

# **Can audiobooks, utilised in combination with traditional reading methods, improve comprehension of texts and enhance reading stamina, enjoyment and focus?**

Hoxton Garden Primary School, Upper Phase

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to establish whether a combined approach to reading - utilising traditional texts alongside an audiobook component - has a meaningful impact on improving the comprehension scores of children in a test setting. Furthermore, moving beyond a purely quantitative study, interviews with children and the observation of reading sessions sought to obtain qualitative data regarding reading enjoyment, behaviour, stamina and general focus.

Using a focus group model, the study utilised middle ability readers from Years 5 and 6, whose comprehension skills were identified as being moderately below the year group mean. It was hoped that with regular exposure to the combined approach of traditional texts and audio, a meaningful improvement will occur in comprehension scores. Children were initially asked to sit a baseline control paper in order to assess their initial starting points. They completed a short survey to qualify their attitudes towards reading and identify any potential obstacles to reading enjoyment and the ability to answer comprehension questions. Subsequent sessions sought to introduce audiobooks alongside texts: children's responses to this additional stimulus were observed - with particular emphasis on behaviour, focus and reading enjoyment as well as informal comprehension questioning. Final sessions brought together the text and audio component in a test setting, where children were exposed to a number of suitably challenging texts and once again their comprehension skills were tested. As a result of student's exposure to the complete process, quantifiable improvement was ascertained from this final testing.

## Introduction

*“Studies on electronic media consumption are still relatively limited, and the audio book genre has been ‘woefully unaddressed by the academic community in general.’” (Irwin, 2009)*

Many children in our schools lack a ‘culture’ of reading. A plethora of external stimuli available to children in the modern world are often perceived - with good reason - to have a negative and distracting impact on their reading stamina and general attention span. As a result, fewer children are exploring and persevering with reading as a source of enjoyment. YouTube clips - arguably the most influential current source of young people’s entertainment - are instantly accessible to our students anywhere, through a multitude of devices. The average length of such clips is around four minutes; video analytics reveal that the first ten seconds are critical for viewer engagement and that by the minute mark, videos have often lost 45% of their audience (Microsoft Study, 2015). It is little wonder then that with such trends on the rise, our children are ill equipped to acquire the necessary cognitive skills in order to access and enjoy the written form - both as a source of enjoyable entertainment and, more significantly, for academic purposes.

As a consequence of this ongoing battle for the attention spans of young minds, creating a multi-sensory experience for our children when reading a text could feasibly, significantly enhance the overall reading experience for the child and allow them to focus for longer and with more enjoyment and understanding of content. Furthermore, academic evidence points to a strong link between written and auditory comprehension, particularly at a young age: *“When considering differences in...comprehension skill...comprehending written language is strongly related to skill at comprehending auditory language; in other words, reading and listening correlate highly.”* (Gernsbacher, 1990).

It is therefore logical to conclude that any attempt to aid the development of a student’s skills in one of these areas will naturally benefit the other. Combining them into a multi-sensory activity, may well prove to have a significant positive impact on both. Beyond this, there is a wide plethora of benefits which audiobooks poses as a learning tool. Firstly they expose the listener speech patterns and rhythms which

can often be missed through silent reading. This is particularly applicable to young readers who are making early links with the written and spoken word and where visual attention spans are directly linked to decoding, (Bosse, 2009). Secondly, exposure to a wider range of vocabulary and syntax can be attained; audiobooks can help students access stories that would be too advanced for them to read without the benefit of prosody, guiding intonation and emotive clues from the narrator. Consequently, reluctant readers can be more readily persuaded to engage with both narrative or non-fiction, whilst all students benefit from the 'enforced isolation' of a pair of headphones - improving their listening skills and creating an environment in which distractions and behaviour issues are considerably negated as they become absorbed by what they are - simultaneously - reading and listening to. *"University of Memphis research shows that we're more likely to persevere with an audiobook that doesn't immediately grab us than we would with a book, so [it] could help build stamina for stories if your child loses interest in books quickly."* (Graesser, 2005)

Any method by which our children are exposed to literature can only be a positive thing; with our increasingly busy lives, audiobooks may well become a favoured method by which future generations can access the written word with pleasure and enthusiasm, in a more convenient format.

