

The Power of the Listening Ear

Teachers agree that listening is important, but do we spend enough time building students' listening skills? A teacher suggests many classroom-tested strategies.

George Bernard Shaw said, "The problem with communication, is the illusion that it has been accomplished" (qtd. in Healey 201). Communicating effectively is a skill that must be taught and practiced and the act of listening is a large part of this skill.

According to the *International Journal of Listening*, listening skills are imperative to reading comprehension and are valuable enough for "38 out of the 51 government entities to include listening skills as part of their English language arts standards" (Beall, Rosier-Gill, Tate, and Matten 129). This same article makes it clear that, although the skills are seen as valuable, they are not given sufficient time in the classroom. I created a survey about the importance of listening skills in the classroom that I presented to the faculty of a rural high school. I found that 80% of the teachers believed that listening skills are equally important across the curriculum but 75% said they devote less than 10% of instructional time to listening skills. Although students spend half their school day listening and at least 80% of what one knows is acquired through listening, *Education Digest* reports that students are only operating at a 25% listening efficiency (Anderson and Brent 67). The teachers I surveyed said that fewer than half of their students are effective listeners.



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I believe I have identified a real problem between what is expected and what is being taught. Teachers typically use an auditory method of teaching because they assume that students know how to listen. The state of Illinois, for example, does not assume that their students know how to listen. The state has dedicated its fourth goal in the Language Arts learning standards to listening and speaking effectively, because these skills are essential to sending, receiving, and understanding messages. Illinois has even included a requirement that the student be able to follow complex oral instructions. These standards hold the teachers and the students in Illinois accountable for the improvement of listening skills across all 13 years of school (<http://www.isbe.net/ils/ela/standards.htm>). This accountability goes beyond content and grade levels and requires all teachers to work toward a common goal, which is the increase of listening and speaking skills in their students.

Discovering "Hearing Aids"

The following suggestions are research-tested and practical, without being time-consuming. They focus on "active listening skills," in other words, listening that requires a great deal of concentration and focus. The three basic principles prevalent in my findings are teacher-modeled listening, defining a purpose, and preparing for listening.

Keith McPherson in *Teacher Librarian* suggests that modeling active listening skills is a big step toward teaching those skills in the classroom. Making eye contact with children while they are speaking to you, clarifying the message by repeating or rephrasing, and asking questions and not interrupting are important aspects of this model (McPherson 74). One of the best teaching tools for any skill is modeling. “[W]hen children have a good listening model to refer to—when they not only feel they are being heard but listened to as well—they are more likely to listen to others” (75).

The first step for teaching listening in the classroom is for teachers to evaluate their own listening skills. The organization RFB&D, or Recording For the Blind & Dyslexic, has created a listening inventory tool that would be helpful for teachers to use to check their own listening skills as well as those of their students (see www.learningthroughlistening.org). This inventory is aligned with the *New York Learning Standards for English and Language Arts* but can be adapted for other states. The results of our listening inventory can help teachers become aware of their listening processes and the model of listening we are displaying for our students.

B. Nancy Hysop and Bruce Tone suggest that a teacher working to improve students’ listening literacy should focus on establishing a purpose for listening while reading aloud or requiring students to listen effectively.

The Learning Assistance Center from City College of San Francisco (see <http://www.ccsf.edu/NEW/en/student-services/learning-resources/learning-assistance-center/college-success.html>) provides strategies and surveys for listening skills, including a chart that lists poor listening skills or common pitfalls to listening for the average student. The poor listener focuses on the speaker’s voice, clothes, or looks and, in so doing, discounts whatever they might say due to a critical stance on the speaker. The good listener looks for the ideas present and doesn’t focus on the speaker.

