

Between the lines: exploring the auditory bridge to literacy

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Catriona M. Lawson
Murdoch University

Not long ago, in conversation with a student whose essays I had taken great pleasure in reading, I commented that she had a feel for language and wondered where it might have come from. Her answer was as unexpected as it was unsurprising: "I love reading. I love books – the feel of them, the smell of them". She went on to talk about her vivid memories of being read to as a child. This intuitive link made between a feel for language and a love of reading warranted, I felt, an exploration of dimensions of the experience of learning to read that might suggest alternative starting points for thinking about literacy development.

It is generally acknowledged that children who are read to are more likely to succeed at school than those who are not. Such children are seen to have an educational advantage because being read to increases their reading practice and practice leads to reading fluency (Nathan and Stanovich, 1991). However, someone who reads a great deal and reads fluently may not necessarily have a *love* of reading, which suggests something of greater substance than cognitive skill; it implies emotional attachment, perhaps even a therapeutic element. A *feel* for language similarly expresses an affective connection to the written word. A love of reading and a feel for language *appear* to be both sides of the same coin. Yet Gundlach suggests that children "build a bridge to writing from the speech that is used by adults and children when they read books aloud to one another" (Gundlach, 1982, 138). So, what, by way of language, do children hear that allows them to build this bridge? Britton's theory of language functions examines spoken and written languages (Britton et al, 1975) and provides a useful framework with which to illuminate the ways in which children build bridges between reading and writing.

Britton suggests that writers who have a feel for language learn what they need to know implicitly and that "any attempt to introduce explicit learning would be likely to hinder rather than help" (Britton, 1982, 168). Similarly, Smith points out, that children learn to read the complexities of the human face without being taught and that they "are not usually confused by written language - until someone tries to *instruct* them on how to read... It is not the reading that many children find difficult, but the instruction" (Smith, 2004, 3). It is worth noting here that Goodwyn, in his studies of pre-service high school English teachers over a number of years in England, found them to be both avid readers and skilful writers who, while they had very positive and vivid memories of reading and of being read to, could not, for the most part, remember *learning* to read. (Goodwyn, 2002). All of this seems to suggest that a feel for language may be a corollary of

a love of reading and that a love of reading cannot *explicitly* be taught but may be learnt by experience. It does little, however, to illuminate what exactly is learnt and experienced.

Doris Lessing, in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, stated that “writers do not come out of houses without books” (Lessing, 2007). This is rather a bold statement. There must, surely, be writers of note whose childhood was bereft of books: Frank McCourt, for example, whose book, *Angela’s Ashes*, describes the searing poverty of his early life. Yet he says, “...when you have nothing, little things become very precious, like books. There was an occasional book that came into our house and we just devoured it... I can remember all of them, even the look of them and the smell of them” (<http://www.achievement.org/>). He continues, “...my father ...would tell us stories and teach us songs... My mother was a good storyteller too...I remember [the] fire, looking into the flames darting and leaping, and she's telling the story and we're having tea” (<http://www.achievement.org/>). Cullinan says that “[s]tory has great power in human lives. We know that it is a primary act of mind; it is the way we organize our minds and understand our world” (Cullinan, 1989, 50). Nathan & Stanovich state that “stories help create an interest in books” (1991, 179).

It seems clear that stories and books are powerful stimuli, but to suggest that hearing stories encourages reading is problematic, if only because all cultures tell stories (e.g. Minami, 2002) but not all cultures are written cultures. Bus and van Ijzendoorn (1995, 998) suggest that interest in reading “is not a natural phenomenon but rather is evoked by the pleasure of sharing a book with the parent.” Smith, however, says there is nothing unnatural about it. What *is* natural is to try to make sense of the world, and “making sense of print [is no] more complicated than making sense of speech” (Smith, 2004, 4). Nevertheless, if story-telling and being read to are associated with making sense of the world in a pleasurable way, what sets story-language apart from everyday language to such an extent as to create the impetus to engage in reading for pleasure?

