



The Capacity Building Series is produced by The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat to support leadership and instructional effectiveness in Ontario schools.

*The series is posted at:
www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/*

For information: lns@ontario.ca

Why teach listening?

"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." (LeLoup & Pontero, 2007)

SECRETARIAT
SPECIAL EDITION #10

Let's Talk about Listening

"Reading and writing float on a sea of talk," British scholar and teacher educator James Britton wrote many years ago, evoking a powerful image of the role that oral language plays in learning. Over five or more decades, researchers have explored why it is that good talkers and listeners are more likely to become good readers and writers, noting that it is listening – the "least explicit of the four language skills" – that is perhaps the most essential for academic learning (Chand, 2007). And yet it is the least taught (Tindall & Nisbet, 2008).

Assumptions about listening are shared by teachers and students alike, sometimes creating an unintentional bias against explicit instruction in this fundamental skill. The first common assumption is that listening is a passive process and the second is that it is learned naturally, at least by most students. Yet listening is more than hearing; it's the active process of making meaning from what is heard. Researchers suggest that we think of listening as thinking – predicting, hypothesizing, checking, revising and generalizing information (Ronald & Roskelly, 1985), holding information in memory, focusing attention, forming images, interpreting, comparing and evaluating (Grunkemeyer, 1992). Further, while some students need explicit instruction in listening, all students benefit (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a).

In classrooms, where talk accounts for as much as 80 per cent of the information conveyed, good listeners are at a great advantage (Opitz, & Zbarackin, 2004, p. 7). It's time to talk about listening!

Listening, speaking, reading and writing build upon one another.

As students become aware of the connections between forms and types of text, they learn to identify how their written communication skills can improve their oral communication skills and, inversely, how their oral communication skills can improve their skills in reading/viewing/writing/producing text. Teachers can help students grasp these relationships by asking some guiding questions:

- How does listening make you a better thinker/speaker/writer?
- In what ways does listening to someone else read help you to become a better reader?
- Why is talking through your ideas before writing them down helpful?
- In what ways does listening to someone else read aloud what you have written help you to improve your writing?"

(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006a)

October 2009

ISSN: 1913 8482 (Print)

ISSN: 1913 8490 (Online)

Some listening strategies

- Prepare for listening (e.g., set aside biases, make predictions).
- Focus on the topic.
- Continuously paraphrase what you are hearing.
- Seek clarification by asking questions (at appropriate times).
- Make connections to what you already know.
- Mentally summarize and continuously assess information for accuracy/implications.

(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a)

Listening is social.

The social conventions for oral language vary according to context (New Zealand Education Monitoring Project, 2002). The manner in which students listen, speak with and respond to friends differs from how they might carry on a conversation with peers in more formalized settings, such as discussion groups in a classroom setting.

Both aural and visual cues impact on the meaning of what is being said, so students need to be able to interpret them. Intonation, gestures and eye contact “contribute to, shape or change the meaning of what they are listening to.” The oral statement “I like you” means something vastly different if accompanied by the rolling of eyes. As well, living in a world of increasing globalization means students must learn to listen with sensitivity to cultural differences (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006a).

Teachers can create a supportive social environment for listening by:

- stressing the importance of audience behaviour
- ensuring that students understand the purpose of their oral activities
- establishing norms that reflect the value placed on attentive listening (e.g., using body language to indicate you are paying attention to a speaker or paraphrasing what you have heard to confirm understanding)
- discussing the etiquette of listening
- modelling good listening behaviour
- sharing listening strategies

Listening is metacognitive.

Careful listening to others is not the only means by which students enhance their thinking and understanding. They also need to be encouraged to have “silent conversations” with themselves – to become aware of and attend to “their inner voice” as they monitor, reflect on, and deepen their understanding. Teachers support students in learning how to listen to their inner voice by modelling this process themselves during read-alouds and think-alouds. They can identify strategies that students are utilizing throughout the day in various subjects and across language strands by routinely asking questions that encourage students to focus on their inner voice – “What are you thinking?” and/or “How did you make that connection?” (For a more thorough discussion of prompts to support metacognitive awareness, refer to Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008b, p. 5).

