

# 6 Essential Literacy Skills

# The Right to Be Literate

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## Chapter 3

# Listen Hard: Hear What Is Said

*It is the province of knowledge to speak and it is  
the privilege of wisdom to listen.*

—Oliver Wendell Holmes

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**Surprisingly,** the natural skills of hearing and speech take a back seat to the other language skills even though they are the first skills exercised in language development. Two arenas that address this phenomenon are (1) neuroscience and the development of the human brain and (2) cognitive sciences and the development of curriculum and instructional priorities.

Looking first at neuroscience, we learn that hearing and speech are hardwired into the human brain (Sylwester, 1995). In fact, when looking at the cognitive sciences, listening and speaking are the natural precursors to formal language development. This suggests that these primary language skills deserve frequent, continual, and consistent attention both in informal conversational situations and in formal, carefully structured lessons (Vygotsky, 1962) in K–12 classrooms. Listening needs to evolve into what is often called active, attentive listening.

It's prudent to remember that in the field of pedagogical understandings, oral language not only precedes written language but also provides cognitive rehearsal for the written word (Piaget, 1950; Vygotsky, 1962). The phenomenon of voice and text becoming a seamless duet of skills

has been expanded by a technology tsunami. Students today have communication options using sleek digital tools to produce a range of communiqués. These tools are accessible to schools and applicable to a wide spectrum of struggling, developing, and second language learners.

Yes, reading and writing warrant considerable focused attention and formalized instruction in the classroom, but the emergence of technology—epitomized by the common phrase “I was *listening*, but I didn’t hear what you said”—has only amplified the need for hard work in the areas of casual conversations and conventional discourse.

In this chapter, we first discuss the principles of cooperative learning, which help students develop strong listening skills. We then look at the PACTS technique to encourage attentive listening. Finally, we explore five standards-based strategies to grow this important skill.

## Principles of Cooperative Learning

The predominant instructional model employed in the development of listening skills is cooperative learning. There are three elements that are essential to make cooperative learning successful: (1) task complexity, (2) defined roles and responsibilities, and (3) relevant applications.

### ***Task Complexity***

Cooperative learning, like any strategy designed to foster higher-order thinking, requires robust relevant complex content. Students have to learn how to listen to each other in order to compromise or come to consensus on the assignment or project. For example, in brainstorming for ideas, themes, projects, or possible performances, one of the most fruitful strategies is to listen to what others in the group say and piggyback on the ideas by association. Cooperative learning is most successful when the task is complex enough that students depend on each other to achieve the goal; if the assignment consists of simple convergent questions, then students are more likely to not engage and go off task. In fact, the number one reason cooperative learning is not as successful as it could be is because the task the students are asked to do is not complex enough.

### ***Defined Roles and Responsibilities***

Effective cooperative learning depends on a clear definition of the roles and responsibilities in the group, which should be a priority of teacher observations of student learning. A challenge for English learners may be hearing all instructions correctly and translating them fast enough to understand in the moment. At the same time,

a student who is gifted verbally, who has had success in school because of ability and comfort speaking in front of the whole class, may have a difficult time being disciplined enough to listen with intention and purpose. Whereas in the past, this student jumped into a conversation or class discussion with the right answer, this same student can discover by listening that she can respond with an answer or a question that takes the conversation to a deeper place than simply “the right answer.”

## ***Relevant Applications***

When addressing the CCSS Speaking and Listening standards, teachers must give students as many opportunities as possible to speak and listen. For example, when using the formal structure of AB partners, if Partner A is supposed to explain a concept and Partner B is supposed to listen, then a teacher’s focus should first be on who is really talking in that group. When done correctly, Partner A learns that he can take time to formulate his ideas and share them without fear of being interrupted. Partner B learns that good listening helps her prepare for her response by focusing on what is being said and not just saying the first thing that comes to mind. This commonly used strategy is different from assigning different cooperative learning roles that each carry a specifically described responsibility, such as recorder, reporter, or illustrator.

## **PACTS Cues**

Beyond learning to cooperatively listen and speak, the right to be literate implies that students will be able to intelligently contribute to the discourse. Listening is an active, attentive, acquired skill important to such contributions. To listen means not only hearing music, the sound of someone’s voice, or loud noises but also comprehending the meaning of the rhythm and melody, the words, or the possible implications of the loud or small noises. Listening attentively implies that the listener is able to paraphrase, affirm, clarify, test options for meaning and intent, and sense the tone of the speaker—a set of cues known as PACTS. In short, PACTS are the microskills of “listening hard.”

- **Paraphrase:** Paraphrasing, the ability to say something in one’s own words, is a critical skill for deep understanding. Paraphrasing allows students to anchor their learning in their short-term and then long-term memory because the words and phrasing are theirs. They own it, and when they own it, they are less likely to plagiarize, because they understand it well enough to use their own language.
- **Affirm:** Affirming another’s thoughts or words is acknowledging what the other has said. Affirmation provides the speaker with the authentic feedback that completes the dialogue cycle. It can be in the form of a mere nod of

the head, indicating agreement, or an “uh huh” on the phone to give the speaker a signal that one is listening and is on the same page as the speaker.

