

10-1-1996

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Recommended Citation

Casbergue, R. M., & Harris, K. (1996). Listening and Literacy: Audiobooks in the Reading Program. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 37(1). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol37/iss1/4

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Listening and Literacy: Audiobooks in the Reading Program

Renee Michelet Casbergue
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Parents and educators have long been encouraged to read aloud to children. Trelease's (1985) *Read Aloud Handbook* and *New Read Aloud Handbook* (1989) have found receptive audiences in both parents and professional educators, most of whom acknowledge that children derive a wide variety of benefits from listening to good literature.

In fact, being read to is unquestionably the best preparation for learning to read independently. Studies consistently demonstrate that when children are frequently read to during their preschool years, they make exceptional progress in literacy and language development (Chomsky, 1981; Durkin, 1966; Teale, 1982; Wells, 1986). Furthermore, reports of children in elementary grades indicate that the positive effects of reading aloud are not restricted to the primary years (Elley, 1989; Elley and Mangubhai, 1983).

Perhaps in response to heightened awareness of the pleasure people of all ages take in listening to good literature read aloud, publishers of both children's and adult literature have begun to produce audio versions of their most popular titles. The new availability of a broad range of literature in

audiobook form is in sharp contrast to an earlier focus on audio tapes accompanying simple picture books for beginning readers. Audio versions of treasured classics and contemporary young adult fiction by such authors as J.R.R. Tolkien and Ursula LeGuin are now readily available.

The accessibility of these relatively new materials raises some interesting questions for teachers. Are there really enough benefits derived from listening to literature to justify the use of audiobooks in the classroom? Do the benefits continue once children are fairly independent readers? What types of students might benefit from using audiobooks? How should one go about selecting quality audiobooks? How might a teacher use audiobooks once they are acquired? Each of these questions is addressed in the following pages to assist teachers who are weighing whether or not to invest in audio-tape libraries for their classrooms.

Benefits of listening to literature

When youngsters hear stories, they unconsciously internalize the typical structures that narratives take in their society (Stein and Glenn, 1979). American children learn that stories in western cultures usually have an introduction that establishes setting and characters, followed by a formulation of the problem, attempts to solve the problem, and a climactic resolution. Knowledge of story grammar, often learned in early childhood from tales as simple and varied as *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* (Roberts, 1989) and *The Snowy Day* (Keats, 1987), enables children to predict and follow events in literature they will ultimately read on their own as they gain mastery over print (Mandler and DeForest, 1979; Ferreiro and Teberosky, 1982; Taylor, 1986).

In addition to internalizing basic structures, hearing stories read aloud helps children recognize the underlying

construction of written language which can be markedly different from oral usage. Formulations such as "... said the cat," or "... the mom answered," rarely heard in normal conversations, are ubiquitous in stories. Understanding these structures is critical to comprehension (Perera, 1986). In fact, inclusion of such structures in their own retellings or emergent readings of storybooks has been used as an indicator of literacy development in young children (Sulzby, 1985; Morrow, 1990). Clearly, the more they are exposed to literature, the more this development is likely to occur.

Reading aloud to children has the further benefit of increasing vocabularies (Elley, 1989). Good writing familiarizes youngsters with words and constructions unheard in their daily oral environment, thus allowing them to expand beyond the bounds of experiential limitations in mastery of language. In literary works, unfamiliar vocabulary is embedded in the context of an interesting narrative, making it possible to infer meanings of new words relatively effortlessly. Few preschoolers, hearing Sendak's (1963) *Where the Wild Things Are*, will miss the meaning of "gnashed their terrible teeth," and while not understanding each individual word, will surely deduce something raucous is implied when it is time to let "the wild rumpus start."

Long before they are able to read independently, children's general knowledge of the world can also be enhanced by the literature that is read to them. While enjoying the repetition and rhyme of Aardema's (1981) *Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain*, children will absorb images of African plains, herdsmen, migration and drought. They will begin to understand the ways of ancient Japanese imperial palaces, and roles of lords and servants alike as they listen to Paterson's (1990) *The Tale of the Mandarin Ducks*. *Working Cotton* (Williams, 1992) provides hints of the arduous life of people who

continued to work cotton plantations long after slavery had been abolished. Later, when they encounter *The Boy and the Samurai* (Haugaard, 1993), they will have some experience of Oriental culture on which to build. Similarly, when they hear *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1994) some images will resonate from earlier experience. Thus, the more children hear books read aloud, the more general world knowledge they will have. In fact, the relationship between listening to literature and increasing knowledge is symbiotic; the more youngsters know about a subject, the easier it is to make sense out of new information, as increasingly complex and detailed texts become more accessible.

