: listening; meta-cognitive; socio-affective; receptive skill; ESL

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1. Introduction

Since the emergence of rigorous research on listening, listening has been found to play an important role in communication. It is said that of the total time spent on communication, listening takes up to 40-50%, speaking, 25-30%, reading, 11-16% and writing about 9%, (Mendelsohn, 1994). Although teaching of listening comprehension has long been "somewhat neglected and a poorly taught aspect of English in many English Foreign Language (EFL) programs" (Mendelsohn, 1994, p .9), listening is now regarded as much more important in both EFL classrooms and Second Language Acquisition research (Ahmadi, 2011). Rahimi (2012) observed that "in the past few years the interest in teaching listening skill has grown. Nowadays, it is not regarded as a neglected skill anymore. Many people, including students, need listening skill in diverse settings such as school, travel, and work. Therefore, developing listening skill is considered significant in many language teaching courses.

Berne (1998) and Mendelsohn (2001) discuss the mismatch between the researchers' focus and actual classroom practice on listening skills. The mismatch is that studies on listening skills have not yet reached the classroom; as a result, scholars such as Richards and Renandya (2002) argue that for many years listening skill did not receive priority in language teaching. Previous teaching methods emphasized productive skills, and the relationship between receptive and productive skills was poorly understood. Until recently, the nature of listening in a second language was ignored by applied linguists; it was assumed that listening skill is acquired through exposure. Currently, this notion has been replaced by an active interest in the role of listening comprehension in second language acquisition, and the inclusion of carefully developed listening courses in many English Second Language (ESL) programs. Some applied linguists argue that listening comprehension is at the core of second language acquisition and demands greater prominence in language teaching. The neglect on teaching of listening as observed by Mendelsohn (2001) has slowed down research on teaching listening skill in ESL contexts. Thus, Ahmadi (2011), states that in spite of its importance, listening has been the neglected skill in second language acquisition, research, teaching and assessment.

1.1 English in Swaziland

English in Swaziland is one of the two official languages, the other being SiSwati. English is used as a medium of instruction from the fourth grade to secondary school and university (Swaziland Education and Training Sector Policy, 2011). All subjects in the school curriculum in Swaziland except siSwati are taught in English at secondary school (Mthethwa, 2014). The history of the English curriculum in Swaziland can be traced back from the General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level (GCE O-Level), the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE), and the Swaziland General Certificate of Secondary Education (SGCSE). From the late 1960s, the Swaziland education system at senior secondary used the GCE O-Level curriculum. The O-level curriculum was a traditional approach to language teaching, which stressed grammatical competence (IGCSE Consultative Document, 2005). As is the case with the current curriculum, English was offered as a second language and only two skills (reading and writing) were examined (Consultative Document, 2005).

Listening and speaking were marginalized. Communicative language teaching (CLT), the new approach, introduced a skill based syllabus, which focused on the four language skills; reading, writing, listening, and speaking. To open space for CLT, Swaziland phased out O-Level in 2006 and introduced IGSCE, which assessed all four language skills. In 2009, the Ministry of Education developed the SGCSE curriculum, a local version of the IGCSE. The SGCSE examined the four language skills. The examination is divided into four

components which test each of the four language skills separately (SGCSE syllabus, 2013-14). The listening component of the SGCSE still examines listening skill, including understanding for specific information. To date, students are examined on the four language skills, as opposed to the past, where they were examined on productive skills.

1.2 Students' Performance in Listening Comprehension

In Swaziland, students' performance in the English listening component is below the expectation of the examiners (SGCSE Examination Report 2012). Very few students are able to score 20 out of 30, which is the total mark. According to the examination report (2012), the majority of students score between 11 and 17. And these are not desirable scores for a component of this importance. The table below shows students' performance from 2012 to 2014.

Table 1

Students' Performance

Year	Credits	No credits
2012	29.7%	69.0%
2013	25%	73.4%
2014	31.5%	66.5%

As seen from the table above, there is a steady decline in students' performance. The overall percentage of students who credited listening (getting symbol C and above) in 2012 was 29.7% and 69.0% of the students did not credit listening. In 2013, only 25% of the students credited listening and 73.4% did not credit listening. In 2014, there was a slight increase on the percentage of students who credited listening comprehension, as it grew to 31.5%. However, 65% of the students did not get credits. It is therefore crystal clear that the performance of students in the listening examination is poor; the percentage of students who credit listening comprehension is below that of students who do not credit listening comprehension. Therefore, listening with understanding is still a problem for candidates.

