FASTBACK

314

Strategies for Developing Children's Listening Skills

Mary Renck Jalongo

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Introduction

Of all the language skills human beings acquire, listening is the one they will use the most. The sense of hearing functions even before birth, and listening becomes the dominant mode of communication for a lifetime thereafter. Sara Lundsteen (1979) described the significance of listening this way: we listen the equivalent of a book a day, talk a book a week, and write a book a year.

Children are expected to devote even more of their time to listening than adults, because listening is essential to the learning process. If we logged the hours that a typical child devotes to the other communication activities of speaking, reading, and writing, it would take all of them combined to equal the time devoted to one activity – listening. Both in school and out of school, children are cast in the role of listeners about 50% of the time (Norton 1985; Strother 1987; Wilt 1950). Even though children have ample opportunity to listen, they need more: they need to learn *how* to listen.

For too long, education has trivialized listening by emphasizing immediate and short-term memory of details. But this is the lowest level of listening behavior. Higher-level listening skills are more than hearing sounds or even remembering them. Listening, in the full sense of the word, is both interactive and constructive. It is interactive because good listeners are involved with the message; it is constructive because listeners build meaning from what they hear.

Although teachers, parents, administrators, and researchers in the field of language arts agree that listening abilities are important, higher-level listening skills rarely find their way into the curriculum guide or classroom. Why? Perhaps it is because Americans tend to be crisis-oriented, and deficiencies in children's listening skills are not yet perceived as a crisis. Swanson (1989) argues that we tend to rally around "one word causes" (such as illiteracy), and there is no convenient label to describe poor listening abilities. Perhaps it is because our society is print- and image-dominated. As a result of this orientation, the skills of print and visual literacy overshadow the oral skills of speaking and listening. Others attribute the neglect of listening to the erroneous assumption that learning to listen is automatic (Funk and Funk 1989; Plourde 1989). Thus listening is treated as a "given," and better listening habits in children are sought but not built.

Another reason why listening is not emphasized in the school curriculum is because teacher preparation programs seldom give listening the attention it deserves. In a survey of 15 textbooks used in teacher education (Swanson 1984), only 82 pages out of 3,704 pages of text even mentioned listening! Moreover, teachers' own abilities, both as speakers and listeners, may need improvement (Faber and Mazlish 1987).

Whatever the explanation for this dichotomy between expressed and actual support for teaching listening skills in the schools, one thing is clear: listening more is not the solution, listening better is (DeHaven 1983).

Although listening has been neglected, ignored, and undervalued, there are some indications that listening is coming into its own. First, the teaching of listening skills became a mandated part of the school curriculum after the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was passed. Second, more universities are offering separate listening courses due to the demand from business and professional communities. And third, many corporations now recognize the importance of effective listening and have begun to offer formal training programs

in higher-level listening abilities (West 1983). Interactive listening behavior is often regarded as the single most important skill in an organizational environment (Tuttle 1988).

Teaching children to "listen better" is an essential task. It is also long overdue. Achieving this goal demands three things from the adults who work with children: an understanding of the listening process, the implementation of research-based strategies for improving children's listening, and an appreciation for the changes we need to make in ourselves, in our homes, and in our schools.

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Understanding the Listening Process

Listening is a sensory channel that not only brings us great pleasure, such as words of love or beautiful music, but also aggravation and anguish, such as noise pollution or news of a loved one's death. Think about something you have listened to with great intensity recently. Chances are, you were involved both intellectually and emotionally with the message.

Clearly, everyone who hears something does not always listen. In fact, we can give all of the outward appearances of listening carefully when we are only listening marginally or not at all.

A Definition for Listening

The ancient Greeks differentiated between hearing and listening. They formed the word "listen" by placing "hyper" in front of "hear." In Greek, listening is, quite literally, "hearing in great amount" or "acute hearing" (Merryman 1990). Our contemporary definitions regard listening as even more than intense hearing; listening is "the process by which spoken language is converted to meaning in the mind" (Lundsteen 1979). When understood in this way, listening involves: 1) sensing, 2) interpreting, 3) evaluating, and 4) responding (De Stefano, Dole, and Marzano 1989; Steil, Barker, and Watson 1983).