Some questions to engage students in silent (mental) conversations include the following:

- How do you check to be sure that you understand correctly what others are saying during a discussion?
- What listening strategies help you to contribute effectively to group discussions?
- How do you know your presentation is effective? Which elements work really well?
- What types of questions do you ask yourself as you are listening to others?
- How does listening to different kinds of texts help you to create ideas for your own writing?
- Which listening strategies help you the most in developing interpretations of media texts?
- What strategies help you understand and follow a discussion with another person or among several people?

Students listen when they are interested.

A steady diet of recall questioning will not stimulate student reasoning and thinking or get students listening. Instead, teachers need to pose higher-order questions that encourage students to infer, associate and connect, compare and contrast, analyze and apply information. Questioning that engages student interest leads to multiple possibilities and various interpretations rather than one right answer, encouraging them to explore other viewpoints and other

texts in order to verify information, wrestle with different opinions and engage in dialogue and debate (Ontario Ministry of Education 2008b, p. 86).

Teachers elicit students' interest in inquiry – and their focused attention – when they:

- introduce topics and concepts that connect learning to issues students perceive as interesting and important (i.e., issues that provide a “window on life”)
- provide daily opportunities, through various forms of classroom talk, for students to share personal reactions and insights and extend their thinking on these topics
- model an open-minded attitude and curiosity, especially in response to student thinking and ideas
- provide students with a variety of relevant and/or current texts – including newspaper articles and presentations from guest speakers – to assist students in making connections between their learning in school and the world outside.

(Adapted from Ministry of Education 2008b, pp. 24 & 84)

Some Activities to Encourage Listening Comprehension

Many students equate listening with not talking (“You know, you listen, you don’t talk.” [Tindall & Nisbet, 2008]), which suggests there may be a great deal of room for establishing and modelling listening strategies within everyday classroom experience. Just as with teaching reading and writing, teachers should model, explicitly teach and give students lots of opportunities to practise, before, during and after instruction.

The following activities encourage students to practise their listening skills:

Quick Writes – Provide a prompt to specific topics in an oral text and give students a few minutes (three to five) to jot down a first-draft response.

Graffiti – Write the main points from an oral text that the class has shared on large sheets of paper (one idea per sheet) and post them around the room. Divide the class into partners or small groups to take turns generating and recording responses to each point. When students have had a chance to respond to all the points, bring them together as a group to cluster related ideas, eliminate duplication and reach consensus.

Tableaux – Give students the option of using graphic forms of expression such as a drawing or a living “tableau” to depict the key ideas or scenes referred to/described in an oral text.

ReQuest – Have students read two to three pages of text and then ask an open-ended, higher-order question. Following discussion, have them read the next few pages and again pause, this time encouraging one of the students to pose a rich question for the group to explore (a good strategy for stimulating student thinking during a read-aloud or guided reading lesson).

Inside-Outside – Have students form an inner and an outer circle, designating one circle as “speakers” and the other circle as “listeners.” Pose a question and then invite the speakers to share their thinking, solutions or viewpoints with the classmate directly in front of them. Have each listener paraphrase what each speaker has shared, adding his/her own response. Then have the outer circle rotate one person to the left (or right) and begin the cycle again, this time exploring a new question (Ministry of Education, 2006b, p.130).

Carousel – Following an oral presentation, divide the class into groups, designating one student in each group to remain in place as the “designated speaker” while the other students rotate to each of the other groups, on signal, to listen to the other designated speakers. Again, on signal, have students rotate to a new group and continue in this manner until all groups have been visited (Ministry of Education, 2006b, p.121).

Five Principles for Creating a Listening Classroom

1. **Learn as a collective.** Students benefit by engaging and building on the ideas of others, not just those of other students but those of the teacher as well, building their understanding and refining their thinking together as a classroom community.

How can teachers assess listening?

Student response to oral text can be assessed through a variety of expressive modes (e.g., talking, writing, visual arts, media).

Some examples of forms of talk that are suitable for assessing listening comprehension include: discussion groups, writer’s circle, author’s chair, student-teacher conferences, literature circles, pair work, three-way interviews and book talks (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004, p. 60).

When listening to their peers and/or guest speakers, students become the audience. They can be assessed on their ability to respond and to interact with the speaker(s), to give feedback constructively and sensitively and to coach so that all learn and grow together (Ministry of Education, 2008c, p. 81).

Before, during and after assessment, students need to be encouraged to identify the strategies they use to derive meaning and/or improve their ability to communicate.

