

AUDIOBOOKS & LITERACY

An Educator's Guide to Utilizing Audiobooks in the Classroom

By Dr. Frank Serafini

Introduction

The challenges facing individuals in today's society who are unable to read are well documented, and classroom teachers struggle every day with students who come to school unprepared to meet the challenges of literacy instruction. More and more young children have not had access to books, have not been read to regularly, and have not had exposure to the elements of written language. When the experiences that are necessary for becoming literate are absent from a child's experiences, it is the role of the classroom teacher to provide them. In an overcrowded curriculum, teachers are being asked to do more for each student with less time and fewer resources. This is where audiobooks can play a significant role in developing reading abilities in young readers.

To educators it often seems that the success of literacy instruction programs is measured by standardized tests. The ability to succeed on these tests depends primarily on a child's ability to read and comprehend what has been read. With current legislation (in particular the No Child Left Behind Act) and high-stakes testing, there is a push for even greater amounts of standardized achievement testing. Effective tools for helping children learn to read are critical, and one important tool is audiobooks.

The Road to Becoming a Reader...

Experts agree that reading aloud is the single most important activity for developing proficient reading skills. The road to becoming a reader begins with hearing stories read aloud. In fact, a Commission on Reading report entitled "Becoming a Nation of Readers" states, "The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children." Reading aloud to students

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fosters the process of phonemic awareness by introducing the sounds of written language, allows access to the structure of written language, demonstrates appropriate phrasing and intonation, and provides a model of fluent reading. It serves as an introduction to the important lessons and stories of our culture and provides access to literature. Reading aloud with young children is the key to developing lifelong reading ability.

“Reading out loud to children is a proven way to develop vocabulary growth and language expansion and plays a causal role in developing both receptive and expressive language capabilities. Reading out loud can also enhance children’s background knowledge of new concepts that may appear in both oral and written language.”

—G. Reid Lyon, <I>The Keys to Literacy: Overview of Reading and Literacy Research<I>

When stories read in school or at home are accompanied by a discussion, readers and listeners can share their ideas and negotiate meanings with each other. These discussions provide opportunities to generate understanding in a community of readers and help readers make sense of the stories they hear. Literature discussions at home and in school extend understanding, clarify misconceptions, and provide young readers with the support necessary for better comprehension.

“Students enjoy listening to Listening Library selections because they provide a ‘voice’ for the novel they are reading in class. Listening to dialects, a powerful tool in differentiated instruction, enriches the enjoyment of literature by connecting the reader to the region itself. They are invaluable to our students with special needs as well as reluctant readers who may need assistance to become actively involved in a story.”

—Pat Yosca, School Media Specialist, North Middle School, Lynbrook, NY

Many question what happens when there are 30 or 35 children in a classroom, or when parents work two jobs to make ends meet. Who has the time to spend reading to children as much as is necessary for their success as readers? Consider those parents

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who are unable to read to their children. In these situations, audiobooks are an important tool for exposing children to stories and developing literacy.

The Many Benefits of Audiobooks

“Audiobooks are a powerful literacy tool. I’ve used them in my classroom for over 10 years and watched audiobooks change my students’ lives.”

—Phyllis Jacobs, Head, Reading Department, Atlantis Academy, Miami, FL

The research that documents the importance of reading aloud with primary-, intermediate-, and middle-grade students is compelling. Reading aloud to young and older readers alike introduces new vocabulary and concepts, provides demonstrations of proficient reading, and allows young children access to stories that they are unable to read on their own or that they might not choose for themselves. Research has also shown that reading aloud with children provides the foundation for their development as readers and that audiobooks are an important component of a comprehensive reading program.

- The Milken Family Foundation has investigated the effects of audiobooks on children’s reading ability and found that programs that included the use of audiobooks improved children’s reading proficiency more than programs that did not use them.
- Barbara Baskin and Karen Harris reported in an article in the *Journal of Reading* that audiobooks have a legitimate place in reading programs and provide alternatives to struggling readers unable to read independently.