Sensing is a physiological process that includes auditory acuity (the ability to hear) and auditory perception (the ability to discriminate among sounds, to blend sounds together, and to hold sequences of

sound in memory). Sensing is an act of perception that includes focusing, becoming aware, and selecting cues from the environment.

Interpreting is an act of comprehension that begins with hearing and listening. Listeners interpret when they try to make sense out of the messages that they hear.

Evaluating combines the two previous levels and uses the message to construct both literal and inferential meaning from what is heard, associate messages with something already known, organize the components of a message in some useful way, and compare various sources of information.

Responding is the highest level of listening and is dependent on the previous three. At the response level, listeners combine knowing with feeling. They are able to imagine fully the scenarios that they have heard, to appreciate the language and power of a message, or to empathize with a speaker.

Usually, when we say that we want to improve children's listening skills, what we really mean is that we want to improve the three highest levels of listening: interpretation, evaluation, and response. These are the "higher-order" or "critical listening" skills.

Listening Behavior: Myths and Realities

How much do we know about listening? And how much of what we believe is accurate? Rate your own knowledge of listening by indicating whether you agree or disagree with the following statements:

1. Listening is a passive activity that requires little from the receiver.
2. Good listeners ignore much of what they hear.
3. Children's listening skills are improved when they are reminded to pay attention.
4. Good listeners keep their eyes on the speaker at all times.
5. Listening carefully to instructions and complying with them is essentially the same thing.

6. The major deterrent to improving children's listening skills is the child's short attention span.
7. A child has not been practicing good listening skills unless he or she can repeat the message verbatim.
8. Expectations for listening skills are identical in different societies around the world.

Now compare your responses to the following discussion of common myths about listening.

Myth 1: Listening is a passive activity.

Listening is an active process in which listeners relate what they have heard to their prior knowledge and experience, interpret meaning, create mental images, and formulate responses. Like reading, listening is a receptive language art; like reading comprehension, listening comprehension is a worthy intellectual achievement.

Myth 2: Good listeners pay attention to everything they hear.

With so many sounds and messages competing for the listener's attention, good listeners are actually forced to ignore much of what they hear (Smith, 1967). We sometimes speak of "selective hearing" in a derogatory way, meaning that a person hears what he or she wants to hear. But good listeners really are selective about what they hear; they concentrate on what they deem important and deliberately repress competing auditory stimuli. Furthermore, good listeners are capable of interpreting both explicit and implicit messages. They can evaluate, for example, that the way something is said often communicates more than the words that are spoken.

Myth 3: Children's listening is improved by admonishments to listen.

It has been rightly said that teaching is more than telling, and telling children to listen does not teach them how to listen or what to listen for. Children become better listeners when they see adults who are good listeners, when a specific purpose is set for listening, and when they are called on to use what they have heard in some meaning-

ful way. Simply reminding them to listen is ineffective because it does not provide a role model, a focus, or a goal.

Myth 4: Good listeners keep their eyes fixed on the speaker at all times.

Although it is useful to look at the speaker, the good listener often looks away -- to appreciate an apt turn of phrase, to enjoy a symphony, to weigh the evidence during an argument. Equating eye contact with listening has become a joke among school children. They kid each other about inventing glasses with fake "eyes" that stare straight ahead, giving the impression that they are "paying attention" while they are really sleeping.

Nearly every teacher has had the experience of assuming that a child who appeared to be distracted was not listening, only to find that the child had heard and understood every word. Although it is true that most adult listeners keep their eyes on the speaker as a way of maintaining attention or being courteous, simply staring at the speaker does not guarantee listening, even at the lowest levels.

Myth 5: Compliance and listening are synonymous.

Consider this experience of one seven-year-old who is listening to a lesson on measurement. The teacher asks the children to generate ideas about how they might measure the carpet using various items around the room. The students suggest pencils, chalkboard erasers, books, and other items as units of measure. Jon is giggling and appears distracted, so the teacher calls on him:

Teacher: "What is another way that you could measure the carpet?"

Jon: "You could get an ant to walk around it and ask him how many steps it took."

Teacher: "And I know a little boy who is going to be walking down to the principal's office if he doesn't start listening right now."

This teacher equates listening with "reading her mind" and obviously concluded that Jon was being flippant. But Jon was mortified by the teacher's response and surprised that his answer, which would have been viewed as creative at home, was considered "poor listening" at school.