## **Research Process**

The project was co-ordinated by the Upper Phase Leader and took place at lunch times with 12 middle ability readers from Years 5 and 6. Although the reading fluency of these children was generally good, their reading comprehension skills had been identified as being moderately below the year group average. The initial session comprised of a short formal comprehension activity in which the children were asked to read a short extract of 'The Ransom of Red Chief' by O. Henry and were given 15 minutes to answer ten comprehension questions of varying degrees of complexity. Subsequently, they were asked to complete a short survey at home in which their attitudes towards reading for pleasure and barriers to written comprehension tasks were assessed, (see Findings B).

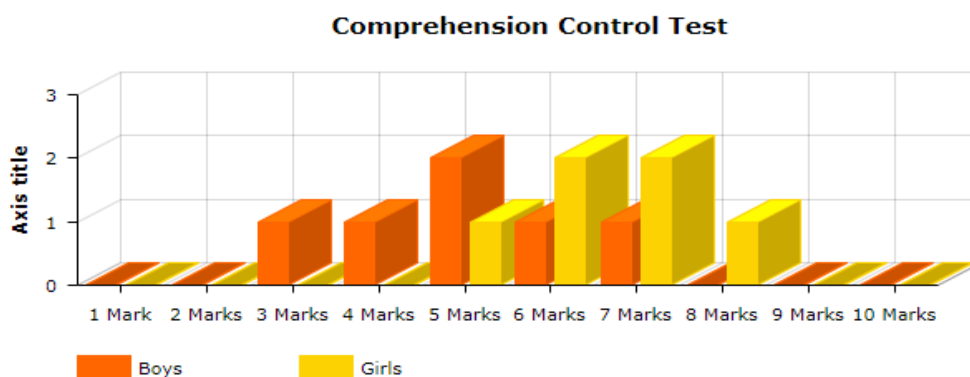
There followed a series of sessions in which children were exposed to a selection of extracts from both narrative and non-fiction texts, 80% of which were accompanied

by an audio version of the reading. Children were then informally assessed on their comprehension after 15 minutes. At this point in each session, students were informed that they were free to leave or could chose to stay for a further 15 minutes and read/listen to more of the text for pleasure, (see Findings C).

Ultimately, children were once again given a formal comprehension test of ten questions based on a new section of the original reading of 'The Ransom of Red Chief.' Every effort was made to keep questions pitched at a similar level to those in the initial session. A comparison of the scores at the start and end of the process was then made, (see Findings D). Finally, upon completion of the final session, students were asked to reflect on their experiences and discuss whether they found reading more pleasurable and comprehension easier with the assistance of an audio element, or whether they felt that it did not make any significant difference, (see Findings E).

## Findings

### A.

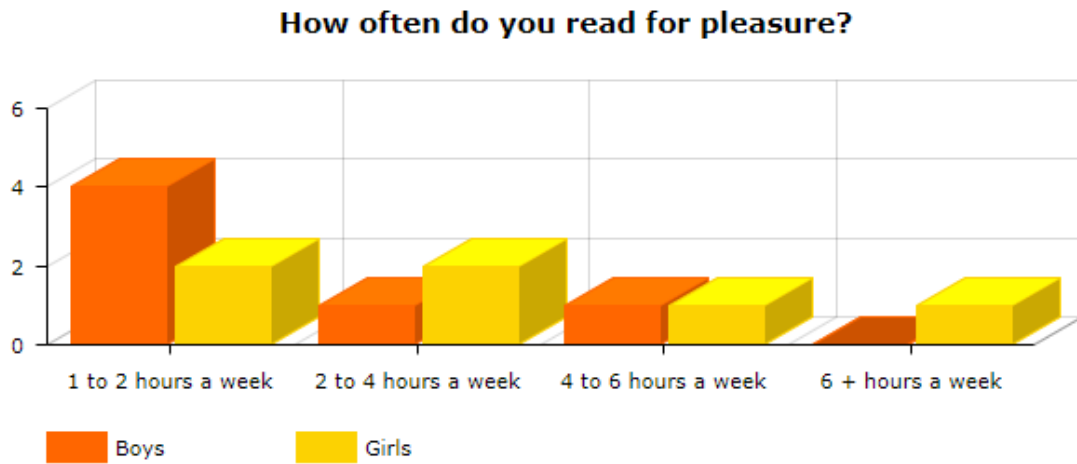


Quantitative results from the initial control testing, showed scores which suggested that girls had a slight edge with the more challenging comprehension questions and generally accumulated more marks than the boys - particularly on inference and clarification type questions. Both groups showed roughly similar predisposition to fact retrieval type questions, in which both groups scored highly.

