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Learning How to Listen Through a Tactile Approach



ARTICLE BY **BRAD WILLIAMS**; ILLUSTRATIONS BY **PAUL ASHCRAFT**

In order for all children to achieve their greatest potential in academics, they have to first learn how to listen. There is no argument over the importance of listening. The controversy exists in how it should be taught or whether listening can be taught at all. With the successes I have encountered teaching learning disabled children through manipulatives and other tactile modes, I believe listening can and should be taught through a tactile approach.

If our objective is to teach children how to recall information for a test, we must first teach them how to listen when it is initially presented. Next, we must teach them how to "file" that information so that it can be easily retrieved. Teachers often assume that all students know how to do these first two steps, and that their only problem is in trying to recall the knowledge. We need to teach children how to organize their information so they can find it later. Consider the following analogy.

A child is given five dollars a week for his allowance. He intends to save it up to buy a model airplane for thirty dollars. Dad teaches him to put his money in a glass jar on his dresser. The jar is marked "airplane." Each week the child puts his allowance money into the jar. Any other money he receives is spent immediately on candy. After six weeks, he saves up thirty dollars because he has learned how to organize his savings. Without the jar, the consistent and marked storage place, he might have spent more of his money on candy. Because of the jar, he knew exactly

where to put each allowance and where to find it when it came time for retrieval.

In a similar way, listening can be taught to improve writing and recalling skills. This is not a radical approach to teaching listening as evidenced by the success and popularity of music in various forms of education. Music is an excellent medium to use for teaching listening, because it is already arranged in an easy to recall format. Words and ideas are rhymed in songs which makes it possible for many children, including the learning disabled, to memorize a song after hearing it only a few times. We need to keep these successes in mind when teaching children how to improve their listening skills.

I believe that listening can be taught in a tactile way so that the student feels he is in control of his own learning, and therefore, he can retrieve the information much more easily. The following method will demonstrate this theory.

My objective is to teach the students how to sort the information they receive into common, but specific, categories which will facilitate the recalling of this knowledge when it is needed at a later time.



These techniques draw upon a tactile approach of storing the information. This helps the children to draw a clearer picture of how the facts are placed into their memory for easier retrieval. This method expands on the basic KWL strategy by passing the control from the teacher to the students. As the students progress past this tactile stage, they will generalize this strategy to specific storage compartments in their minds. In this sample lesson, we will be using the text entitled *Frogs*, which I have written for this demonstration.

Frogs

Frogs are wet and slippery and come in many different colors. They have three eyelids for protection. Some frogs that spend a lot of time in water have webbed feet. Other frogs that climb trees have suction cups on their toes. Frogs belong to a group of animals called amphibians. Amphibian means having a double life. Most frogs spend part of their lives on land and part in water.

Frogs are carnivorous which means they eat meat or small animals, such as bugs and fish. Unlike you and I, frogs don't drink water. They absorb it through their skin. Some frogs can also breathe through their skin.

Probably, the weirdest thing about frogs is that they often shed their skin like snakes do, but instead of leaving their skin on the ground, they usually eat it. *Yuck!*

This technique has been designed for a group of 10-12 students, but I have used it in larger groups, also. As a special education teacher, I have used this approach with all ages and ability levels and have found cooperative learning groups to be an excellent way to manage this exercise.

In preparation for this lesson, I write out each sentence from the chosen selection on strips of paper. These sen-

tence strips will be used after the first reading of the story.

I begin the lesson by writing the word "Frogs" on the board, and telling my students they will be learning about frogs today, but first I need their help and input. I ask them to brainstorm everything they know about frogs already. In a full group discussion, the students share their ideas and all suggestions are written on the board.

When the children's ideas are exhausted, I ask them to offer any questions that they would like to know more about, pertaining to frogs. Even if they think they already know the answer to some questions, it is important to write those questions down, too. This will help in building a purpose for reading, and the students will also be able to see if their predictions were right when the story is read.

I make it a point to write down all their questions on the board, so that everyone feels involved in the lesson. However, I also offer some general questions that relate to the given story if the students don't come up with all the main ideas.

The *secret* to my success with this approach is reading the excerpt ahead of time and coming up with 4-5 general categories that can be used to sum up all the important facts in the article. However, instead of writing these categories on the board, I try to find ways to prompt my students, or mold their ideas and words into making them think they came up with these questions. This accomplishes the goal of letting the children feel they are in control of the learning. In *Frogs*, for example, I try to get the children to come up with something like:

- 1) What does it eat?
- 2) How does it look?
- 3) What kind of animal is it?
- 4) Where does it live?
- 5) How does it live?

When these five questions are creat-

ed, by whatever means are chosen, it is time to begin the story. Now, I let the students know that these will be the five main ideas they will search for in the story.

The next stage of this process deals with a tactile application of storing the information. I divide the students into five groups, as equal in number as possible. There should be the same number of groups as there are main questions created.

