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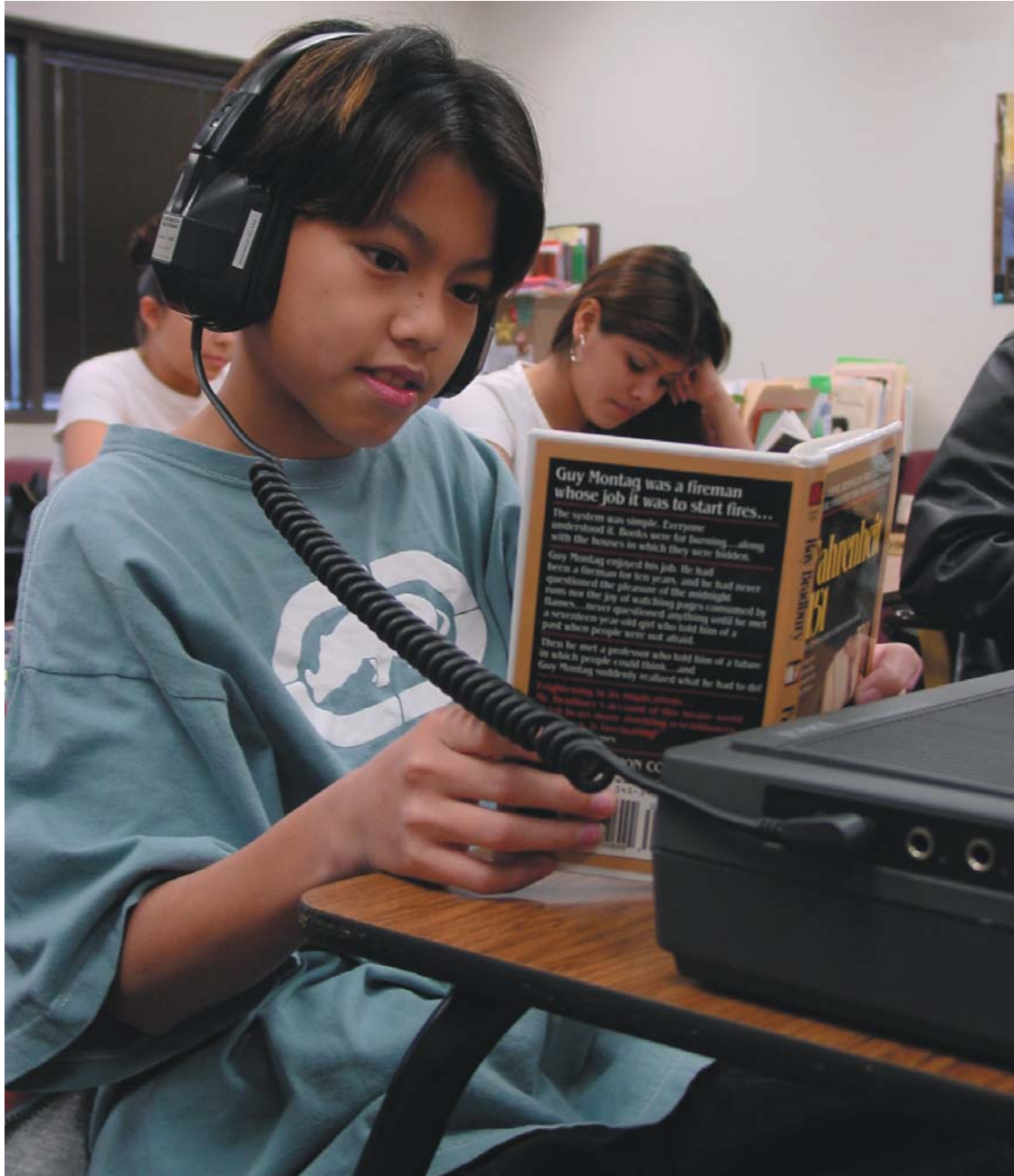
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"LISTENING TO LEARN ENGLISH"

by Denise L. Marchionda



Lewisville High School student Paul Sebastian listens to Fahrenheit 451.

