
If you can't read it then audio read it

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Abstract

Audiobooks are a very popular reading medium for adults. Their use with children as a means of supporting reading has not yet really been investigated to any great extent. Gillie Byrom here describes her study into the use of audiobooks with struggling readers and suggests there is certainly a great deal of potential in these alternative texts.

Children often have to become good readers before they can appreciate the pleasures of reading; before they recognise that it provides a key to accessing information and ideas; before they understand that it involves making interpretations and predictions and so on. If failing readers were to taste what it is to be a fluent reader, would they feel more motivated to practise the skill more often and thereby close the gap between immature and mature reading?

To enhance my work as a special educational needs teacher, my research aim was to find a method of simulating reading where apprentice readers could actively experience fluent and accurate reading appropriate to their age, in a way that would free them to interact with the story content and characters. On an informal basis I have worked with audio books for the past five years involving some 60 children over that period. I could see that audio books worked well as a tool to remotivate failing and disinterested readers and I wanted to investigate what was actually happening. Many approaches to reading are criticised for moving too rapidly from a position of heavy support to a relatively abrupt lack of support. Could audio book reading provide a smooth scaffolding bridge?

Audio book reading enables unskilled readers to gain a far greater exposure to print than is possible by traditional methods. Audio readers are required to simply follow text whilst listening to an accompanying audio tape recording of that text. By learning to track text accurately, the reader is involved in the process of visual word recognition through the support of the continuous audio prompt. Silent reading is simulated and the burden of decoding words, recalling them and reading them aloud is removed so that the pleasure of *reading for meaning* can be experienced by the audio reader. Audio books provide a 'taste of the carrot' which skilled readers enjoy.

In a ten week qualitative study carried out with three Year 5 boys in a State Primary School who were at least three years behind in their reading, the aim was to assess how the experience of audio reading might influence their independent reading; might change the subjects negative attitudes to reading; might help them to attend to the task of reading and generally remotivate them to take an interest in reading.

All three boys had perceived reading as laborious and boring, but although they had largely out-grown being read to, they found audio reading enjoyable and their self-confidence as readers improved. There was a marked reduction in the quantity of errors they made when reading independently and the type of error changed from largely graphophonic to syntactic and semantic (showing improved reading for meaning). The boys' reading fluency and comprehension also improved. These findings are supported by other researchers in the field of audio reading: notably Topping et al. (1996), Medcalf (1989), Dring (1989) and Neville (1975). Audio reading provided these boys with an interactive model of fluent and efficient reading which conveyed meaning through accessing literary conventions which good readers take for granted.

Exposure to print has been hypothesised as one of the most significant factors in learning to read. Over ten weeks these three ten year old boys averaged 23 books each at a rate of 2 hours audio reading per week, exposing them to a minimum of 12,000 words of print each week. After four weeks one of the boys could for the first time follow a text his teacher read with the class and all three boys showed more interest in and awareness of literature, noticing books in their classroom, discussing the audio books with class mates (whom they were delighted to find had also read some of these books) and voluntarily making drawings of story characters.

As an alternative to being largely preoccupied with the technicalities of reading, the boys found audio reading was relatively effortless yet they perceived that they were reading books appropriate to their age and were proudly announcing that they could now read 'hard words' like their peers. There is a parallel here with children who are learning to swim. Inflatable armbands enable them to feel that they are swimming in the same way that children learning to ride a bicycle benefit from a steady adult hand on

the saddle as they experience what it is to ride a bike. In both these instances it is accepted that we encourage positive associations between the learning of a skill and its practice. Children who have learnt to fear water or feel anxious about falling off a bike will not acquire these skills so easily and may even avoid learning them. A novice swimmer needs to spend time in the water learning to swim just as an apprentice reader needs nurturing in the world of reading.

My findings and those of other researchers suggest that audio reading can be used as a flexible scaffolding tool which can be adjusted to the pupil's needs, stretching their skills to a point within their grasp, with the aim of bridging independent silent reading. Since the audio books are graded and the audio tapes are read at varying speeds, it is possible to offer maximum support using the simplest texts and slowest reading speeds and gradually reduce this support by introducing the reader to texts of increasing syntactical complexity, read at faster speeds and sustained for longer periods of concentration.