1.3 Input Hypothesis

Krashen (1982) identified five hypotheses that provide foundation for second language acquisition. This study draws from the input hypothesis. The input hypothesis is the central part of an overall theory of second language acquisition. This hypothesis claims that humans acquire language in only one way, by understanding messages, or by receiving comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982). Krashen's view is that language acquisition relies on trying to understand what other people are speaking. If students listen to meaningful speech and understand it, acquisition will occur. According to Krashen, language acquisition occurs through comprehensible input. Krashen (1982) defines comprehensible input as i+1, i representing the current competence of the students, and 1 referring to the language that includes structures a little beyond the learner's current level. In the process of listening, i+1 can be explained as the material that is familiar to the student, in which students have schema, while (i) is a certain amount of unfamiliar material, whose meaning can be inferred. Listening skill is therefore anchored on input and its cognition.

1.4 Present Study

Studies on listening comprehension are not very common because, as stated earlier, this skill has not been at the centre of focus for many years. It is only recently that research has been directed towards investigating not just the properties of listening skill, but also the pedagogical practices teachers use in the classrooms. Even then, not many empirical studies have been conducted on this aspect. The present study therefore examined the teaching of listening comprehension and the pedagogical practices teachers of listening comprehension utilize when teaching listen comprehension at senior secondary. The study also sought to investigate challenges faced by teachers in teaching of listening comprehension.

2. Related Literature

Earlier cognitive psychologists conceptualised listening as "an active and conscious process in which the listener constructs meaning by using cues from contextual information and from existing knowledge, while relying upon multiple strategic resources to fulfil the task requirement" (O'Malley, Chamot, & Kupper, 1989 p. 19).These scholars provide an explanation of what happens in the minds of listeners during a listening comprehension lesson in class. Mendelsohn (1994) defines listening comprehension as the ability to understand the spoken language of native speakers. She observes that in listening to spoken language the ability to decipher the speaker's intention is required of a competent listener, in addition to other abilities such as processing linguistic forms like speech speed and fillers, coping with listening in an interaction and understanding the whole message contained in the discourse, comprehending the message without hearing every word and recognizing different genres. Listening comprehension is viewed theoretically as an active process in which individuals concentrate on selected aspects of aural input, form meaning from passages and associate what they hear with existing knowledge (Ahmadi & Gilakjani, 2011). Overall, cognitive psychologists define comprehension as information processing.

Different scholars have defined listening. Coakley and Wolvin (1986) state that listening in second language (L2) is the process of receiving, focusing attention, and assigning meaning to aural stimuli. It includes a listener who brings prior knowledge of the topic, linguistic knowledge and cognitive processes to the listening task or oral text. A simplified definition is that "listening is the activity of paying attention to and trying to get meaning from something we hear" (Underwood, 1989, p. 1).This definition implies that in a listening comprehension lesson, students should listen and understand what is said by the teacher or a recording played to them in class. Listening is also viewed as a process of receiving what the speaker actually says, constructing and representing meaning, negotiating meaning and creating meaning through involvement, imagination and empathy (Rost, 2002). What is prevalent in these conceptions is that during listening the listener pays attention to what he or she hears in order to get meaning of what he or she listens to. According to Richards and Renandya (2002) listening has assumed "greater importance in foreign and second language classrooms" (p. 338). The emphasis of the role of comprehensible input in second language acquisition gives listening a major boost. For non-native English speakers, listening is the first encounter with the target language in their language learning journey (Berne, 2004).

Also, mastering listening comprehension is the first step towards fully acquiring a second language or foreign language (Liu, 2009). However, in spite of the importance of developing listening comprehension abilities, L2 students are rarely taught how to listen effectively (Berne, 2004; Vandergrift, 2007). Scholars such as, Berne (1998), Elkhafaifi (2005), Hadley (2001), Kao (2006) and Rost (1994) suggest several instructional procedures to help students effectively develop their listening comprehension in foreign language. These procedures are as follows; providing materials that are familiar or relevant to students' interest, providing materials that are at an appropriate level of difficulty, conducting pre-listening activities, providing effective visual aids, introducing a range of listening inputs, including different types of speakers, speeches, modes of presentations and situations, allowing repetition of speech, providing support and encouragement to confidence in L2 learning, and encouraging students to independently seek out listening opportunities outside the classroom. To successfully teach listening comprehension teachers should incorporate the instructional procedures suggested above. These instructional procedures can assist in developing listening comprehension skills in English Language listening comprehension.