The website Learning Through Listening (<http://www.learningthroughlistening.org>) provides a plethora of resources for teachers regarding listening literacy. One of the suggestions regarding preparing students to listen is a KWL chart. The students start by writing what they already *know* about the topic at hand, then they write a few questions

regarding what they *wonder* about, and then, after the presentation or the reading, the students will write what they *learned* about the topic. This resource operates as a wonderful cross-curricular assessment tool to measure the effectiveness of listening. Students will be much more apt to listen effectively if they know why they are listening and what they are listening for. There are tools available to teachers to help students develop this skill. For example, the Learning Assistance Center provides a helpful mnemonic device that can encourage students in their purpose for listening (see http://www.ccsf.edu/Services/LAC/Lern10_Online_Tutor_Training/tripA.html). Triple-A-Listening requires attitude, attention, and adjustment. Attitude reminds students that half the battle in learning is attitude; if students maintain a positive attitude about a lecture or a teacher, they will be far more open-minded and prepared for the mental reception of orally presented material. Attention is to encourage students to be active in their attempts to concentrate. Focusing on the lecture or reading will ensure that student will process the ideas, rather than dump them quickly out of short-term memory. Adjustment encourages students to ask questions if they don’t understand or to be prepared to follow a speaker when he or she goes off on a tangent. Students must be able to adjust while listening to obtain the desired information no matter what the presentation style or distractions might be. These skills will work for reading comprehension as well as helping students to retain the knowledge given to them in a lecture. Once students are aware of their purposes for listening, they can employ the Triple-A-Listening technique as a skill to focus on the purpose and positively affect their ability to retain what they hear.

Finally, teachers can employ procedures and methods in the classroom that will help students *prepare* to listen. One procedure I have used in the classroom came from Harry K. Wong and Rosemary T. Wong’s *The First Days of School: How to Be an Effective Teacher*. For quieting down the classroom and getting the students’ attention, Wong suggests simply raising a hand and not saying a word (182). I began to use this procedure with my classes and

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found that when I employed it before giving directions I had to repeat myself much less often and the students were more successful in the completion of their assignment. I tested the procedure through

the use of videotapes where I looked for the number of times directions had to be repeated with and without the use of the procedure. The procedure cut down on 75% of repetitive questions concerning directions. This evidence tells me that students are al-

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ways going to ask questions about content or directions, but using a procedure and teaching the students how to listen to directions effectively dramatically reduces the instructional time devoted to answering repetitive questions.

Helping students develop the ability to listen effectively to directions will be useful for them in the future, as they will be required to listen to instructions from professors, managers, or just within the normal interactions of life.

More Suggestions for Teaching Listening

Teachers can teach active listening, but they should also encourage the constant use of active listening in the classroom. Mellisa L. Beall, Jennifer Rosier-Gill, Jeanine Tate, and Amy Matten promote listening education at all levels and give wonderful suggestions to teachers on how to implement the skills into the classroom. One suggestion that all teachers could implement with little time and preparation is “planned discussion,” which requires teachers to take a two- to five-minute break from a lecture or reading to have students discuss the most important aspects of the lecture or reading. Such breaks from presentation of material can help increase students’ comprehension, as the authors describe: “This task involves students in constructing meaning, and guiding them to express their thoughts, to evaluate their own thinking and the thinking of others, and to reflect on ideas different from their own . . . therefore, it can also be assumed that evaluation of the thoughts of others cannot take place without careful listening” (129). This same skill set can be developed through a “pair and share” of notes.

Another way to implement and test listening skills in the classroom is a Describe and Do activity (one of many resources found at the Learning Through Listening website). For this activity, the teacher describes a process, such as a “how-to,” or the students watch an actual how-to video that demonstrates a task. The students are then asked to write out a task card testing their ability to listen to the directions and then effectively communicate those directions to the rest of their group. Suggested tasks include how to tie a tie, how to do a magic trick, and how to play Rock Paper Scissors.

Another useful tool to develop students’ listening skills is audiobooks. They are beneficial for differentiating instruction for a multilevel class, but beyond that they can be used to increase students’ understanding and appreciation of the written word. Gene Wolfson shares that “[a]udio books can model reading, teach critical listening and encourage oral language usage while increasing comprehension” (106). Denise Johnson states that audiobooks can be used to sidestep unfamiliar dialects or accents, increase vocabulary, and most importantly teach critical listening.