The end result of audio reading is to wean the reader off listening to the audio tape and to read freely and silently for himself when he is ready to do this. In audio reading these are the gradual stages of scaffolding towards becoming a proficient reader:

1. 'spectator' (watching the skilled reader tracking text)
2. 'participator' (engaging in the joint activity of tracking text by using a finger to shadow the skilled reader's tracking finger).
3. 'apprentice reader' (tracking text while the skilled reader supports tracking proficiency and monitors comprehension).
4. 'independent reader'
 - (i) able to audio read on own and after audio reading (rehearsal of passage), able to read same text silently and independently. Reading captions independently.
 - (ii) able to read independently without the audio aid.

Through the apprenticeship stages, the novice reader should be in a 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky, 1962) – always reading audio books with a "listenability" ahead of his own reading age whilst at the same time being assured of necessary audio scaffolding to support his particular stage of reading development. Used as a scaffolding tool, audio books model fluent and expressive reading whilst at the same time actively engaging the audio reader both perceptually and cognitively, in the reading process. Shifting the burden of decoding from one of *recall* to that of *recognition*, frees the audio reader not only to tally an accurate match between the phoneme and grapheme (which he tracks with his finger and which is confirmed by the continuous prompt of the audio

tape reading) but also models the language and rhythm of story telling. It seems likely that where audio readers have actively engaged in constructing schema from the story they have a better chance of reading for meaning (Anderson (1977) and Ausubel (1967)). If a passage has previously been rehearsed through audio reading and the same passage or next part is then read independently, the reader has a pool of vocabulary to select from. This considerably reduces guessing while maximising confidence. This develops the concept of reading which simultaneously brings to bear on the text the skills of 'best fit guessing' and 'decoding'.

My ten week research into audio reading was relatively short compared with the work of Medcalf (1989) and Dring (1989) whose subjects read audio books for between one and two years and showed substantial progress on normative tests over this longer period of research. I would not recommend testing and measuring children's independent reading ages after only 10 weeks as it would be akin to yanking up seedlings to check the root growth.

Choice of audio books

I recommend abridged classics suitable for foreign language students learning English. The classics can be relied upon for their engaging narrative, well-defined characters and well-tempered excitement and drama together with 'happy endings' and the moral security of 'goodies winning over baddies'. Typically failing readers have never encountered these stories except in their T.V. and video equivalents and it was interesting that the more they had enjoyed the film, the more they wanted to read the book.

All the E.F.L. abridged classics are graded on the basis of vocabulary, sentence length and structural complexity. I found 8 levels covering estimated reading ages of 6 to 12 years. This meant that the books could be ranked in order of increasing listenability/readability so that each child's audio reading could be sensitively stretched. In setting up my personal library of audio books I largely relied upon the publishers' recommended level and also graded books according to the various speeds at which they had been recorded. Commercial tapes are available at a price but I chose to record almost all my 80+ books myself (over 2 years!) both to save money and to assist the tracking. I had the publishers' permission to make these recordings as I had no intention of infringing copyright by selling them.

Making an audio reading

Dring (1989) comments about the difficulties weak readers have with following commercially produced tapes as the page number is never given and the

speed may be too fast. Of course one can vary the speed of the audio player but this sometimes leads to voice distortion. Carbo (1978, 1992) recommends recording audio books in small chunks, with a slow pace and short phrases. Too slow and apprentice readers lose fluency of the story; too fast and they are forced to skim and may get lost. The books were read at a rate of about 100 words per minute for level 1 (reading age 6 years) ranging to about 180 words per minute for level 8 (reading age 12 years). I only used audio books with estimated reading ages of 6–9 years until the audio tracking skill is learnt. To facilitate tracking of the text the page number was always given aurally as well as visually in the earlier books, with instructions about when to turn the page. The reader was also reminded to pause the tape to look at the illustrations (though they soon learn to glance quickly without losing their place since the story is often too compelling to want to halt it). Each tape recording reminded the reader to follow the text while listening to the tape and always gave the page number for each new chapter to save getting lost. I tried to model natural expression and intonation to the apprentice reader, taking special note of punctuation as an aid to tracking. For example there was an obvious pause after a full stop with a clear beginning to the next sentence or a new paragraph. Audio books varied in length of listening time from 15 minutes (early audio books with a reading age of 6 years) to 90 minutes (for audio books with an estimated reading age of 12 years). Similarly, the number of pages increased with increasing complexity of the text and the illustrations became fewer in number. Most children like to audio read all in one session (unable to put the book down!), therefore it is important not to exhaust them with too long a reading. 90 minutes was the preferred limit for the Year 5 boys I studied.