As they listen to a variety of books read aloud, youngsters' understanding of story structure, written language conventions, vocabulary, and aspects of their own and exotic cultures increases. As this knowledge base grows, more challenging stories become comprehensible to them, leading in turn to higher levels of understanding of structure, conventions, vocabulary and general information.

Perhaps the most important insight children gain from listening to literature, however, is that reading is an intensely pleasurable pursuit. Listening to books read by competent, enthusiastic readers begins the process of becoming a lifelong reader. Fortunate toddlers associate books with the warmth and security of snuggling comfortably close to a caring adult who shares the mutually enjoyable experience of hearing a favored story. In this environment, books are soon associated with affection, comfort, entertainment and stimulation. When children move into school settings, shared book experiences provide useful social interactions centered around literature, as listening stations stocked with appealing audiotapes can become popular gathering spots. The correlation is perfect; the more books that are read to them, the greater

children's interest in reading will be. In school settings, particularly, reading can be an enjoyable shared social experience, not just another isolated academic chore (Weaver, 1994).

Continuing the practice of reading aloud

The benefits of listening to literature extend beyond the primary years. Well into the middle grades, students' ability to understand written language outstrips their ability to translate print into meaning (Chomsky, 1981). Even after they have developed adequate skills to enable them to read on their own, children still enjoy the challenge of hearing more complex stories than they could manage themselves. Relieved of the burden of decoding material exceeding their ability, they can concentrate instead on the substantive content of texts. Hearing such stories, they are confronted with greater intellectual demands than they would encounter in narratives within their deciphering skills. Kipling's stories from *Mowgli's Brothers* (Kipling, 1993), *A Cricket in Times Square* (Selden, 1994), and *A Charmed Life* (Jones, 1992) can be experienced at an age when the stories would have most appeal, but when many youngsters are unlikely to have achieved the necessary competence to translate print into meaning. Attending to increasingly complex stories encourages youngsters to construct more sophisticated knowledge of story grammar, decontextualized language of written texts, new vocabulary, and interesting concepts just as they did for the simpler stories of their early years.

Given the benefits children derive from being read to, it is hard to justify abandoning the practice. Yet time devoted to this activity typically declines over the years. By the time children reach the upper elementary grades, reading aloud is almost entirely eliminated at both school and home. As youngsters become increasingly competent readers, teachers

set aside less time during the school day for reading aloud. Parents, too, reduce the amount of time spent reading to their children, apparently assuming that once a child is skilled in decoding, providing time, opportunity, and encouragement is sufficient. For both avid and reluctant readers, however, there are compelling reasons to continue the practice of listening to literature. As adults lessen the time they spend reading aloud to youngsters, it is essential to replace that experience with a comparable activity.

Fortunately, recent dramatic increases in the availability of audiotapes featuring juvenile literature can, at least in part, fill the gap. Companies such as Recorded Books, Listening Library, and Chivers, the early leaders in the field, are being joined by others. Together they offer a sufficient variety of taped works of fiction to appeal to a wide variety of tastes.

Potential audiences for audiobooks

Although audiotapes can be beneficial to all students, those with special needs may find them indispensable. Youngsters with low vision, with visual perceptual problems, or those who simply prefer auditory learning will find this format particularly useful. Children recovering from surgery or illness during which time they are bedridden, have low energy or other conditions which make the physical handling of print difficult to manage, may prefer the spoken to the written word.

Students who are not fluent in English will find listening to stories easier than decoding print. Their comprehension is aided by all the verbal techniques which provide clues to meaning that professional narrators use in interpreting text. ESL children can readily employ audiotapes to improve both reading and speech. As they follow the printed text while listening to an identical taped version, they are helped

not only in the decoding process, but also in emulating phrasing, pronunciation, accent, emphasis, tone, and other attributes which characterize standard English speech patterns.

Poor readers will find recorded narratives a means of keeping up with the literature demands of the classroom. Since their skills are limited, to be successful print readers they must be restricted to simplistic material. Otherwise, their excessive focus on the challenge of decoding leaves them unable to attend to content. If grouped by ability and subjected to listening to peers flounder through text, the models they confront mirror their own performance. Hearing literature read expertly not only enables them to absorb the story line, but offers examples of fluency. If the text is of sufficient interest, it may even be useful in transforming hostility to appreciation. Similarly, youth who exhibit print aversive behavior, may be more amenable to experiencing fiction in a format that is free of negative associations.