2.1 Bottom-up and Top-down Processing

According to Oxford (1990) bottom-up strategies include word-for-word translation, adjusting the rate of speech, repeating the oral text, and focusing on prosodic features of the text. In listening comprehension, bottom-up processing occurs when listeners attend to linguistic features and decode each sound and word for semantic meaning (Siegel, 2012). On the other hand, Clement (2007) proposes that in bottom-up processing, the

language students heavily rely on sound input in listening comprehension. In order to guess what a word might be in the listening text, a listener might try to match initial sounds to various lexicons that he/she knows and eliminate more and more possibilities until he/she finds the most accurate match to the input sounds (Clement, 2007). When students encounter listening input for which they have no prior knowledge, they resort to top-down processing to compensate for the insufficient knowledge of the language (Wilson, 2003). In top-down processing, the listeners draw upon background knowledge and expectations of the upcoming oral text and then infer what the true meaning of the speaker may have been (Clement, 2007). The representation of such prior knowledge or a generic concept of the subject is also referred as a schema.

According to Rost (2005) schemata are frequently being developed and updated, and listeners refer to a variety of schemata that help them interpret the text and predict the outcomes. This knowledge could also assist students to make sense of the oral text and fill in missing information. In the case of a cultural or intellectual disconnection, students are able to adjust or incorporate a new schema to facilitate their comprehension. Top-down strategies include predicting, inference, elaborating and visualization. Vandergrift (2003) analysed four cognitive strategies. The first cognitive strategy of trying to comprehend without translating is used when the listener attempts to understand L2 input without translating to L1. This strategy is useful because often times, many words do not have equivalents in one of the languages, tendering the comprehension process more difficult. This strategy, therefore, directs the listener's attention to the meaning and structure of the target language.

The second cognitive strategy is focusing on the main words to understand new ones. The listener creates meaning by applying his/ her knowledge of words from the target language to sentences. This strategy is very useful, especially for beginning listeners, who rely on their small vocabulary repertoire to build their comprehension. The third cognitive strategy is relying on the main idea to comprehend the whole text. This strategy helps the listeners to locate the theme first and details later. One of the techniques that this strategy involves is skimming. The learner who uses this strategy locates the main idea quickly and understands the L2 aural input very rapidly. The fourth cognitive strategy is guessing the meaning by relying on any clues (contextual or linguistic). Listeners use this strategy when they do not know all the words, or they do not understand the overall meaning of the sentence. Both native and non-native speakers use this strategy either when they have not listened well enough or when the meaning is not clear (Vandergrift, 2003). Students use top-down processing when they activate their own background knowledge of the listening text, and they rely on bottom-up to help them decode the sounds and grammatical patterns of English. During listening, the two cognitive processes combine to facilitate listening comprehension because listeners use both prior knowledge and linguistic knowledge in understanding messages (Graham & Macaro, 2008; Vandergrift, 2004).

In a listening comprehension lesson students are expected to use both prior knowledge and linguistic knowledge to enhance their understanding of listening material presented in different forms. It is worth mentioning that every scholar who has done research on listening discusses bottom-up and top-down processing since these are key factors in understanding new input students get from any listening exercise they are exposed to. Bottom-up and top-down processing play a crucial role during listening, thus teachers should ensure that students use these processes effectively during listening lessons.

2.2 Metacognitive Strategies

The second type of strategies is metacognitive strategies. According to Rubin (1987), these are management techniques employed by students to have control over their learning through planning, monitoring, evaluating, and modifying. For instance, for metacognitive planning strategies, listeners would clarify the objectives of an anticipated listening activity and attend to particular aspects of the aural language input or situational details that facilitate the comprehension of aural input. According to this understanding, metacognitive strategies are higher order executive skills that may involve planning for, monitoring, or evaluating activities to manage, direct, regulate, and guide learning (O' Malley & Chamot, 1990). On the other hand, Vandergrift and Goh (2012) state that metacognitive instruction refers to 'pedagogical procedures that enable students to increase awareness of

listening process by developing richer metacognitive knowledge about themselves as listeners, the nature and demands of listening, and strategies for listening '(p.97).In the same vein, Goh (2008) maintains that metacognitive instruction strengthens students awareness and listening process which assists students in using appropriate strategies.