- **Clarify:** Clarifying questions are extremely effective as part of the dialogue cycle. Inquiries such as “Do you mean . . . ?,” “Are you saying . . . ?,” or “Can you clarify . . . ?” move the conversation along and permit the speaker to expand on his or her idea. Clarifying is an extension of attentive listening, because the listener is actively trying to make sense of the words, honoring the speaker in the process.
- **Test options:** This speculation on meaning and intent is similar to clarifying but is often more specific to the listener’s interpretation or take on the issue under discussion: “Wouldn’t that be the same as . . . ?,” “That’s what I thought; it’s really much like . . .,” or “I might phrase it . . .” The inquiries or statements often lead the discussion in a different direction.
- **Sense tone:** Sensing the tone of the speaker is a subtle and sophisticated listening skill that relies on keen interpretations of the word choices and how the words are actually said. Think about how different tones taken with the same sentence might be interpreted: “That’s a great statement to make.” When said with anger (“THAT’S a great statement to make”), different words are emphasized than when said with admiration (“That’s a GREAT statement to make”) or agreement (“That IS a great statement to make”).

To share these cues with students, teachers build short practices into their classroom discussions and into their cooperative learning partner dialogues. Once students have these microlistening skills, they will use them regularly and, in the process, optimize these listening skills.

## Standards-Based Listening Strategies

The five standards-based strategies shared in this chapter are all grounded in these PACTS skills to help students become good listeners.

1. 2-4-8 Focus Interview
2. AB Pyramid Game
3. Five Minutes of Metacognition
4. Serve and Volley
5. Debate Format

The first three strategies are all forms of partner dialogues. Partner work is used frequently in K–12 classrooms because it is effective and manageable. It is hard for a

student to drop out of the partner talks, so participation is high. It is also more easily managed than some of the other cooperative structures that include three, four, and five students.

The last two strategies are forms of conversation and discussion structures. Formally structured classroom discussions give students opportunities to be involved in group interactions that require a more complex set of listening skills.

## ***The 2-4-8 Focus Interview***

The 2-4-8 Focus Interview strategy encourages attentive listening and active speaking, which are at the heart of collaborative dialogues. It behooves the listener to listen hard, because he will be responsible for retelling his partner's story. The stakes are high, since the partner is listening for accuracy and the important details while her story is being told by her partner.

While the real focus is on listening to that first partner, the exercise advances as students move from groups of two to groups of four, and possibly on to groups of eight, relaying partners' stories to one another. The interaction follows these three collaborative structures.

1. **Pairs:** Begin with students moving into A and B partners. Have Partner A share a memorable experience or book with Partner B, holding a related item as a symbolic reminder of what the focus of their discussion is going to be. Then, the listening partner takes the prop to serve as a cueing device in preparation for the next part of the interaction. The process is then reversed. Partner B talks, holding his artifact, and passes it to Partner A, who gets ready to repeat what she heard in next stage of the activity. Teachers can also have students share artifacts from a specific engaged learning lesson, such as a lesson sample of assigned spelling words in science or math homework, or their completed social studies project.
2. **Quads (pair of pairs):** Partners A and B then join another pair, Partners D and C. Each student now demonstrates listening skills by repeating or summarizing his or her partner's sharing to the new partners. This is done with their first partner's artifact in hand, as a physical reminder to what was said and what was heard. Partner A tells Partner B's story. Then, Partner B tells Partner A's story. In turn, Partner D tells Partner C's story, and Partner C tells Partner D's story.
3. **Eights (optional):** If the students manage the foursome well, eventually, the teacher may move them a third time into a configuration of eight students. In the group of eight, each person must tell a third partner's story from the sharing that occurred in the foursomes. Note that at this

point, with eight stories to retell, the stories are quite short as each person has just a little information, as compared to the first partner interaction in which the pair had more time to share. While all three interactions take about three to five minutes, by this round, each student is telling a thirdhand story that may not be remembered very well; thus the talking time is short for each person, but it evens out because there are eight speakers and eight listeners.

The 2-4-8 Focus Interview is welcomed as an opening activity to get students talking and sharing. It sets the stage in a partnership and then in a small group of four, to share ideas in a comfortable environment. This strategy is also a great way to summarize ideas from a lesson, as well as a way to introduce students to the idea of listening to others with a sharp ear for the gist of the story as well as important details.

### *Elementary-Level Example*

#### ■ Topic: Show-and-Tell

A first-grade teacher uses the 2-4-8 Focus Interview as an abbreviated show-and-tell, in which the items are shared first by the owners and then again by the listeners as they move into the foursome. For instance, Tommy says, “Here is my favorite comic book. I love Batman because he helps others.” Then, in the foursome, his partner says, “Tommy brought his Batman comic, his favorite comic book. It tells how Batman does good for the world.”

