

Guided Listening

A framework for using read-aloud and other oral language experiences to build comprehension skills and help students record, share, value, and interpret ideas

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Introduction

“You cannot teach today’s students with yesterday’s materials and expect them to have success tomorrow.”

—*Rhonda Stonecipher*

Imagine opening the cover of a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle. As you gaze into the confusion of colors and shapes, lines and textures, you know that somehow these smaller pieces amazingly all belong together. Each piece fills a unique place to create a larger image. However, as you stare into the mosaic of pieces before you, the final image is invisible. What would you do if there was no picture on the cover of the box? Where would you begin? How would you start to organize those pieces so that they would all fit together? Imagine, now, that you knew that the red pieces formed an apple at the centre of a bowl of fruit. Would this change your approach to organizing the pieces before you? Perhaps you would begin by sorting through the pieces and selecting only the red pieces that would combine to form the apple. Somehow, having an idea of the final image helps us to organize the smaller components in a way that makes sense.

Guided Listening is based on the principle that students listen more effectively when given a purpose for listening. Students are bombarded with so many ideas that it is sometimes challenging for them to see the unified purpose of text—the bigger picture the ideas represent. When given the tools to organize this collection of ideas (like the picture on a puzzle box), they can listen attentively for cues and have a greater focus for their listening.

On a recent vacation in the southwestern United States, we found ourselves driving south along a beautiful coastal highway. On our right there were spectacular ocean views of crashing waves and sandy beaches. To our left there were breathtaking cliffs and crumbling hills, with the land majestically bowing to meet the sea. Suddenly, ahead of us the highway divided and branched inland. We continued along this route for a number of kilometres before the view became mundane and we wished to return to the ocean views of the coastal highway. A crossroad appeared ahead; it seemed to be a main throughway. We decided to follow this unknown route, believing that if we headed west, we would again find the ocean. It was not long before the town faded into the distance and a sharp left turn led us into the mountains. The road was winding and narrow. On the right the road dropped sharply into unknown abysses. The path ahead seemed uncertain as it wound perilously close to the edge of high mountains and around bends. As almost all signs of civilization disappeared behind us, we questioned whether or not it was wise to continue along this road.

We were like children listening to an onslaught of ideas, thoughts, and images, trying to decipher the important concepts and decide whether or not to persevere. How many times have you seen your students cock their heads sharply to the side, furrow their brows, and try to decode new material?

Let's return to the example of the highway journey. Did we proceed? The key to our success was the roadmap that clearly marked the path to follow. Knowing that the coastal highway was ahead instilled in us the confidence to persevere through the unknown and to emerge at the desired destination. We were not sure how we would get there, but we knew where we were going.

Guided Listening is a roadmap for students, with the destination clearly marked. When they know their final destination, they are more able to recognize the landmarks along the way.

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What is Guided Listening?

“The mind arranges and stores information in an orderly fashion. New information about a concept is filed into an existing framework of categories called a schema that contains specific information about a concept. So, when prior knowledge is retrieved, this schema provides a framework on which to attach new knowledge”

—Karen Bromley

Guided Listening is an instructional tool that effectively links elements of oral language with independent reading through the use of metacognitive strategies. Through Guided Listening, students become more proficient at understanding that reading is a “dialogue with text.” Guided Listening creates the scaffold for effective listening. Students listen more effectively when they clearly understand what they are listening for. Guided Listening establishes this through giving students

- a purpose for listening
- a framework on which to organize their ideas
- a way to record, share, and value the ideas of others
- a practical transfer of these skills to their independent work

Guided Listening vs. the Traditional Read-Aloud

Most teachers read daily to their students as an essential component of the balanced literacy program.

Often while I was reading to my class, I would wonder if their minds were wandering off. Sometimes I even caught my own mind straying from the words on the page, yet the automatic reading aloud continued. Sometimes I saw my students doodling, fidgeting, or playing with items of their clothing (or the clothing of others). I sometimes saw raised hands and, hopeful that they may have something profound to add to the story, was disappointed when I discovered that they needed to go to the washroom. On occasion, I would complete a story, and then proceed to have a “discussion” with the students about why a character did something, or what they would have done in a similar situation—often to be faced with students unable to recall the intricate details of the text, or even the overall theme. *How about providing proof from the text? How do you know that? What made you think that?* They were often unable to recall the specific details of the text or had not attended to the things that were truly important.

I was once surprised after reading a chapter of *Charlotte’s Web* by E.B. White that, when I asked my students to describe the main idea, and they told me that Fern had a crush on Henry Fussy.

I wondered if my students would be able to listen more effectively if they understood the purpose for listening *before* I read to them. If we give the students the “questions” ahead of time, then they can listen for the answers, instead of trying to remember random bits of information that may possibly be the answer

Providing direct instruction on metacognitive reading strategies, allowing time for students to independently practice these skills, and assessing and providing feedback, results in strong readers.

to a possible question that the teacher may possibly ask that they may possibly have to answer.

Guided Listening is not an “add-on,” not simply something to add into your instructional day. Guided Listening allows you to take instructional activities that are already in place and make them more successful, purposeful, and focused. Every teacher reads aloud to the class, and every teacher allows time in the day for independent reading. Guided Listening allows these two activities to become purposefully connected. Incorporating Guided Listening to your teaching practice is a natural transition. It gives structure to already existing practices and results in invaluable assessment opportunities that can serve to strengthen students’ learning.