Take your earphones off for a moment. Listen around you. In every city and nearly every town of this country, if you listen closely enough, you can hear many different languages spoken. You may already know a neighbor, friend, child, co-worker, or acquaintance who is learning English as a second language. If so, you can encourage them to try audiobooks.

When learning any new language, it helps to become completely submerged in it to gain the most knowledge quickly. One effective technique is the language immersion method. According to Myriam Met, in the ERIC Digest “Foreign Language Immersion Programs,” when all teaching and learning is conducted in a specific foreign language, students develop a high level of proficiency and positive attitudes toward those who speak the language and their culture.

Based on this premise, audiobooks can be a key tool in learning English as a second language (ESL). For the non-English speaker, listening to audiobooks can be a natural evolution from (or a relief from) using audiocassettes in a language laboratory, where students labor over taped conversational programs and perform the traditional “listen and repeat.” Audiobooks are available for so many books that they can easily be matched with the print versions to aid the non-English speaker with comprehension of the text.

Non-native speakers of any age can benefit from the varieties of English—from colloquial to regional styles—found in literature. They need practice in recognizing speech habits and deciphering meaning, and audiobooks offer fine examples of speech, along with dialogue and accent that can aid in absorbing the English language.

Sandi Wells, an ESL teacher at Snyder Independent School District in Snyder, Texas, has found this to be true for her fifth- and sixth-grade students. She encourages her students to get their families involved in learning English with audiobooks. She says, “At home they do not have good models of native English speakers. Here in West Texas, some of our ESL students come straight from Mexico, while others are second-generation kids who have grown up here but have one or both parents speaking only Spanish. Televisions at home are generally always left on the Spanish language channel; thus, they have no models. When I send home audiobooks, I encourage the students to allow everyone in the family to listen to them. I know that I will eventually have their little brothers and sisters in my classroom and want to help them learn, too!” This activity not only helps children to learn English and love reading, but the lower-than-adult-level

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vocabulary (and the number of illustrations in the printed book) may afford the adult listener more helpful cues to English language skills.

Listening to literature while reading the text increases not only conversational ability but also comprehension of the written language. “To succeed in school, students must learn to read, write, speak, and understand English at a fairly high level,” says Wells. “Generally, the easiest way of learning a new language is through hearing it and seeing it and then doing lots of practice, practice, practice!”

For the first time last summer at North Valley Middle School in LaSalle, Colorado, ESL teacher Monica Lounsberry used an audiobook and accompanying text of *Julie of the Wolves*, by Jean Craighead George, to increase her students’ English vocabulary and dialogue skills. “They looked forward to it,” she says. “It was good listening practice, good flow, with no interruptions.” She is now looking into getting audiobooks for her lower-level students, she says, “to build vocabulary and sight words.”

Elizabeth “Betty” Emile, a ninth-grade ESL teacher at Lewisville High School North in Lewisville, Texas, has had tremendous success using audiobooks to get her students through the ninth-grade curriculum, which includes *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Odyssey*. A couple of years ago she ordered her first audiobook from Recorded Books, to test out her plan of listening to the book along with the text. At first the kids groaned at the titles, but hearing an audiobook intrigued them. Emile now has an “extensive library” of classics as well as contemporary literature. She says they are very easy to use with the whole class. “We can stop at any time and discuss or replay a part,” she explains, “and the audio helps with the correct pronunciation of words, narration, and inflection and reinforces oral English.” One year, she had a belligerent group of tough characters in her class who had refused to read. She told them they were going to try something new—audiobooks—and by the end, she had them reading. “They were even asking to do reports on the book,” Emile says. “Audiobooks turned the whole class around!”

Listening is a critical skill in learning English as a second language because it is used two to five times more than speaking, reading, and writing in a normal workday.