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Using audiobooks is not without its disadvantages, but with proper preparation and training they can be a wonderful tool for all students. I shared an audiobook of *Macbeth* with my twelfth-grade students without any preparation or prior discussion and then gave them a listening comprehension quiz. Almost half of the class only answered one out of three questions correctly. More determined than ever to implement the active listening strategies previously discussed, I instructed my students to read the printed text while listening by following along on the page with their finger or a pencil. I then had them take notes on character and theme for a follow-up discussion, and finally I prepared the students for what they were going to hear by reviewing the previous section and helping them make predictions. The students listened to the second section of *Macbeth* and I gave them three questions following the recording. The results were clear: 40% of the class answered all three questions correctly versus only 20% in the pretest. I tried the same method with tenth graders and got similar results; I noted an increase of 50% of the students scoring above 75% on the test after the instruction. This marked increase provides powerful evidence that the teacher has the power to improve students' ability to listen effectively.

The benefit of audiobooks for improving reading skills is similar to that of reading aloud. In their *Teaching for Comprehension in Reading: Grades K–2*, Gay Su Pinnell and Patricia L. Scharer say “[t]he key strategies that are supported within interactive read-aloud are connecting, inferring, summarizing, synthesizing, analyzing and critiquing. These strategies support and extend comprehension” (219). These strategies, which we want students to master, can be demonstrated and exercised through listening to reading either on tape or reading aloud.

Can We Compete with the iPod?


Can we compete with all the noise present in the world today to teach students to listen effectively? I believe we should employ the philosophy “if you can’t beat them, join them” by introducing podcasting into the curriculum. The Russell Educational Consultancy and Productions website offers ways that teachers can “exploit” the educational potential of podcasting (“Exploiting”). The site lists

three areas where the potential of podcasting can be realized: cross-curricular activities, alternative teaching approaches, and promoting personalized learning. One of the activities suggested is a tourism guide via podcast, which requires students to research a specific geographical area, write a script, and then record the podcast for listening via iPod or MP3 player. A tourist or interested local could use the podcast along with a map to get the most out of an unfamiliar travel destination (“Exploiting”). Podcasting may be a stretch for some classrooms, but with the right equipment it can serve to complement other teaching methods and enrich the quality of learning.

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The Importance of Listening

The positive effects of developing good listening skills goes beyond the simple ability to follow directions. The University of Colorado’s Conflict Information Consortium (<http://conflict.colorado.edu>) links active listening skills to conflict resolution. The consortium defines active listening as a way of listening and responding to another person that improves mutual understanding. The researchers at the University of Colorado have found that active listening helps people avoid misunderstandings, and it tends to improve the depth of communication, as people say more when they feel they are really being heard (“Active”). The conflicts that occur in everyday life might be minimized if we learned how to listen to each other more effectively.

Winston Churchill once said, “Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen” (qtd. in Warrell 111). Listening well does take courage, but it also takes skill and practice. English teachers can help. 

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Robyn Campbell is a tenth- and eleventh-grade English teacher at Russell High School in Russell, Kentucky. She is a graduate of Shawnee State University in Portsmouth, Ohio, with a degree in Integrated Language Arts. She is a mother of two teenagers and a lover of all literature. Email her at kcamp1027@windstream.net.

READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

The Think-Pair-Share strategy, found on ReadWriteThink.org, is designed to differentiate instruction by providing students with time and structure for thinking on a given topic, enabling them to formulate individual ideas and share them with a peer. This strategy promotes class participation by encouraging a high degree of pupil response. Additionally, this strategy provides an opportunity for all students to share their thinking with at least one other student, which, in turn, increases their sense of involvement in classroom learning. Think-Pair-Share can also be used as an information assessment tool. <http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/using-think-pair-share-30626.html>

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