Listening Strategies Become Reading Strategies

“The way a book is read—which is to say, the qualities a reader brings to a book—can have as much to do with its worth as anything the author puts into it.”

—Norman Cousins

The work of Debbie Miller (2002) and Harvey and Goudvis (2000) identify seven metacognitive reading strategies. These include Making Inferences, Making Predictions, Determining Important Information, Making Connections, Visualizing, Asking Questions, and Synthesizing. Palinscar and Ransom (1988), Brown et al (1986), and Paris, Lipson and Wixon (1983) found that, in addition to understanding these strategies, students must know when, why, and how to use them. Direct modelling of these strategies with texts followed immediately by guided practice will help student to understand these strategies and become proficient at applying them to both listening and reading.

Making Inferences and Predictions

Inferring and predicting are closely linked skills. Both require the student to attend to information in the text and draw upon their own knowledge to form a guess about the text. Harvey and Goudvis (2000) state

Predicting is related to inferring, of course, but we predict outcomes, events, or actions that are confirmed or contradicted by the end of the story. Inferences are often more open-ended and may remain unresolved when the story draws to a close.

Identifying Theme

Inferring is often used when identifying the theme of a story. If students are told to listen critically for the theme, moral, or lesson in a story, they are able to filter through the erroneous information and break the story into its most rudimentary elements.

A favorite author for this activity is Dr. Seuss, as many of his works have very simple underlying themes that are easily decoded by critical listeners. For example, Horton Hatches the Egg tells the story of an irresponsible bird (Mayzie) who would much rather have fun than take care of her egg. She cons poor Horton, an elephant, to sit in her tree in her place. Mayzie then flies off for an
Another such story by Dr. Seuss is *The Sneetches*. If students are reminded of the importance of looking beyond the obvious tale of strange-looking birds (Sneetches) some with stars on the tummies and some without, they will identify the themes of equality, acceptance, fairness, inclusion, and discrimination.

extended vacation leaving Horton to tend the egg. Horton repeatedly states, “I said what I meant, and I meant what I said, an elephant’s faithful one hundred percent.” Finally Mayzie and Horton meet again, just as the egg begins to hatch. She wishes to reclaim the egg now that the hard part is over. The egg hatches to reveal an elephant-bird. Horton’s faithfulness is rewarded.

On the surface, the story tells the tale of an elephant, an egg, and a bird. However, if students are told to look beyond the characters and summarize the lessons learned in this story in one sentence, they may think of such themes as responsibility, loyalty, faithfulness, deception, etc.

---

**Prompts for Making Inferences**

- What is the lesson the author wants us to learn from this book?
- What’s the author’s message?
- What is the theme of the book?
- What do you think it means when…?
- How do you think the characters are feeling?
- How would you feel if you were the main character?
- What did you really want to know at the end of the story?
- What conclusions can you make?
- What did you like/dislike about the book?
- How might the story have been different if one of the other characters were telling it?
- Even though it doesn’t really say in the book, how did you know…?
- If you could hear another’s character’s point of view, who’s would you like to hear? Why?

---

**Reading Between the Lines**

Reading between the lines is a more challenging inferential strategy than identifying theme. Guided Listening provides the perfect opportunity for students to be introduced to this skill. Students will find it easier to read between the lines if the teacher places emphasis on certain phrases, allows wait time for students to generate new ideas and make connections, and draws their attention to subtleties in the author’s work.

A fantastic book for this type of inferencing is *The Mystery at Eatum Hall* by John Kelly. Glenda (a goose) and Horace (a hog) Pork-Fowler are invited to spend the weekend at Eatum Hall, and inn owned by Dr. Hunter (a wolf). When they arrive, no one is there to greet them, but there is plenty of food. Glenda and Horace eat gluttonously throughout the weekend; the illustrations provide hints as to Dr. Hunter’s true intentions. The weekend ends with a pie-eating festival, and students are left to “read between the lines” as to the contents of the pie. Students thoroughly enjoy the task of making inferences and drawing conclusions as they listen to this story.

---

**Understanding Characters’ Feelings**

As readers, we tend to connect with characters through our own experiences or emotions. Sophisticated readers are able to easily draw conclusions about how
characters feel based on cues from the author. Younger readers sometimes require more guidance in this area. If the author does not say that someone is sad, for example, students may not realize that this is so. Directing students’ attention to cues such as body language, tone of voice, or actions may help then make these inferences with greater ease.