Britton (1982) differentiates between the functions of language. He formed his discourse theory from studies on language development and from Halliday’s (1973) functionalist theory, and distinguishes between the roles of *participant* and *spectator* in an event, relating these two roles to the ways in which we talk about ourselves. To invite our listeners to share with us our pleasures and misfortunes, our past experiences, our dreams of the future and our gossip, and to express our opinions and our attitudes, we talk as spectators, using the unstructured expressive discourse of the shared context. When we want to get something done, to inform or to convey our ideas, we talk as participants, using a transactional form of discourse to invite our listeners to participate with us in achieving our ends (Britton, 1982). This function embraces the practical to the abstract dependant on how far it is removed from immediate experience (Durst and Newell, 1989). There is a third discourse function, the *poetic*, which is the preserve of literature and

poetry and which Britton describes as “the form that most fully meets the demands associated with the role of spectator...by MAKING something with language rather than DOING something with it” (Britton 1982, 155).

Britton argues that underpinning any text is the speaker’s need to make his/her intent clear to the listener. Since vocabulary and syntax alone may be ambiguous, a speaker will underpin the text with acoustic features such as pitch, contour and timbre. The intent of an adult who speaks to an infant is often to give pleasure or to soothe, an intent closely allied to the poetic function, where language is used both to represent an experience and to create, in the listener, a virtual experience (Durst and Newell, 1989). A child hearing such infant directed speech will hear language that differs markedly from that of everyday transactional or expressive discourse, and owes much more to the poetic, or even musical, by way of its variation in melodic contour.

It is well established that infants are sensitive to musical qualities even three months before birth (Papoušek, M., 1996). A baby’s musical ‘ear’, *in utero*, is mature enough to respond differently to contrasting musical styles (Lynch et al, 1995) and can differentiate speech from background noise (LeCanuet, 1996). Infants are well prepared as auditors of the prosodic or musical aspects of speech. They do not understand the words but they hear adults talk to them in ways that are “drenched in musicality” (Fox, 2000, 24). Elements such as melodic contour, pitch, rhythm and meter, harmony and timbre are all features of the adult’s utterances. The pitch is raised, the tempo is slowed and speech segments are shorter, more repetitive and more well-defined in broad melodic contours than in adult directed speech (Fernald and Simon, 1984; Papoušek, M., 1996). The timbre, or tonal colour, is warm; the ‘edges’ are softened to avoid giving any inkling of alarm. At the same time, infants, far from being passive recipients of this musical stimulation, engage as active participants (Sloboda, 2004). Within eight weeks or so the baby is able to control her rate of breathing to produce prolonged cooing and, over the following months, her repertoire of utterances becomes tuned to the vowel sounds and rhythms of her mother tongue (Garbarino et al, 1992; Papoušek, H., 1996). Both caregiver and infant match each other’s vocalisations in what appears to be a reciprocal exchange (Piaget, 1962; Papoušek and Papoušek, 1989, Papoušek, M., 1996). As the interactions become more complex, it becomes increasingly difficult to detect who is imitating whom in the prosodic duet.

This early music education has been found to be universally present across cultures – though not consistently present amongst caregivers. Studies (e.g. Snow, 1989, Papoušek and Papoušek, 1991) have shown that auditory feedback in the form of parental imitation of infant vocalisation encourages infants to practise controlling the prosodic elements of speech and that the infant’s later rate of lexical imitation is predicated on the frequency of reciprocal vocal matching in the early months (Papoušek and Papoušek, 1989). To make meaning from speech, infants need to be able to segment what they hear into units and then determine which units

correspond to a particular meaning they experience. A number of studies (e.g. Stern et al, 1982; Jusczyk and Krumhansl, 1993) have demonstrated that infants parse their caregivers' speech in syntactic units like phrases and clauses, and that they do this by using prosodic information. Prosody is central to understanding spoken language (Frazier et al, 2006) and parents intuitively use musical vocal play as a means of teaching infants how to use dialogic skills (H. Papoušek, 1996). Since prosody is prominent in infant-directed speech and infant directed speech displays universal prosodic elements (Grieser and Kuhl, 1988), there may be some biological predisposition for the perception of melodic contour in reciprocal parent-child interaction. (M. Papoušek, 1996; Fassbender, 1996, Levitin, 2006).

