Developing an "Ear" for Synthesized Speech

WHAT: This strategy is designed to help students listen to a variety of text forms using synthetic text-to-speech tools.

Overall Goal: Student will listen with comprehension to text read to him/her through a computer.

WHO IS THIS FOR: This strategy can be used with all students who use voice output for communication or who need voice output to help support reading. I was struck by the similarities when learning a new language (see right).

I was particularly struck by the need to practice listening, practice speaking (or writing), and reading out loud.

Top Ten Tips for Learning Spanish

http://www.studyspanish.com/topten_tips.htm#nine

1. Don't expect to be perfect!
2. Work on developing an "ear" for Spanish.
3. Practice SPEAKING!
4. Be consistent.
5. Talk to yourself.
6. Use flashcards.
7. Label your surroundings.
8. Be patient.
9. Find a partner.
10. Read out loud.

HOW?
There are many programs that provide text-to-speech functions. Most will allow copy and paste of text, while others can import .txt, .doc, and sometimes .pdf files.
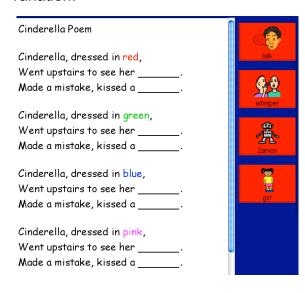
Here are a few FREE options (thanks Karen - http://udltechtoolkit.wikispaces.com/)

1. WordTalk - a free text-to-speech program for the PC that works within WORD and Outlook and highlights each word that is read. Includes a talking spell checker and a talking thesaurus. WordTalk was upgraded in January 2009 and now includes the ability to save, and you can convert your text file to a wav or MP3 file. Makes this free download even more valuable. (Seems to be trickier with Office 2010 and Vista or Windows 7)
2. Natural Reader - another free text-to-speech software program which converts any written text to speech (Word, pdf, websites, emails)
3. Fox Vox - a free Firefox extension, highlight the text, right click and choose Speak Selected Text
4. Voki - a free program that allows educators and students to create and share online avatars using text-to-speech technology. Voki works from any browser and anyone can place a voki in a blog, website, or send in an email.
5. http://www.neospeech.com/ - type in text for demo to hear it read back (evaluation purposes)

Deanna Kempka Wagner   www.aacintervention.com

Some great **commercial products** for special education may be available to you:
- AAC devices with text-to-speech (not recorded) voices
- Boardmaker Plus, SDPro or Studio
- IntelliTools Classroom Suite
- Kurzweil 3000
- Read and Write GOLD
- WYNN
- Inspiration/Kidspiration

Start by finding text that is engaging for students. Think about materials that would still be interesting when read more than once. This may include stories or news for children from the internet. Or perhaps e-mails about home events sent in by parents. Or even poems. Look for opportunities for predicting ahead when listening. Think, repetition with variation!

Cinderella Poem

Cinderella, dressed in red,
Went upstairs to see her _____.
Made a mistake, kissed a _____.

Cinderella, dressed in green,
Went upstairs to see her _____.
Made a mistake, kissed a _____.

Cinderella, dressed in blue,
Went upstairs to see her _____.
Made a mistake, kissed a _____.

Cinderella, dressed in pink,
Went upstairs to see her _____.
Made a mistake, kissed a _____.

CHANGE THE VOICE
Many programs with text-to-speech have voice options. Use changing the voice as a reason for listening to the same text more than once. If there are options to change the speed or pitch, change these settings and listen to the text again. This screenshot is from Poetry Power. IntelliTools Classroom Suite provides tools that allow students to use buttons to change the voices with fun options. You can add similar buttons for reading the message window in Boardmaker Plus.

SAVE as MP3
Some programs will allow you to save the text being read as an MP3 file (e.g., Kurzweil, WordTalk). This way students can look cool listening to text read over and over using some type of portable MP3 player.

How To Extend Learning:

- Put text up on a computer with a projector for group read-alouds, using whatever text-to-speech option available to you.
- Add buttons to Boardmaker, Classroom Suite or AAC device that temporarily changes the voice, so the student can independently re-read with different voices.
- Load text files into student communication device(s) and listen to what was written (by selecting the message window or using other tools/behaviors that would read one sentence and advance).