Listening checklist

- Make eye contact with the speaker and/or follow the speaker's movements.
- Summarize what the speaker is saying every few sentences by stating to yourself the main ideas. Take notes, if this is helpful.
- Link what you are hearing to what you already know.
- Check your understanding of what you're hearing by asking yourself questions. If you can answer them, you understand the material. If you can't, you need to ask the speaker for help.
- Model and practise these steps over and over.

(Learning Through Listening website)

- 2. Encourage reciprocity.** Teachers can encourage students to have a sense of ownership for classroom learning by fostering a climate of give and take where they listen to each other respectfully, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints. By restating and summarizing student responses, teachers ensure that every response is heard, a modelling practice which builds inclusiveness and strengthens a sense of reciprocity.
- 3. Support cumulative learning.** Teachers and students need opportunities to build on their own and each other's ideas and to make connections not only with one another's thinking but also with their own prior learning. Activities such as debate, readers' theatre and consideration of texts promoting different viewpoints help students to make connections to prior learning, prioritize ideas and synthesize new information.
- 4. Be supportive.** Students need to be able to express their ideas and to help each other reach common understanding without feeling they are risking embarrassment. Through such activities as paired learning, conferencing and buddy reading, students are able to gain confidence in thinking about their own thinking and communicating their ideas to others.
- 5. Be purposeful.** Teachers must be clear about learning objectives and plan purposeful classroom talk, learning from what they hear in classroom discussions to generate new questions for students and refine purposes.

(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004, p. 58)

Good teachers are good listeners.

Effective teachers are conscientious listeners themselves. They listen to their pupils to determine each child's depth of understanding. Daily, they "hear" the emotions and personal feelings that characterize their students' lives and interactions. They listen and observe in order to respond to student needs and to build on successes. When listening to students, teachers use their "eyes" as well as their "ears," looking for expressions to catch a glimpse into pupils' thinking (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007, p. 40). Equally important, teachers engage in constant dialogue with their own inner voice to challenge assumptions, problem solve and deepen understanding of the teaching/learning process.

References

- Chand, R. K. (2007, November). Same size doesn't fit all. Insights from research on listening skills at the University of the South Pacific (USP). *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 8(3).
- Grunkemeyer, F. (1992). Add two cups of flour and one cup of salt. *Texas Child Care*, 21(4).
- Harvey, S. & Goudvis, A. (2007). Strategies that work: *Teaching comprehension for understanding and engagement*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Learning Through Listening. Classroom Tools. Sound Advice. <http://www.learningthroughlistening.org/>
- LeLoup, J. W., & Ponterio, R. (2007, February). Listening: you've got to be carefully taught. *Language Learning & Technology*. <http://llt.msu.edu/>
- New Zealand Education Monitoring Project (NEMP). (2002). Forum: Listening and viewing: Assessment results 2002. http://nemp.otago.ac.nz/_search.html
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2004). *Literacy and learning: The report of the Expert Panel on Literacy in Grades 4 to 6 in Ontario*. Toronto, ON: Queen's Printer for Ontario.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2006a). *The Ontario curriculum grades 1-8: Language*. Toronto, ON: Queen's Printer for Ontario.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2006b). *A guide to effective literacy instruction, Grades 4 to 6. Volume 1: Foundations of literacy instruction for the junior learner*. Toronto, ON: Queen's Printer for Ontario.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2008a). *Connecting practice and research: Listening Guide*. http://www.edugains.ca/resourcesLIT/CoreResources/Listening_Guide_June4%202009.pdf
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2008b). *A guide to effective literacy instruction, Grades 4 to 6: Volume 4: Oral language*. Toronto, ON: Queen's Printer for Ontario.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2008c). *A guide to effective literacy instruction, Grades 4 to 6: Volume 7: Media literacy*. Toronto, ON: Queen's Printer for Ontario.
- Opitz, M., & Zbaracki, M. (2004). *Listen hear! 25 effective listening comprehension strategies*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Ronald, K., & Roskelly, H., (1985). Listening as an act of composing. Paper presented at the 36th Conference on College Composition and Communication. (ED 257 094).
- Tindall, E., & Nisbet, D. (2008). Listening: A vital skill. *The International Journal of Reading*, 15(6).

Learn more about LNS Resources

Visit Building Networks for Learning
<http://www.curriculum.org/LNS/networks/>

Call:
416-325-2929
1-800-387-5514

Email:
LNS@ontario.ca