Singing, too, is common amongst caregivers in all cultures and, in almost all cultures, movement is integral to making and listening to music (Levitin, 2006), so language learning, for most young children, is a musical experience; elongated vowels, extravagant intonation, repetition, musical games and rhythm foreshadow the onset of infant rhythmical, repetitive babbling of syllables that appear to be common to all languages (e.g. dadada; mamamam) and lie somewhere between song and nascent language (Jourdain, 1997). According to the constructivist theory of meaning-making (e.g. Bruner, 1966), making sense of something is a matter of relating it to what is already known and has become part of long-term memory. Making sense of language and music is no different. Prosody is the "skeletal frame" of language (Frazier et al, 2006, 248) which, through frequent exposure, becomes fixed in long-term memory allowing the child to become familiar enough with the syntactical structure of the mother tongue to be able to predict characteristic patterns of the language (Levitin, 2006; Frazier et al, 2006).

Children across all cultures are exposed, almost exclusively in their early months, to the prosody of infant directed speech, the contours and rhythms of which are more akin to Britton's poetic discourse, in that they represent the experience rather than describe it. However, children's first words signal a change; "they seem to open the way for verbal, rational, conscious, and culture-dependant guidance" (Papoušek, 1996, 48). Thenceforth they hear, almost exclusively, the everyday language of transactional and expressive discourse as they learn to participate in, and spectate on, their social lives – that is, unless they are read to.

Children whose parents read regularly to them hear the sound of the written language when it is read aloud. This is quite different in pitch, tempo, timbre, rhythm and contour from the spoken language, *if it is done well*. In other words, a parent needs to *perform* rather than to read. The child who hears a parent *make* something of the language by reading aloud with a voice that expresses the prosody of the narrative written text maintains a continuity of connection with the voice of poetic discourse, first heard through infant directed speech, nursery rhymes and lullabies. She comes to know the sound of written text and, through the reader's oral 'transcription' of highly structured syntactic groups (Guaïtella, 1999), she can hear the

segmentation of text into clauses and sentences; she hears punctuation. The very nature of most transactional and expressive speech precludes segmentation into intonation units, imbued as it is with hesitation, stutters, repetitions, false starts and unfinished sentences (Cruttenden, 1986). Breathing, which is both a limiting and a contributory factor in spontaneous speech, is “neutralized in a reading aloud context because of its positioning with respect to punctuation” (Guaitella, 1999, 518). On the other hand, gesture and facial expression, which play active roles in the rhythmic organisation of speech, exist in the context of reading aloud simply to add theatricality. The primary medium of language is sound and the prosodic features of language, including written language, need to be *heard* if the writer’s intent is to be understood. By hearing the written language read aloud, a child begins to develop an ‘inner voice’ and learns to manage prosodic phrasing along with its associated punctuation (Chafe, 1987). As a consequence of this “apprenticeship of listening to others” she learns, as a writer, to listen to her inner voice “dictating to h[er] the story [s]he wants to produce” Britton (1982, 167). The extent of her ability to nurture her inner voice may have a substantial influence on her later capacity to write effectively.

Children are active in developing their inner voices. They ask for the same stories to be read again and again. Furthermore, they expect those stories to be read in the same manner each time. As anyone who reads regularly to a child will attest, the listener will readily pounce on and correct the reader’s error whether it be a missed or misspoken word or a matter of intonation – getting the ‘voice’ wrong. “Expressive reading is remembered” (Fox, 2001, 21) but while the auditory aspect of narrative text may be crucial to the development of an inner voice and thence a feel for language, it does not account for a *love* of reading. A child may take great pleasure from being read to and from the conversations that go on during readings, but reading inevitably becomes a solitary activity. If a child is to become fluent beyond the level of children’s stories – to extend the ‘growing edge’ (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993), he or she will necessarily read and, more importantly, *want* to read more and more complex texts.