Non-English-speaking adults may also benefit from listening to audiobooks, says Carol Van Duzer, from the Center for Applied Linguistics, in “Improving ESL Learners’ Listening Skills: At the Workplace and Beyond.” Therefore, developing listening skills is paramount for adults learning English.



Sharisse Butler

Left to right: Ashkan Jebelli, Paul Sebastian, and Patricia Cruz in Bette Emile's class.

Resources for English as a Second Language Teachers and Learners

Culturally Diverse Videos, Audios, and CD-ROMs for Children and Young Adults, by Irene Wood, is a good start for listeners interested in their country of origin. African American, Asian American, Hispanic American, Native American, European, and Pakistani cultures are represented. According to Wood, listening to culturally diverse literature can add to knowledge of "the special vocabulary, idioms, modes of expression as well as phrasing, inflection, and emphasis that distinguish speech patterns of different cultures replicated." For those whose culture is represented in the book, "their community can appear to be validated through hearing them reflected in audiobooks. For the assimilated ESL student, these books can connect them to their own culture."

Blackstone Audiobooks

The ReadyReader program explores the childhoods of great Americans. Examples include Betsy Ross and Abraham Lincoln. Each comes with paperback and accompanying audiobook read at 80 words per minute (versus the usual 120). The slower rate allows ESL students more time to comprehend the text.

Listening Library

Prepackaged audiobook and print book sets for use in the classroom. These sets often come with teacher-reproducible worksheets and activities to enhance the listening/reading experience.

Recorded Books

Two programs especially for ESL students called Adapted Classics and English for You! Adapted Classics are classic literature rewritten with easy-to-understand phrases, syntax, and accessible vocabulary while keeping the author's original voice. SteadyReaders and SmartReaders are read at reduced speeds. These can be used to afford a bit more time to comprehend and listen to pronunciations.

Audiobooks would seem to be a natural for teaching adults ESL, yet Bette Steinmuller, associate professor of ESOL (English to speakers of other languages) at Roxbury Community College in Boston, Massachusetts, and an avid personal listener of audiobooks, initially nixed the idea of using audiobooks with her students. She said, "No, they need to read." But after thinking more about it, she sees that audiobooks could serve as supplementary materials or as a homework assignment. "We could have discussions, maybe some correspondence. I think it might be a good idea, but it depends on the student."

As promising a language-learning tool as audiobooks appear to be, they also have some limitations that must be considered. Audiobooks used alone do not afford any visual aids to the listener in understanding the content. The level of English language competence and vocabulary must be taken into account when choosing audiobooks. And pacing of the narrative may be too quick for non-native listeners.

Although there may be some drawbacks, ESL teachers who have used audiobooks say the benefits outweigh them. Audiobooks and their printed texts can be used by individuals or groups. They can be used instructionally or recreationally. Listeners can be introduced to any subject area or genre. Through the spoken word, we audiophiles all have the chance to open the wide world of reading in English to a non-English-speaking friend. All we have to do is listen for the opportunity. ☺

Dr. Denise Marchionda is a former Assistant Professor of Education at Notre Dame College in Manchester, NH. She has been an advocate of audiobooks for many years, both for education and recreation, and believes that an active mind leads to an active life.

Shared Listening

Building a community of readers



Victor Lopez

explained to him, "That was the only way I finished the last book."

That was three years ago, and since then Hedges has developed a successful strategy of using audiobooks to develop readers who discuss and analyze works in a sophisticated manner. He says, "It was my students who drew attention to its success. I thought I was cheating." Hedges teaches at the Brooklyn Comprehensive Night High School, where students range from 17 to 21 years old. Many students come to school after working full-time

jobs; others leave school to go to work at night. Although they are all English speaking, they are a cross-cultural mix made up of native New Yorkers and more recent arrivals—most from Trinidad, Haiti, Barbados, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

As Hedges discovered, shared listening creates a sense of community and makes learning go quickly. "The students have a forum to express ideas immediately," he says. "This keeps them coming back to class." His classes have the best attendance record, and more students have successfully finished his class than any other at the night school.

