



# Record and play

**Michael Jones** reports on a project to help develop the speaking and listening skills of children through the use of audiotapes

**A**ll school children need to develop their speaking and listening skills, and for most children this usually occurs through everyday classroom experiences. However there is growing concern about the speaking and listening skills of many young children. Teachers now frequently talk about 'language impoverishment', to describe children who have reduced expressive language skills because of lack of experience. Children with general learning needs, who also typically need support in speech and language development, and those with specific language learning difficulties are increasingly being included in mainstream schools. When we also take into account the needs of children who

are learning English as an additional language, we can see that there is a real need for teachers to plan practical approaches to develop speaking and listening skills.

Researchers and practitioners are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of children's oral language skills and the development of creative writing. Children's *narrative abilities* – the ability to retell a story, or make up stories of their own – are particularly important. These skills come about through regularly sharing books with adults. Children like to hear the same story several times, and this helps them learn the language needed for storytelling and story writing.

Playing with miniature animals and figures, or 'small world play' is



particularly valuable for young children's language development, especially when they are able to play alongside or with other children. Children often need a stimulus for small world play, and those with learning needs often need adult guidance to maximise the potential that this type of play has for language development and social interaction. Although we know that these activities are important, it can be a real challenge for class teachers to make the crucial investment of quality time needed to share this type of activity with children.

As an advisory teacher, supporting primary schools to meet the needs of children with speech and language difficulties, I am always looking for ways to improve children's language skills. The best ideas are often those that build on existing good practice, to benefit all children in a class, including those with communication needs. Recently I explored using a resource that is often seen in the classroom: the 'Coomber' audiocassette recorder and headphones.

In many classrooms, children use the cassette recorder to listen to commercially produced audio books. Without adult supervision, equipment can rapidly fall into disrepair. Most audio books don't provide a cue for the children to turn the page, so they quickly lose their place in the text. (There are a few notable exceptions like those produced by *Oxford Reading Tree* or the *Ladybird Read it Yourself* series). Publishers assume that children can already read the books, or the cassettes are designed for children to listen to the story without the text. This limits the value of the tape as an educational tool for learning, and they can be less satisfying for children who are at early stages of reading.

I worked with teachers in Foundation and Key Stage 1 classes to set up 'listening corners', with a cassette recorder, headphones and 'talking picture books', as a focus for language development and independent learning. The key question was whether we could improve children's listening skills, and

their ability to retell stories. What we found were big improvements in listening and language skills and development in children's play, as well as improvements in reading and writing.

### Recording the stories

I visited classes for four mornings, and planned with the teachers which stories to introduce. Initially I recorded the stories in advance. Twenty-minute and thirty-minute cassettes were available from educational suppliers, but we also used standard C60 cassettes found in the schools. We chose the length of cassette that would fit an entire story on one side. Experience has shown that children become confused when they have to turn tapes over, reducing their independence.

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I made the recordings in a quiet room, and initially used a musical instrument like a chime bar to indicate when to turn the page. (On later tapes I dispensed with the musical instruments and just said, 'Bing!'). I read slowly enough for the children to follow the text, and left a large enough gap after reading for children to look at the text and pictures. This took a bit of practice. I didn't need a microphone, as the internal mike on the 'Coomber' was strong enough to pick up my voice, as long as I was fairly close to the cassette recorder.

I used the same language to introduce and finish each tape. I usually read the title of the book, with author and illustrator, followed by, "When you hear this sound ('bing!'), turn the page". Older and more experienced children knew to start the story at the first page of text, but younger children needed to be guided as to which page to start on. Putting a paperclip or small PostIt note on the starting page helped to clear up any



confusion. At the end of the tape I always say, "Now, press stop and rewind, and listen to the story again". Make sure you break off the two small plastic flanges on the cassette. This prevents the tape from being recorded over by children accidentally/on-purpose if they press the red 'record' button!

### The listening corner

Children needed to know that the listening corner is a valued area of the classroom. We found that the best arrangement was placing the equipment on a table large enough to take the cassette recorder and headphones (possibly kept in a basket or tray), and sufficient space for two children to sit comfortably sharing a book. Two children sharing a book is the ideal number, with a spare set of headphones for an adult to listen along. Placing the table facing a wall provided fewest distractions, and we could use the wall space for an attractive display, which the whole class contributed to. This included a 'Who's in the Listening Corner?' sign, and advice on how to use the equipment.