### *Middle-Level Example*

#### ■ Topic: Book Reports

A seventh-grade literature class uses the 2-4-8 Focus Interview to share book reports. Each student makes a poster of his or her book to show. Once students understand the speaking, listening, and retelling sequence, their listening skills can be stretched into the 2-4-8 format of active speaking and attentive listening. To extend the reports, the teacher asks them to create posters representing their take on the chosen books to help partners recall what was said. Objects such as these anchor their attention. With middle-grade students, who like to socialize, the 2-4-8 Focus Interview often becomes one of their favorite standards-based literacy activities.

### *Secondary-Level Example*

#### ■ Topic: Apps

A high school teacher decides to use the 2-4-8 Focus Interview to have students share digital apps on their smartphones or tablets. They take turns sharing apps they



have discovered to be useful as study aids, for college selection, for job hunting, and for exploring career paths. Such apps interest them because they help with their studies and with the anticipation of moving on to a tech school, junior college, on-the-job training, or a four-year university. The telling and retelling process in the 2-4-8 format is similar to that of previous grade levels, with something concrete in hand as students try to recall what was said by their partner.

The thinking skills targeted by the 2-4-8 Focus Interview strategy are interpret, understand, and represent. For more detail, refer to table A.1, “Thinking Skills and Acronym Tools for Each Area of Student Proficiency” (page 131), in the afterword.

## The AB Pyramid Game

In this strategy, one participant gives word clues to a partner. The partner is supposed to figure out the target word from the clues given. This is a dynamic, active, and fully engaging strategy to build important academic vocabulary with students. These words affect students’ assignments, assessments, and everyday work in the classroom and many times cross disciplines.

To start the game, have AB partners sit or stand, shoulder to shoulder, with Partner A facing the large media screen in the front of the room and Partner B facing away from the screen. Name a word category and then show words one at a time on the screen. Partner A reads the words silently and begins to give clues to Partner B to elicit responses. Once Partner B responds correctly, she raises her hand up and down to signal that they are ready to go on. All student pairs are doing this at the same time. The teacher makes a judgment, when most are ready to move to the next word on the slide. Partner A continues the process by giving clues for the next word revealed on the screen as Partner B guesses. It is high energy and uproariously funny at times as partners collaborate with gestures, pantomime, use rhyming words, and change their tone of voice to help their partners identify the words and finish the game as winners! There is no real scoring for the game. It is an energizer to get students generating lots of words and build vocabulary as they participate in these highly active classroom collaborations.



One of the major benefits of the AB Pyramid Game is the need for sharp listening skills by both partners. While Partner B must listen well and use the clues to generate a word, Partner A must also listen closely to the responses to steer Partner B closer to the goal. For example, if Partner B says “divide” in response to a clue for math

functions, Partner A could use that answer and lead his partner along with a second clue: “opposite.” Partner B picks up on the sequence and says “multiply”—the right answer.

The AB Pyramid Game offers an opportunity for students to interact while also working on listening skills *and* vocabulary. It serves as a great mixer as well, since it gets the teams on board and builds team spirit. The AB Pyramid Game is a nice way to begin a class period with a bang! It also works well right after a lunch break, when students are becoming a bit lethargic. The energy really surges once the game is under way. It offers a perfect opportunity to move students into new partnerships, which always energizes the room. Of course, it is a powerful ending strategy, too, as it is a great way to review key vocabulary words and concepts utilized throughout the study unit. It keeps students on task as the day winds down and also provides an enthusiastic closure to the class.

### *Elementary-Level Example*

#### ■ Topic: Math

In a fourth-grade classroom, the teacher structures the AB Pyramid Game in four rounds, two with Partner A as the speaker and two with Partner A as the listener. In each round, she puts the four words on the screen, one at a time, as the listener tries to find the target word. Then, the roles are reversed, and the same process continues in the next round. See figure 3.1 for the mathematics vocabulary. Again, the game is not really about scoring. Its purpose and intent is to share vocabulary words in an interesting and collaborative way and spark understanding about word meanings.

Round 1: Partner A	Round 2: Partner B	Round 3: Partner A	Round 4: Partner B
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Addition</li> <li>• Measurement</li> <li>• Mathematics</li> <li>• Reasoning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Subtraction</li> <li>• Geometry</li> <li>• Arithmetic</li> <li>• Accuracy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Division</li> <li>• Perimeter</li> <li>• Calculator</li> <li>• Logical</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Symmetry</li> <li>• Solution</li> <li>• Computation</li> <li>• Equation</li> </ul>

**Figure 3.1: Sample fourth-grade math vocabulary for the AB Pyramid Game (using academic Tier 2, 3+ syllable words).**

Beck, McKeown, and Kucan’s (2002) Tier 2 and Tier 3 words provide rigor during the AB Pyramid Game. For instance, teachers could use Tier 2 academic words

(*paragraph, table, chart, narrative, expository, opinion*) and possibly Tier 3 domain-specific words (*cell, mitosis, DNA, hereditary, genetic, disease*).

