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Shirley Olejnik
Huntley Middle School, DeKalb, Illinois

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FACTORS AFFECTING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LISTENING AND READING

Shirley Olejnik

HUNTLEY MIDDLE SCHOOL, DEKALB, ILLINOIS

In a chapter devoted to the topic of integrating reading with the other language arts, Otto and Smith (1970) state that "reading is a language process and as such it is properly placed within the total language arts curriculum with writing, speaking, and listening." (p. 93).

Although it is important to look at the relationships between all of the language arts, the purpose of this paper is to focus on the relationship between reading and listening. There are several practical reasons for focusing on these perceptive skills. With the myriad of listening/reading materials published today, reading teachers must be ready to evaluate the effectiveness of such materials. In addition, they should be armed with knowledge about the utility of using training in specific and general listening skills as a method of improving reading skills. And, finally, they should have some ideas as to how to incorporate listening activities into a reading program.

Similarities Between Listening and Reading

In the past fifty years there has been much discussion on the similarities and differences between listening and reading. In a review of the research, Bracken (1970) described both listening and reading as demanding "thinking in the sound-symbol-understanding process." (p. 37) Otto and Smith (1970) also noted that both involve similar mental processes triggered by visual and auditory stimuli. In a recent study, Walker (1975) stated that a review of the research in this area revealed that there was "wide agreement on two principles of information processing that operated in both reading and listening: cue sampling and message reconstruction." (p. 255) In general, most authors seem to concur that listening and reading are similar in that they are receptive processes and involve information processing.

Differences Between Listening and Reading

While there are general similarities between listening and reading, it is in exploring the differences that some insight can be gained into how best to use listening in a reading program. Moffett and Wagner (1976) note that "what is unique about reading is not the intellectual part, the comprehending, which characterizes listening also, but the translating of print into speech, the literacy part." (p. 112) This and other differences have been discussed by several investigators (Cunningham, 1975; Mart, 1971;

and Walker, 1975). In reviewing the available literature, six basic but important differences seem to emerge. First, in reading, there is a written code which must be translated into a verbal code which in turn must be processed as information: whereas, in listening, auditory stimuli are already present in a somewhat familiar verbal code. Second, in listening, the auditor has the aid of a speaker's intonation and timing, whereas a reader has no such aids. Third, in listening, the auditor may have to adjust to a speaker's dialect before he can understand the verbal code; this is not a problem for the reader. Fourth, unlike reading, a listener cannot go back to recheck what he has heard; he must rely solely on his memory. Fifth, a listener does not have control over the rate of presentation. With written stimuli, a reader can adapt his rate to the difficulty or unfamiliarity of the message he is processing, but, because a spoken message is ongoing, a listener cannot. Finally, a listener cannot skim or preview the message he is to hear to discover if it suits his purpose; he must expose himself to the entire message, whereas a reader can selectively concentrate on those sections of print which are most suited to his purposes. Processing aural stimuli in a listening situation is indeed different from processing written stimuli, and these differences should be taken into account when using listening activities in the classroom.

Factors Affecting the Relationship

Despite the differences, reading and listening seem to be related skills, and numerous studies correlating tests of listening and reading tend to support this relationship. Researchers have also shown that there are other factors which confound the relationship between listening and reading; moreover, these factors should be taken into account if one is to use listening activities in a reading program. Grade level, intelligence, degree of reading disability, socio-economic status, and factors related to the message itself (e.g. difficulty, familiarity, organizational structure, etc.) all may influence the transferability of listening training to reading.

In studying the relationship between listening and reading, grade level seems to be an important factor. Most authors seem to agree that listening comprehension surpasses reading comprehension in the early grades but that in the intermediate and upper grades reading comprehension becomes superior. This appears to be a function of vocabulary development. Durrell (1969) explained that in the lower grades listening vocabulary is superior to reading vocabulary but that they grow to be equal by about the eighth grade. It has been demonstrated that as one advances in reading and especially into the content areas, words and their meanings which are recognizable in print may not be in the listening vocabulary of a student. This has important implications for teaching listening in the upper grades. Swalm (1974) indicated that "listening is generally better for learning purposes in the primary grades and that reading is more effective for learning in the upper grades." (p. 1110) He concluded that both listening and reading need to be emphasized in the lower grades. This does not mean that educators should eliminate the teaching of listening at the secondary

level, but it does suggest that using listening training to improve reading at this level may not be very effective for most students.

The second factor which may affect the transferability of listening training to reading is intelligence. In general, Reeves (1968), Brassard (1970), and Duker (1971) have found that the more intelligent students seem to be the best listeners and that students with high I.Q. scores had the least discrepancy between reading and listening comprehension. Likewise, those with lower I.Q.'s tended to score lower on listening comprehension tests.

A third factor which may confound the relationship between listening and reading is the degree of reading disability. In considering good versus poor readers, researchers tend to agree that the good reader is likely to be a good listener; and, similarly, the poor reader is likely to be a poor listener, but that the listening level of a poor reader is usually much higher than his reading level. (Duker, 1971; Markert, 1974) Because the listening ability of a poor reader is generally much greater than his reading ability, one might conclude that a poor reader would benefit more from listening training than a good reader and that this growth in listening might affect his growth in reading. Indeed, researchers have found support for this conclusion. Reddin (1971), Heckler (1975), Swalm (1972), and Taylor (1972) noted that poor readers are more likely to improve in both listening and reading comprehension when given training in listening than are good readers.

A fourth factor which seems to make a difference in the effectiveness of listening training as it affects reading is socio-economic status. Van Valkenburg (1968) found that low socio-economic status students profited more from listening training than high or middle socio-economic status students. Similarly, Dewar (1972) concluded that a listening program in the third grade was particularly effective for lower and middle class students.

The fifth and final factor which seems to affect the relationship between listening and reading are variables within the message itself. Although a few studies (Siegel, 1974 and Sticht, 1971) have taken into account such factors as difficulty and type of material used in listening training, Reddin (1971) points out that more studies are needed of the nature of the material being heard.

What implications does the above research have for reading teachers? Although the studies are not extensive, one could tentatively conclude that training in listening would be a viable method of increasing reading achievement for students in the lower grades, for poor readers, and for students from lower socio-economic areas. Although emphasis upon listening is important for all students, the brighter student who is reading up to grade level or expectancy level is not as likely to benefit from listening skills training as the poor reader. Since the research has focused on the primary and intermediate grade levels, generalizations cannot be applied to the secondary level. Although students in a secondary school reading at a primary level might benefit from listening training, little research has been done in this area.

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