Connecting Practice and Research: Listening Guide

"Listening is arguably the most important skill required for obtaining comprehensible input in one's first and any subsequent languages. It is a pervasive communicative event: we listen considerably more than we read, write, or speak."

(Decker, 2004; Omaggio Hadley, 2001; Wilt, 1950, cited in Hysop & Tone, 1988)

What Is Listening?

Listening and speaking are at the heart of student learning. James Britton (1970) wrote: "Reading and writing float on a sea of talk …." The sea of talk, which includes both listening and speaking; is a way of thinking, co-constructing and re-constructing meaning; and the foundation for reading and writing.

Key Message
Listening is more than hearing; comprehending spoken language involves process-oriented thinking skills. Because listening involves language and thought, the ability to listen effectively develops as students' language abilities develop and mature.

Listening to understand requires more than decoding what is heard. As Lundsteen (1979) notes, the crucial difference between hearing and listening is thinking. As is the case for reading and writing, the complex, active process of listening requires prior knowledge, attention and intentional cognitive activity before, during and after listening. So, while listening involves the physiological activity of hearing, it also involves predicting, hypothesizing, checking, revising, and generalizing skills (Ronald and Roskelly, 1985), holding information in memory, focusing attention, forming images, interpreting, comparing, and evaluating (Grunkemeyer, 1992; Lundsteen, 1979).

To listen well, listeners must have the ability to decode the message, the ability to apply a variety of strategies and interactive processes to make meaning, and the ability to respond to what is said in a variety of ways, depending on the purpose of the communication. Listening involves listening for thoughts, feelings, and intentions. Doing so requires active involvement, effort and practice (Shen, Guizhou, Wichura, Kiattichai, 2007).

And like all literacy processes, listening is contextual: we use our knowledge and experience to make sense of what we listen to (Emmert,1994; ILA,1995).

Why Learn to Listen Well?

Most of us spend most of our day speaking and listening (Rankin, 1926; Wilt, 1950; Hyslop and Tone, 1988) and it is estimated that 80% or more of what we know is acquired through listening (ILA, Hunsaker, 1990). Research has demonstrated that adults spend 40-50% of communication time listening, 25-30% speaking, 11-16% reading, and about 9% writing (Vandergrift, 1999). Listening:

Key Message
Since there is a strong correlation between listening skills and literacy skills (Smith, 2003), **explicit instruction in listening skills and strategies should be embedded in all subject areas**. Explicit instruction in listening is necessary for some, but good for all.

- provides information
- connects us to other people
- expands powers of concentration
- confirms or modifies personal positions
- provides starting points for further investigations and discussions
- provides us with other points of view
- exercises the imagination
- develops and extends vocabulary
- reinforces or contradicts visual information

Because listening is often used in conjunction with the skills of speaking, reading, and writing, strong listening skills enable students to succeed more easily in these other communication processes. But despite the benefits and amount of time spent listening, only a small amount of what we hear actually registers. Consequently, the development of active listening skills needs explicit teaching, modelling, and practice in every subject.

Why Teach Listening?

In all subject classrooms, students' ability to listen with attention and reflection is often assumed and expected; however, oral communication can be demanding. Although listening seems natural and automatic, active listening must be taught.

Listening has an important role in second language acquisition as well (Nunan [online]; Krashen, 1982). Receptive (listening) language abilities precede expressive (speaking) language abilities, so English language learners need to spend a great deal of time listening while developing their speaking abilities. All students benefit, however, from hearing language spoken in meaningful constructions, and in multiple contexts.

Connecting Practice and Research: Listening Guide

How Can Listening Be Taught?

All students can be taught to be better listeners. Teachers can encourage, teach, and help students develop accurate and efficient listening skills. As Kingen (2000) notes, "Almost any speech activity provides an opportunity for assisting students to develop better listening skills if the teacher takes the time to discuss the matter before or after the activity."

Key Message
When devoting classroom time to listening strategies, teachers need to SLOW DOWN to focus on depth, not breadth, in teaching (Beebe et al., 2000).

Teachers can create a supportive environment for listening by:

- establishing norms that reflect how attentive listening is valued, e.g., by using body language to indicate attending fully to the speaker or paraphrasing what is heard to confirm understanding
- discussing the etiquette of listening
- stressing the importance of the audience in a speaking-listening situation, i.e., the interactive relationship
- modelling good listening behaviours
- ensuring that students understand the purpose of their oral activities
- explicitly teaching listening skills using the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model.

Teachers can design a range of activities that engage students in opportunities for listening:

- read alouds
- listening and speaking in pairs, small groups, and large groups
- listening for a variety of purposes, such as for information or for pleasure
- listening in informal and formal, one-way and interactive situations
- participating in productive talk to construct or clarify understanding
- writing conversationally.