### Middle-Level Example

#### ■ Topic: Biology

An eighth-grade biology teacher uses the AB Pyramid Game to strengthen vocabulary knowledge. He structures the game in four rounds, two with Partner A as the speaker and two with Partner B as the listener. In each round, the four words are revealed on the screen, one at a time; the speaker gives clues as the listener tries to guess the target word. Then, the roles are reversed, and the same process continues through each of the remaining rounds. Middle-level students can get quite enthusiastic about this word game, so management rules need to be firmly in place. See figure 3.2 for vocabulary.

Round 1: Partner A	Round 2: Partner B	Round 3: Partner A	Round 4: Partner B
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skeleton</li> <li>• Digestion</li> <li>• Circulation</li> <li>• Genetics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Muscular</li> <li>• DNA</li> <li>• Temperature</li> <li>• Dendrites</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cardiovascular</li> <li>• Cellular</li> <li>• Antiseptic</li> <li>• Logical</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arteries</li> <li>• Hereditary</li> <li>• Injury</li> <li>• O-Positive</li> </ul>

**Figure 3.2: Sample eighth-grade biology vocabulary for the AB Pyramid Game (using academic Tier 2, 3+ syllable words).**

### Secondary-Level Example

#### ■ Topic: Government

A high school U.S. history teacher arranges the classroom for the AB Pyramid Game: four rounds, with the partners alternating speaking and listening to find the target word. Even though these are high school students who teachers may think are too sophisticated for this kind of review, it's surprising how much they like the action-oriented game. See figure 3.3 (page 60) for vocabulary.

The thinking skills targeted by the AB Pyramid Game are analyze, generate, and associate. For more detail, refer to table A.1, "Thinking Skills and Acronym Tools for Each Area of Student Proficiency" (page 131), in the afterword.

Round 1: Partner A	Round 2: Partner B	Round 3: Partner A	Round 4: Partner B
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tradition</li> <li>• Democracy</li> <li>• Government</li> <li>• Liberty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-Evident</li> <li>• Anarchy</li> <li>• Citizenship</li> <li>• America</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Separation</li> <li>• President</li> <li>• Inalienable</li> <li>• Happiness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Created</li> <li>• Independence</li> <li>• Constitution</li> <li>• Declaration</li> </ul>

**Figure 3.3: Sample tenth-grade U.S. history vocabulary for the AB Pyramid Game (using academic Tier 2, 3+ syllable words).**

### ***Five Minutes of Metacognition***

Active brains lead to mindful engagement! When teachers mediate for conscious and unconscious processing, they are teaching the learner the skills of metacognitive reflection. Metacognition, or reflective thinking, is at the heart of self-assessment. Metacognition literally means *beyond knowing*. Metacognitive reflection is knowing about how one knows, thinking about how one thinks, and learning about how one learns. It's really about self-monitoring, self-assessing, self-correcting, and generally becoming self-aware.

Although metacognition is about oneself, it can be fostered in reflective pairs. The Five Minutes of Metacognition strategy uses three rounds of sharing and listening to help student pairs see how metacognitive reflection can be a powerful listening strategy. Five Minutes of Metacognition fosters reflective learning before, during, or after a lesson as students explore planning tools such as goal setting and advance organizers, monitoring techniques such as learning logs and cooperative structures, and evaluation measures and reflective questioning to judge one's responses.

Often used as a pre- or postlearning strategy in the classroom, Five Minutes of Metacognition begins with the student pairs determining who will start first. Once that is clear, the speaking partner responds to a prompt that poses a situation or question related to the lesson. Figure 3.4 demonstrates what might occur between two students. Five Minutes of Metacognition is a strategy for all grade levels, when applied with appropriate concepts and time expectations. For example, young students can talk about how hard or easy the task was, while older students might discuss where they got stuck and how they got unstuck. High school students might move into more sophisticated territory by agreeing or disagreeing with a current event issue and go on to justify their positions. It is clear that the concept of reflective talk benefits every classroom, as it helps concretize learning for students young and old.

With repeated applications, students become more comfortable talking about their thinking, and they realize in a short time how important it is to listen closely to their partners so their responses make sense.

The reason this reflective strategy is so important is that students learn more about how to be strategic thinkers when planning, monitoring, and evaluating their work, habits, likes and dislikes, strengths, and weaknesses in and out of school. Thus, reflective thinking becomes second nature for lifelong learning adventures.

**Self-Assessing Question:** How are you relating to this historical figure (Lincoln), and why do you think you're thinking that way?

**Round 1 Directions:** Each partner gets two minutes to state his or her position on the topic.

Partner A: I don't relate to him very well, because I am not driven to school myself as he was. I pretty much rely on the system to push me along. I think my lack of intrinsic motivation is why I'm thinking about Lincoln this way. He was motivated to read whatever books he could find. I am not anything like that.