2.3 Socio-affective Strategies

The last category of strategies is socio-affective, which encompasses the attempts to create and promote positive emotional reactions and attitudes towards language learning (Chamot & O'Malley, 1989). Vandergrift (2003) defines socio-affective strategies as the techniques listeners employ to collaborate with others, to verify understanding, or to lower anxiety. Socio-affective strategies represent a broad range of activities that involve either interaction with another person or affective control in language learning. Socio-affective strategies are exemplified by students asking questions for explanation or clarification from the teacher and working together with peers to solve a problem. All the listening comprehension strategies are crucial in teaching listening comprehension. Teachers should understand that students have to engage in cognitive, meta-cognitive and socio-affective strategies in listening comprehension lessons, so that they are actively involved in the lesson.

2.4 Listening Instruction Strategy

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) address two methodological issues in the instruction of learning strategies. The first issue is whether instruction should be embedded or explicit. In explicit or direct instruction, the teacher informs students about the value and purpose of a particular strategy and then provides explicit instruction on how to apply the strategy. However, in embedded instruction, the teacher guides students through activities and materials that are associated with the strategy but does not tell students of the benefits and applications of the strategy. In a typical language classroom, students learn to use the strategies that are cued by the textbook, while working on exercises. Thus embedded instruction requires less teacher training comparing to explicit instruction (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). The second issue is whether strategy instruction should be separated or integrated with classroom instruction in the language or content subject. Researchers in favour of integrated strategy instruction argue that integrating strategy instruction into regular classes provides students with opportunities to practice strategies in an authentic language learning environment and to transfer the strategies to other language tasks (Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinary, &Robbins1999; Kendall & Khuon, 2006; Oxford, 2002; Zhang, 2008). On the other hand, researchers in favour of separated instruction raise concerns that students would be less likely to transfer strategies to other tasks after receiving integrated instruction, and it might be unrealistic to train all language teachers to teach strategies in regular language classes (Gu, 1996).

2.5 Inferential Process

Ever since teaching of listening comprehension gained prominence, scholars have put forth different views on listening comprehension. Listening comprehension is also viewed as an inferential process (Brown, 2001; Rost 2002). These scholars hold the view that linguistic and world knowledge interact as listeners create a mental representation of what they hear during listening comprehension. According to these scholars, listening comprehension is not merely the process of unidirectional receiving of audible symbols, but an interactive process. It requires the use of non-linguistic as well as linguistic knowledge. The National Capital Language Resource Centre (2003-2004) states that the processes involved in listening comprehension include; speech perception, word recognition, sentence processing, constructing the literal meaning of a sentence, holding the information in short term memory, recognizing cohesive devices in discourse (Amir & Mitra, 2016). It also involves inferring the implied meaning and intention, predicting what is to be said and deciding how to respond to questions (National Capital Language Resource Centre 2003-2004). Therefore, listening is more than just hearing a word; it involves an interplay of all the processes mentioned above. Students need to be taught how to be effective listeners. For successful communication, whether between first speakers of a language or second speakers of a language, the skill of listening is essential. In order to teach listening comprehension effectively, the

teacher should be knowledgeable about developing the skill of listening in students.

3. Research Design

The study falls under a qualitative paradigm, anchored on an intrinsic case-study design, which draws its strength from the interpretivist philosophy. The goal of this intrinsic case-study was to understand the case as a holistic entity, as well as to understand its inner workings. For this study to meet the requirements of understanding the case holistically, it examined the teaching of listening comprehension, with an intention of unearthing pedagogical practices and their relevance to the ideals of teaching listening comprehension using best practices.

3.1 Participants and Sampling

Twenty purposively selected participants volunteered to participate in the study. These participants were selected from 20 schools found within a population of 204 schools. In each school, one teacher was asked to participate in the study. As highlighted by Johnson and Christenseen (2012) in purposive sampling the researcher specifies the characteristics of the population of interest and locates individuals with those characteristics. In this study, all the participants were high school teachers and taught listening comprehension as one of the components of the syllabus. About 60% of the participants were females, while 40% were males. Their ages varied between 26 and 55 years. And all of them were qualified high school teachers, holding Bachelor of Arts in Humanities as a minimum qualification and Master of Arts in English or Education as the highest qualification. Their average teaching experience ranged between 2 and 30 years.