Consider the following excerpt from *The Breadwinner* by Deborah Ellis. This story tells of the challenges faced by Parvana and her family to survive in Afghanistan under the harsh rule of the Taliban. Few students have experienced feelings of sheer terror but, using the cues provided by the author, they are able to identify Parvana’s feelings.

Parvana felt the shadow before she saw it, as the man moved between her and the sun. Turning her head, she saw the dark turban that was the uniform of the Taliban. A rifle was slung across his chest, as casually as her father’s shoulder bag had been slung across hers…

The Talib kept looking down at her. Then he put his hand inside his vest. Keeping his eyes on Parvana, he drew something out of his vest pocket.

Parvana was about to squish her eyes shut and wait to be shot when she saw the Talib had taken out a letter.

**Making Predictions**

Students naturally like to make predictions. When given the opportunity, they will frequently have some input on what they think will happen next. The challenge, however, comes when they are asked to provide evidence for their predictions. If students are informed prior to reading aloud that there will be a point in the story where they will be asked for a prediction and evidence to support their ideas, they will be more focused while listening, mentally collecting and organizing information.

*Brave Irene*, a picture book by William Steig, tells the tale of a young girl, Irene, who faces insurmountable obstacles as she attempts to deliver a special gown to the duchess through a snowstorm. There are numerous opportunities for students to predict the outcome of Irene, the dress, and the dress box. Students enjoy discovering if their predictions were correct.

**Prompts for Making Predictions**

- What do you think will happen?
- What clues did the author give that something important is about to happen?
- What evidence did you base your prediction on?

**Determining Important Ideas**

We read texts differently, depending on the type of text, the purpose with which we are reading, and the perspective we are reading from.
Would you read a magazine in the same manner as a mystery novel? Certainly not! Novels are intended to be read sequentially, revealing pertinent information in an order dictated by the author. But you “flip” through a magazine in any direction, pausing to read an article, look at a caption, or examine a photograph as it captures our interest. You might read a magazine any number of times, identifying different key concepts each time.

Personal perspective also determines which ideas will be considered important. For example, a sports fan and a politician would definitely identify different important features when reading the same newspaper.

Prompts for Determining Important Ideas

- What ideas do you think are important?
- What does the author want us to think about?
- What do you think the story is really about?
- Why do you think the author used italics/bold/capitals/etc. for this word/sentence?
- What is the main idea of the story? How do you know?
- What evidence supports this information?
- What are some facts about this?
- What did you learn from the text?
- What information did you initially think was important? Has that changed? Why? What do you think is important now?

As sophisticated readers, we are able to decipher between text styles and the varying approaches to them, but students need to be taught these differences. They need to recognize the differences between text formats and to identify which skills they need to determine importance. When introducing various text forms to students, it is important to model how to make sense of the information presented and how it is organized. Students need to be taught the elements of a variety of text forms so that they have a toolkit with which to attack new texts.

Non-fiction vs. Fiction

Many students enjoy non-fiction books, but they tend to approach them as they would a novel—they begin at the beginning and end at the end. It is helpful for teachers to model how to use a non-fiction book as a resource. Modelling to students how to use an index or table of contents to gives them “permission” to flip through a book and read only the information that they have deemed important.

When reading non-fiction, importance is usually placed on facts. Fiction may require the reader to determine important ideas, then possibly revisit, revise, and rethink the ideas that were originally deemed important. As the story unfolds, a critical reader will eliminate information that no longer seems relevant and build on ideas that seem critical to the plot. This spiral—identifying important ideas, learning more information, then revisiting initial thoughts and revising them to go on to learn more information again—is an ongoing interaction between the reader and the text. Sophisticated readers do this seamlessly, but younger readers need guidance. Asking students to determine important ideas after reading aloud a small part of a book, and then continuing to read and revisit their
Making Connections

Students make connections in three ways: Text-to-Self, Text-to-Text, and Text-to-World. Children naturally find connections between texts and their own experiences. Even toddlers looking through a picture book search their own schema for things that they recognize in print to connect to that which they have experienced. For example, a two-year-old may not know what a sheep is, but is quite familiar with dogs, so she may point to a picture of a sheep and say “dog.”