Training in audio reading

Training in correct tracking is absolutely essential with the first introduction of an audio book, to be sure that the readers are paying attention to textual features while listening to the accompanying audio tape. In this way they learn to tally spoken with written language. I recommend giving each reader their own book mark which carries brief annotated notes supporting verbal instructions on how to follow text and avoid getting lost:

- follow book while you listen to tape
- pause tape to turn page
- pause tape to look at pictures
- if you get lost:-
 - go to the start of the next paragraph and wait for that word. You will hear a pause at the end of the last paragraph.
 - look for names – words with capital letters are easy to spot.
 - wait until you hear the next page number.

- at the end of the book rewind the tape for the next person.

In my investigative study I saw each of the boys for three half hour sessions of audio reading per week. After each session they took the book home and finished it before the next session. Each boy needed training to become proficient at tracking. One of the boys was proficient after the first week where it took the other two four weeks to master the skill. One of these boys had an identified weakness in visual perception and it was interesting that the skill of tracking text improved his sensory and motor co-ordination. To start with he was very jerky and haphazard, after 4 weeks he was delighted to find he could follow a text which his teachers read with his class. He had always lost his place before. This same boy preferred to use a pointer rather than his finger while learning to overcome poor co-ordination. Following with a finger is found to be best as the reader can more easily coordinate the turning of pages with following the text and a finger doesn't obscure too much of text, unlike a card.

The equipment

I used a Phillips AAC 7000 tape recorder with excellent voice reproduction to record all the audio books. Both teacher and pupil used headphones to listen to the audio reading as they cut out distracting noises in school in the same way that a personal 'Walkman' is ideal for home listening. I was not able to monitor how they followed at home but I asked how they coped and watched how they improved in the sessions at school. It was not necessary to send the audio book home but all three boys chose to take them as they were enthusiastic about finishing each story as soon as possible.

Engaging in audio reading

The boys reviewed each book and gave it a grade. The fact that the boys bubbled with enthusiasm about the books and gave the top grade of 5 to an average of 85% of the audio books perhaps reflects the relative dearth of good literature available to failing Year 5s as much as the motivating effect of audio reading.

For the first 5 weeks I selected audio books for the boys. I wanted to ensure that they were reading books pitched at their level of listenability (cf. Carbo's (1992) reference to sensitive matching when selecting an audio book to cater for a child's changing needs). After 5 weeks two of the boys were reading audio books with a reading age of 11 years while the third boy was able to track books with a reading age in advance of this. This does not mean that their reading ages improved by 5 years in as many weeks but

their ability to stay on task and co-ordinate visual with auditory information certainly improved dramatically.

It surprised me that the boys wanted to know as much as possible about each book prior to reading it. This is so unlike recommending a book to a good reader. It was therefore immensely valuable that I had recorded the books myself and so was thoroughly familiar with the story content as I could use my knowledge to engage each boy in identifying with the characters or the narrative. They always wanted to know how the book ended and were even more enthusiastic to read it once they knew. It was as though there was a confirmation of trust that it would be worthwhile and of course they had already constructed an outline schemata for the story.

In the study for the purposes of investigation, the three subjects were being accelerated as fast as possible over a short period to read audio books with an increasingly large variation in reading age. Upon giving each boy an audio book I would ask him to read the first page aloud and independently. Then when we started the audio book I observed him tracking the text of this first page while listening to the audio tape. Next, and at least 24 hours later, upon returning the audio book I would ask each boy to read the first page aloud and independently once again (this time after the benefit of audio reading). I carefully monitored this comparison through miscue analyses (cf. Arnold), recording any error reduction and change in substitution miscue. I observed that rehearsal (through audio reading) had the effect of reducing the number of errors and changing the substitution miscues from graphophonic to a type that showed semantic and syntactic constraints. It was also apparent that the same effect applied where a new and 'unheard/unseen' book was read, showing that the experience of audio reading was positively influencing independent reading. These changes need to be taken into account when selecting the next audio reading for a child. The best guide is the reduction in error *after* audio reading.

