

USING AUDIO BOOKS

Using Audio Books to Improve Reading and Academic Performance

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DrM-Resources

This working paper was originally created for submission to a peer-reviewed journal. This version is complete and is being made available to ERIC in the interest of making its contents available to education researchers as soon as possible. Revised articles for publication are expected to be very different from this working paper. This working paper was first made available over the Internet on May 27, 2009. Copyright is retained by the author. Presentations based on this article also available online in both Adobe Acrobat (.pdf) and Adobe Presenter (narrated) formats. For more information, please visit <http://www.joelmonty.net>.

ABSTRACT

This article highlights significant research about what below grade-level reading means in middle school classrooms and suggests a tested approach to improve reading comprehension levels significantly by using audio books. The use of these audio books can improve reading and academic performance for both English language learners (ELLs) and for native English speakers (NES).

Literate adults need to be capable readers and capable readers must enjoy reading (Carbo, 1990, p. 26). Reading needs to be a “flow” activity which Csikszentmihalyi describes as “the way people describe their state of mind when consciousness is harmoniously ordered, and they want to pursue whatever they are doing for its own sake” (1991, p. 6). Carbo observed that only one-third of students in the United States read at levels that are likely to assure them academic success and good jobs and that nearly the same number of students cannot function at the most basic level of literacy (1996, p. 8). Reading RIT scores (NWEA, 2009c) on the Northwest Evaluation Association’s (NWEA) Measures of Academic Performance (MAP) test (2009a) taken in December 2008 by seventy-four seventh and eighth-grade English language learners, averaged at least four years below grade-level. The average Reading RIT score was 202 (NWEA, 2009b) for seventh-graders and 198 for eighth-graders. Converting the Lexile ranges (MetaMetrics, 2009) reported by NWEA for these scores into reading grade-levels, resulted in reading grade-level ranges between 2.9

and 4.0 for seventh graders and between 2.6 and 3.5 for eighth-graders (Advantage Learning Systems, 2009).

Students Lose Enthusiasm for Learning to Read

While most students enter school with an enthusiasm for learning to read, many become progressively less motivated to read (Carbo, 1983). “At virtually all levels of performance...an achievement gap inevitably emerges and enlarges over time that negatively affects students in high poverty schools and minority students” (McCall, Hauser, Cronin, Kingsbury, and Hauser, 2006, p. 43). Low-income and Spanish-speaking English language learners generally struggle in reading. Research indicates that eighty-five percent of Latino students in fourth through eighth grade read below grade level, as much a four years below their native English-speaking counterparts in middle and high schools (Preciado, Horner, and Baker, 2009).

Consequences of Below-Grade-Level Reading

Students reading significantly below grade level have trouble keeping up with academic requirements expected of seventh and eighth-grade students. Students who struggle academically are more likely to develop problem behaviors designed to escape and avoid academic demands (McIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun, and Cochrane, 2008; Moore, Anderson, and Kumar, 2005; Morgan, Farkas, Tufis, and Sperling, 2008; Preciado et al., 2009).

Because they are unable to read and understand academic textbooks often containing above grade-level language, students become frustrated when trying to complete assignments in the classroom. At the same time, students who are unaccustomed to listening to English and reading grade-level English-language

textbooks also find it extremely difficult to take meaningful notes in class. In fact, when asked to complete routine written assignments, students unaccustomed to reading written English at grade-level are unable to communicate effectively at grade-level in spoken or written English. When the majority of students in a classroom are significantly challenged by grade-level academic expectations, they are also less likely to engage effectively in cooperative or independent learning activities and are more likely to engage in off-task behavior (Preciado et al., 2009). “When students disrupt the educational environment, they stop teaching from occurring, thereby preventing their own learning” (McIntosh, Horner, Chard, Dickey and Braun, 2008, p. 132). Carefully selected behavioral and academic interventions are required for students who have developed the habit of repeatedly choosing off-task behavior to avoid engaging in academic tasks beyond their skill level (McIntosh, Flannery et al., 2008; Moore et al., 2005; Morgan et al., 2008; Preciado et al., 2009).

Audio Models Improve Fluency and Comprehension

Two most effective models for teaching reading--storytelling and reading aloud--familiarize students with the “sound and sense” of written language (Carbo, 1996, p. 8). Audio books offer a way to recapture enthusiasm for reading. Carbo reports that poor readers frequently have a “global/tactile/kinesthetic” reading style, best addressed through holistic reading methods (1990, p. 26).

For these learners, listening to stories recorded at a slower-than-usual pace (the recorded book method) reduces much of the stress involved in reading and has been found to increase fluency and comprehension (Carbo, 1987, 1990). “Repeated

exposure to the correct reading methods and interesting, well-written books is the fastest way to reach high standards of literacy in our classrooms” (Carbo, 1990, pp. 27-28). As children grow older, they become more independent readers who need more choices of high-interest materials and individualized programs in which they read alone or with peers (Carbo, 1983, p. 56).

Much of what has been learned to improve first language literacy applies to building literacy in a second language (Daniel and Hoelting, 2008). Both NES and ELLs benefit from using audio books. Audio models provide a form of scaffolding that makes it possible for students to read material that is more difficult and to focus on meaning (Koskinen et al. 2000). Students capable of independent reading (grades 2-12 and beyond) can benefit from using books and audio books. “Providing access to books and corresponding (audio) gives language learners an opportunity to simultaneously hear sounds and see the corresponding graphic representation” (Drucker, 2003, p. 25). “A second language learner has to develop an ear for differentiating between the sounds of a language before he or she can comprehend” (Daniel and Hoelting, 2008, p. 6). Developing effective listening skills is important to learning and creates a foundation for speaking, reading and writing (Glasser, 2008; Author, 2009b, Vygotsky, 1978). (See Figure 2.)