"To listen" is not synonymous with obeying, although the term is often used in this way by adults. Actually, it is possible to sense, interpret, evaluate, and even respond to a message without acting the way the speaker may wish, particularly if that speaker has a very limited range of acceptable responses in mind.

Myth 6: The difficulty in teaching children to listen is that they have such short attention spans.

The same adults who complain that children cannot attend to a task for more than five minutes also complain when children beg to hear the same story again and again or become totally absorbed in their play. Children's attention can be sustained if the message is appealing and if they are actively involved. Rather than assuming that the fault rests with children, adults need to ask themselves such tough questions as:

What efforts do I make to be clear, concise, and share the structure and purpose of my words with children?

Is the push to cover the curriculum causing me to race through material and do nearly all of the talking, thereby encouraging children to be passive?

Do I communicate that listening is valued not only through words but through my own listening behavior?

Can students manage to get by in my classroom without listening carefully because abbreviated answers to low-level questions are the norm?

Myth 7: Children are listening if they can repeat the message or recall a sequence of events or directions.

Short-term memory is the lowest level of listening behavior. Repetition alone does not demand intellectual involvement (for example, comprehension or imagination), nor does it require emotional involvement (for example, appreciation or empathy). Asking children to put instructions into their own words is a better check on their listening comprehension than asking them to parrot the teacher's words.

The best way to assess higher-level listening abilities is through higher-level questions and open-ended activities. One word, fill-in-the-blank answers are as inadequate in assessing listening abilities as they are in assessing thinking skills. Instead, we need to challenge listeners with performance-oriented questions and activities.

Myth 8: Expectations for listening behavior are the same in all societies.

Listening behaviors are culture-bound (Scollon and Scollon 1981). In *The Education of Little Tree*, Forrest Carter (1976) describes how his Cherokee grandfather always stops everything else he is doing when listening, including walking, in order to give the speaker his undivided attention. Within our own culture we frequently give nonverbal or verbal signals (a nod of the head, "uh-hmm," "Exactly!") to indicate we are focused on what the speaker is saying.

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Variables Affecting Listening Behavior

Listening is affected by the sender, the environment, the message or medium, and the listener.

The Sender

As senders of messages, we can exert a positive influence on the listening process by speaking audibly and clearly, using nonverbal communication effectively, providing clarification when necessary, and avoiding distracting habits. Good teachers recognize when their students are confused and quickly adjust through corrections, clarifications, or even starting over again.

Both speakers and listeners are affected by perceptions, expectations, stereotypes, social status, and the social context of sending a message (Peterson 1983). Teachers can become more aware of how these factors operate in their own classroom talk by asking themselves such questions as:

Do I have different standards of courtesy for listening to adults than for listening to children?

Do I rush to interpret a student's message before hearing the child out?

Am I more likely to communicate with some students than with others?

Do I use children's names as a synonym for "No," "Don't," or "Stop?" (Kostelnik, Stein, and Whiren 1988)

Exploring questions like these tells us something about ourselves as senders of messages to child listeners.

The Environment

The listening environment should be relatively free from distractions or interruptions, but this does not mean insisting on quiet throughout the day. Rather, creating a climate for listening involves children in a wide array of communication contexts, such as interviewing a speaker from the community, listening to a book read aloud by another child, conducting and explaining a science experiment with a group of peers, or conferencing with the teacher and classmates about a piece of writing.

The Message and Medium

Generally speaking, messages that are long, vague, abstract, use complex sentences and vocabulary, or are distorted in some way are more difficult for listeners to understand. Conversely, messages that are concise and clear, that introduce new vocabulary in context, and that use concrete objects to illustrate or emphasize key points tend to be well understood.

Research suggests that children younger than age six or seven do not distinguish between informative messages (where they know the speaker's intent) and ambiguous messages (where they have to guess the speaker's meaning) (Sodian 1988). Therefore, it is especially important for adults to provide young children with unambiguous messages.

The Receiver

Listeners are affected by their physical ability to hear, their motivation or disposition, their cultural background, their level of conceptual development, and their previous experience (Bromley 1991*a*).

Specific listening strategies, such as associating new information with prior knowledge, seeking clarification, and providing opportunities for active participation, also influence the receiver of a message.