Infant directed speech consists of “prototypical contours” (Papoušek, 1996, 94), the frequent repetition of which allows infants to perceive, anticipate, answer and, ultimately, control the maternal music (Papoušek, H. 1996). Similarly, children’s texts follow repetitive prototypical patterns. Nursery rhymes, for example, introduce children to the timbral repetition of rhyme, assonance and alliteration. Fairy stories begin with “Once upon a time” and end in “And they all lived happily every after” (or their equivalents in other languages). Children do not find these repetitions tedious. They know what to expect and can anticipate, particularly if a parent repeatedly reads the same book in the same expressive way. Repetition, far from leading to habituation and desensitisation as one might expect, is experienced as being pleasurable. If this seems counterintuitive, it should be noted that there is “probably no other stimulus in common human experience that matches the extreme repetitiveness of music” (Huron, 2007, 141). The same parts of the brain process all sounds, including speech. However, patterned variations in

pitch, rhythm and timbre engage other parts that are involved in feelings of pleasure (Levitin, 2006). The voice of expressive reading aloud is rich in melodic variation and contrasts of timbre. The more the child experiences being read to, the greater will be the strength of the memory trace for that experience and its associated feelings of pleasure. Such a child may develop a love of reading and may even attribute feelings of pleasure to the representation of the stimulus (Huron, 2007): the book itself, the look of it, the feel of it and the smell of it. It is not unreasonable to suggest that books can be transition objects (Winnicott, 1953), tangible manifestations of the love between parent and child when discourse is at its most poetic, that allow the child to build a bridge between home and school and to develop an independent existence, while still being able to find comfort during moments of anxiety.

By the time she reaches school, a child who has been read to regularly may have as much as three hundred hours' head start in listening experience over a child who has not been exposed to written texts. Experience itself, of course, is not a guarantee of improved performance (Ericsson & Lehmann, 1996). More significantly, a child who has been read to *expressively* is likely to know the pleasure to be had from reading, to care about reading as something important, perhaps even to have acquired a taste for a particular type of book or story, to be motivated to practise, and to be able to hear the sound of the written language as distinctive. It is with these factors in mind that it is necessary to address what may happen where their importance is underestimated and where reading is treated as a predominantly visual experience, for example sound/symbol connection or emphasis on pictures and the look of the page.

The "Big Book", intended to be "the classroom equivalent of twenty or more children on [the teacher's] lap at one time!" (Parkes, 2000,13) may be such a case. The notion that a child can join in shared reading from the first day of school is very appealing. However, for the novice, it may be counterproductive. The model of shared reading is based on Holdaway's (1979) observations of early readers whom, he noted, had been read to regularly at home, had spent time by themselves with books, and whose parents had provided them with scaffolded reading opportunities. Since not all children would have had these opportunities, teachers, Holdaway believed, could compensate by creating the same conditions in the classroom. Children sit together on a mat in front of the teacher who holds the Big Book. All children are able to see the book and the pictures while the teacher enthusiastically models the reading process. Typically, on rereading the book, the teacher encourages the children to join in and the conversation afterwards focuses on textual features and reading strategies (Holdaway, 1979).

This is not the experience created for the child who has been read to in the peace and quiet of home and who undertakes an "apprenticeship of listening", hearing the poetic discourse of stories read many times and in the same way without expectation of transactional participation. The novice in the classroom hears the voice of the teacher accompanied by the ragged chorus of

his peers as well as the inevitable shuffle of children sitting on the floor. The classroom, too, may be brightly decorated, designed to catch the eye but not the ear of the children. Amidst this background clamour, the ear may have difficulty in becoming attuned to the nuances and prosodic elements of poetic discourse. For some children, prosody and timbre may be significant barriers to building a bridge to literacy.

Children from non-English speaking backgrounds are accustomed to the rhythms and contours of their mother tongues. If they arrive speaking little or no English at all, they may remain silent for some time as they tune their ears, not just to the vocabulary, but also to the prosody of the new language. It may not take them long to acquire the day-to-day language required for survival, but they must carry the double burden of learning to hear and differentiate, virtually simultaneously, the prosody of both the transactional and expressive discourses with their contractions, abbreviations and elisions and of the poetic discourse, whose Standard written English, by and large, outlaws such informality.

In Australia, English-speaking Indigenous children face, perhaps, greater difficulty simply because it is assumed that they speak the common language. However, the prosody of Aboriginal Australian English is very different from that of Anglo-Australian English. For example, in Aboriginal Australian English there is a tendency to shorten vowels, to stress the first syllable and to employ long inter-turn pauses, differences that may have “a serious detrimental outcome on speech events in which European Australian conventions are dominant” (Kachru, Kachru and Nelson, 2006, 81) As a consequence, Indigenous students may endure many of the same difficulties as migrant students, but, possibly, with less teacher sympathy and understanding.