3.2 Data Collection Procedure

The study used non-participant observations and interviews as forms of data collection methods. The purpose of the observations was to solicit information related to pedagogical practices teachers use when teaching listening comprehension, while interviews collected data related to teachers' challenges. Data were collected from twenty participants in twenty schools. While the schools in the study were randomly selected, participants were selected purposively. Within the observation protocol, the study observed the following best practices of teaching listening comprehension; lesson introduction, pre-listening activities, use of material relevant to real life situations, use of authentic language, variation of teaching materials, use of motivating techniques, and post-listening activities. In this study six participants' lessons were observed, and overall, twenty participants were interviewed. For the first six participants, observations preceded the interviews. Standard open interviews were the main form of data collection method in this study. Overall, the observations lasted for the duration of the lessons, while interviews took ten (10) minutes per participant, translating to an average of 200 minutes for interviews and 180 minutes for the observations, wherein an average time for a lesson was forty (40) minutes.

3.3 Validity and Reliability

The question of reliability and validity is viewed in terms of believability (Schreiber & Asner-Self, 2011). However, there is a debate whether or not these concepts are relevant in qualitative research. Some scholars such as Schreiber and Asner-Self (2011) argue that these concepts are more relevant to quantitative research than qualitative. Such scholars view trustworthiness as the most appropriate measure of reliability and validity in qualitative research. Trustworthiness is "based on the criteria and methodological procedures for determining whether a naturalistic investigation can be trusted'' (p.117). To ensure validity of the instruments, the study used content validity in which the instruments were validated in terms of their content and construct relativity.

4. Data Analysis

Data were analysed using the constant comparative method. Lichtman (2010) states that the steps for the

constant comparative method involve open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. In this study, the codes were developed and subsequently organised around concepts. For precision, the study used the following Three-C model proposed by Lichtman (2010).

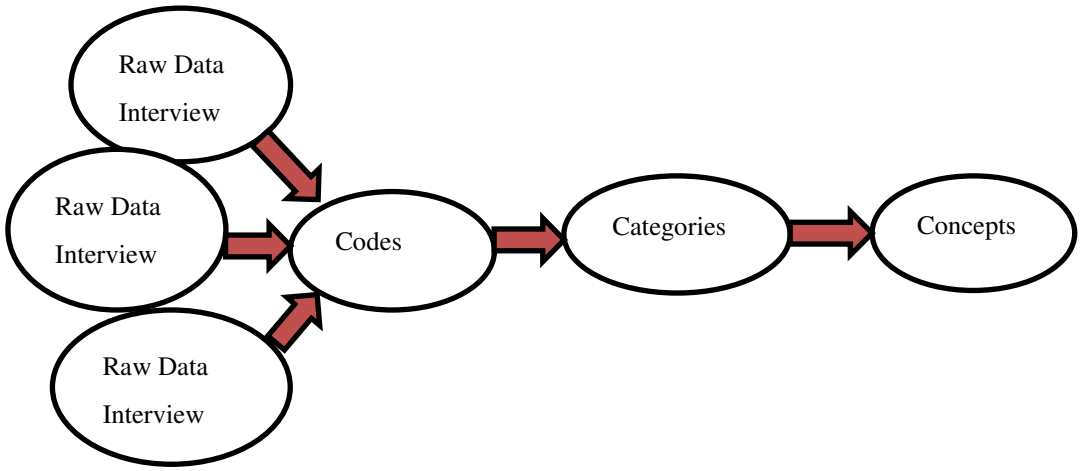

Figure 1. Three-C Model

The Three-C model has six steps to be followed by a researcher. The first step is initial coding, and it involves the researcher moving from the responses of the participants to some central idea. The second step is revisiting the initial codes to modify the coding. For instance, in this study, some of the codes were merged. There were two themes; misunderstanding of questions and failure to understand content. These two themes were merged to form one major theme of *Misunderstanding of content and questions*. The third step was to develop an initial list of categories or central ideas in which data were modified and organized into categories. Lichtman (2010) observes that certain codes become major topics, and other topics can be grouped under that major topic or become its subsets. The fourth step was to modify the initial list, which involved going through the initial list, sorting categories from important to less important. In the fifth step, the researcher revisited the list of categories and removed redundancies. Finally, the last step was to identify key concepts that reflected the meaning attached to the data. Lichtman (2010) observes that by using this model fewer well supported concepts are developed and make for a much richer analysis than many loosely framed ideas. The Three-C model therefore reinforced the analysis by mainly eliminating redundancies.