As teachers, we can systematically control, manipulate, and adjust all of these influences on listeners. First, we can check children's health records or observe their classroom behavior to determine if any of them have hearing impairments, and if so, to what degree. Accommodations for these children include seating them close to the teacher so they can hear better or even read the teacher's lips. We can introduce lessons with a dramatic example to capture children's attention. We can help children with limited English proficiency by combining words with gestures, pictures, or real objects to facilitate understanding. We can plan activities that are appropriate to children's conceptual levels and that build on their previous experiences. And finally, we can invite them to participate.

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Critical Listening Skills

At the most rudimentary level, listening is simply perceiving sounds or having a short-term memory of a given message. Children might hear a word, repeat it, and use it without understanding its meaning. Five-year-old Sherri announced, "Mom, I'm constipated." "That's a big word," her mother replied, "Are you sure you know what it means?" Sherri responded, "Sure. And do you want to know why I am constipated? Because I can't get these dumb jeans unfastened!" Sherri had heard this word on a TV commercial, pronounced it correctly, and even used it in a sentence without really comprehending it. It was only after her mother explained the meaning of the word, which required Sherri to use higher-level or critical listening skills, that the preschooler understood the new vocabulary word.

Higher-level listening skills are used: 1) when listeners understand the message and 2) "when the listener, the message, and the listening situation interact" (Levesque 1989, p. 94). When we listen at higher levels, we visualize what is heard, comprehend its meaning, and respond to the message both intellectually and emotionally (Jacobs 1990; Norton 1985). More specifically, higher-level listening activities should have some of the following attributes:

Discriminative. Listeners are required to differentiate among various sounds, sound patterns, messages, and sources of information; they use the pictures in their minds as a way of distinguishing and thinking more clearly about the ideas they have heard.

Purposeful. Children not only pay attention, they see the "pay off" for that attention and are called on to use what they have gathered from the message.

Critical. Children (to use Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy) comprehend, apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate the messages that they hear.

Appreciative. The listening activity focuses on pleasure and the elements that contribute to overall enjoyment. Although appreciative listening is usually associated with literature, poetry, or music, it encompasses the traditional academic subjects as well. For example, children can appreciate the message that addition is a way of checking their subtraction just as much as they appreciate the lyrical quality of a poem.

Active. Listening can go beyond comprehension to insight and empathy. Active listeners often respond to the welfare and interests of the speaker (Thomlison 1984). For example, the child who listens to a classmate's story about wanting a horse might respond with, "I don't own a horse, but I 'rented' one for the summer. You could go to the barn with me if you want to and ride it." In this case, the child has become so involved in the message that she switched from the role of listener to that of speaker and problem solver.

Creative. Listeners synthesize what was heard into an original and satisfying activity. Creative listening is not confined to the arts; children can listen just as creatively to a discussion during a student council meeting as they do when composing an original piece of music at the piano.

Strategies to Improve Children's Listening Skills

In talks with hundreds of inservice teachers about listening, I find that most teachers contend that children's listening skills have deteriorated in recent years. They place the blame on the breakdown of the family structure, television, or electronic games. As compelling as these arguments might be, the fact remains that few teachers have been taught to teach listening skills. This chapter highlights eight general precepts that can begin to improve children's listening abilities.

1. Analyze the amount of listening time required in your classroom.

Record your classroom on audiotape or videotape for a few days. Then review it with these questions in mind: How much time do I spend listening? How much time do children spend listening?

If your classroom day is typical, children will be expected to devote about 40% to 50% of their time listening to your voice (Funk and Funk 1989). This "listen and learn" approach, which casts teachers in the role of talkers and dispensers of knowledge and children in the role of listeners and absorbers of information, does little to improve children's listening skills. Murray and Swartz (1989) go so far as to say that "what we need is not better teacher talk, but less teacher talk if we are to increase pupil learning" (p. 58).

One way to reduce teacher talk and enhance children's listening is to teach them to listen to one another. Coach children on how to participate in discussions, how to use signals to let others know they are listening, and how to use different ways to respond appropriately.

2. Provide a purpose for children's listening.

"We will be making our puppets today, and there are three things you must remember." This teacher knows how to give directions. Instead of telling children to listen *to* something, he has directed them to listen *for* something (Funk and Funk 1989). This distinction is important, because "listening to" is unfocused while "listening for" is clearly focused. The teacher concludes by asking a child to write the three key instructions on the board, thus reinforcing an auditory message with a visual one.