Partner B: That's funny because that was my first reaction, but when I thought about it a little longer, I realized I am like that about some things. I want to learn all I can about motorcycles. It's a passion I have had since I was little and spent summers in my uncle's Harley shop. It was fascinating to see the welding torch melt the metal and how the handlebars and seats were assembled. Mostly, I loved when the spray paint turned the metal into bright and brilliant colors. I think Lincoln's story is a great model of following your passion.

**Round 2 Directions:** Each partner gets one minute to compare the two positions.

Partner A: Well, now that you said all that, I do love technology, and I pursue every new app I hear about. I am basically an app junkie. Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying Lincoln was a book junkie, but he did pursue his passion for books relentlessly, and I think I do the same.

Partner B: It's interesting how we both had an initial reaction to the question and then, with some reflection time, we really went deeper into Lincoln as a person we can definitely learn from. It's revealing to think about historical figures that way. It makes the history part more relevant when you can see connections to our lives today.

**Round 3 Directions:** Each partner gets thirty seconds to wrap up a final position.

Partner A: Thanks for sharing with me. I feel like I did get a lot of insight and want to read more about Lincoln and other famous people from history.

Partner B: Yeah, I know what you mean. The history class has a lot more to offer me than I originally thought. It just depends on how much I am willing to think about it in terms of what I can take away.

**Figure 3.4: Sample Five Minutes of Metacognition strategy.**

*Elementary-Level Example*

## ■ Topic: “The Three Bears”

A second-grade teacher provides his students with the self-assessing question: In the story “The Three Bears,” which of the three bears are you thinking about, and why do you think you chose that one? For the first round, the teacher sets a timer for two minutes per partner and gives the students—who are sitting in pairs—the instructions to take turns assessing their own responses.

- **Partner A:** I’m thinking about the baby bear, because I am the youngest in my family and I am always the last one to get a turn.
- **Partner B:** I’m thinking of the mom, because my mom is the one who is always in the kitchen fixing dinner.

Then the teacher sets a time for one minute per partner for round two and tells the pairs to compare their responses.

- **Partner A:** When you said the mom, I know just what you mean. My mom does the cooking too.
- **Partner B:** Well, I am not the youngest. I am in the middle.

Finally, round three takes place, with thirty seconds per partner to wrap up a final position.

- **Partner A:** It’s funny neither of us picked Papa Bear. But I like my baby bear choice.
- **Partner B:** Me too. I like what I picked. I couldn’t have picked Papa because he isn’t always there for dinner.

*Middle-Level Example*

## ■ Topic: Goals

A fifth-grade teacher decides that the Five Minutes of Metacognition strategy will help her students create and stick to goals for writing the assigned thousand-word essay. After splitting students into pairs, she gives them the monitoring question: How will you track your progress with the thousand-word essay due in two weeks?

Round one begins, with two minutes per partner to state their positions.

- **Partner A:** I already have a daily chart to check off that I write my one hundred words. If I miss one day, I plan to double the number to two hundred the next day.
- **Partner B:** I want to do 150 each day just to be sure I have time to finish and time to look it over one last time. So I need to plan in that time.

Next, the teacher sets the timer for round two, with one minute per partner to compare positions.

- **Partner A:** That's a good thought. I need to think about the final stages and what I might have to do, even though I plan to read and revise one hundred words every day I write.
- **Partner B:** I know what you mean. I do like the tracking on a chart, and I think I might mark it on my calendar each night.

The class finishes up with round three. Each student has thirty seconds to wrap up a final position.

- **Partner A:** I've been thinking; I want time for someone else to read the final draft before I turn it in.
- **Partner B:** That's a great idea. I think I'll ask my sister right away if she will help me by reading it, even though it is a lot of text.

### *Secondary-Level Example*

#### ■ Topic: Art and Architecture

A high school class studying art and architecture uses the following planning prompt to begin the Five Minutes of Metacognition strategy: How are you as a planner? Rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 as the lowest) based on renowned architect D. H. Burnham's quote, "Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men's blood. Make big plans: aim high" (as quoted in McBrien, 2010), and justify your ranking. The teacher instructs students to follow the back and forth of the strategy, with necessary cueing and sampling from her.

With round one, the teacher puts two minutes per partner on the clock so the students can state their positions.

- **Partner A:** On a scale of 1 to 10, I am probably a 3. I am a pretty poor planner, when I really think about it. I plod along with no real thought about the big picture. That's why I'm always late with things.
- **Partner B:** I'm just the opposite, so I'm probably an 8 or 9. I can't start until I have a plan in my head. I need to see the whole thing before I know where to start. It's funny, but once I see the end, I am ready to begin.

Next, round two begins with one minute per partner to compare positions.

- **Partner A:** Maybe I should try seeing the end before I jump in so impulsively. It can't hurt, right?
- **Partner B:** Yes, I think it's worth it to at least outline a plan. It works for me, so I'm sticking to it.