5. Results and Discussion

The purpose of the first research question was to investigate the pedagogical practices teachers of listening comprehension utilize when teaching listening comprehension. For this question, data were collected using an observation protocol. The major variables of the observation protocol were as follows: lesson introduction, pre-listening activities, use of material relevant to students' real life, motivation, use of authentic language, variation of materials, and post-listening activities. These variables are tenets of best practices of teaching listening comprehension. The results are presented and discussed through the use of vignettes encased in creative synthesis. The names used in the vignettes are pseudonyms.

Vignette 1

> *Cynthia (pseudonym) is a female senior secondary teacher who has taught Form four (4) for two (2) years. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Humanities and a Post Graduate Certificate in Education. She enters a class of 43 students and gives them question papers, and informs them they will listen to a dialogue and complete notes. She then reads a passage about the Life of Teenage Boys as a pre-listening activity. Her main listening activity is about Weather Forecast. Thereafter, her students write answers to questions based on the listening activity. They complete*

notes while she reads the listening text. She grades students' scripts and thereafter asks them about challenges they encountered while listening.

Observation

From this observation, Cynthia got to class and started the lesson with little consideration of a humanistic approach that would help her to set-up the stage and also allow her to motivate her students before the beginning of the lesson. As a result, her students were not motivated throughout the lesson. Some got lost as they were looking around at what other students were doing, showing that they did not understand what they were supposed to do. Also, the post-listening activity Cynthia gave to her students did not relate to the main listening task. For instance, the pre-listening activity was about the *Life of Teenage Boys* and the main listening activity was about *Weather Forecast*. Karakas (2002) posits that in a listening comprehension lesson, it is important for the teacher to introduce the lesson and engage students in a pre-listening activity that will prepare them for the main listening task. The main listening activity actually builds on the pre-listening activity; thus, teachers of listening should select pre-listening activities that are related to the main listening task. Also, after the main listening activity, the teacher should engage students in a post-listening activity to assess comprehension. Post-listening activities may include making students write notes on what they listened to or write a letter. They can also discuss in pairs what they have listened to.

Vignette 2

Joseph (pseudonym) is a male senior secondary teacher who has taught Form four for nine years. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in Humanities and a Post Graduate Certificate in Education. He enters a class of 45 students and asks them what comprehension is. Students respond to his question by saying they think its understanding. Joseph moves on to explain what listening is, and that it requires utmost attention from the students. He distributes question papers to students and instructs them to listen attentively to the compact disc (CD), while answering questions. Students listen to information about opening a Bank Account. Thereafter, students respond to given questions by writing short sentences and completing notes. After completing the given task, Joseph instructs students to exchange their exercise books and mark their work, while he reads out the correct answers.

Observation

Joseph's class was little enthusiastic. Students seemed motivated even though the source of motivation is unknown. That is, it is not clear whether students had extrinsic or intrinsic motivation. However, there was no form of motivation Joseph did during the lesson that could account for extrinsic motivation; unless, perhaps, Joseph did it during previous lessons. Like Cynthia, Joseph did not give students a pre-listening activity. He also did not give his students a post-listening activity. Joseph also did not vary listening materials; he only used a past examination paper as a source of input. Scholars such as Kao (2006) state that teachers of listening comprehension should introduce a range of listening inputs, including different types of speakers, speeches, modes of presentation and situations to students. Another striking observation in this lesson was that during discussion students argued over correct answers, and Joseph had to replay the CD. Notably is that even though the CD was played twice, still, students did not grasp the information necessary to answer questions correctly; instead, they requested the CD to be played for the third time.

Vignette 3

Samuel (pseudonym) is a male teacher who has taught Form four for eleven years. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in Humanities and a Post Graduate Certificate in Education. He enters a class of 39 students and asks them to mention four basic skills one must acquire before sitting for a final examination. Students respond to the question. He then mentions that the lesson will focus

on listening. He asks students what they can listen to in order to improve their listening skills. Students respond by saying they can listen to worldwide news and announcements. He then reads announcements to them as a listening activity. At the end of the listening activity, students complete notes prepared by Samuel.