This natural desire to fit the unknown into the known continues throughout our lives as readers. We are constantly interpreting text based on our personal experiences and knowledge bases. As children get a broader range of experiences with a variety of texts, they become more adept at seeing ways that they are connected. Children begin to look for connections between things they know about the world to be true and the texts they read; the statement, “That could never happen...there’s no way he could jump off the top of a building and survive!” is a text-to-world connection. The student is analyzing the concept introduced in the text and comparing it with his/her knowledge of basic physics—height, gravity, and acceleration—although not in so many words.

As I greeted my new class in September, I was greeted by a family who had just arrived in Canada from Korea. Their daughter was starting a new school in a new country with a new language. The only word she knew was “Hi.” As her mother wiped her tear-stained face and kissed her goodbye, we all felt her anxiety, even though she could not tell us in words. As time passed, she started to use English phrases and her skills strengthened. She would frequently try to say new words and phrases, and soon became able to understand and communicate. One day, I read the book *My Name Is Yoon* by Helen Recorvits, the story of a young girl from Korea who needs to find her place in a new country. As I read this book with my class, we were all able to make personal connections with the text. Many students recalled when they were new to a situation or a school; they were all able to relate to the feelings of Yoon. My text selection helped the students making meaningful connections based on experiences I knew they had in common with the characters in the text. Finding one’s way in a new country can be an overwhelming experience. It’s nice for students to connect with each other and with stories, to know that they are not alone.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prompts for Making Connections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Does this remind you of another story?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do any of the characters in the story remind you of anyone you know?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What does this story remind you of?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Have you had a similar experience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do any of the pictures remind you of anything?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Where have you seen/heard this before?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Strategies for Teaching Students to Make Connections

Activate Prior Knowledge

In order for students to effectively make connections while a text is being read, it is important that the teacher set the stage for the story. Prior to reading, you may wish to introduce students to the main idea of the story, the main character, or some other key element. This will allow students to begin to activate their prior knowledge in order to make connections to the text.

Allow Sufficient Wait Time

Wait time is also an important element when teaching a Guided Listening lesson on Making Connections. If we ask the students to consider a time when they felt the same as the main character, it may take students a few minutes to recall a personal experience.

Encourage Sharing Ideas With Peers

Listening to the connections made by others may trigger memories for students. Too often, teachers share their personal connections with students but neglect to leave enough time for them to share with and listen to each other.

Text Selection

When asking students to make connections, text selection is crucial. If you select books in which the characters are similar in age, interest, or situation to your students, it may increase the likelihood that they will make connections with ease. Selecting non-fiction texts on a subject that students have had some prior experience with will also help students to make connections.

Intentionally Link Books

If you use a number of texts on the same subject or by the same author, students will naturally begin to see links between the texts. It may be more difficult for students to make text-to-self connections with books on certain topics (for example; the Holocaust, or slavery), but if they have been exposed to a variety of books on the subject, they will begin to make connections between the texts and, as their knowledge base grows, they will be able to make more text-to-world connections.

Include Various Forms of Media

Remember to include movies, newspapers, magazines, TV shows, Internet sites, games, and songs as texts. These are valid text forms, and they play a very prominent role in most students’ lives. Think of how much stronger a student’s understanding of a fictional text would be if he is able to see connections between it and his favorite computer game.
Visualizing

When we speak of visualizing to students, we often tell them to create pictures in their mind or to imagine the story like a movie. Although it is essential for students to fully incorporate their sense of vision, their other senses are just as crucial. Visualizing with all of their senses increases students’ understanding of the text. Imagining the tone of a character’s voice, the smell of fresh bread baking, or the feeling the dampness in a musty old basement is a visualization skill that students need to develop. When taught visualizing through Guided Listening, students will learn to focus their attention on key phrases that help to create these mental images.

Prompts for Visualizing

- What can you picture in your mind?
- What do you think the character/setting/etc. looks like?
- If you were inside the book, what would you be able to hear/smell/taste/feel?
- What words does the author use to help us to create a picture in our mind?

The book *Poppy* by Avi presents students with countless opportunities to use all of their senses as they perceive the dangers felt by a little mouse, very alone, in a dark dangerous forest.

There was no time to waste. She dived into the log. …she moved deeper in to the musty dark. Suddenly she stopped. At the far end of the log she heard the distinct sound of heavy breathing. It was exactly what she had feared: Another creature was already in the log. …Poppy stared back in to the log’s darkness. The breathing and rattling were drawing nearer. She was trapped.