We planned for an adult to sit with pairs of children for the first sessions, to establish that all children knew how to use the equipment. The



children needed time to learn the vocabulary involved (cassette recorder, tape, fast forward, rewind, stop, etc). The adult also modelled the behaviour expected. This included how to put on headphones, how to insert the cassette, how to share the book and how to leave the listening corner tidy afterwards.

Initially we found it helpful to only have one tape and book out for use at any time. As the collection of tapes grows, book-and-tape sets can be kept in plastic wallets in the listening corner, for children to choose from.

### Which picture books?

There was a broad spread of reading ability and interest in books within any one class, and we needed to bear this in mind if we were going to keep the children interested. Choosing the type of book to record was particularly important for children with learning needs. More able and experienced children were able to focus on picture books with extended narrative and rhyme, like *Room on the Broom* by Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler. Others preferred shorter books with one picture on each page and much simpler text; e.g. *One bear, one dog* by Paul Stickland. We learned that it was best to prepare two books per week. The main book was often related to a topic that the class were studying, or was a focus of the Literacy Hour, for example Giles Andreae's *Rumble in the Jungle*. The shorter book had broad appeal, like *Dinosaur Roar* by Paul and Henrietta Stickland. This was introduced midweek, and children could choose the book that suited their interests or reading ability.

### Involving the children

At the beginning of each week I presented the story to the class, by reading the book and using toys and artefacts to illustrate the story. Sometimes I would read out loud, or show the book while the whole class listened to the taped story. I took pairs of children into the listening corner throughout the morning. Many children already knew how to use the equipment, either from experience in previous classes or at home.

One of the most successful experiences



in Year 1 came when I lost the cassette that I had recorded the previous week. On Monday morning I was due to share the planned text for that week's literacy lessons: *Supersonic Engine Juice* by Roderick Hunt and Alex Brychta. Luckily two of the more able readers in the class were volunteered to help. After a 45-minute recording session in the corridor outside the class, we had produced the most popular talking picture book to date! Incidental noises, including children saying "Hello" as they passed by, and the sound of the hand-dryer in the boys' toilets added to the atmosphere, and actually improved the children's concentration. Adding a small question-and-answer session to the end of some pages increased interest, as did the children's spontaneous interjections and sound effects.

### Links to small world play

We collected as many toys and artefacts as we could to accompany the picture books, and used commercially produced Storysacks and sacks made by parents. In one Foundation class, children helped the class teacher set up a small world environment on a builder's tray on the Friday before we introduced our story.

(See Helen Bromley's excellent book, *50 exciting ways to use a builder's tray* for a wide range of ideas). After the story was introduced, with the toys, the children were able to use them to play with throughout the week. During the following week these toys were transferred to the water tray for further spontaneous extensions of the children's play and language. *Handa's Surprise*, by Eileen Browne and *Itchy Bear* by Neil Griffiths were very popular Story Sacks with Year 1, while *Duck in the truck* and *It's the bear!* by Jez Alborough proved enduring hits with Foundation.

### Art, display and writing

In another school I visited I involved a Year 2 class in sharing the African folk tale *Greedy Zebra*, by Mwenye Hadithi and Adrienne Kennaway. During the afternoon the children listened to the talking picture book, and illustrated their favourite parts of the story. This led to a wall display, and the class producing their own version of the story. Throughout the week children listened to the story, reinforcing their language and literacy skills. Toys and artefacts from the Storysacks can also be made into attractive interactive displays. By playing with these displays children are able to develop their vocabulary and rehearse the language needed for recounting stories.



## Children's responses and teacher feedback

Feedback from teachers has been very encouraging. A teacher who introduced the listening corner in her Foundation class found that children were more able to retell stories, and used more detail. They began using 'story language' when sharing books with an adult, including non-fiction books! Some children who had been at an early stage of reading began to recognise words in the text they had been listening to in previous weeks, and could pick out the same words in other books. Teachers also noted an improvement in the children's listening behaviour, particularly when listening to stories as a whole class. One class insisted on shouting out, "Bing" whenever it was time for the teacher to turn the page!

