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Learning through Listening Strategies for Literature

Jean E. Brown

We have learned that listening is more than sitting quietly, and we have also learned that listening is not a passive activity. It involves direction and support from the teacher and concentration from students. Students spend between 40-70% of their time in school listening; therefore, we need to provide them with skills and strategies to listen more effectively. We know that students who are actively involved in listening, need and want experiences to share and to develop what they have heard. Good active listeners are assimilating new information or adding it to the information they already have. Unfamiliar information and new ideas are processed in a more sophisticated accommodation into their schemata to address these new concepts and handle new problems. Listening must be viewed as a vital and active part of communication and learning in the classroom. Refining these skills through middle school and high school are significant steps in developing lifelong learners. In Michigan, as in New York and other states, listening skill will be assessed. The most recent revision of the English/language arts MEAP test contains a listening component.

At the recent ALAN Workshop at the 2001 Fall Conference of the National Council of Teachers of English, keynote speaker, Harvey Daniels asked the audience: "What do you do when you finish a really great book?" One member of the audience responded that he "grabbed all the people he could and read sections of the book to them." He did not assume that his listeners would be passive; he sought to engender in them the excitement and connection he felt with book by letting

them listen to parts of it. His comments reminded me of hearing powerful voices of characters, of visualizing, in detail, places I've never been and sights I've never seen, or enjoying the sound and the power of language as phrases and images resound in memories. Certainly, the impact of listening cannot be minimized as a way of learning and as a way of experiencing literature. Listening to stories stimulates our senses and challenges our minds.

There are a number of strategies that teachers can use effectively in their classrooms to help students develop listening skill and gain an appreciation for literature. Four of the most successful of the strategies are teacher read alouds, listening guides, readers' theater, and listening logs used with audio books or books on tape in the classroom.

The reasons for including listening activities in the classroom may be as simple as using reading aloud to students to introduce a book and encourage them to "get into it on their own" or as sophisticated as helping students to recognize the varied narrative devices used in a work. Whether students are listening individually to a recorded poem to hear the uses of figurative language or the whole class is listening as their teacher reads a particularly dramatic chapter from the book everyone is assigned, students will hear and experience the sound of intertwining of words and their power to convey meaning and images and ideas and hopes. A shared listening activity provides both teachers and students with an experience that is both vital and immediate.

Teacher Read-Alouds.

A teacher read-aloud (Stephens and Brown, 2000) is a prepared selection that the teacher has practiced and that meets the objectives of the lesson. Its purpose is to create interest and curiosity about the selection among students. The selection to be read can vary in length, style, and content as long as it fits within the lesson.

*Teachers also use read-alouds to interest students in independently reading books related to a particular topic or theme. They read a short excerpt that leaves the student wanting to know more and then say, "Anyone who wants to know what happens next may borrow this book from me."
(Stephens and Brown, 175)*

Read-alouds are effective tools to use with literature circles to introduce the available books to the students. In this use it is important to choose chapters or shorter selections from all the books that will elicit interest in the students.

An alternative approach is for teachers to spend a few minutes daily to read a whole book with the class. For example, an acquaintance recently related an experience from when she was in fourth grade. Her teacher read *Bridge to Terabithia* aloud to the class. She and her classmate felt the shared grief of Leslie's death. She said she had read the book herself before and was saddened by the death, but hearing it and experiencing her classmates' surprise and unhappiness heightened the experience for her. The community of sharing makes the affective dynamic more intense, just as the cognitive aspects of a reading have more of an impact when they are experienced and discussed immediately.

Listening Guides.

The effectiveness of any listening experience is enhanced when teachers assist students with learning activities that provide a framework

for attending and focusing. The following example is of a listening experience that Dr. Elaine C. Stephens developed to use with middle grades students. Before reading Russell Freedman's *Kids at Work: Lewis Hine and the Crusade Against Child Labor* to students, she shows several of the photographs from the book to them and involves them in a prediction exercise. Then she asks if they have ever held a job and they discuss the working conditions they've experienced. Students complete the following Listening Guide developed by Dr. Stephens as they listen to her reading the book. Their responses are then used as the basis for class discussion.

