Is Listening a Missing Link to Academic Language Acquisition in Today's Secondary Schools?

Develop literacy skills as they simultaneously learn, comprehend, and apply content area concepts

The EL Gap in Secondary Schools

A well-documented achievement gap exists for ELs overall. For some, shortfalls in academic achievement can lead to heavy consequences via lower earnings, poor health, and higher rates of incarceration (McKinsey). Once students are in middle or high school they are expected to learn increasingly complex content, often without the prerequisite language proficiency. Even if students go on to higher education, they may require remediation. The goal of college readiness remains out of reach for many.

Why are ELs at the secondary level falling further behind? ELs may quickly become proficient in basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) but not in cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). Academic language is more complex and develops more slowly, with students taking 4-7 years before becoming proficient (Cummins, 2000).

English learners, who are often moved to general education classes without having acquired necessary academic language, must develop literacy skills as they simultaneously learn, comprehend, and apply content area concepts through their second language. (Garcia & Godina, 2004) While the use of academic language may be more obvious for reading and writing, academic language is also necessary for listening to class discussion, lectures, and debates, as well as delivering speeches, presentations, and oral arguments.

Listening to the Research on Academic Language

There are many analyses as to why ELs are not making gains at the same speed as their peers. We wondered if educators are underestimating the impact that ongoing work with oral academic language can have on comprehension in the content areas. New research from Tiffany Hogan shows that a growing number of students fail to develop adequate reading comprehension skills primarily due to poor listening comprehension. In exploring this idea, we want to revisit some research on the role of listening and the needs of English learners in developing academic language.

Listening to Authentic Oral Language

Few ELs go home to a community with strong academic English skills, so they primarily hear English when their teachers speak or when using materials. Traditional listening materials lack realistic intonation, pronunciation, varied rate of speech, and clear turn taking between speakers. Exposure to language that has controlled vocabulary and limited exposure to complex concepts results in ELs learning less than their peers. The use of authentic listening materials gives students the chance to develop the skills needed to comprehend and to use language as is it found in real situations.

According to Taher Bahrani and Tam Shu Sim, "TV and radio are not just entertainment tools anymore, but can be used as pedagogically valuable technology that can provide authentic language input for language learning."

Authentic listening resources engage ELs in content that improves their level of proficiency and helps them gain meaning when using English (Brown, 2001). It motivates students by providing content that they want to understand, and engagement and enjoyment are highly correlated with achievement in all areas of literacy (Campbell, Voelkl & Donahue, 1997).

Listening and Literacy

Language subtitling supports literacy. Listening to English and reading English subtitles helps decoding and improves reading. In studies with students, half exposed to videos with captions and half to the same videos without captions, Brij Kothari and others (2004) found that captions contributed to word recognition and word comprehension skills. Other studies show subtitles support understanding of a movie or audio sources.

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Listening to Academic Language

Listening to stories on a variety of topics provides students with exposure to a wide range of academic language. It has been shown that incidental exposure to vocabulary through listening to stories helps students learn the meaning of unknown words. (Neuman & Dickinson, 2001; Blachowicz & Obrochta, 2007).

Research also shows that on average students can listen 2-3 grade levels above what they can read (Biemiller & Slonim, 2001). Oral language skills and recognizing words when listening are the foundation for the development of the more-advanced language skills needed for comprehension (Cain & Oakhill, 2007, p. 31). When students listen, using difficult vocabulary to stretch their receptive abilities helps their language acquisition.

Listening to Academic Vocabulary in Context

Many researchers have shown that context is an important factor in learning academic vocabulary. Complex texts and stories have more complex words. In addition to learning about the world, many scholars agree that listening activities within the context of a content area are a more efficient way to promote second language acquisition. (Atamane Bedjou, "Using Radio Programs in the EFL Classroom, 2006).

Authentic Listening to Accelerate Academic Language Acquisition

Given the research, it seems like a natural conclusion to incorporate audio that is rich in real-world context and authentic academic language into English language instruction. But, it takes a lot of time for a teacher find the right audio and differentiate instruction for ELs. Furthermore, some effective techniques, such as language subtitling, cannot be realistically done by teachers on their own.

At Listenwise we develop authentic listening experiences that accelerate academic language acquisition for English learners. We curate public radio stories to find relevant, authentic, motivating topics for the classroom, and align them to the curriculum standards. The stories, along with our instructional resources, provide authentic language and academic vocabulary in context. Instruction for English learners provides necessary supports for language learning and is scaffolded to make the content comprehensible. Learn more: https://www.listenwise.com/ELL

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