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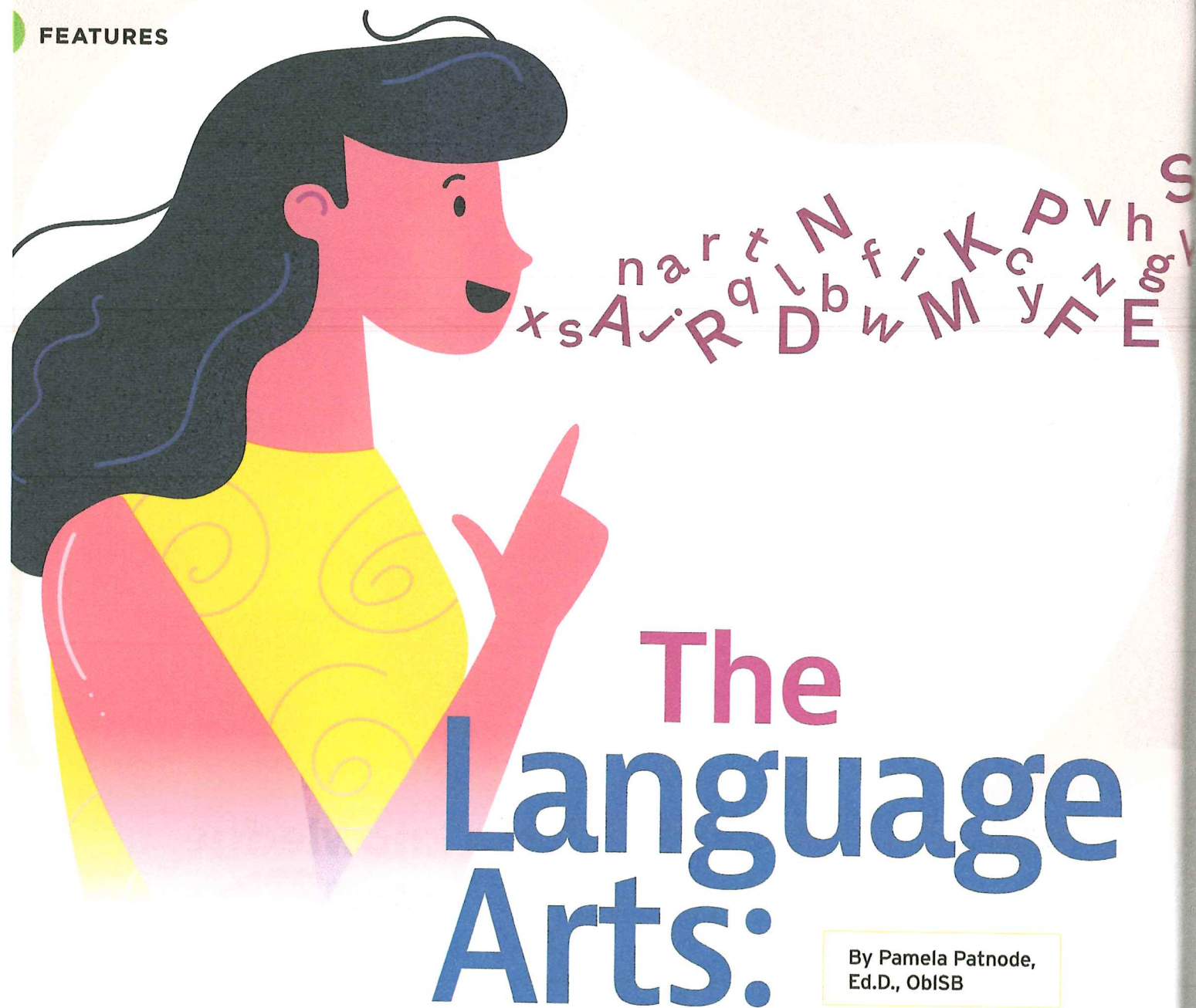
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The Language Arts:

By Pamela Patnode,
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What is Commonly Overlooked?

“Listen . . . with the ear of your heart.” (*Rule of St. Benedict, Prologue*)

Recently, I was asked to record a presentation titled “The Art of Language.” As someone who has taught reading, writing and literature; worked with English language learners; tutored students with dyslexia and dysgraphia; and taught and studied foreign languages; for me language is fascinating, and this invitation was a joy. However, for the brief recorded talk, I wondered: What should be the focus of this presentation? The “Art of Language” is a broad topic, and I wondered how to narrow the scope to just one aspect.