In the obscure murk of the log’s interior, Poppy crouched tensely. Slouching slowly out of the dark came a flat-faced beast with a blunt black snout and fierce grizzled whiskers. Its eyes were heavily lidded as though it had just awakened. The creature moved ponderously, with a waddle and rattle. Its stench was powerful enough to make Poppy clamp a paw over her nose.

This example clearly demonstrates that visualization is much more than making a “picture” in one’s mind. It is the carefully woven cues that we attend to, that stimulate all of our senses.

Participating in the anticipation of the characters, sensing the danger lurking around the next bend, or feeling the hair on the back of your arms stand up are also visualization skills. *Where the Red Fern Grows* by Wilson Rawls is a touching story of a boy and his two dogs. The selfless love between them is undeniable. As effective listeners and readers, students intricately weave images of these characters into a heart-warming tale. Without visualization, this story would fail, as the author plays on the reader’s ability to see, feel, and sense the challenges and tribulations faced by the main character, Billy. Using this book for Guided Listening creates numerous opportunities for students to become proficient at using their senses to envision the story.

When your heart races, and you can’t turn the pages fast enough, then you have indeed connected with the author in a special way and are feeling the feelings of the characters. When you laugh out loud, or burst into tears—then it is because you have truly visualized the story as told by the author.
In this selection, the author creates the perception of danger by alerting one to the sounds, feelings and images sensed by this young boy as he is alone in the darkness of the night.

Then I saw them—two burning, yellow eyes—staring at me from the shadowy foliage of the tree. I stopped, petrified with fear.

The deep baying of Old Dan stopped and again the silence closed in.

I stared back at the unblinking eyes.

I could make out the bulk of a large animal, crouched on a huge branch, close to the trunk of the big tree. Then it moved. I heard the scratch of razor-sharp claws on the bark. It stood up and moved out of the shadows on to the limb. I saw it clearly as it passed between the moon and me. I knew what it was. It was the devil cat of the Ozarks, the mountain lion.

Non-Fiction

Non-fiction texts sometimes present an interesting challenge for students. When working with expository texts, it is helpful for students to make connections to things that they already know about in order to visualize something they may not understand as fully.

Did you know that the blue whale’s heart weighs about 1000 pounds and it has about 14,000 pounds of blood in its body? That means that its heart is about the size of a Volkswagen bug, and its aorta is so large that a human could crawl through it. (enchantedlearning.com)

As you read this to yourself, which pieces of information have that largest impact? Would you remember the exact numbers, or did you create a mental image of someone crawling through the aorta of a whale?

When reading non-fiction with students, it is important to have them listen for key connections that will help them visualize and remember important information. Using graphic organizers—such as timelines, charts, webs, Venn diagrams, idea trails, and fishbones—may help students form greater understanding of non-fiction texts. Encouraging students to record their ideas visually by drawing a diagram while they are listening is a good way for them to represent information graphically.

Asking Questions

As teachers, it is natural for us to expect to have the answers for our students’ questions. The purpose of teaching students to ask questions is to allow them to have a dialogue, not with the teacher, but with the author. If we answer the questions for the students, then there is no need for them to further interact with the text.
Prompts for Asking Questions

- What were you curious about?
- Were you confused about something?
- What were you wondering about?
- What would you have asked the character/author?

Students initially find it difficult to ask questions. It is not common for students to ask questions; they are accustomed to answering them. Encouraging students to share their questions and focusing attention on what makes a good question helps reshape the way they approach asking questions. When students can ask questions that initiate controversy or a debate, then they have truly mastered the art of asking questions.

*Fly Away Home* by Eve Bunting is a picture book for students of all ages. It tells the story of a young boy and his father who are homeless and seek shelter in a busy airport. While listening to this story, students will generate many questions. Quite a few of the questions will remain unanswered at the end of the text. Does this mean that the questions are not valid? Exactly the opposite! Books that leave students thinking, questioning, and wondering what happens next have initiated a dialogue between them and the author.

Generating questions helps students to fully engage in an intimate personal dialogue with the author. Each reader’s questions are different, hence engagement with the text is a unique conversation for each reader. Two readers exposed to the same text may have completely different questions at any given point.

