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This article describes a study of journal keeping to focus business students' attention on their listening behaviors and the need for improvement. Guided by an instructor, 42 students wrote daily observations of their listening behaviors for 10 weeks. These observations were arranged into 10 prescribed general listening categories. Using content analysis procedures, two trained decoders identified content themes that were observed by more than half the students in 7 of the 10 general categories. The results demonstrated that the journal, combined with content analysis procedures, can be used successfully to identify students' listening behavior problems so that a targeted training regimen can be designed to address these deficiencies.

Using Journals to Improve Listening Behavior

An Exploratory Study

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Researchers today recognize that while in college, business students need more listening training to prepare them for later employment. Hunt and Cusella (395), and Barker, Pearce, and Johnson (450), for example, report probable links between listening training and organizational/managerial effectiveness. Although collegiate business instructors may use various techniques to improve students' listening behavior in their classes, there appears to be no record of using journals for this purpose. Yet, instructors who teach basic writing skills have used journals successfully for years (Leahy; Connors). If it is true that writing and listening skills are somehow related (Munte 245), could we also use journals successfully in listening instructional programs, although we would use them for different purposes than they are used in basic writing?

The prospect of a positive response to that question led us to design a study to explore the journal as a medium to enhance business students' awareness of their listening behaviors and the need for improvement. The specific purposes of the study were to (a) increase students' awareness of their listening behaviors by recording per-

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TABLE 1
Student Demographics

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Number of Students</i>
Course	
Undergraduate organizational communication	42
Class	
Junior	22
Senior	20
Cumulative grade-point average	
2.0-2.5	18
2.6-3.0	14
>3.0	9
None reported	1
Gender	
Female	22
Male	20
Age	
18-22	22
23-28	15
29-34	5
Nationality	
American	40
Indian	1
Ethiopian	1
First language	
English	38
French	1
Portuguese	1
Amharic	1
Hindi	1
Prior listening training	
None	28
1 course or seminar	2
>1 course or seminar	12

sonal observations daily in journals, (b) analyze the observations to gain insight into their listening environments, and (c) suggest hypotheses for future research using content analysis.

PROCEDURES

Students in two upper-division undergraduate organizational communication classes at our university served as subjects in this study. Selected demographics for the sample appear in Table 1.

Students made daily written observations of one of their listening behaviors for one week at a time. They examined 10 listening behaviors—a different one each week—during the first 10 weeks of the semester, as part of the regular classroom assignments. The instructor explained the assignment and the anticipated procedure before starting the journals, then introduced a new listening behavior at the beginning of each week. Throughout the 10 weeks, the instructor clarified or repeated instructions as needed. The instructor also told the students that all responses would (a) be kept confidential, (b) count as part of the course grade, (c) assist them in their understanding of listening behaviors, and (d) be used for research purposes. Students recorded incidents involving the specific behavior under investigation, their reactions to these incidents, and the reasons they believed they reacted as they did. They also noted other individuals who were involved in the incidents. At the end of each week, they analyzed their entries for habitual behaviors and other information that could serve as a basis for improvement. Sample excerpts from two students' journals appear in Table 2.

Throughout the 10 weeks, the instructor provided feedback upon request and twice examined all journals to ensure that students were following procedure. About 5% of the entries required mediation to ensure correctness. This mediation involved approximately 20% of the students and concerned misunderstandings about the meaning of a general category (as defined in the next paragraph), distinctions between and among general categories, and how to record and summarize entries in the journals.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

Following the 10th week, all students turned in their completed journals on the same day. The 10 observed listening behaviors served as general categories, and individual journal entries defined these categories more specifically (Emmert and Brooks 293-314; Gerbner et al. 12-16, 45-56, 319-25). The general categories, as follows, are derived from the listening barriers of Steil, Barker, and Watson, who draw on the work of Nichols and Stevens, and Weaver, among others:

1. Call the subject uninteresting.
2. Criticize the speaker's delivery.
3. Get overstimulated by some point a person makes.

TABLE 2
Excerpts from Two Listening Journals on Third-Week Topic:
Getting Overstimulated by a Point a Person Makes

Journal 1

Entries

Movies tend to overstimulate me. If I have a strong visual that goes with speech, I will usually be carried away and start thinking about what it all means to me instead of listening. It happened the last time I went to see a movie. I saw *The Joy Luck Club* and just went off thinking about my mother and our relationship.

When I get into arguments, I have trouble listening because I let my emotions take over. I had an argument with my roommate about the bathroom being cleaned. I remember what I argued about but can't recall what she said.

My history professor was giving us too much information. I felt bombarded with information and felt myself going off thinking about something he said earlier instead of what he was currently discussing.

Summary

I need to make sure that when drifting away from the subject at hand, I make myself come back.

Journal 2

Entries

[The instructor] described overstimulation, and I started thinking about how often I do it and how much it gets in the way.

Someone started complaining about her weight, and she got me thinking about dinner at my parents' house and how much I miss it.

When he mentioned buying dog food, I started thinking about money and all the bills that I owe.

She told me about her car's problems. I started trying to figure out how much it would cost to get the Volvo on the road.

My teacher was telling us how to make [money], and I started trying to figure out a job that would make me more [money].

She mentioned having to work on Saturday night, and I remembered working on Monday and things that happened then.

My economics teacher's doing a problem on vodka and makes a joke about how much college students drink. I start thinking about drinking tonight.

Summary

I do this always. I'm always spacing out, thinking about something else when I'm listening to people. I'm an introverted listener, and I apply everything I hear to myself. So I'm always thinking on tangents.

4. Listen only for facts.
5. Try to outline everything (too much) of what is said.
6. Fake attention to the speaker.
7. Tolerate or create distractions.
8. Avoid difficult expository material.