For quite different reasons, boys, too, may not have adequate opportunity to access poetic discourse. In a culture where boys are expected to go outside and play, the pitch, rhythm and timbre of language that their ears become attuned to is likely to be associated with transactional discourse. A backyard game of football will elicit prosody far removed from that of the bedtime story. Moreover, if the prosody of poetic discourse is associated with the feminine voices of mother and female teacher and the more pleasurable prosody of transactional discourse is associated with the masculine voices of father and male sports coach, for example, reading may become a gender issue unless, perhaps, boys are exposed to transactional texts - non-fiction - read aloud as though they were narratives, using the prosodic features of poetic discourse.

It is interesting to note that these three groups of children are those who seem least able to build a bridge to literacy (e.g. AASW, 2000). Solutions are proffered that generally involve some form of ‘guided’ reading practice for the struggling or reluctant reader and that invariably focus on the visual; graphic novels, phonics; large print books. Children who have been read to have enjoyed hours and hours of stress-free practice in listening to highly expressive and poetic

discourse. On the other hand, the struggling reader, whose 'ear' has been inadequately tuned, may be taken to the 'wet area' or the veranda to be listened to for fluency and comprehension as a participant in the transactional discourse between judge and judged. Where is the pleasure in that?

Even more experienced listeners may detect that the poetic discourse that is a salient part of reading at home has begun to take on a more transactional tone at school. Story can become something that is *done*, rather than enjoyed. Children may be asked to respond in writing to stories they have heard, perhaps rewriting the ending. Children do not yet have the tools to write or rewrite the highly-evolved art form that is narrative. The inner voice that is nurtured by many hours of experience in hearing the poetic discourse has barely begun to whisper. Young children know this and, despite teachers' best efforts, they focus on those elements of writing that are within their control, recognising "good" writers as being those whose spelling is accurate and whose handwriting is legible rather than who is the most imaginative (Kos and Maslowski, 2001).

Stories are often used to introduce children to 'story grammar' and other elements of narrative. However children learn to understand language just by being exposed to it. They are able to "generate sentences without any formal training in [the] underlying rules" (Jourdain, 1997, 275). Similarly, they learn generic structure by repetitive exposure and are well versed in the more everyday genres of recount and instruction having been told what happened and what to do for most of their lives. In fact, studies have found that children prefer to write more transactional (informational) texts at school (Newkirk, 1987) and that even adults prefer to confine the expressive and poetic functions to their private writing and to a time of their own choosing (Schreiner, 1997).

Britton believed that the expressive function, being most closely related to children's early language, should be encouraged in their writing since it would act as "a kind of matrix from which differentiated forms of mature writing developed" (Britton et al, 1975, 83) but there is little evidence to support this claim (Durst and Newell, 1989). On the contrary, in the absence of hearing the sound of more complex patterns, the expressive function has come into its own. Best understood as the function that corresponds to "informal talk among friends, where the rules of use are relaxed" (Durst and Newell, 1989, 378), expressive discourse is the lingua franca of YouTube, FaceBook, MySpace and Twitter. The written equivalent of the oral language has been developed, with all its hesitations, repetitions, contractions, abbreviations and elisions. It is similar to young children's writing in that it includes non-linguistic features, *emoticons*, for example. Punctuation is, by and large, dispensed with, except as a means of signifying gesture and emotion, the *smiley*. Being exposed, daily, to the three-line paragraph of the Internet, the efficient spelling of the text message, the verb-less grammar of the news headline and oral phrasing dictated by the teleprompter, current generations are communicating effectively *with each other*

with an alacrity undreamt of by previous generations through “a context of shared interests, mutual experience, and common goals and objectives” (Applebee, 1978, 6).

