

Plug in and listen to learn

Adele Falconer, Head of Library Services at The King's School bought the requisite MP3 tools when she became interested in the power of digitally delivered curriculum content. As a daily commuter, she began to listen to podcasts of documentaries that she had missed. As an avid reader, she downloaded audiobooks - the commute to work and back home again has taken on a new meaning as those precious hours lost in travelling are now used to catch up on the news of the day and her 'reading'. The offshoot was Adele's interest in the power of listening and the outcome was her undertaking of a literature review investigating the value of developing listening as an essential literacy.

We can see the evidence: kids love audio. Just look around to see the extra bits attached to their ears these days. But whatever is going in has them engaged. And listening is as important as chatting.

The Art of Listening

Listening is an undervalued art, perhaps because of its seeming passivity. Listening is recognised, however, as a valuable literacy in our increasingly multi-modal world (Board of Studies NSW *English 7-10 Syllabus*, 2003). Interestingly, fifth grade listening ability has been identified as a *predictor* of high school performance (Anderson et al. 1985, in Beers 1998). Prensky's digital natives (2001) are increasingly 'tuned-in' throughout their daily lives; students find myriad opportunities to listen, including in their role as commuters en route to school, home and holiday destinations (McCormick 1996; Varley 2002).

The popularity of digital MP3 players and the availability of digital audio content offer unprecedented opportunities for teachers to engage students in listening activities.

But would they be meaningful activities?

Is listening really of value in the classroom?

The Value of Listening

A review of the literature uncovered significant and, at times, evocative comments about listening as a valuable learning strategy.

1. *Listening is a medium in its own right for both content acquisition and enjoyment:*

- Listening can provide an extra literacy for all students, increasing their understanding of subject content material (see study by Boyle 2003).
- Listening meets the needs of the 30% of students who have been identified

as auditory learners (Dunn & Dunn 1993 in Chen 2004) and use of audio content therefore demonstrates teacher respect for differing learning styles.

- Listening is an especially effective learning tool for boys. While girls' recall is not hampered by the mode of content presentation, boys' recall after listening and after reading aloud is better than their recall after silent reading; also, boys' recall after listening was as least as good as girls' (Johnson 1982).
- Listening is a way to enjoy both fiction and non-fiction content when unable to read print such as when commuting or exercising. Adult audio fans are generally avid readers who listen when they could not otherwise be reading (Aron 1992); the two activities fill different needs and those who do both often cannot remember later whether they read a particular book or listened to it (Varley, 2002).

2. *Listening can be a scaffold in overcoming barriers to reading:*

- Listening can increase motivation. Audiobooks provide a taster of fluent reading by removing the difficulty that poor readers have in moving beyond the mechanics of reading to the enjoyment of the action of the story (Allen 2000). Audiobooks can also enable students to experience success in reading (Beers 1998). Remember that for older beginning readers, the memory of past struggles in reading is hard to overcome (Baskin & Harris 1995).
- Listening can overcome text complexity. Audiobooks can bridge the gap between reading and listening vocabulary, allowing students access to age appropriate literature which would otherwise be beyond their reading ability (Baskin & Harris 1995). By facilitating access to the content of books, audiobooks enable students to participate in classroom discussions with their peers, an important step in their learning (Beers 1998). Even able readers are challenged, at times, by such features as unfamiliar names or words and complicated sentence or narrative structure in books. Many textual features (such as accented speech, tone, sarcasm and humour) are enhanced through audio rendition, bringing greater comprehension (Baskin and Harris 1995).
- Listening can improve reading strategies. Reading aloud to children is seen as a single most important activity for building knowledge required to become a reader (Anderson et al. 1985, in Beers 1998). To older students, listening while reading offers the opportunity to hear fluent reading modelled and to practice reading both independently and often.

Listening as a learning and teaching strategy

Teachers in general have reservations about using audiobooks, which appear to stem from several perceptions (Cox 1996):

- the seeming passivity of the act,

- the perceived interpretive nature of audiobooks, and
- teacher unfamiliarity with medium.

The active nature of listening (vs. hearing) is seen in an audiobook listener's ability to keep track of characters, settings and plot in a story, which may last for hours (Chen 2004). As well Varley (2002) discovered that the brain's short-term memory works harder in listening than in reading

Teachers readily use video in classrooms to add meaning to texts studied and are able to draw comparisons and conclusions from students regarding various interpretations and emphases; this does not often extend to using audiobooks which may be used to similar effect.

Summary

The literature strongly suggests that listening has a valid place in learning and teaching. Audio is a means of conveying content material to all students. Audio can also overcome barriers to reading such as lack of motivation, text complexity and lack of reading strategies. As well, students can gain different insights from an audio version of a text than from their own interrogation of print version.

Audiobooks are one of the longest-standing media available to teachers and have evolved to use the most up-to-date and popular technology available, thus warranting, as Baskin & Harris (1995 p. 373) note, examination into:

how its unique properties could be harnessed to enhance the learning environments of the secondary classroom - not just as an attractive alternative to the usual presentation of literature but as a basic instructional tool.

And finally, because young people are fast to uptake new technologies, audiobooks, podcasts and MP3 files merge with powerful classroom potential.

So smile when the kids are plugged in. They are developing an important literacy!

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