In practice, provided the child could track text properly while listening to a tape, it would be more important to listen to him or her independently reading a passage of that text *after* audio reading and not before, thereby nurturing reading confidence and not discouraging it. An approximate 80% error reduction following audio reading indicates that the reader has found his listenability level. 100% reduction in error shows that the text is well within his capability whereas 25% for example, shows it to be beyond the zone of proximal development.

After 5 weeks, once the three boys had learnt to track text while listening to the audio tape, they were invited to select audio books for themselves. For the

first time they saw the entire collection. One boy continued to read new books (plenty of which were available) while the other two preferred to re-read some of the earlier books they had enjoyed so much. Although they tried some of the new books, these two kept returning to their favourites. Perhaps there is a parallel here with the small child who wants a particular book read over and over again.

Listening and reading comprehension

It is possible to track text without comprehending the story. Therefore in my study I wanted to find out how involved the subjects were with the audio books by engaging each boy in discourse about the audio story as it progressed. It was principally the illustrations which prompted discussion. Two of the boys particularly enjoyed discussing story content and making predictions about the outcome while the other, whose language was immature, needed coaxing to use his imagination. He benefited the most by developing his relatively limited vocabulary and broadening his general knowledge. Engaging the boys in informal discussion enabled them to respond unselfconsciously to the story, often making spontaneous remarks and even reading the captions quite uninhibitedly. This contrasted with their relative tenseness when asked to read a passage aloud for the first time. Hearing them read independently is so often for the benefit of we teachers who monitor progress *but* this may in fact be *counter-productive to a reluctant reader*. When listening to these children read aloud it is even more vital that we do not leap in and correct every error for they may actually be reading for meaning and managing to retain the sense of the passage – a skill which silent readers have the luxury of attending to unobserved and undisturbed.

Using audio books in the "literacy hour"

I do not wish to be prescriptive in my recommendations to teachers but I believe there is potential for audio reading in the required literacy hour. In his Musselburgh project Topping et al. (1996) reports that over half his subjects preferred taped reading to silent reading for accessing a new book. This suggests that pupils who are currently failing to read texts silently in class would benefit from being introduced to audio reading as a scaffolding tool, thus gaining improved access to the National Curriculum for example. By the same token that some children require spectacles to enable them to read a book, others may require an audio tape to enable them to read the same book in order that they might all contribute to a stimulating discussion about the content. In this way Literacy Hour could be as meaningful and motivating for all levels of readers and as I have shown in my study, the audio book support can be fine-tuned to meet each pupil's needs.

Audio reading is an effective means of providing differentiation. Using the *same* text independent readers can read silently while apprentice readers follow an audio reading through headphones at speeds appropriate to their needs, having already been taught how to track text proficiently, as described earlier. Both groups can benefit from tracking an audio reading made by a highly skilled reader who models intonation and nuance, besides fluency, accuracy and the conventions of punctuation. The main feature of audio reading is that it gives reluctant readers a taste of silent reading. Alternatively a small group of readers with the same level of reading skill might follow together an audio reading which is say 2 years in advance of their reading ages. After rehearsal, which accesses the structure and content of the text, they might then try as a group to read the passage independently and discuss what they have read. The teacher would monitor substitution errors and error quantity in order to gauge which text they could try next, always with the aim of stretching their reading skills to a point within grasp. Audio reading can expose readers to a wide variety of printed text. If the text helps to sustain their reading they willingly stay on task for a far longer time than if they were asked to read independently and aloud.

Failing readers who are simply engaged in the subskills of reading without experiencing a taste of the pleasure of fluent reading can be likened to people trying to do a jig-saw puzzle without the picture. They are taught strategies for linking pieces together e.g. collect all the pieces of the same colour, or with straight edges (learn similar phonic patterns); look for an unusual shape and find its negative (learn irregular sight words). But this is all done in preparation for real reading, often using contrived material and it is no wonder that pupils become demotivated. They have not been given sight of the overall picture of the jig-saw they are constructing – no taste of the

experience of fluent reading, other than passively listening to successful readers, reading to them. Audio books not only model reading but they actively engage the reader in the text so that reading is simulated and the reading habit established through the reader being willing to practise reading.

I recommend the audio reading techniques described here to teachers contemplating structures for the literacy hour, as a useful addition to their traditional methods.

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