During Guided Listening, it is important for the teacher to acknowledge this variety of question types, and try to refrain from answering the students’ questions. If you validate questions with a response such as “good question,” or “interesting thought,” rather than pointing out the answers, you help students search within the text to find their own answers. Although students may initially ask questions with answers that seem obvious to the teacher, they will gradually become more complex and meaningful as they become adept at formulating questions.

Some themes generate more questions than others. Books that deal with controversial subject matter, issues of injustice, or inequality leave readers questioning the very concept of the story. Books like *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry, a holocaust story of Annemarie and her family as they try to help their Jewish friends escape to safety, raise a lot more questions than answers.

Synthesizing

Synthesizing is the process of combining the ideas presented in a text with one’s own ideas to create something new and different. It is essentially the evolution of our ideas as we progress through a text. As we read, we are thinking of ideas, making sense of the words, and generating thoughts of our own.

When more information is added to our existing thoughts, we may broaden or alter our ideas. It is this self-reflection that defines synthesis. Not only are we thinking, but we are thinking about our thinking, reflecting on these thoughts and reshaping them to include new information. Confused yet? Debbie Miller (2002) uses an analogy that helps to visualize this process. Imagine dropping a pebble into a pond. The initial splash represents our initial ideas. The water begins to ripple in concentric circles, radiating out from that point, each ripple larger and more encompassing than the one before it. These ripples represent the
new ideas stemming from, and building on, the initial idea. It’s important that students be able to recognize their own ideas, but also have an awareness of how their ideas change and develop.

**Prompts for Synthesizing**

- Did you have an idea or thought that changed as we were reading?
- How did your thinking evolve?
- Did you change your mind about anything?
- What did you add to your understanding?
- What do you think the book is really about?
- Do you feel differently now that you know more?
- Why/how did your feelings change?

The picture book *The Stranger* by Chris Van Allsburg tells the story of a mysterious stranger arriving in the life of the Bailey family just as the summer is turning to fall. Mr. Bailey accidentally hits the stranger with his truck and the stranger seems to suffer some minor injuries—the worst is that he can not recall his identity. The family works together to try to help the stranger remember. Chris Van Allsburg brilliantly provides clues throughout the story that an attentive listener may be able to identify. Students need to carefully piece the clues together to determine the stranger’s identity. After concluding this book, it is interesting to flip back through the story to find the clues that might have been overlooked the first time through. It’s fantastic for students to experience the “ah-ha!” moment as they finally understand all of the strange events surrounding the stranger’s presence.

Through Guided Listening, students can listen carefully for information that will contribute to their interpretation of the text.

**Integrated Metacognition**

In the Introduction to this book, we compared the complex processes of comprehension to the task of assembling a thousand-piece puzzle of a bowl of fruit. Usually, when we begin a complicated puzzle, we examine the picture on the box and use it as our guide throughout the process. In the same way, students need to have a clear image of what the effective use of comprehension strategies looks like. As teachers we, in fact, are the picture on the cover of their comprehension-puzzle boxes. They watch us closely for clues as to what to do, how to think, and how to use various strategies. We must make sure that the picture we present to students is clear and consistent.

As puzzle makers, after a thorough examination of the image on a puzzle box, we usually begin by sorting the puzzle pieces that will create the frame of the puzzle. In doing this, we build a scaffold into which all of the other pieces will fit. In the same way, presenting students with a framework on which to organize their ideas enables them to identify key ideas and record them.

Once we have completed the frame, we are set to begin to fill in the important features. In our fruit-bowl puzzle, we might select the red pieces to form the apple. We would know which pieces belong together because of their
distinguishing features—in this case, color. As effective listeners and readers, each fruit represents a different comprehension strategy. We use different cues in the text for each strategy.

However, our bowl of fruit is not complete with an apple, or a banana, or even a bunch of grapes. The fruit-bowl puzzle requires that we complete each of these features in isolation; however, in order for the image to be clear, they must somehow fit together into a larger picture. As puzzle makers, we select pieces that fit together, and as readers we find important elements in the text that fit together to effectively use each of the strategies. Our puzzle is not complete until all of the fruits are linked together in a unified way; so, too, our understanding of text is not complete until we can integrate all of the metacognitive strategies into a larger picture. This integration of metacognitive strategies is the final step in the comprehension puzzle. Our goal is the big picture: students figuring out how to smoothly flow from inferring to asking questions, from making connections to determining important information, from visualizing to synthesizing, all the while understanding the text and thinking about their thinking.