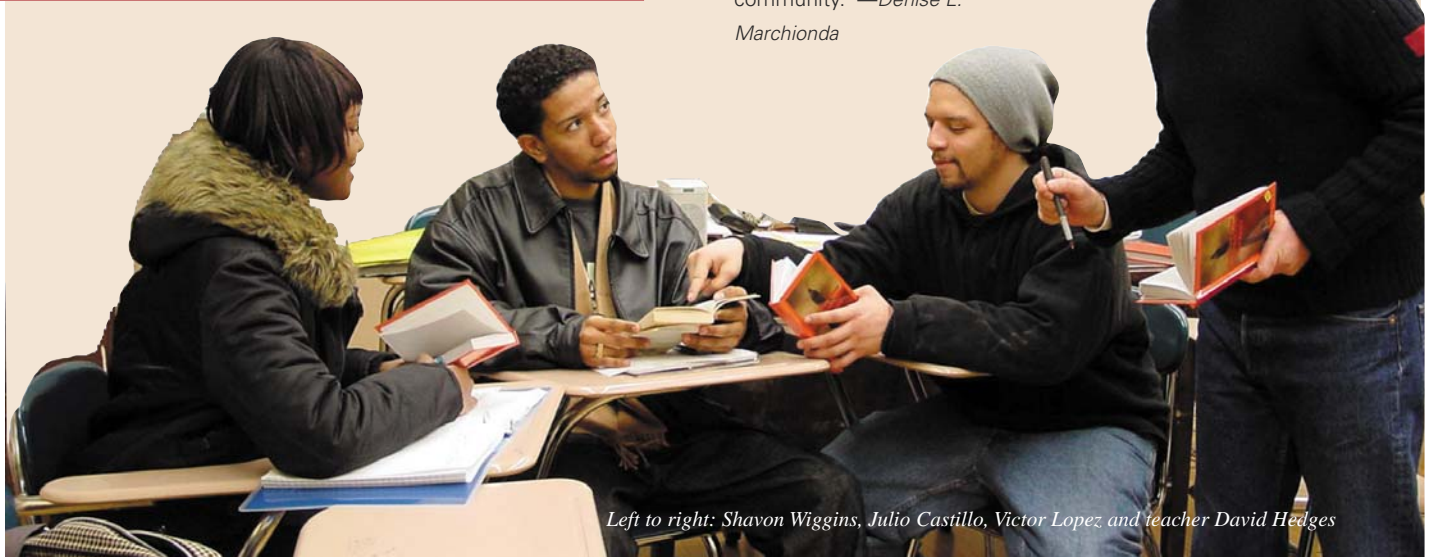
Hedges says students get frustrated when he stops the tape too many times. "They don't want to feel imposed upon, but if I just put the tape on without question and discussion, they're not engaged." He continues playing the audio at a pace that is comfortable for students, and they also read portions of the book on their own. Among the titles they've listened to and read are John Steinbeck's *Cannery Row* and *Tortilla Flat*, "My November Guest," by Robert Frost, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, by Ken Kesey.

His students have astounded Hedges with their quick recognition of an author's technique. For example, they are sensitive to Steinbeck's incantatory style and the rhythmic language in his books. "This is a very technical observation for these students," Hedges says. "Shared listening adds an extra dimension. Books come alive, and students identify with them. When you listen in the company of other people, literacy is a by-product of community."—Denise L. Marchionda

Marchionda

DAVID HEDGES'S STRATEGY FOR SHARED LISTENING

1. Write a focus question related to the book on the board.
2. Generate discussion from the question before listening.
3. Give each student a copy of the book. Focus their attention on what they will be listening to and give them something to look for in the text.
4. Play the audiobook a few minutes, then stop. Pursue answers to the focus question.
5. Ask another question and play the tape a few more minutes, perhaps doubling the play time.



Left to right: Shavon Wiggins, Julio Castillo, Victor Lopez and teacher David Hedges

PHOTO: ALISTAIR HAYNES

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