Observation

Even though Samuel gave students listening material relevant to their real lives, the first part of the lesson was marred by confusion. Samuel first read a wrong passage, and his students sat back, confused. After he was done, a student raised her hand and told Samuel he had just read a wrong passage; there was a mismatch between the passage and the questions they had to answer. Samuel was perplexed and apologised to the students that he mistakenly took a wrong passage. Did Samuel prepare for the lesson? This is a difficult question to answer; however, the things that unfolded points to the contrary. Apparently, there is enough suspicion that there was little or no preparation on Samuel's part. Furthermore, just like Cynthia and Joseph, Samuel did not give his students a pre-listening activity and also did not vary the listening material he gave to his students, including the post- listening activity, to allow full engagement of the students with content.

Looking closely at this analysis, the fundamental question is whether or not teachers of listening comprehension, in these cases, were aware of rigorous pedagogical approaches, associated with teaching listening comprehension successfully. As seen in this study, the observations revealed different unconventional practices used by teachers when teaching listening comprehension. This is supported by glaring evidence of inconsistencies in teaching of listening comprehension. For instances, in all the vignettes, the lessons were introduced by distributing question papers. Teachers did not do warm-up activities with the students before listening activities. At times, the lessons were introduced by writing words related to the topic on the chalkboard. Samuel introduced the lesson by asking students to mention four skills they must acquire before sitting for the final examination. Well, talking about examination could have been his strategy for motivating the students; however, some students cringe at a mention of the word *examination*. Perhaps, Samuel could have thought of less threatening reasons for which the language skill is beneficial such listening to music, listening to cell phone conversation and many more. Such reason could be more enticing than examination.

Overall, this inconsistency in teaching of listening suggests that teachers lack strategies to teach it. Precisely, listening comprehension involves planning for the lesson at all its phases. For instance, Westrup and Baker (2000) state that teachers should plan listening skill lessons in three phases; pre-listening activities, while-listening activities and post-listening activities. And pre-listening activities should not be more than five minutes. It may include brainstorming; which is discussing the topic students will listen to. Another pre-listening activity may be discussion. Students may discuss among themselves a picture related to listening activity, talk about what they think the listening activity will be about. Questioning is another strategy in which students look at a picture and think of the questions they would like answered after the listening activity. Fisher, Brozo, Frey, and Ivy (2007) refer to this as an anticipation guide.

The purpose for research question number 2 was to investigate challenges encountered by teachers when teaching listening comprehension. Data for answering this research question was collected through standardized open-ended interview protocol. Figure 2 shows the percentage distribution of the challenges.

Resource Books and Material (30%) - The major challenge faced by teachers in teaching of listening comprehension is lack of resource books and material such as pre-recorded listening clips. During the interviews participants revealed that they do not have resource books on how to teach listening comprehension. However, they have books on teaching of the other language skills, such as writing and reading. The participants mentioned that, as a result, they rely on past examination papers and junior certificate (J.C.) text books for resource. Otherwise, at the senior level, they do have books to support the teaching of listening. With respect to this challenge, one participant said:

> *"We don't have resource materials, so we go around asking materials from other teachers and they tell us the same story that they have none, except past examination papers which we also have. So, I think, we need a lot of resource material to be more effective in teaching listening comprehension."*

Lack of resource material on teaching of listening comprehension is a major hindrance for teachers. Perhaps, with more books teachers could vary their teaching strategies and improve the teaching of the skill.

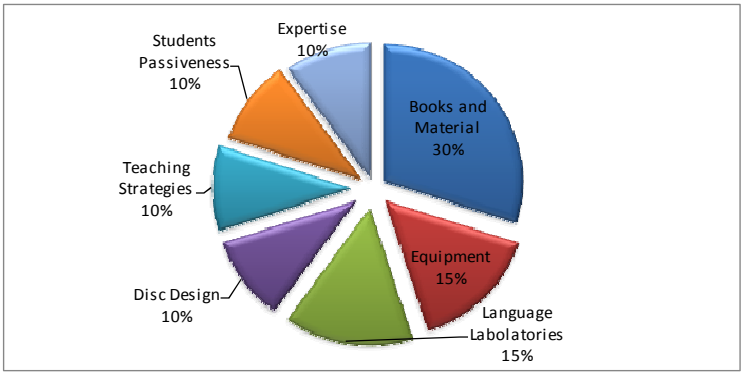

Figure 2. Teachers' Challenges

Equipment (15%) - The second major challenge teachers revealed was that of lack of equipment. They revealed that teaching listening skill is difficult because they don't have equipment such as CDs and CD players. The number of CDs they have tends to determine how often they teach listening comprehension. That is, if they have fewer CDs, they are unable to conduct listening lessons often, because students lose interest when listening to something they already know, even if they would be answering different questions. Also, some of the equipment, according to the teachers, is old. Sometimes, it stalls in the middle of a lesson and disrupts the entire activity.