What Does a Traditional Read-Aloud Look Like?

- The teacher sits with the class to read aloud a text to them.
- The students gather together to sit and listen to the story and look at the pictures.
- The teacher pauses occasionally to discuss concepts and ideas with the students.
- The teacher poses questions for students to answer.
- Students may be asked to share their thinking; one or two answers may be shared with the class.
- There may be a follow-up activity after reading the text, for which students are asked to remember, retell, and reflect on parts of what they have heard.
- The teacher usually focuses on incidental learning, reading the text and thinking-aloud to model successful reading strategies.
- There is little or no assessment of students’ understanding of the text.

What Does Guided Listening Look Like?

- The teacher gathers the class together to share the text with them using the Guided Listening procedure.
- The teacher shares with the class the purpose for listening and provides focused instruction *prior* to reading the text.
- Students use clipboards to record their ideas while listening.
- The teacher pauses occasionally to discuss specific concepts and ideas with the students.
- The students pose questions, present ideas, make inferences/predictions/connections, and reflect on the ideas of their peers
- All students are actively engaged in the listening task.
- There is individual student accountability for learning.
- There can be direct connection to, and transfer of, listening skills to independent reading.
- Isolation of listening and reading strategies allow opportunities for practice and mastery of skills.
- Guided Listening allows the teacher opportunities for instructional feedback, diagnostic assessment of student’s oral language skills, and intervention as needed for specific students (diversified instruction), and isolated assessment of each listening and reading strategy.

Read-alouds and independent reading are essential daily components of balanced literacy program; however, students often become passive observers and not all students are accountable for demonstrating their learning or have an equal opportunity to participate in discussions. Guided Listening helps students to listen critically and respond appropriately.

What's the Difference?

- During a traditional read-aloud, the teacher is fully engaged in the text, but is unsure if all students are on task, listening attentively, and understanding the text. Guided Listening ensures that all students are engaged and accountable for recording and sharing their ideas.
- During a traditional read-aloud, the teacher asks the questions and the students answer them. During Guided Listening, students ask the questions; many questions remain unanswered.
- During a traditional read-aloud, the teacher determines which ideas are important based on questions the teacher poses for discussion; during Guided Listening, students determine important ideas from the text based on parameters set by the teacher.
- During a traditional read-aloud, the students are not aware of the follow-up task while they are listening, so they are unable to selectively listen for information that may be helpful. In Guided Listening, the students are presented with a clear and concise purpose for listening prior to the read-aloud.
- The traditional read-aloud is not usually connected to students' independent reading. Guided Listening provides a clear connection and direct transfer between the instructional purpose of the read-aloud and the student's independent reading.

Metacognition

Metacognition, in short, means thinking about thinking. When students are intentionally taught the processes connected with successful reading, they become successful readers themselves. It is not enough for students to know what reading strategies are connected to reading, but they need to have direct instruction and sufficient time to independently practice these skills. Students require monitoring and feedback on their use of reading strategies. Instruction on metacognitive reading strategies needs to be ongoing, purposeful, integrated into a variety of subject areas and with a variety of texts. When you teach strategies in isolation, you allow students to focus specifically on the steps associated with each skill resulting in gradual integration and independence.

Meena Singhal (2001) concluded that strategy training leads to improved reading performance. A chart that summarizes her recommendations for successful strategy instruction is on page 12.

I think; therefore I am...
I think about my thinking;
therefore, I understand.

Keith Lenz (2005) from the University of Kansas concludes that the most successful ways of teaching comprehension strategies is to use very direct and explicit instruction.

Successful Strategy Instruction	Connections to Guided Listening
Teachers must focus on the processes involved in reading and allocate instructional time to teaching these strategies through direct strategy-instruction and modelling.	Guided Listening is a structured time with direct instruction and modelling of each metacognitive listening strategy.
Teachers must think about how a particular strategy is best applied and in which context.	Texts should be carefully selected so that students will easily be able to apply the strategy that is being taught.
Teachers should monitor use of reading strategies in order to determine individual students' strengths and needs. This, in turn, will help to provide effective and appropriate strategy instruction.	Students' application of oral language can be monitored during Guided Listening. This easily forms the basis for further instruction.
Teachers must present strategies as purposeful to a variety of texts and contexts so that students can apply these strategies in a variety of reading situations.	Using a variety of texts for Guided Listening will help students to effectively transfer their skills and knowledge of listening strategies to a variety of applications. Introducing students to different forms of media will also facilitate this transfer of skills.
Strategy instruction needs to be consistent and ongoing, not just a single lesson or unit.	Using Guided Listening on a regular basis helps students to continue to build on previous knowledge and begin to use these strategies with greater ease and integration.
Students must be provided with opportunities to practice strategies that they have been taught.	Encouraging students to read independently immediately following a read-aloud enables them to relate listening strategies to reading strategies, and to practice the application of strategies while they are fresh in their mind.
Students benefit from sharing with each other about their reading strategies.	Encouraging students to share their thoughts and ideas during Guided Listening gives them the chance to verbalize their thoughts. Sometimes, students think better when they can "hear themselves think." Sharing with partners or groups helps to strengthen their learning.