Listening Guide

**Kids at Work: Lewis Hine and the Crusade Against Child Labor
by Russell Freedman**

What were some of the working conditions U.S. children suffered under at the beginning of the 20th century?

Who was Lewis Hine?

What did he do that was significant in the crusade against child labor?

Imagine you are an investigative reporter, what questions would you have about child labor?

The first three questions help students focus their listening and also help students prepare for what they will be listening to. The final question serves as a springboard for post-listening discussion.

Readers' Theater.

Readers' theater is an activity in which students select or are assigned a part from a script based on a book or story (Brown and Stephens, 1995).

They read their parts and convey meaning primarily through voice inflection. The process of readers' theater is one that requires a close and critical reading of a work. In this technique, either the teacher or students turn a story into a script for students to read aloud. Commercially prepared scripts are also available and popular with many teachers. Students must be involved and listen closely so they read when it is their turn (Shanklin and Rhodes, 1989).

When she spoke at the ALAN Workshop on November 21, 2001, author Karen Hesse was asked how she would like teachers to use her latest novel, *Witness*. Her immediate response was that she would like students to experience the book as readers' theater. This historical novel follows her approach in *Out of the Dust*, a novel written in blank verse. *Witness* is a complex story with eleven different narrators who relate the story of the infiltration of the Ku Klux Klan into Vermont in the 1920s. Readers' theater would allow students to hear the voices of a community rife with bigotry and intolerance as it struggles with an awakening conscience. Each of the eleven narrators is different and distinct and hearing them will make those differences come alive for students.

The process of readers' theater is one that requires a close and critical reading of a work. While the poems of *Witness* lend themselves to this format, teachers would have to create scripts for more traditional works to be read in the classroom in order to capture the dialogue and emotion between the characters. Through the use of voices and interpretative body movements, the readers seek to convey an understanding of the book.

Listening Logs Used With Audio Books.

Providing students with the opportunities to hear books or selections from books being read by professional actors helps even reluctant readers. Books on tape are frequently read by a single actor who changes his or her voice to take on each character. In a few cases, such as the *Redwall* series, the author Brian Jacques is joined in reading his books by a cast of readers who assume the roles

of all the characters. Victor Martinez is another author who reads his book, *Parrot in the Oven, MiVida*, on audiotope, but most often actors read the books for audiotapes. Recently two students were discussing Louis Sachar's *Holes*; one had read the book while the other listened to the tape. By listening to how they talked, the listener was able to sort out the characters more quickly than the reader. Other students have reported enjoying following the text as they listened to the tape.

Audiotapes can be used in various ways in the classroom. One effective method is to focus on specific elements of a work. For example, I have several short selections from Will Hobbs' *Jason's Gold* that I use to help my students gain a greater appreciation of the vital setting he creates.

Listening to books helps students to understand the development and evolution of characters and the interrelationships among them. For example, Ellie in Joan Bauer's *Squashed* deals with her personal struggles within the context of the public competition of the giant pumpkin growing contest. Students have indicated that they enjoy the humor of this book even more by hearing it on tape or reading it aloud. Bauer deftly juxtaposes humor with life lessons in her books, and students seem to enjoy these two elements as they listen to the books. Another book that presents powerful voices of its characters is *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, a first novel by Ann Brashares. In this book, four girls, lifelong friends, spend the summer before their sixteenth birthdays separated for the first time ever. The "Traveling Pants" represent the magical bond among these friends as each faces changes and challenges. Listening to this book on tape, students experience the friends' unique voices by hearing and sharing the girls' joy and grief.

Each of these approaches—teacher read alouds, listening guides, readers' theater, listening logs—provides students with a heightened involvement with literature. Realistically, with the pervasive role that the mass media play in our lives, people spend more time listening or listening and viewing than in any other language activity. The more effectively students learn to listen, the more

effectively they will process ideas and solve problems.

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About the Author

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