3. Model good listening and speaking habits.

If we alert children to the organizational structure of spoken messages, they become better listeners and we become more effective speakers (Wyatt 1989). Basically, there are five structural patterns in messages:

- Chronological: information arranged by temporal sequences or relationships.
- Procedural: explains how to do something in a step-by-step fashion.
- Categorical: classifies things into types or kinds, based on purpose or function.
- Comparative: uses similarities or differences as a way of organizing.
- Causative: answers how and why by presenting causes and effects.

4. Create a listening environment.

The teacher who wants children to be good listeners considers possible sources of distraction and strives to eliminate or at least minimize them. When standardized tests are being administered, "Do Not Disturb!" signs appear on every door and the school hallways are very quiet. Yet it is common, when children are listening appreciatively to literature, for people to barge in, without apology, thus breaking the mood and the flow of the story. How refreshing it would be to see a sign that read: "Please do not disturb. Story-sharing session in

progress." In an environment where literature is valued as much as test scores, such signs would be commonplace.

Other ways for teachers to help set the stage for good listening are to make it clear when one activity is over and another is about to begin, to introduce activities in an interesting way, and to use flexible seating arrangements (Funk and Funk 1989). Creating a listening environment should be a daily goal rather than an occasional one.

5. Design learning experiences that promote active listening.

In order to improve children's listening skills, it is essential that the teacher design active-listening activities that require children to participate and to use what they have heard. For example, after the teacher and students have conducted a science experiment, the teacher might ask students to restate ("Repeat the steps in conducting the experiment"), to summarize ("Now that you have conducted the experiment, what are your findings?"), to reflect ("How would you interpret your findings?"), and to conduct self-assessments through questions ("Could you explain the purpose of this experiment to someone else?").

6. Integrate listening activities into all subject areas.

We will never find time for teaching listening skills if we have to set aside time in an already overburdened curriculum. Rather, an emphasis on listening should be the normal operating procedure and should cut across all subjects. Some ideas for "weaving in" listening throughout the school day are (Plourde 1989):

Give only one direction at a time and encourage children to ask specific questions. Teachers commonly complain that children do not follow instructions. The solution is not to give more of the same by repeating or by over-elaborating. The solution is to switch from one-way communication to two-way communication. If we give instructions once and invite questions, it allows children to interact with the message. We become more lucid and concise in our explanations, and children practice active-listening skills.

Occasionally throw children a "vocabulary curve." Instead of always using familiar words, build vocabulary and listening skills by using new words in context. After a lesson on pets, a teacher might say: "All the feline lovers line up. Now all the canine lovers stand."

Encourage students to express their ideas in complete sentences, just as they are required to do in their written work. There is not much point in listening to classmates if their speech is limited to one-word answers.

Use cooperative learning techniques. Instead of having children always work in isolation, let them work together in many different groups organized to accomplish various goals (Hilke 1990). The success of such groups depends to a considerable extent on listening skills.

Increase student responsibility. When we put children in charge of greeting classroom visitors, guiding tours of the school, making announcements, or conducting interviews, we encourage them to listen carefully. There are many opportunities to practice listening skills, which should be considered a true basic in the curriculum.

7. Use the power of narratives.

The human brain tends to handle information much more efficiently when presented in story form than when presented as isolated facts or lists of key ideas. This is particularly true for children, who tend to be more imaginative and less logical in their thinking than adults. It would follow, then, that children's listening can be improved by increasing the use of narrative or story structures in our teaching.

Autobiographies and biographies are good examples. By listening to personal narratives, even young children can grasp and respond to complex concepts like injustice and prejudice. Listening to the Rosa Parks story about a black woman refusing to go to the back of the bus or a picture-book account of Jackie Robinson's experiences as the first black major league baseball player (Golenbock 1990) is far more compelling than listening to a lecture about the civil rights movement.

8. Plan follow-up and extension activities.

After children have been good listeners, we need to recognize and reward that effort. Such follow-up activities might be inventing new verses for a familiar tune and singing the song together, or putting on a puppet play of a favorite story. If children know that they will be asked to use what they have heard in an activity, they are more likely to listen carefully.

