

Audiobooks Help ESL Students Achieve Success

ESL students have higher test scores, increased fluency, and more confidence when they use audiobooks

By Shari Quan-Rios

It is a known fact that English is one of the hardest languages to learn, and more and more teachers are turning to audiobooks as the ESL solution. They are proven effective in increasing vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, and confidence for these very special students.

Studies show that it takes approximately 7 years to become fluent in a second language. Unfortunately, today's students are not usually given that long. Expected to move very quickly, ESL students of all levels are only eligible to have exemption from many state and local assessments for a maximum of three years. Students must not only speak the language, but also read and comprehend—on grade level—in a language that is often still foreign to them. The task of predicting meaning using inferences, and understanding similes, metaphors, synonyms, and antonyms is often daunting for native English speakers, and often proves to be overwhelming and frustrating for ESL students.

As a former ESL teacher, I know that it is absolutely essential that teachers have the best tools available to help students become fluent in the English Language. For me, those tools came in the form of audiobooks. A student in my sixth grade classroom named Elisa is the perfect example of how audiobooks can help ESL students get ahead.

Elisa was a student in my advanced ESL class. A sixth grader, she could speak English fairly well, but had a difficult time comprehending new vocabulary and could not read or write English at a level much higher than kindergarten. Still, Elisa was required to participate in the school's Accelerated Reader program. Elisa checked out books and took the AR tests, but scored no higher than a 20% on the tests. Her confidence was low and she was frustrated by her confusion. Working with her reading teacher, I had Elisa start combining audiobook versions with the print books required for her AR tests. Elisa listened to the text being read aloud while following along in the print book. On her first AR test after using the audio and print books together, Elisa scored a 70%! Her confidence soared as we continued to combine audiobooks with her AR print books. Her English vocabulary increased as she was able to make contextual connections, and her English writing greatly improved. As her understanding of the language grew, so did her fluency and her confidence.

Elisa's story is only one example of the many times I used audiobooks to help my ESL students. When teaching ESL, the most important thing is for students to hear English spoken properly. Too many times, as in Elisa's case, ESL students are given something to read and are expected to comprehend it on their own. But when students look at the words and try to sound them out, they are confused by pronunciation and are unable to comprehend meaning and nuance. Students spend so much time trying to figure out how to say a word, they never get to the step of comprehending the context of what they read, making standardized tests with require comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, and writing skills difficult.

Audiobooks alleviate this problem by allowing students to hear words read correctly while they follow along in the print book. When Elisa was able to hear the text read in its entirety with proper pronunciation, she was able to decipher meaning and learn pronunciation without having to stop reading and concentrate on individual words. With audiobooks, students like Elisa can move past simple pronunciation and begin to finally comprehend what they are reading—the ultimate goal for ESL learners. When they see the text as a whole, students can begin to use context clues to decipher meaning from new words, and are more easily able to incorporate these words into their daily conversation. This leads to increased fluency and confidence.

The use of audiobooks is, in my opinion, the best tool educators can use in helping ESL students and struggling readers. Whether using audiobooks for group reading of novels, individual reading, or student check-out, they will help your ESL students achieve. My sixth grade ESL students particularly enjoyed texts that would have been very difficult for them to comprehend without the aid of audiobooks: *The Outsiders*, *Rumble Fish*, *Among the Hidden*, and *Holes*. By combining the print and audio versions of these titles, my ESL students could not only read and understand the books, but enjoy and learn from them like the rest of their class.

My ESL students came to me failing their reading class because they could not pass assessments on comprehension. Many students, like Elisa, went from grades well-below failing level, to strong C-averages and above. The audiobooks not only helped these students pass tests, but improved their vocabulary and fluency, which in turn greatly increased their confidence. The results speak for themselves!

Shari Quan-Rios is a former ESL instructor and ESL Instructional Support teacher for the Garland Independent School District, Texas. She is now a representative for Recorded Books, the leading publisher of unabridged audiobooks for schools. She is able to use her experience to help other ESL teachers and district personnel incorporate audiobooks into their classrooms, allowing ESL students and struggling readers to achieve higher fluency and comprehension rates.

To find out more about the benefit of audiobooks in the classroom, see www.recordedbooks.com. Recorded Books offers many resources for ESL students, including Adapted Classics and SmartReaders, which Shari frequently used in her ESL classroom.

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