Qualitative observation of reading behaviours displayed another interesting variance: Girls tended to complete the reading portion of the activity quicker, where as some of the boys struggled to complete the reading in the time permitted, or found it more difficult to maintain concentration and not seek distractions. There was no noticeable

difference in approach in either group during the subsequent comprehension task. Both sets of children sought to re-read the text in order to help locate answers.

**B.**

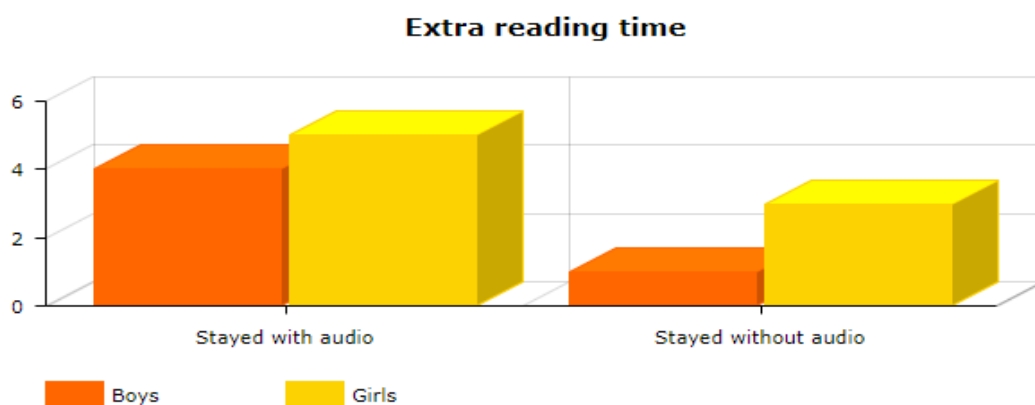


Reading for pleasure was defined as reading beyond the expectations set by the school and/or parents. Initial findings showed a general reluctance to read for pleasure by boys and a slightly more even spread by girls.

When asked to list barriers to successful reading comprehension the reasons given were as follows:

- An inability to understand the text in its entirety = 1 child
- Unknown vocabulary = 3 children
- Finding it difficult to retain focus over large amounts of text = 4 children
- Lack of time = 2 children
- Not engaged by the reading = 2 children

**C.**

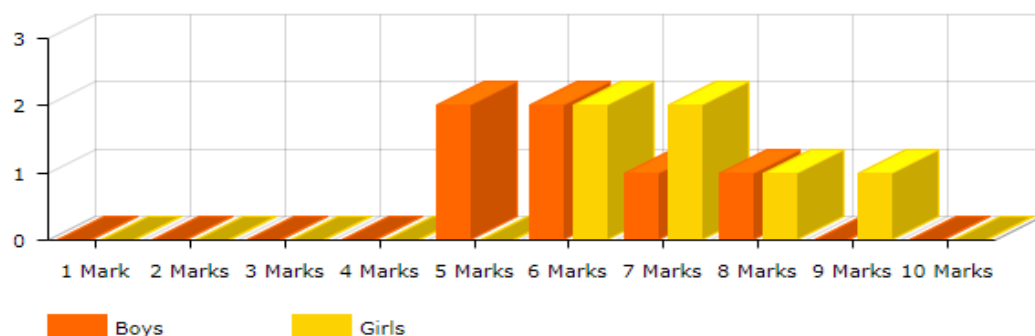


When reading sessions were combined with an audio element, reading behaviours showed a marked improvement with the introduction of headphones and a narrator. Children were visibly more reactive to the reading - particularly with narrative texts - and could be seen smirking, laughing or reacting emotionally at appropriate parts of the narrative. Furthermore, reading pace noticeably increased and pupils showed a general trend towards following the pace of the narrator by skimming the text with their finger. The influence of outside distractions was to a large extent curtailed, as children were no longer distracted by classroom or hallway noises and as they attempted to follow the text visually in time with the audio coming through their headphones, they were less inclined to look around for sources of distraction. Pupils continued to remain more engaged throughout the session and significantly more willing to stay and enjoy more of the text they were given after an initial 15 minutes. This was the case for both narrative and non-fiction texts. Having made an allowance of several sessions for any possible novelty factor to wear off - it was a trend which nevertheless continued up until the penultimate session as the averages on graph C indicate.