A child arrived from another country while I was working in a Year 1 class. He had no English, but quickly learned how to use the cassette recorder. He enjoyed the stories, and after a few sessions I noticed him mouthing the words to the story as it was being read. This was a valuable experience for him, and added to his confidence as an English speaker.

Children who had previously used the role-play area to act out simple domestic routines had progressed to making up small dramas with roles for different children. Small world play was also more focused and extended. Children used the listening corner as part of free choice, and the area was properly cared for. More confident children helped those who were not able to master the equipment independently, e.g. checking the cassette was put in properly and rewound to the beginning.

Children were enthusiastic about making recordings of their own, and enjoyed listening to their voices on tape. When they made their own recordings, it was gratifying to hear them use the same phrases that they heard on my tapes at the beginning and end of recordings. Now that the listening corners have been set up, teachers have continued to make their own tapes, and are involving children in the process. One teacher has experimented with recording non-fiction



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books, and found children to be enthusiastic about them.

By participating in this project the children had not only developed their speaking and listening skills, but had also covered aspects of the ICT curriculum for the Foundation Stage: finding out about and identifying the uses of everyday technology and using information and communication technology to aid their own learning.

## Some final observations

Some children may not be ready to put on headphones, or listen to stories, but the cassette recorder can still be a valuable tool for learning. Listening games, such as sound lotto, or *Crash bang wallop* from Orchard Toys, can be used to familiarise children with listening to tapes, and develop their language and listening. Children benefit from making their own sound games, e.g. recording sounds around the school and seeing if other children can identify them, or recording children's and adults' voices and matching them to their photographs.

This approach need not be confined to mainstream schools. I recently worked with a class in a special school, where most children had significant communication needs. We acted out the story of *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*, and followed it up by making bridges in the playground with large wooden blocks. Later the children were involved with small world play, reading and writing. The cassette and book from the *Ladybird Read it yourself* series was ideal, as children could listen to the story and follow the text, then listen to the story again and repeat each phrase after they had heard it. On side B they answered simple questions about the story. Level One of the series is aimed at children who are ready to take their first steps in reading, and they can continue through to Level Four, with

longer stories for more fluent readers.

I was fortunate enough to be able to give my time to set up the listening corner, record the stories and share the recordings with the children. Teachers may be able to work with a Teaching Assistant, volunteers or parents to prepare the tapes and support the children. This investment of time will reap dividends as the children's language develops and their play skills improve. This approach can also be included on Individual Education Plans (IEPs) as a strategy for developing the language and listening of children with general learning difficulties or specific language learning needs. Teachers and support staff can make tapes on a regular basis, and this can be included in planning to develop language and literacy. Once children reach the point where they are able to participate in recording tapes with an adult, this becomes a valuable activity in itself, and provides the class with very popular resources.

At a time when the music industry is phasing out cassettes in favour of CDs,

there is still an important place in schools for the humble cassette recorder!

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#### Useful further reading

Bromley, H (2002) 50 exciting ways to use a builder's tray, Lawrence Educational Publications  
Bromley, H (2002) 50 exciting ideas for story boxes, Lawrence Educational Publications  
Bromley, H (2004) 50 exciting ideas for small world play, Lawrence Educational Publications  
Burrell, A and Riley, J (2004) 'Young children should be seen and heard', *The Primary English Magazine*  
Gibbons, P (2002) *Scaffolding language, scaffolding learning: teaching second language learners in the classroom*, Heinemann  
Jones, M (2004) 'Here's one you've heard before', *Special Children* (November/December)

#### Resources

Story Sacks are available from Storysack Ltd, Resource House, Kay Street, Bury BL9 6BU Orchard Toys, Debdale Lane, Keyworth, Nottingham, NG12 5HN, and from leading toyshops.

Audio Tapes are available from Hertfordshire Supplies, Mount Pleasant Lane, Hatfield, Herts AL9 5NR

Cassette recorders and other equipment: Coomber Electronic Equipment, Croft Walk, Worcester, WR1 3NZ.