9. Let emotion-laden words arouse personal antagonism.
10. Waste the advantage of thought speed.

Two coders trained in content analysis procedures allocated the journal entries to the general categories and established an interrater reliability coefficient of .86. This indicates strong consistency in interrater analysis of the themes found in the journals. According to Holsti, content analysis procedures derive a percentage score by comparing coding agreements with coding decisions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The information in Table 3 shows the content themes that evolved from analyzing the journal entries, along with the percentage of students who made these particular remarks. Those persons who interacted with the students in these exchanges were primarily instructors, followed by classmates and friends, and then followed by family members and coworkers or managers. All 42 students described effects of classroom or other instructional encounters among their entries, which is unsurprising because most of them were attending classes full-time and because the journal-keeping assignment originated in the classroom.

As requested, students successfully focused on their own reactions and those of others in these encounters. Themes reported by more than half the students emerged in 7 of the 10 general categories. The most predominant theme appeared under the category "criticized speaker's delivery," in which more than four-fifths of the students (83%) reported that a speaker's verbal and nonverbal habits or lack of organization evoked the behavior. Almost two-thirds of the students (66%) listed noise in the environment, a theme associated with the "tolerated or created distractions" category; another 47% listed others' physical movement as a theme under this same category. Approximately two-thirds (64%) specified a boring subject or redundant speaker under the "called subject uninteresting" category. Although only 37% of the students said they daydreamed, slightly more than three-fifths (61%) of them "wasted thought speed" by jumping to conclusions and planning their responses while listening. Slightly less than three-fifths (59%) "got overstimulated" when comments related to them or their lives. Whereas 30% of the students thought emotion-laden words had no real effect on them, more than half (54%)

TABLE 3
Content Themes Reported for Each General Category

<i>General Category</i>	<i>Percentage Reporting</i>	<i>Content Theme</i>
Called subject uninteresting	64	Boring subject; redundant speaker
Criticized speaker's delivery	83	Speaker's verbal/nonverbal habits; speaker's lack of organization
Got overstimulated	59	When comment related to me, my life, or my experiences
Listened only for facts	51	When comment related to probable exam question—specifics in quantitative course, generalities in qualitative course
Tried to outline everything	30	Everything seemed important; speaker did not prioritize
	38	When comment related to probable exam question—specifics in quantitative course, generalities in qualitative course
Faked attention	12	Just to be polite
	26	Other things on my mind, not concentrating
	33	Boring, unrelated topic
	42	Poor speaker presentation habits
Tolerated or created distractions	47	Others' physical movement
	66	Noise in environment—talk, music, mechanical, people-generated sounds
Avoided listening to difficult material	17	Avoidance of situation that creates negative emotional response
	38	Felt fearful; anticipated topic would be difficult to engage; new topic
	40	Unrelated response; no response
Let emotion-laden words bother me	30	No real effect
	54	Topics more so than words
Wasted thought speed	37	Daydreamed
	61	Planned my response; jumped to conclusions; made personal connections

"let emotion-laden words bother [them]," referring to topics more so than to words alone. A little more than half (51%) "listened only for facts," especially when they thought comments might relate to probable examination questions.

Other themes, given by fewer than half the students, fell into the three remaining general categories. Those students who “tried to outline everything” did so because the speaker did not suggest priorities and everything seemed important (30%) or because they thought the speaker was talking about a probable examination question (38%). Four themes emerged under the “faked attention” category: Students listened just to be polite (12%), had other things on their minds (26%), found the topic boring (33%), and thought speaker presentation habits were poor (42%). Almost two-fifths (38%) of the students “avoided listening to difficult material” because they felt fearful, they anticipated the topic would be difficult to engage, or it was a new topic. Almost one-fifth (17%) avoided the material because it triggered a negative emotional response. However, the largest group (40%) gave unrelated responses or did not respond at all in this category. Despite their instructor’s efforts to define the concept, perhaps some students never fully understood what avoiding difficult expository material actually means.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Clearly, substantive content themes emerged from the analysis that could serve as a basis for improving students’ listening behavior, including especially their classroom listening behavior. In fact, in their summaries of each week’s journal entries and in discussions at the conclusion of the project, many students stated that they expected to make changes that would lead to improvement. Some said they had already begun programs of remedy now that they were aware of their listening problems.

Interestingly, the “faked attention” general category and the subsequent themes identified seem to relate to a number of things, including mental states—lack of focus, general anxiety, closed-mindedness, and doing too many things at once (Steil, Barker, and Watson 59). These categories are not exclusive and may overlap. Yet, the listening problems they reveal have remained among the more persistent ones since Nichols and Stevens identified the problems more than 35 years ago (72). Our purpose with this study was not to test the listening categories themselves but to discover what listening encounters students engage in and how they evaluate why they respond as they do.

Given the nature of the content themes identified in this study, it seems reasonable to conclude that the journal can serve as a credible vehicle for identifying problems with students' listening behavior. This guided self-discovery process promises to be especially motivating as a method for improvement. In addition, content analysis appears to be a promising technique for identifying themes in students' listening behaviors and for noting the strength of these commonalities. The themes identified also indicate areas that speakers could focus on in the speaker/listener interaction. With both parties taking responsibility for effective communication, the chances for greater improvement seem to increase dramatically.

We recommend further research that might lead to improved formal and self-administered listening instructional programs. Content analysis can be used to determine which listening problems to address in these programs, as well as the proportion of the programs that should be devoted to each problem. Possible future research questions using content analysis in the classroom listening environment include the following: Do students' listening skills improve as awareness of their listening problems increases? Are there significant differences in learning course content between students who develop this awareness and those who do not? Further classroom research in self-discovery listening behavior that combines pre- and postassessment with journal content analysis may hold promise in developing an effective listening environment.

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