Audio models of fluent English in the home environment encourage more parent awareness of the student’s reading progress and provide a way for parents who do not speak English to participate as a partner/learner in their child’s home reading. English words “in the air” in student homes appear to capture the attention of others and to

increase the social interaction related to books—important to progress in learning to read (Blum et al, 1995).

Generating Renewed Enthusiasm for Reading

“If students become enthusiastic readers of any type of reading, they will progress enormously” (Krashen, 2003, p. 18). Better readers can build language and literary competence rapidly by becoming “series” readers, thanks to the familiar context and resulting high levels of comprehensibility (Krashen, 2003). Some popular series for students in middle school are *Harry Potter* by J.K. Rowling, *Twilight* by Stephanie Meyers, *Artemis Fowl* by Eoin Colfer, *Down the Rabbit Hole* by Peter Abrahams, *Nancy Drew* by Carolyn Keene, *The Hardy Boys* by Franklin W. Dixon and *Goosebumps* by R.L. Stine. Popular authors for girls are Ann Brashares and Meg Cabot. Popular authors for boys are Anthony Horowitz and Mike Lupica (Hollis, 2009). (See Author, 2009a, for current lists of popular audio books for middle school students.) Acquisition of any written style should facilitate comprehension of any other. While there are differences among different types of prose, there is also substantial overlap. Someone who can read light fiction easily has acquired much of what is needed to read academic prose (Krashen, 2003)

Krashen observed that the evidence is “overwhelming” to show that recreational reading is a means of increasing second-language competence. He calls it the “most thoroughly investigated and best-supported technique” in the field of teaching second languages (2003, p. 18).

Audio Books and Companion Books at Public Libraries

Many award-winning audio books and companion books for a wide variety of grade levels are part of the youth collections in public libraries. Encouraging students to go with their parents to get a library card and to make use of the inter-library-loan provisions of these public libraries assure that students can access a wide variety of high-interest unabridged audio books and companion books. Many public libraries are changing the media format for their audio books. As they replace cassette tapes with CD-ROMs, they sometimes make the used audio books on cassette available to teachers for use in their classroom libraries. Schools can purchase a few inexpensive cassette players for students to use if they do not have any cassette players in the home. These audio books can supplement the companion books available in school and classroom libraries and further extend the reach of public libraries in support of education. Directors of youth services at public libraries are eager to work with teachers, parents and students to stimulate reading and are tremendous resources for helping students select audio books appropriate for current and growing reading levels. (See figure 1.)

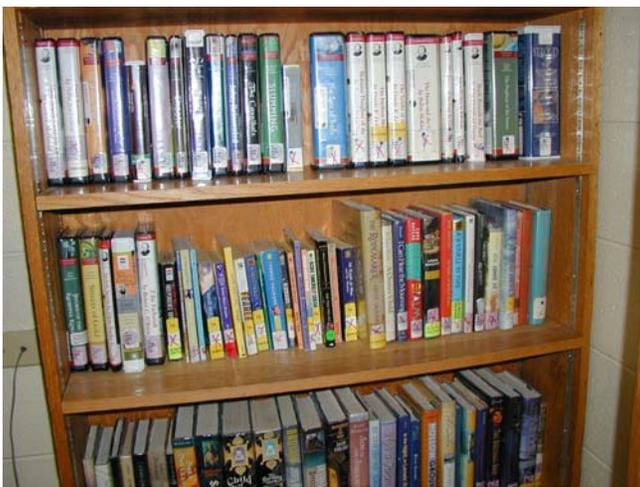


Figure 1

Informal Literature Circles with Audio Books

While much of the audio book listening will take place outside the classroom, it is important to create some time during the regular school day to reinforce the practice. Teachers can encourage students to participate in informal, lunch-time literature circles where students can listen to popular audio books. Students could then take the books home that they were interested in. Time can also be provided for students to talk with each other and with an interested teacher about the audio books they are currently listening to. When presented as an enrichment opportunity rather than a requirement, students interested in sharing more about their reading look forward to participating.

Motivation and Parent-Student-Teacher Conferences

One way to stimulate parent support for students in working with audio books and companion books is to have parent-student-teacher conferences that focus on reading levels tied to test results, academic performance, career goals and the benefits of working with audio books from the public libraries. Providing parents and students with directions to local libraries and with forms or procedures to obtain library cards and with lists of recommended audio books greatly increase the support parents and students feel about getting involved with audio books. Teachers can also offer “points” for students who bring in their first audio books and companion books and can encourage students to share what they like about what they are “reading.” It is also good to recommend these activities for vacation time activities. Working with audio books and companion books is an “almost painless” way to increase fluency and comprehension in English. When students want to practice writing, they can try to write a sequel or a story based on their favorite author or series.

Assessment and Next Steps

Growing enthusiasm for reading will be a primary informal indicator that students are actively engaging in more reading. Recreational reading needs to be kept free of academic demands. Over time, as learning from listening to audio books and reading companion books is integrated by the students, changes in academic performance and on standardized test scores can be expected. It is critical not to hold unrealistic expectations for immediate turn-around in academic performance or for unreasonable progress to be reflected in test scores (Author, 1992).

Teachers need to work with these underperforming students to make sure they learn strategies for cooperative learning and for social-emotional learning as well as challenging them with skill-level appropriate academic tasks (Glasser, 2008; McIntosh, Flannery et al., 2008; Moore et al., 2005; Morgan et al., 2008; Preciado et al., 2009).

Summary

This article highlighted significant research regarding factors influencing below grade-level reading and the impact of this challenge on academic performance and behavior of students, especially at the middle school level (grades seven and eight). The author proposed using audio books to generate renewed enthusiasm for reading and made suggestions for assessment and for involvement of public libraries, parents, and students.

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