Next, I give each group a pouch to store their own information. The pouch can be any type of bag (a grocery bag or paper sack will work fine.) Assigning each group a different question from the list of five that was generated, I have the children write their specific question on their group bag. I make sure to tell each group they will be looking and listening for information pertaining to, or having something to do with their topic.

Now, it is time to read the story. Depending on the level of one's students, the teacher may have to read parts of or the whole story. After explaining that the story will be read twice, I tell the children to just listen the first time through to get a general idea and become familiar with the piece.

When beginning the second reading, I tell them that I will be stopping after each sentence for discussion. I read the first sentence, "Frogs are wet and slippery and come in many different colors."

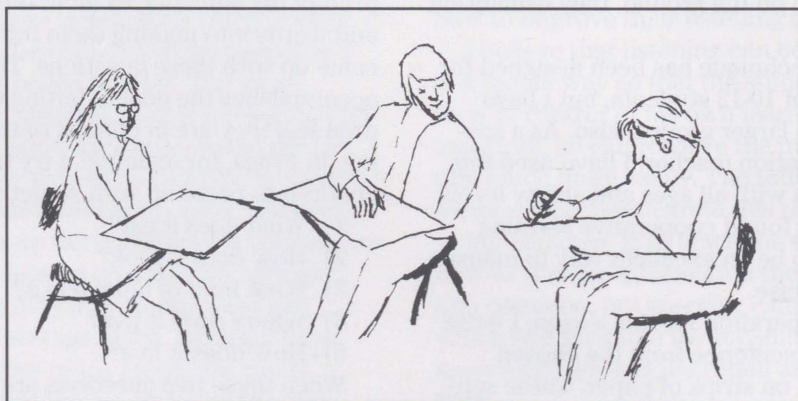
Then I stop.

My students are asked to discuss in their individual groups whether or not they feel this sentence should be placed in their pouch. It should only go in one pouch. If there is more than one idea in a sentence, and it is causing a problem, then divide the sentence up into two different ideas. If more than one group feels the idea belongs in their bag, then I serve as a mediator to help them make the best selection. At this point in the learning process, we need to step back and let our students argue, discuss, and decide on their own into which bag the idea should go. Although it may be extremely hard for some teachers to turn over control to students, I have found it to be the best way to make this information meaningful for them. When a consensus is reached, I have the selected group come get the strip and place it in their pouch.

We continue these steps until all sentences in the story have been divided up among the groups. If a sentence is too trivial or not important such as the last statement, "Yuck!" then my students and I just throw it out. This shows them that not all information in a story is important.

The length of each story used is at the teacher's discretion. It is sometimes easier for me to create original short articles which include the information I

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instance, that all teachers are responsible for all of the kids, regardless of classification), they examine legal and turf issues and they focus squarely on the question of what it will take to make *all* students successful according to agreed-upon expectations.

The way I figure it, we have about a year and a half before the first administration of the Proficiency tests and the inevitable publishing of failure rates by

school district in the local newspapers. When that happens, the cry for remediation will be loud and reactive. We could use the precious time we have now to proactively rethink remedial programs and come up with something better than what we have done before.

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want my students to learn. However, if you can find a short book or an excerpt that covers the main ideas of your topic, by all means use it.

When the story is completely “dissected,” each group takes turns sharing. I ask representatives from each to come up and give the name of their pouch (the assigned question), and share each strip they have accumulated. For younger students, I usually have to read the strips for them. However, given the context clues of each sentence, I am often pleasantly surprised what they can remember about each strip from when it was put in their bag, and therefore, claimed as their own property. This is one excellent way that learning how to listen can improve their reading.

Discuss how all information can be divided up into similar categories so that it is easier to remember. For a test, put all the bags away, and ask one question at a time to see if they can come up with their new information without looking. Compare this to the assignment of reading a story and asking your students to tell you what they remembered in the story. You will see a huge difference, especially in long term memory, because they took the time to “file” each bit of information.

As I use this technique throughout the year, my students and I discuss how we

would use this technique when reading or listening to a story for the first time. For example, when the topic is announced, it helps to write down or think up specific categories or questions about the information. As different facts are read, we try to “file” each bit of information under one of the main categories, either on paper or in our heads.

My goal is to eventually have the students be able to generalize the hands-on approach of filing and sharing to a more practical application of writing down the information or putting it logically into their memory banks for easy recall.

I have created and used this tactile approach in my Special Education classroom of first, second, and third graders. In just one year, I have trained more than half of my students to use these strategies with success. I have seen amazing results with their ability to recall information, which has also improved their reading, writing, thinking, and speaking skills. Most importantly, it has raised their confidence and their self-esteem.

Brad Williams is a Special Education teacher in the Bay City Public School System. He enjoys songwriting and relaxing around the house with his wife, Nancy.