Finally, they go to round three, with thirty seconds per partner to wrap up a final position.

- **Partner A:** This was helpful to think about how I plan and how I might adjust some of my habits for getting things done on time.
- **Partner B:** I got a lot from this talk, too. You affirmed my process and that made me feel good, but I'm also thinking about maybe being more spontaneous about parts of my plan as it unfolds.

The thinking skills targeted with the Five Minutes of Metacognition strategy are generate, generalize, and apply. For more detail, refer to table A.1, "Thinking Skills and Acronym Tools for Each Area of Student Proficiency" (page 131), in the afterword.

## ***Serve and Volley***

Serve and Volley is a cooperative strategy for two students, designed to teach the skill of asking probing, clarifying questions in a safe environment. What distinguishes the Serve and Volley strategy from simply having students work together is that each partner has a specific task that depends on the serve or volley that the other partner makes. Thus, the actual dialogue is akin to a serve and volley play in tennis.

Ideally, the partner dialogues revolve around an essential question or big idea at the heart of the instructional unit or even that day's lesson. Here is an example of the Serve and Volley:

- **(Serve) Partner A Task:** Infer the gist of this message.
- **(Volley) Partner B Task:** Compare your understanding to your partner's.
- **(Serve) Partner A Task:** Dig deeper into the message using a life situation.
- **(Volley) Partner B Task:** Contrast that example to one in a school situation.

The Serve and Volley is designed specifically to teach students to listen critically and to speak responsively, as their answers are wholly dependent on their ability to incorporate or react to what their partner has said. The first partner shares, or "serves," an idea, an interpretation, an opinion, or an answer. His or her partner then has to "volley" a response back. This is not as easy as it may sound. Yet, once students enter this kind of dialogue, they become focused and engaged (Caine & Caine, 1990). See figure 3.5 for sample relays.

Good listeners maintain eye contact, nod their heads to acknowledge they are hearing what the partner is saying, and do not interrupt. They wait until the appropriate time to offer their own ideas. The goal is for students to contribute an appropriate response in any conversation. Good conversationalists are like good readers,



intuitively knowing what questions to ask as they process the information either from what they are reading or what they are hearing. They determine whether they should ask questions to make a comparison, to clarify a key idea, or to elaborate on a connection they have made.

**Critical Thinking:** Analyze, Evaluate, Problem Solve

**A**—Evaluate who needs to hear this message. Explain.

**B**—Analyze. Give at least one reason.

**A**—Summarize both comments into one sentence.

**B**—Synthesize the entire conversation into three words or less.

**Creative Thinking:** Generate, Associate, Hypothesize

**A**—How does this quote relate to your own life experience?

**B**—Elaborate on one key point with multiple associations.

**A**—Draw one conclusion based on all of the associations your partner generated.

**B**—Hypothesize: The concept of \_\_\_\_\_ is like \_\_\_\_\_  
(kitchen utensil), because both \_\_\_\_\_.

**Complex Thinking:** Clarify, Interpret, Determine

**A**—Determine a significant theme from the media or text.

**B**—Interpret your partner's viewpoint by paraphrasing.

**A**—Clarify the theme with another rich example.

**B**—Determine if this is the central theme. Explain.

**Comprehensive Thinking:** Understand, Infer, Compare

**A**—Infer the gist that this message sends.

**B**—Compare your understanding to your partner's.

**A**—Dig deeper into the message with a life situation.

**B**—Contrast that example to one in a school setting.

**Collaborative Thinking:** Explain, Develop, Decide

**A**—Explain how you would approach this critical issue.

**B**—Develop a next step for your partner's approach. Justify.

**A**—Explain why you think it's a good idea.

**B**—Represent this conversation using a song title.

**Figure 3.5: Seven Serve and Volley relay samples.**

continued →

**Communicative Thinking: Reason, Connect, Represent**

**A**—Make a connection between two (characters, problems, or situations).

**B**—Provide two good reasons why you agree or disagree.

**A**—Connect three reasons in an original statement.

**B**—Represent the flavor of dialogue with a memorable quote.

**Cognitive Transfer: Synthesize, Generalize, Apply**

**A**—Generalize your opinion of this with evidence.

**B**—Apply this opinion to a similar situation and explain the connection.

**A**—Use a mathematical equation and connect the two situations.

**B**—Synthesize the ideas discussed using a nursery rhyme.

Strategies that teach speaking and listening are successful when there is a clear objective to the learning. In fact, Renate Nummela Caine and Geoffrey Caine (1990) cite that challenge engages the mind, and the back-and-forth design of this strategy creates this focus. In the Serve and Volley strategy, if students listen well, there is immediate evidence, as they volley back their answer. In addition, some of the listening skills required in the Common Core anchor standards for speaking and listening are to participate effectively in a range of conversations, build on others' ideas, integrate and evaluate information, and include a speaker's point of view, reason, and use of evidence and rhetoric (NGA & CCSSO, 2010a)—which are covered by this strategy.