Language Laboratories (15%) - Teachers revealed that another challenge they face is having an appropriate teaching space such as language laboratories. If schools had English Language laboratories with computers connected to internet, they would use this facility to enhance the teaching of the skill, because they would be able to access online listening materials. Thus, teachers are of the view that having language laboratories with access to high speed internet would alleviate some of the problems. And even offer solutions to the challenges orchestrated by lack of resource materials.

Compact Discs (10%) - The fourth challenge is the design of CDs. Teachers noted that the CDs are designed interactively, such that the teacher has to insert it in the CD player and be closer to the CD player so that he or she could press the start/pause buttons as required by the voice prompts. This then divides the teacher's attention. On one hand, the teacher has to operate the CD player; while on the other, he/she has to ensure students are prepared to listen to the activity. Occasionally, when the teacher is actively involved in the operation of the CD player, students (being students) engage in something else, and this makes it difficult for teachers to ensure that all students are attentive, especially in classes with huge numbers, which is the case in most schools. Like in one of the classes observed, there were 45 students, packed in a small class like sardines. In classes with huge numbers, each time teachers have challenges with the CD player; students take advantage and do something else.

Teaching Strategies (10%) - Knowing different teaching strategies is one of the key strategies in eliminating boredom in teaching listening comprehension and other language skills. In this study, teachers mentioned that they do not know alternative strategies for teaching listening comprehension. That is, they find teaching listening routinely. For instance, they photocopy questions and most often the schools don't even have photocopier machines. When that is the case, they go somewhere else to make copies. They get copies and when they get to class, they distribute the question papers and read or play the input. After that they mark students' work. They find this procedure routine, and wish they could know other alternative teaching strategies they

could use.

Students' Passiveness (10%) - Teachers further revealed that students are more often passive during listening lessons. They engage very minimally. In many instances during listening lessons, students maintain eye contact with teachers, as if they understand the lesson, yet when asked questions based on the lesson, they are unable to respond correctly. Teachers revealed that they find difficulties in dealing with such situations because most often times students are not disrupted by something recognisable; instead, they pay attention, yet at the end, they are unable to respond to asked questions. Perhaps, this challenge is related to students' slow cognitive processing, which teachers may not be familiar to deal with it. Cognitive psychologists may be better positioned to help students experiencing such challenges.

Using and Fixing Equipment (10%) - One last challenge revealed by this study is that teachers lack expertise on how to use and fix the equipment (those that have it). At times the equipment stall because of a very minor technicality, and they have to put it aside, while they wait for a technician to assist. And, at times, they wait for very long periods before they get assistance; as a result, they lose material time of teaching listening, resulting to fewer contact hours with students. One participant in relation to this problem said:

> *"I think I need knowledge on how to use and fix the equipment such as the CD player, how to select, rewind, fast forward, or pause. This knowledge can be very helpful to support listening lessons."*

Revealed by this study is that not all teachers are familiar with the use of technology. At times teachers do not know how to operate the CDs players to select the clip they want to play at that time. As evidenced by the teachers' testimonies some would play multiple clips, before they reach the one they have actually chosen for the lesson. In short, they cannot select the clip they intend to play from the many clips from the CD. Since technology changes often there is need for the teachers to get frequent upgrades on technology to match the changing times.

6. Conclusion

There is no doubt that the prevalence of unconventional attested practices in teaching of listening comprehension is a course for concern in Swaziland and, perhaps, in other similar ESL contexts. As revealed by this study, the results of these unchecked practices are not sustained or contained by the ideals of teaching listening comprehension, reflective of best practices and conventional metaphors. As a result students are not performing well in listening comprehension in Swaziland. Perhaps, a more vigorous form of pedagogical intervention, supported by current practices in teaching listening may be an effective springboard for alleviating these challenges. Presuming that these challenges are insurmountable could be folly, if necessary remedial activities such as in-service workshops could be put in place, coupled with supply of adequate resource material, dealing with listening as an aspect of prime focus. Such attempts could mediate the epitome of knowledge inadequacy, and furnish teachers with current listening comprehension teaching metaphors, associated with students' success.

7. References

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