Teachers and parents are encouraged to use audiobooks because they:

- Expose readers to new vocabulary. As new words are heard in the context of a story they become part of a child’s oral and eventually written vocabularies.
- Provide demonstrations of fluent reading and appropriate phrasing, intonation, and articulation.

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- Expand access to materials for readers. Experienced readers and those struggling with decoding can listen to stories well beyond their independent reading levels and can comprehend more complex literature.
- Create opportunities for readers to discuss literature. Reading comprehension is enhanced through discussion, and audiobooks provide a perfect opportunity for classes to share these stories.
- Support struggling readers. As developing readers listen to audiobooks and follow along with a printed version of the story, they learn to match the sounds of oral language to their written counterparts. This matching of sounds to symbols is the basis for reading instruction.
- Invite children into the world of reading and literature. One of the most important roles of classroom teachers and librarians is exposing children to quality literature.

Ideas for Classroom Teachers

Audiobooks are an important component of a comprehensive reading framework in elementary-, middle-, and high school classrooms. Here are some examples of how teachers can use audiobooks as tools in the classroom:

READING CENTERS: Audiobooks can be used in reading centers, where children are invited to listen to their favorite stories read aloud by talented performers and to follow along with a copy of the book. These shared reading experiences provide vocal support along with visual confirmation as young readers learn to match the oral language with the printed text.

BOOK BACKPACKS: Audiobooks and a printed copy of the book can be included in a book backpack that students can take home and enjoy with their families. Students take turns using the book backpacks, and teachers may choose to include learning activities that relate to the story. Book backpacks involve parents and family members in a young reader's development.

SHARING AUDIOBOOKS IN THE CLASSROOM: The whole class can listen to a selection together. This sharing of ideas deepens readers' interpretations and develops their ability to comprehend and analyze literature.

BOOK CLUBS: Children of varying reading abilities often want to read the same book together and discuss it in a book club. Many struggling readers would be left behind without some support for their independent reading of stories. Audiobooks help readers understand the text and discuss the book with classmates. Audiobooks level the playing field, allowing struggling readers to participate in discussions.

TEASERS: Play a section from an audiobook to entice readers to read the book on their own. These book teasers can be used to motivate reluctant readers by introducing them to new stories and interesting them in stories they would not ordinarily choose for themselves. There is no such thing as a child who hates to read; there are only children who have not found the right book.

“Introducing a new book to the entire class by playing the first chapter motivates most students to read on independently. They are hooked!”

—J. Chemotti, Educator of the Month

DEVELOPING READING-COMPREHENSION SKILLS: Young readers need to learn to attend to the language of literature and how to follow a story from beginning to end. As students and teachers listen to audiobooks together they can discuss strategies for attending to the story, strategies for analyzing and comprehending the story, and the personal connections they make to the characters and events in literature. Research has demonstrated that proficient readers are able to use particular strategies when they read for meaning. The following is a short list of research-based reading comprehension strategies:

- Visualizing the characters and setting of a story
- Asking questions during reading. Teach young readers to ask themselves questions while reading in order to monitor their understanding of the story

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- Drawing inferences
- Summarizing
- Predicting and anticipating events.

AUDIOBOOKS AS A TOOL FOR TEACHERS: An enormous number of children's books are published each year, and one great way for classroom teachers to remain current in their knowledge of children's literature is through audiobooks. Listening to books as they drive to and from school, teachers can review approximately 25 new books each school year without taking time out of their busy schedules to read them.

In Conclusion

Audiobooks help children become better readers and develop a desire to read for themselves. With parents' and teachers' time at a premium, audiobooks can help readers explore new worlds through literature. If we want children to read for themselves, they must have stories read to them and must have the opportunity to discuss what they hear. There is no such thing as a child who hates to read; there are only children who have not found the right book.

Audiobooks serve the classroom by:

- supplementing teachers' and parents' ability to read to their children and students
- providing access to new vocabulary, a key to success in reading
- providing demonstrations of fluent reading
- providing readers access to books they are unable to read for themselves
- creating opportunities for discussing stories, in order to better comprehend them
- supporting struggling readers by helping them focus on meaning rather than the decoding of text
- inviting children to enter the magical world of literature
- fostering a love of literature and reading.

Biographical Information

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