To develop the skill of listening critically, students need many opportunities with peer interactions, not just listening attentively to the teacher during whole-class instruction. The Serve and Volley strategy is effective for the speaking partners because the students develop more skill as they hear their ideas repeated and incorporated in their partner's response. This feedback loop is important at any level but especially for students making the transition from a passive learner to an active, engaged learner (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

In this strategy, pairs of students discuss something they read on the board, a video clip they just saw, a chapter they read the night before, or a lecture they just heard. Teacher prompts are designed to emphasize different thinking skills. These prompts help students respond with probing questions and take the conversation deeper; Socratic questions, for instance, are a great prompt style because they provide a historical prompting model



that mirrors the back and forth of the Serve and Volley, yet with a slightly different purpose. You can have just one type on the board or a combination of questions. See figure 3.6 for sample questions.

**Conceptual Clarification Questions**

- What exactly does this mean?
- How does this relate to what we have been talking about?
- What do we already know about this?
- Can you give me an example?

**Probing Assumptions**

- What else could we assume?
- You seem to be assuming . . .
- How did you choose those assumptions?
- What would happen if . . . ?

**Probing Rationale, Reasons, and Evidence**

- How do you know this?
- Can you give me an example of that?
- How can I be sure of what you are saying?
- What evidence is there to support what you are saying?

**Questioning Viewpoints and Perspectives**

- What alternative ways of looking at this are there?
- What is the difference between . . . and . . . ?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of . . . ?
- How are . . . and . . . similar?

**Probe Implications and Consequences**

- Then what would happen?
- What are the implications of . . . ?
- How does . . . affect . . . ?
- Why is . . . important?

**Questions About the Question**

- What was the point of asking that question?
- Why do you think I asked this question?
- Am I making sense? Why or why not?
- What else might I ask?

**Figure 3.6: Sample Socratic questions—Serve and Volley relays.**

The Serve and Volley strategy facilitates actual conversations in a college or career environment, where the skills of listening critically and responding appropriately in ways that deepen or clarify the topic are expected. At the heart of collaborative problem solving—a skill employers look for in prospective hires—is speaking effectively and listening productively. Regardless of the job or career path chosen, communication—specifically the skill of oral communication—is often an understated essential skill, as indicated by this quick story. The director of the Southern Hemisphere Observatory in Puerto Rico alluded to the importance of communication skills when we talked to him years ago during a professional development day. He was talking about how lucky he was to have his dream job. He had wanted to be an astronomer since he was nine years old. Yet, in this role as an admired astronomer, he confessed that he spends 75 percent of his time writing grants and addressing Congress in Washington, DC, in order to get funding for the observatory projects. He said that for as much as he loves astronomy, he knows that his skillfulness in communicating ideas and collaborating with others is as responsible for his success as his background in science.

### *Elementary-Level Example*

#### ■ Topic: Determining the Main Idea When Reading

As part of determining the main idea during reading instruction, a third-grade teacher discusses how to refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

In the exercise, students sit in pairs. Each pair has a copy of the chosen passage from “The Making of a Hurricane” (Lauber, 1996), and the teacher reads it to them and then with them using Choral Reading. The students decide who will be Partner A and Partner B. After reading the text, the students begin the Serve and Volley process, and the teacher keeps the time so that each exchange does not go too long and provides the following prompts to keep students on target.

- **Partner A:** Give three factors that contribute to the creation of hurricanes.
- **Partner B:** Of the three factors Partner A mentioned, which is the most important? Give two reasons for your answer.
- **Partner A:** Agree or disagree with Partner B’s reasoning, and explain why.
- **Partner B:** Summarize both comments into one sentence.

At the end, the teacher samples some of the final summaries.

### Middle-Level Example

#### ■ Topic: European History

A seventh-grade teacher has the students out of their seats and paired up at the board. She asks the students to determine who will be Partner A and who will be Partner B. The partners read “Living Fences” from *England: The Land* (Banting, 2003) silently to themselves and then together. This simple act of buddy reading adds a social component to the cooperative learning activity, which is critical to the success of any cooperative learning strategy (Johnson & Johnson, 1997). Once they’ve finished reading, their teacher guides them in the Serve and Volley strategy.

- **Partner A:** Who do you agree with, the people destroying the hedgerows to build large farms or those trying to save them? Share your reason.
- **Partner B:** Compare and contrast your partner’s opinion to yours.
- **Partner A:** Summarize both comments into one sentence.
- **Partner B:** Synthesize the summary sentence into three words or less.

### Secondary-Level Example

#### ■ Topic: American Literature

Before having students read *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960), a high school literature teacher wants the students to explore some of the big themes in the book and posts an essential question on the board: In real life, does one person always receive the same treatment as another?

An example of the Serve and Volley includes the following:

- **Partner A:** How does this relate to what we have been talking about?
- **Partner B:** Give an example of your partner’s idea.
- **Partner A:** Comment on the example or give another one.
- **Partner B:** Why are these ideas important today?