Reading, however, is not a social activity. A shared context cannot be assumed in the classroom either between students and teacher or amongst students. A study conducted in America of over 17,000 students on their attitudes to reading (McKenna, Kear and Ellsworth, 1995) showed all children, regardless of reading ability, gender and ethnicity, to have a positive attitude to reading and learning to read before entering Grade 1. By the time the children reached Grade 6, their positive attitude had declined, in some cases precipitously, but with a notable exception. While there was an overall decline in attitude towards academic reading, attitude to recreational reading declined considerably less steeply amongst high-ability readers in general and amongst high-ability girls in particular. Furthermore, no significant difference was found amongst students whose teachers had relied heavily on basal readers for reading instruction and those who had used literature. Another American study, (Pressley, Rankin and Yokoi, 1996) showed that reading aloud by teachers rapidly drops from almost daily in pre-primary to around monthly in Grade 2. It is possible that, with respect to recreational reading, high-ability readers, already accustomed to reading for pleasure, continue to read *in spite of school*, whereas novice readers may have some early inkling that there is pleasure to be had from reading but discover that it is increasingly beyond their grasp as they are exposed progressively less frequently to the sound of poetic discourse read aloud.

The auditory bridge to poetic discourse is not new; Stories of the Dreaming, Bible readings in church, recitations of the Qur’an, Children’s Hour on the radio are all examples of language heard by children at its most expressive. However, building an auditory bridge to *literacy* depends, first of all, on creating the conditions in which inner voices may be nurtured, which is to say, generating repeated hearings of poetic discourse spoken beautifully against a background of quiet and an absence of visual distraction. Children who are read to at home by adults who do it well experience a long apprenticeship of listening to the sounds of the written language and, equally important, of hearing those sounds spoken in a timbre that evokes an almost visceral pleasure. Just as we develop a preference for musical sounds that we have heard in infancy (Jourdain, 1997), so we may develop a preference for the vocal quality epitomised by a parent’s reading. Language, as something that is heard, is “fundamentally a system of timbral contrasts [and the] human voice is the supreme instrument of timbral contrast (Patel, 2008, 51). However, some instruments seem to find more universal favour than others, as is evident from the inability of a number of ‘silent’ film stars to make the transition to ‘talkies’. The timbral quality of the voice may, to an extent, be controlled at any given moment but the timbral quality of the overused, untrained voice is likely to suffer over time. Yet, of all public speakers, teachers are least likely to have been taught how to use their voices. Teachers’ vocal impairment due to lack of voice training has been shown to have a detrimental effect on children’s speech perception

(Rogerson and Dodd, 2005). It is possible, therefore, that a teacher's lack of training in reading aloud may have a detrimental effect on children's perception of the sound of the written language. If this is coupled with an ear ill-attuned to the nuances of poetic discourse, the listener's pleasure is unlikely to be aroused. Moreover, since nuance can be communicated only by demonstration (Sloboda, 2004), the novice reader, in the absence of an adequate model, may find it onerous to 'play read', unable to develop a feel for, and practise control of, the prosodic elements of the written language and to nurture the writer's inner voice.

This may strike a dissonant chord with the contemporary perception of classrooms as colourful, collaborative places, which has arisen out of the social, functionalist tradition of language associated with, for example, Jakobson (1960) Halliday (1978) and Britton et al (1975). However, if, as this paper argues, the bridge to literacy is an auditory one, perhaps it would be useful to alter Britton's 'spectator' role to that of 'auditor' and to focus on what students *hear* by way of literacy, how often and how well. It is possible that the reluctant or struggling reader has had an insufficient apprenticeship in listening and is being distracted by the bright, print-rich environment of the contemporary classroom, misled by the notions that interaction and engagement with text are the same as reading and that 'silent' reading is the mute decoding of print rather than an opportunity for pleasurable internal discourse. A warm, softly lit, quiet reading area; a large comfortable couch; and a child on either side of an adult or older child who reads beautifully are much closer to the home experience where a love of reading and a feel for language are cultivated over time.

No one, thank God, killed the language or mutilated the literature I loved by hacking it into little pieces and teaching it to me little bit, by little bit. No! I was instead blessed many times over by having people read aloud to me. My mother and my father, my teachers and my professors all poured into my willing ear the finest prose, the most glorious stories, the most uplifting verse, and the most inspiring drama written in the English language. My ear was my teacher.

Mem Fox (www.memfox.com/green-sheep-secrets.html)

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