As they do for reading instruction, teachers can model, explicitly teach, and give students opportunities to practise before, during, and after listening strategies. When students determine what strategies to use while listening and reflect on their strategy use, they are using their metacognitive skills. Students need to know which listening strategies best serve a particular situation and learn to monitor the effectiveness of the strategies they've selected. They can self-assess by determining whether they have achieved their listening comprehension goals.

Key Message
Listening effectively requires practice.
Systematic and explicit instruction in listening for a variety of purposes is required, with a wide range of materials.
Students become active listeners when they deliberately attend to the speaker's message with the intention of immediately applying or assessing the ideas or information

Many literacy strategies are structured to provide opportunities for engaging in the authentic listening and speaking in the co-construction of understanding, e.g., Four Corners, Place Mat, Inside-Outside Circles, Three-Step Interview, and Jigsaw. Low-preparation, easily integrated strategies also provide opportunities for a quick focus on listening or for listening practice.

Role-play helps students develop effective communication skills. According to Johnson, Sutton and Harris (2001) students perceive role-playing, introduced after there has been an opportunity to explore and discuss the situation, characters, and issues, as one of the most important techniques for learning communication skills. Since learning improves when a student is motivated and engaged, role-play can be valuable part of the teacher's repertoire.

Question prompts can focus students' concentration and help them take a critical stance toward what they hear. The goal is that students gradually internalize the prompts, e.g.

- Who is speaking? Is s/he qualified to speak on this topic?
- Is the information fact or opinion? Is the information useful to me?
- How is the speaker influencing me and the audience?
- What other perspectives are possible?
- What is the speaker not saying?

Think-Pair-Share or Turn and Talk can help students understand that they must continuously monitor their understanding and seek clarification, if necessary. The strategy provides opportunites for productive dialogue and co-construction of meaning.

Reciprocal teaching is another effective small group strategy that involves four steps: summarizing, questioning, clarifying, and predicting. Reciprocal teaching can be used systematically across subject areas to improve listening comprehension and to support comprehension monitoring (Palincsar and Brown, 1985).

Connecting Practice and Research: Listening Guide

What Are Listening Strategies and Skills?

A strategy might be thought of as an intentionally executed means to achieve a purpose, whereas a skill is a strategy that is automatically and effectively executed. Still, the distinction between skills and strategies is not always clear. Consider how the following actions could be either skills or strategies:

- prepare for listening, e.g., by making predictions and setting aside biases
- focus attention, e.g., by leaning toward the speaker
- paraphrase, or restate, what .is heard
- respond verbally and non-verbally, e.g., by saying, "that's interesting" and by nodding
- seek clarification, e.g., by posing questions at appropriate times
- use minimal encouragers, e.g., by saying "uh-hmmm", or ask, "and what did you do then?"
- make connections
- mentally summarize
- assess the speaker's authority
- continually assess the information, e.g., for accuracy and completeness.

How can listening be assessed and evaluated?

Since teachers cannot "get into the heads of the students," it is a challenge to assess what students are hearing and how well they are listening. Overall, assessment must focus on students' response to the material that has been listened to. While responses can be oral, kinaesthetic, written, graphic, and so on, the challenge for teachers is to assess listening skills, strategies, and comprehension, and not oral, kinaesthetic, writing, or graphic skills.

A variety of assessment strategies, and tools can provide information and opportunities for giving constructive feedback to students. Teachers can:

- use observation checklists during discussion
- make anecdotal notes on student's question, inferences, predictions, conclusions
- make mental notes on students' answers to oral questions
- schedule teacher-student and student-led conferences
- use directed listening activities
- give listening comprehension quizzes, e.g., identify four main ideas after listening to a text
- use listening response journals, or learning logs
- videotape students during group work or oral communication activities and follow up with a one-on-one conference

Listening to Your Own Thinking

Ellen Oliver Keene (2007) suggests that students need to learn to listen to themselves as well as to others. Wrestling with "the essence of understanding," Keene writes that reading aloud to herself enabled her to "[savor] the cadences and rhythms of the language and *[notice] small similarities and differences, patterns* that would have escaped" her in traditional reading. She began "finally to understand" by *"listening to [her] own thinking"* (Keene, 33), to "the voice" in her mind (36).

Similarly, Donald Murray writes that he is unable to write until he hears his own "voice": "…I write by ear. I do not see what I write—my two fingers are searching the keys—but I *hear* what I say when I type it. Somehow or other, learn to hear your writing." (185).

Frequent checking for understanding in the classroom is essential; otherwise, teachers may remain unaware of what students know and have understood (Edwards-Groves, 2002). Students should also learn to self-assess, e.g., using rating scales and rubrics, particularly if the teacher models the process and follows up self-assessment with brief one-on-one conferences.

Teachers Are Listeners

Teachers can learn to recognize and acknowledge the range of learning styles and thinking processes that individual students bring to the classroom by developing their own active listening skills. Active listening helps "read through" students' individual forms of expression (Henderson, 1996) and construct an empathetic understanding (Nathan and Petrosinol 2003). Teachers can also self-monitor that they balance "evaluative" listening (i.e., listening for how closely the student approximates the right response) with "attentive" listening (i.e., listening for the student's pattern of thinking and for the learning potentia l in the student's response (Davis, 1997, Smith, 2003).