Current articles in industry publications guided my decision. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, much press has been dedicated to national test scores in reading and math. Every state in the nation saw drops in test scores among

public school students. Because of the drop in scores, publicity has circled around the topic of improving student reading and math skills.

Drawing attention to this topic is important. Language skills, including the development of reading, are crucial to educational advancement. In fact, according to researchers, “language is the central achievement necessary for success in schooling.”

In her book *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*, Marilyn McIntyre notes a decline in language skills among her undergraduate students. Reflecting upon changes in education, the rise in screen time and social media use, and the decline in the

role of great literature, poetry, scripture and silent reflection in society, McEntyre admitted that her incoming undergraduate students lack literary awareness and skills. “It is not their fault,” she stated, “But it is their loss.”

McEntyre also observes:

We consider the fate of water, soil, animal and plant species, and food systems. ... Like any other life-sustaining resource, language can be depleted, polluted, contaminated, eroded, and filled with artificial stimulants. Like any other resource, [language skills] need the protection of those who recognize [their] value and commit themselves to good stewardship.

How do we do improve language development in the next generation?

One solution appears to be overlooked.

In a recent article in *Education Week*, the authors noted that current research demonstrates the importance of teaching writing to help students learn to read. In fact, the publication’s articles and research suggest that using a structured, sequential, phonics-based, multi-sensory reading program *in combination with* a structured, sequential, guided writing program helps students learn to read.

Having used phonics-based, structured, sequential reading programs in combination with structured, sequential, guided writing programs for more than 15 years, I agreed with what the authors presented. However, throughout this and other current articles, I have noticed that something has been repeatedly overlooked when it comes to language development in children.

In the traditional sense, the four language arts are listening, speaking, reading and writing. Yet, within the popular press, there has been little attention given to the value of developing listening skills in students. For a student to become a competent communicator, attention must be given to the development of listening.

Developing the Skill of Listening

Listening is listed as the first of the language arts for a reason. Listening is critically important in the development of language. In fact, if a child has a listening impairment as an infant or toddler such as multiple ear infections, hearing loss or an auditory processing issue, it is likely that they will struggle with speaking, reading and spelling as they grow.

Few would argue that the skill of listening is in decline in today’s culture. Indeed, a review of recent political debates demonstrates that many *adults* could use a refresher course in listening. Listening is a skill, and it needs to be intentionally developed.

In fact, for children to develop strong language skills, listening is a significant step. To learn vocabulary, grammar, syntax, rhythm and rhyme, and the beauty and subtleties of language, children must hear huge quantities of well-written literature, poetry, eloquent speeches and scripture.

Andrew Pudewa, the founder of the Institute for Excellence in Writing, often says that we cannot get out of the brain something that is not already there. Pudewa argues that we cannot expect students to write well-written essays, reports, stories or reflections unless we have “furnished their minds with huge quantities of excellent English language” in the form of literature, poetry, essays, beautiful and articulate speeches and scripture. Therefore, listening to quality audio books and listening to a teacher and parent read aloud great literature is critical to the development of language skills.

Numerous schools of higher education also recognize the connection between listening skills and academic outcomes. In fact, Long Beach City College is just one of many that offers a course focusing on the improvement of listening skills as part of a Study Skills program.

Moreover, developing listening skills is also important for building positive relationships. The Bible uses the words *listen* and *hear* hundreds of times, instructing the faithful to listen to God’s voice. According to the

Bible, those who listen to God’s word and obey His commands have better relationships with God and with others. Even today, social scientists confirm that our relationships improve when we demonstrate better listening skills.

Memorization and Speaking

Additionally, asking students to memorize poetry, scripture, excerpts from great literature and excellent speeches further increases the inventory of masterful language in their minds, allowing them to draw from a vast storehouse of language when they begin to speak and write. Listening comes first, then speaking—which can include narration, memorization combined with recitation and even the acting of great drama.

Without question, there is much to be said about the development of reading and writing skills. As an educator who is trained in reading and writing programs, I have been passionate about teaching these skills to many types of learners. It is important to remember, however, that *before* and *while* reading and writing skills are being developed, the intentional development of listening skills is crucial.

Listening, speaking, reading and writing are the traditional four components of the language arts. Listening is easily overlooked—yet it lays the foundation for learning language. The act of listening plays a key role in language development, as well as in our relationships. As educators, it is important that we don’t skip this step. First, we need to model it well. Next, we must give opportunities for developing listening skills. If done consistently over many years, our efforts (and our students’ efforts) will bear fruit.

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