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.

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).

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:
• 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.
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 Kinger (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.”

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.

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.

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).

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.

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 opportunities for productive dialogue and co-construction of meaning.

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?

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

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.

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).

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 potential in the student’s response (Davis, 1997, Smith, 2003).
Connecting Practice and Research: Listening Guide

Professional Print Resources


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


Scholarly Sources


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


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


