25 Effective Listening Comprehension Strategies

Michael F. Opitz and Matthew D. Zbaracki
To Julie
And off we go
MDZ

To Rich and Josh
I finally know something about listening
MFO
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—Matthew D. Zbaracki

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—Michael F. Opitz
The blank stare became a smile, which gave way to a laugh so deep her stomach convulsed. Tears soon followed as she gasped for air.

Such was my wife’s reaction when I (Michael) answered her question, “So what’s your next writing project?”

“Listening,” I responded, taking a second breath to tell a little more about it. But her deep-belly laughter filled the room and overtook my explanation.

Dabbing at her eyes with a tissue, she was finally able to catch her breath long enough to say, “Good! Maybe you’ll learn something!”

This book is proof enough that she was correct. In the process of investigating how we listen and how we can best teach listening, I came across many new discoveries. Imagine my relief, for instance, to discover that I am normal. That is, adults listen with just 25 percent efficiency (Hunsaker 1990). This means that as adults, we attend to and process what we hear just one quarter of the time! In fact, adults may be the worst listeners of all and, as Lundsteen notes, this is so because they have had little education on how to listen. This lack of education takes its toll, for as most know, bad habits can be difficult to change (Lundsteen 1979).

Other discoveries abound. The purpose of this book is to share them in an effort to help you better teach children how to listen. Did you know, for example, that children are often expected to listen for as much as 50 percent of their school day with little, if any, instruction in how to do so (Swanson 1997; Wolvin and Coakley 1996; Strother 1987)? In most classrooms, listening comprehension assumes far greater importance in learning than reading comprehension, yet we seldom address this essential ability, nor do we teach children how to develop and monitor their own listening comprehension. In fact, most of us rarely, if ever, consider the comprehension that is required of all successful listeners.
The truth is that listening comprehension begins at birth and serves us throughout our lives. We need to rethink our understanding of comprehension and extend and refine our definition to include listening comprehension. Clearly, expecting children to listen is quite different from teaching them how. The teaching suggestions offered in this book are meant to help you do just that.

To begin, you'll examine our definition of listening (not to be confused with hearing) as well as factors that influence listening. We offer some reasons to teach listening, the foundation of all the other language arts (Rubin 2000). We also explain why most educators ignore and neglect the teaching of listening. We then present some general guidelines that you can use to facilitate the teaching of listening. As you'll discover, listening has many dimensions. It is much more complex than you might imagine.

Chapters 2 through 6 each focus on a different type of listening and offer teaching strategies that you can use to support that listening. What links all of these chapters is the idea that for any teaching to be effective and have a lasting impact, it must be meaningful to the learner. This is one reason that most of the strategies incorporate children’s literature and reading aloud in some way. What better way for children to see the connection among listening and the other language arts, especially reading? We also tend to agree with Moffett and Wagner (1992), who note that “activities that entail attention, as a preparation for action of one’s own, teach listening skills far better than specific drills focusing on listening alone” (p. 74).

Make no mistake, however! Listening is the main focus in each of the activities because for far too long, it has remained unattended to by most. Demonstrating how to teach it brings it to the conscious level of awareness. As Winn (1988) noted several years ago, “The activities that enhance listening skills are readily available in the existing curriculum and are just waiting for identification to provide the opportunity to practice newly learned listening skills” (p. 145). No doubt about it! It is time for listening to take center stage and let the other language arts perform as backup.

We'd like to make another point regarding the types of listening each chapter targets: One of our key goals is to help children understand that there are many different occasions outside of school when we are expected to listen. One of the best ways to do this is to teach them to listen for a variety of purposes. In short, we want them to go beyond “school listening” (Funk and Funk 1989).

There are ways to assess listening, and these are discussed in Chapter 7. This chapter makes clear that to best understand how learners listen and what they might need help with, teachers should assess
listening in authentic ways. The chapter also emphasizes student self-assessment because of the ownership it brings to the task at hand.

As a result of our research on this topic, we discovered that there are several sound reasons that we, as teachers, avoid teaching listening. Our hope is that by sharing what we have discovered, we can help all of us take a good look at these reasons in an effort to do a better job of helping children (and spouses) do what we want when we say, “Listen to me!”
Thank you for sampling this resource.

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