Extension activities include opportunities to listen for information, to clarify concepts, to elaborate on ideas, to critically analyze material, to appreciate messages, and to respond creatively (Funk and Funk 1989). Through extension activities, children come to understand that learning means applying what they hear, not just being tested on it.

The Listening-Learning Connection

Recently, there has been a reaffirmation of the role that listening plays in learning, especially in learning to read (Choate and Rakes 1987, Levesque 1989, Strickland and Morrow 1989). Basically, these approaches recommend the following:

1. Assess prior knowledge. Relate the listening activity to children's previous experience and build key concepts.
2. Use visualization techniques. Use guided mental imagery to create pictures in the listeners' minds and set a specific purpose for listening.
3. Present the message. Get children involved by asking them to make predictions, listen for cues, or physically participate.
4. Make connections and ask questions. Connect children's prior knowledge with the message and pose challenging questions that require children to interpret and evaluate.
5. Invite reflections and responses. Ask children to summarize their ideas and to respond to what they have heard through discussion, writing, drawing, drama, music, dance, and other forms of self-expression.

Suggested Listening Activities

Some specific listening activities to try in classrooms include:

Explain how something functions. Children are often intrigued by the way common household objects work. A toothpaste pump, an electric eye, and various kitchen gadgets like a hard-boiled egg slicer, a garlic press, or a manual orange juicer can be used to build listening skills. We can ask students to observe the item carefully, compare their ideas with those of a small group of classmates, and then explain aloud to others how the object functions. Finding additional uses for the object also can enhance both critical listening and thinking skills.

Stories on tape. Usually we think of children listening to adults sharing stories. But after children have heard stories many times, they can demonstrate their listening skills by retelling a familiar story in their own words or by creating an original book. These can be recorded on audiotape or videotape and become a part of a classroom lending library.

Sound effects. The challenge of identifying and using readily available items to create sound effects encourages children to listen carefully. After children are introduced to some old-fashioned ways of making sound effects, such as crumpling a piece of cellophane to mimic a crackling fire or wiggling an old cookie sheet to imitate a roll of thunder in the distance, they can experiment on their own. The sound effects can then be used to accompany a radio play, a "music video," or for emphasis during a poetry reading.

Newspaper want ads. Many classrooms produce a class newspaper, including want ads or personals. This can be made into a good listening activity by having children take turns being the "advertising director." In this role they are responsible for listening to and accurately recording the information to advertise events, for the "swap and trade" section, or for the personals.

Listen and illustrate. As children are listening to music, they can draw, paint, sculpt, or create collages inspired by the mental images that the music suggests to them.

Story webs. This activity enables children to practice their listening comprehension of a story. Words and pictures that depict story events and concepts are logically arranged into weblike diagrams or maps after the child has listened to or read a story (Bromley 1995).

Translate what is heard into written, graphic, musical, or dramatic form. For example, as a culmination to their zoo study unit, some second-graders created a papier-mâché zoo, complete with trails and a guided tour tape. Children also can demonstrate their listening comprehension of a story by creating masks for each of the characters and enacting a scene from the story.

Summarize information. Information books are good resources for summarizing information. For example, after listening to *The Quicksand Book* (de Paola 1977), children can summarize the facts about quicksand, what to do if you fall into quicksand, and the procedure for creating quicksand.

Partner art. In this listening activity, two children work together. One person has art materials, the other person gives a detailed description of something (for example, the speaker's pet, house, favorite toy). The child with the art materials must listen carefully in order to produce whatever the partner has in mind. Then the children can reverse roles so that each practices listening skills.

Story comparisons. If children hear several versions of the Cinderella story, such as the original Grimm "Ashputtel," the Chinese "Yeh-Shen" (Louie 1982), and the Perrault version, they can compare and contrast them in terms of theme, plot, setting, characterization, style, and illustrations.

Recognize implications. After listening to a guest speaker, children can be guided in exploring the implications of the message they have heard. Teachers can formulate questions that require children to "read between the lines" and apply active-listening techniques.

Listen for a specific purpose. An audiotape that contains instructions for a no-bake recipe, making modeling material, or origami can

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be used to give children practice in following instructions. Children also can create their own instructions for various projects and test them on classmates for clarity.