When asked informal comprehension questions following sessions in which text was combined with the audio, children were markedly better at answering more complex inference questions - ones in which a more complex understanding of characters personalities and motivations was necessary. Whilst the answering of fact retrieval questions showed no particular improvement (keeping in mind that, they by and large presented the most negligible challenge from the outset), children were able to recall facts with greater speed and showed a perceptibly better understanding of fact/opinion type questions as well as those which required the clarification of technical terms.

**D.**

**Final Test**



The final control test - which included an audio component to accompany the text - showed a slight improvement for children who had originally performed well, but a far more pronounced improvement for those children (boys in particular) who had the lowest initial scores. Reading behaviours were consistent with those observed during earlier sessions with the use of audio and headphones - children followed the text with increased focus and pace and spent noticeably less time answering simple fact retrieval questions. More complex inference questions were also answered with more clarity and with reference to more tangible examples from the text.

When children were asked to reflect upon their experiences of the audio element accompanying texts following the completion of all the sessions, the following points were made:

- A greater ability to focus/avoid distractions = 5 children
- Read text quicker = 1 child
- Clearer understanding of characters/inference = 2 children
- Less put off by ambiguous vocabulary = 2 children
- No appreciable difference to comprehension = 2 children

All pupils who took part in the sessions agreed that an effective narrator made the text more enjoyable and engaging and that they would be keen to seek out audiobooks of their current home readers.

## **Impact and Conclusions**

*"We are more likely to stick with a book that we're listening to than one we're reading...which...also improve[s] our chances of retaining what's in it."* (Graesser, 2005). It is clear that whilst more comprehensive studies are necessary in order to conclusively prove the benefits of audiobooks in the development of written comprehension for children, some more general conclusions can almost certainly be drawn from the series of sessions organised for the purposes of this project. They can be subdivided into the following three categories:

### **Behavioural impact:**

Turning reading into a multi-sensory activity has self-evident and immediate positive implications on the behaviour of pupils. Focus is significantly enhanced, children are

less prone to external distractions and reading pace is increased. The impact of 'silencing' the outside world to some children - particularly those presenting with behavioural/concentration issues - should not be underestimated.

### **Impact on comprehension:**

The presence of an emotive narrator has been seen to aid children considerably with elements of comprehension, which focus on the more complex inference of a character and their motives as well as a more general 'situational awareness' within a narrative. Children are able to pick up clues from tone, pace and expression which they would often miss if reliant entirely on the text. Furthermore, fact retrieval seems to become more efficient when children have had the opportunity to both read and hear a particular piece of information.

### **Impact on enjoyment:**

Perhaps most significantly, there is a clear and obvious enhancement of children's enjoyment of reading when a narrative or non-fiction text is read to them whilst they follow along. Maybe this shouldn't be surprising. Writing is not particularly old in evolutionary terms; insufficient time in many respects for the evolution of specialised mental processes devoted to reading. We continue to use the mental mechanism that evolved to understand oral language - through storytelling, conversation, song, poetry and verbal humour - to support the comprehension of written language. Most children's earliest positive experiences of literature come from oral storytelling by their parents or carers. Perhaps, as educators, we underestimate the powerful impact of the human voice and the human emotions it conveys in creating vivid and powerful imagery in the minds of our children whilst helping to clarify and infer complex ideas and actions.



## References

**Bosse, M L**(2009). Influence of the visual attention span on child reading performance: A cross-sectional study. *Journal of Research in Reading*, Wiley, 32 (2), pp.230-253.

**Graesser, A,** (2002). *The Psychology of Science Text Comprehension*

**Grenschbacher, A** (1990). *Investigating Differences in General Comprehension Skill* in *Journal of Experimental Psychology*:

**Irwin, W.** (2009). *Reading Audio Books. Philosophy and Literature* 33(2), 358-368. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Microsoft (2015). *Attention Span Study for Consumer Insights, Microsoft Canada*

Accessed (June 2019): <http://dl.motamem.org/microsoft-attention-spans-research-report.pdf>