Readily distractable children can use headphones to shut out auditory stimuli which would interrupt or interfere with concentration. Children troubled by attention deficit disorders, who find the physical act of sitting still long enough to absorb a narrative, can be freed from such restraints through the use of a headset and portable tape player. Behaviors which would otherwise impede learning can, at least in part, be neutralized through the medium of audiobooks.

If youngsters duplicate adult usage patterns, the most avid readers of printed text will also be the most enthusiastic listeners (Aron, 1992). Book lovers are most apt to find audiotapes a means of extending what for them is a compelling activity. Through tapes they need not limit their literary encounters to those times when they can physically hold a book in their hands. Interestingly, youngsters, again if following

adult patterns, may listen to works they would not choose to read. Hearing the first few chapters of *The Egypt Game* (Snyder, 1994) or *The Book of Three* (Alexander, 1991) has the power to capture the interest of children who would otherwise ignore these titles. Or those put off by the complexity of Rosemary Sutcliff's language in *The Shining Company* (1994) could find themselves entranced by the captivating storytelling techniques of narrator Ron Keith.

There are important benefits even for gifted readers. These children can experience an expansion of their literary horizons to include more sophisticated narratives. Even competent students can benefit from hearing British novels, for example, read with the appropriate accent and cadence. In *The Secret Garden* (Burnett, 1992), when Mary asks who will dress her, Martha responds "Canna" tha' dress thesen?" Later, Mary asks Dickon to identify a bird. He responds, "Doesn't that know? He's a robin redbreast an' they're th' friendliest, curiousist birds alive." Although some youth will be able to decode the words and infer meaning, they will not be able to reproduce the Yorkshire accent and will inevitably lose some of the richness of the story.

Selection considerations

Single narrator, unabridged audiotapes offer the most desirable format for classroom usage. In addition to best simulating traditional literary experiences, they can be employed to parallel print reading where that is desirable. Since authors and editors have already eliminated extraneous elements, further reductions inevitably reduce the potency of the original. The point of a narrative is the insight and pleasure derived from the reading experience, not the completion of it. While abridgements may be of use to older library patrons, they have minimal validity in elementary classrooms. Abridgements are apt to be resented by book lovers; since a major goal of

listening is to encourage involvement with literature, it is important to provide a complete, authentic experience, rather than a condensed, adapted one.

Dramatized recordings, however, have particular classroom utility. *Tales of Narnia* (1980) by C.S. Lewis and Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1989) have appeared in this form. Typically they begin with a highly engaging scene in which the most appealing or interesting characters are introduced. In this manner, they are able to immediately capture the attention of potential audiences. They provide a means for engaging youngsters who are not habituated to print, exhibiting the same fascination that early radio had. Additionally, this format can be a vehicle for introducing readers theater or fully realized plays. It is also an excellent device for initiating discussion and for comparing original and dramatized versions of the same story.

Technical quality and editorial decisions are other considerations that impact on choice. A recording should entice, not alienate. Recordings should be free of errors and readers should not only speak with clarity, but must be able to employ different voices for the various characters, generating images of different ages, backgrounds, and personalities. Some recordings use musical bridges of varying quality and relationship to the narrative. Those that serve only as filler may be more annoying than appealing.

Of most importance is literary quality. To offer work of little or no distinction is to waste opportunity. The rationale often used with print that no matter how worthless the text, "at least children are reading," does not apply here. Because of the nature of the medium, it is as easy to tempt listeners with quality works as with trash and one does not have the

excuse of picking up decoding skills to justify encouraging encounters with lesser novels.

Utilization of audiotapes

This newly expanded medium enables teachers to enhance literary experiences in several ways. Individual youngsters can use audiobooks as just another format for expanding encounters with books. That is, audiobooks can be employed interchangeably with print volumes, substituting or supplementing as a matter of individual preference or convenience. Tapes can be used in the classroom or at home as a remedial device, allowing youngsters to hear the text as they follow along in the printed version. Children can improve decoding, comprehension, or speaking skills in this manner. Audiobooks can be used in small group or full class situations allowing a commonality of experience for discussion purposes or they can be borrowed from libraries or classrooms for recreational literary listening.

Parents can be encouraged to borrow and use audiobooks when taking extended family car trips. Just as watching their parents read is a prime encouragement to youngsters to read themselves, observing the adults in the family listen to recorded books presents them with a listening model. Tapes have the additional advantage of distracting youngsters from the inevitable disputes that erupt on long trips while making the miles seem to fly by.

The anxiety that so many educators express at the contemplation of an illiterate generation that they see developing can only be alleviated through increasing numbers of youngsters finding in literature enlightenment and pleasure. Audiobooks have a role to play in that discovery.

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