Identify uses of language. In a unit on the study of propaganda techniques, children can listen for the words used to convince and sell various products in television commercials. Later, they can graph their findings on each method of verbal persuasion used in the advertisements.

Really Listening to Children

When I was a teenager, seven visitors from the Middle East came to our house for dinner. My father was in the kitchen carving the turkey when a boy from the group came into the kitchen and began to speak animatedly in Arabic. Dad did not understand a word; but he paused, then handed the boy a morsel. The youth beamed appreciatively.

I asked, "How did you know what he wanted?"

Dad replied, "I guess I just listened."

This anecdote illustrates the four prerequisites for real listening: 1) wanting to listen, 2) recognizing barriers to listening, 3) knowing how to listen, and 4) knowing when to listen rather than talk (Hinds and Pankake 1987, p. 281).

Five ways to improve our abilities in listening to children are:

1. *Hear children out.* Allow children to express their thoughts without interruption, except for clarification.
2. *Listen "between the lines."* Strive to understand the child's intended meaning.
3. *Do not "tune out."* Be patient if the child takes a long time to get to the point.
4. *Do not jump to conclusions.* Try to take the child's point of view rather than focusing on your own emotions.
5. *Concentrate on the child's message.* Learn to filter out most distractions and try to remember what the child says (Vining and Yrle 1980).

Curricular Issues

There are several curricular issues related to listening, including: developmentally appropriate curriculum, "balance" in the curriculum, testing, and curriculum revision (Jalongo 1991).

Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum. If the curriculum is not well matched to the developmental level of students, then only marginal listening will occur. Why? Because there will be an emphasis on "covering" material and on low-level thinking skills (Glasser 1990). Under these conditions, children's listening (or appearance of listening) is totally passive and without engagement (Jacobs 1990).

Curriculum Balance. Swanson (1984) uses the phrase "inverted curriculum" to describe the inverse relationship between what children actually do in schools and the amount of instructional time devoted to it. The inverted curriculum in the language arts means that although human beings spend more time listening than any other communication activity, it is the least-taught subject in the school curriculum (Hyslop and Tone 1988).

Listening is important and our curriculum should reflect that importance. It should be easy to glance through our curriculum guides and lesson plans to see where we can integrate higher-level listening activities throughout the curriculum.

Testing. In America, our curriculum often becomes test-driven. The assessment of higher-level listening skills is comparable to the current predicament in the assessment of writing. If we have been teaching

children to write stories and then try to assess them using only a paper-and-pencil test of vocabulary, then the test is an invalid tool, since it doesn't measure what we have been teaching. The solution in writing is to assess a portfolio of student writing samples using a set of protocols developed to evaluate effective writing. Ultimately, the evaluation of critical listening skills will need to take a similar approach, wherein each child's ability to use what they have heard is assessed not only through tests but also in real classroom situations or through computer or videodisc simulations.

Revising the Curriculum. Will Rogers once remarked that everybody talks about the weather, but nobody ever does anything about it. The same could be said about listening; everyone complains about children's listening skills, but little has been done to remedy the situation. The task confronting educators who strive to develop children's higher-level listening skills can be summed up in one question: "How can we get people who have not been taught to listen to listen about listening?" (Swanson 1989, p. 3). This fastback has offered suggestions for changing the situation.

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Conclusion

There is a story about a doctor in a teaching hospital who tells his medical students that half of what he teaches them will be outdated or proven incorrect by the time they become practitioners. The problem, the doctor says, is that he does not know which half.

Of all the things classroom teachers teach children, listening will surely be in the useful half. Even after the information explosion invalidates some of the subject matter we now teach to children, the listening process will remain useful. Even after today's technological advancement renders yesterday's machines worthless, listening retains its value. In fact, the power of our most sophisticated computers and robots is assessed by how well they "listen" to our voices. Even the rapid pace of our society, which pressures us to change in so many ways, does not obviate the need for listening. To describe someone as a "good listener" is high praise. We admire the skilled interviewers because they know both what to ask and how to listen.

Listening carefully and critically is a fundamental human need. Our legal system is based on listening, on getting a "fair hearing." We gauge the quality of our interpersonal relationships by how co-workers and loved ones listen to us. And ultimately, one unifying characteristic of exemplary homes and schools is that they are not only places that teach each child to listen but also places that listen to each child.

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