Connecting Practice and Research: Listening Guide

Professional Print Resources

Keene, Ellin Oliver (2007). "The Essence of Understanding." In *Adolescent Literacy: Turning Promise into Practice*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. pp. 27-38.

Kingen, Sharon. (2000). *Teaching Language Arts in Middle Schools: Connecting and Communicating*. Lawrence Elbraum

Lundsteen, Sara W. (1979) *Listening - Its Impact on Reading and the Other Language Arts*. National Council of Teachers of English. Urbana Illinois.

Marzano, R., Pickering, D., Arredondo,. Blackburn, G. Brandt, R. Moffett, C. (1992). *Dimensions of Learning Teacher's Manual*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD

Murray, Donald M. (2007). "Teach Writing Your Way". In Beers, Kylene; Probst, Robert E.; and Rief, Linda, Eds. *Adolescent Literacy: Turning Promise into Practice*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. pp. 179-188.

Nair, Marnie; Deshler, Donald D.; Biancarosa, Gina; and Palincsar, Annemarie Sullivan (2007). "The Content of Adolescent Literacy Instruction". In *Informed Choices for Struggling Adolescent Readers: A Research-Based Guide to Instructional Programs and Practices*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association. pp. 37-48.

Wilhelm, Jeffrey (2001). *Improving Comprehension with Think Aloud Strategies*. New York: Scholastic. Classroom Discussion. Dixie Lee Spiegel. New York: Scholastic, 2006.

Scholarly Sources

Arcavi, A. and Isoda, M. (2007). "Learning to Listen: from historical sources to classroom practice". In *Educational Studies in Mathematics* Vol: 66, Issue 2, October, 2007. published online.

Beebe et al. (2000). *Interpersonal Communication: Relating to Others*. 2nd Canadian Edition. Scarborough, Ontario: Allyn and Bacon.

Davis, B. (1997). Listening for differences: An evolving conception of mathematics teaching. *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education*, 28(3), 355-376.

Edwards-Groves, C. J. (2002) *Building an inclusive classroom through explicit pedagogy: A focus on the language of teaching*. Prentice Hall, Sidney, Australia.

Emmert, P. (1994). A definition of listening, in *Listening Post*, 51 (6)

Ginsburg, H. and Opper, S. (1979). *Piaget's Theory of Intellectual Development*. Englewood, Prentice & Hall.

Grunkemeyer, F. (1992). Add two cups of flour and one cup of salt. *Texas Child Care* 21(4), 25.

Hunsaker, R.A. (1990). *Understanding and developing skills of oral communication: Speaking and listening* (2nd Edition). Englewood Co: Morton.

Hyslop, Nancy B. and Bruce Tone. (1988) "Listening: Are we Teaching It, and If So, How?" *ERIC Digest Number 3*. Retrieved March 17, 2008 from: www.ericdigests.org/pre-928/listening.htm

ILA. (1995, April) an ILA definition of listening. *Listening Post*, 53, 4.

Johnson, D., Sutton, P. and Harris, N. (2001) Extreme programming requires extremely effective communication: Teaching effective communication skills to students in an IT degree. Paper presented at the *18th Annual Conference of the Austrailian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education*, Melbourne.

Krashen, S. (1982). *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon.

Nunan, David. (1997). *Listening in Language Learning*. The English Centre, University of Hong Kong. [online]

Ministry of Education, (2003) *Think Literacy Success: The Report of the Expert Panel on Students at Risk in Ontario*, Grades 7-12. Toronto: Queens Printer.

Palincsar, A. & Brown, A. (1985). Reciprocal teaching: activities to promote 'reading with your mind'. *Reading, Thinking, and Concept Development: Strategies for the Classroom*. Harris, T. & Cooper, E.(eds). NY, College Board Public.

Ronald, K. and Roskelly, H. (1985). *Listening as an act of composing*. Paper presented at the 36th Conference on College Composition and Communication. [ED 257 094].

Rankin, P. T. (1928). "The Importance of Listening," in the *English Journal*, 19, October,

Smith, C. B. (Ed.). (2003). *Skills students use when speaking and listening*. (ERIC Document No.480 895).

Shen,L., Guizhou. G., Wichura, W., Kiattichai, S. (2007). *The Use of Websites for Practicing Listening Skills of Undergraduate Students: A Case Study at Suranaree University of Technology*, Thailand.

Swain, K., Friehe, M., & Harrington, J. (2004). "Teaching Listening Strategies in the Inclusive Classroom." *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 40 (1), 48.

Swanson, C. (1996). *Who's listening in the classroom? A research paradigm*. Paper presented at the Annual International Listening Association, March 14, 1996.

Wilt, Miriam E. April, 1950). "A study of teacher awareness of listening as a factor in elementary education." *Journal of Educational Research*, 43, (8).