The thinking skills targeted by the Serve and Volley strategy are compare, analyze, and synthesize. For more detail, refer to table A.1, “Thinking Skills and Acronym Tools for Each Area of Student Proficiency” (page 131), in the afterword.

## Debate Format

The Debate Format strategy is structured for speaking and listening exercises in the classroom. It calls for point/counterpoint, pro/con, yea/nay, agree/disagree kinds of interactions between two students. Yet, unlike the formal debate teams of traditional,

upper-level classes, the Debate Format embraces a model in which all students can practice the art of debating. The purpose of this activity regarding practicing speaking and listening skills is to facilitate quick interactions with several different partners. It is a highly active and lively strategy, and it requires a high degree of listening in order for the listening partner to give a contrasting point of view.

Create two circles of students, one inside the other, and with the same number of people in each circle. Next, announce the topic so students have a little time to think about what they are going to say. The topic can be related to subject matter content, community concerns, or anything else the teacher deems important. Assign the counterpoints of the topic—“Are cats or dogs better pets?,” “Are essays harder to write than stories?,” “Is mental math a high-priority skill?”—to the inner and outer circles and determine which group will talk first. Then play music and instruct the inside circle to move clockwise and the outside circle to move counterclockwise until the music stops, at which point the students pair off with the closest person from the opposite circle.

Then, the first speakers begin presenting one point with supporting evidence on the issue to their partner. At your signal, the partner gives a counterpoint response. Proceed with the music and movement of the circles. When you stop the music a second time, students face a new partner and share points of their argument. Their partner continues by giving a counterpoint. Each time the interaction is repeated, students share with different partners. Usually, a third rotation is the final one.

This strategy models three aspects of active, engaged standards-based learning: (1) collaboration, (2) argument, and (3) evidence. Teachers must not underestimate the energizing power of movement combined with the authentic emotional connections that come with face-to-face dialogues. The conversations often become so engaging and intense that participants barely notice the pairs on either side of them, who are just as actively engaged.

This is an especially valuable strategy as students learn to argue a point and provide evidence to support their point of view in oral dialogues. These debate skills develop over time and can easily transfer into written arguments, evidence papers, and persuasive essays.

### *Elementary-Level Example*

#### ■ Topic: Reading Versus Writing

A third-grade teacher uses the Debate Format to get students talking about reading versus writing. After asking the students, “Which is better, reading or writing?” he arranges them in two concentric circles. To keep their attention, he has them sing a familiar song as they move, such as “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star,” “The Farmer in

the Dell,” “Ring Around the Rosy,” or “Row, Row, Row Your Boat.” The first round sounds like this:

- **Inner-circle partner point**—Reading. For me, reading is faster and maybe easier, because I can think ahead and kinda know what’s coming next.
- **Outer-circle partner counterpoint**—I disagree, because if you don’t know some of the words, or if the topic is unfamiliar, you cannot read very fast and don’t even understand what you have read.

### *Middle-Level Example*

#### ■ Topic: Arguing Versus Persuading

A sixth-grade teacher is discussing persuasive and argumentative writing with her students and decides to use the Debate Format to get a good discussion going. She asks the students, “How is arguing different than persuading?” and tells them to get into two concentric circles. The first round sounds like this:

- **Inner-circle partner point**—Arguing is different than persuading because arguing can get emotional and irrational very quickly. On the other hand, persuasion seems more deliberate and factual.
- **Outer-circle partner counterpoint**—I disagree. Arguing and persuasion are the same. In both cases, you are trying to convince someone of something you believe in or want to promote or advocate.

### *Secondary-Level Example*

#### ■ Topic: Geometry Versus Algebra

A high school math teacher is comparing and contrasting mathematic disciplines and uses the Debate Format to stimulate a discussion among her students. She asks, “Which is easier, geometry or algebra?” Once students have arranged themselves appropriately for the strategy, she begins the music. The first round sounds like this:

- **Inner-circle partner point**—Geometry is definitely easier for me. It’s about logic and reasoning that I can understand and make sense of. It seems like common sense.
- **Outer-circle partner counterpoint**—I disagree. I prefer to do algebra problems, because I love the symbolic language and the formulas and equations. It seems so scholarly. It makes me feel smart.

The thinking skills targeted by the Debate Format strategy are connect, compare, and explain. For more detail, refer to table A.1, “Thinking Skills and Acronym Tools for Each Area of Student Proficiency” (page 131), in the afterword.

## Conclusion

Listening hard is not easy. Students are often distracted at any age. Yet, teachers can instill the habit of focused, attentive listening so students can, with practice, retain as much information as possible. Teachers can introduce the good listening habits of PACTS (paraphrase, affirm, clarify, test options, sense tone) and develop student listening skills throughout the year. Listening is a lifelong skill that can be improved with explicit attention to learning how to listen and hear what is said.