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READ IT WITH MEANING: ALOUD

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Between 1910 and 1925 the emphasis in reading instruction in elementary and secondary schools switched dramatically from oral reading to silent reading. Emphasis on oral reading was almost totally neglected. Educators of the 1920s believed that silent reading was more efficient than oral reading in the areas of rate, comprehension, and convenience. As McCluskey (1942) explained, "a theory was put forth that the faster one read, the more one understood. Speed, therefore, became thoroughly entrenched and oral reading with its slower ways was politely placed in solitary confinement" (p. 15).

However, some educators did not agree with this harsh treatment of oral reading. I. Jewell Simpson (1929) commented that "while readily admitting that overemphasis on oral reading beyond the fourth grade is equally regrettable, much of the best in literature makes it appeal to the ear" (p. 167).

Runchey (1931) stated that "too much literature is read silently . . . silent reading has usurped the time which used to be given to the study of literature" (p. 90). He felt that silent reading emphasized quantity, not understanding or appreciation. McCluskey (1942) agreed with this line of thinking when he wrote that "overemphasis on silent reading has made oral reading almost a lost art — to the detriment of the pupils who have been taught to sacrifice accuracy and clear thinking to speed" (p. 15).

Price and Stroud (1945) stated that in the 1930s and early 1940s many secondary educators felt that much reading difficulty in high school could be attributed to an emphasis on oral reading in elementary schools. Yet, Price and Stroud (1945) further observed that:

It is rather curious, however, that these opinions have not been subjected to thorough experimental investigation. While we do not make the direct assertion that no direct experimental evidence in support of the proposition is to be found, inspection of more than 1200 published investigations on reading and dozens of books on reading in which statements are used concerning the ill effects of oral reading has failed to reveal a single instance in which those statements are supported by experimental evidence (p. 20).

In recent years some educators have again begun to consider the values of including oral reading activities in classrooms at all grade levels. Yet, according to Fry (1972), speed is still stressed, and secondary pupils are seldom required to read aloud. This lack of oral reading practice at the secondary level is common in our present system of education. However, little research has been conducted which explores the advantages and disadvantages of oral reading at the secondary level. The present study explored the effects of oral and silent reading on the comprehension of disabled secondary readers.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were selected from the population of tenth-grade students enrolled in reading classes at West Allis Central High School, a Wisconsin school of approximately 1,500 students. Students meeting the following criteria were classified as disabled: (1) students scoring 100 or below on the Henman Nelson IQ Test (Lamke & Nelson, 1973), and (2) students scoring at or below the twenty-fifth percentile on the reading subtest of the STS, Form R, Developmental Series (Scholastic Testing Service, 1975).

Twenty of the sixty reading students were randomly selected for participation in a pilot study. The forty remaining subjects were randomly assigned to the two treatment groups of the main study.

Materials

Pilot study. Twenty tenth-grade reading students were randomly selected for participation in the pilot study. The task was carefully explained to each student. Each subject read the passages orally in an isolated and quiet location, starting at reading level four. Following this oral reading, the student answered the comprehension questions for each passage orally. An independent reading level was reached and recorded. The subject then continued to read more difficult passages until the frustration level was reached.

After completing this procedure, an easy (independent) reading level and a hard (frustration) reading level were determined for the group. The easy level was identified as the fifth-grade level, and the hard level was defined as the eighth-grade level. At least eighty-five percent of the group's independent and frustration level scores were found at the fifth-grade level and the eighth-grade level respectively.

Main study. The data gathered from the pilot study were used as a basis for the main experiment, involving forty other sophomore reading students. The forty subjects were randomly divided into two groups of twenty.

In one group, each subject read the easy passage and the hard passage orally to the investigator. Comprehension questions were asked after the completion of each story, and the number of the correct and incorrect answers was recorded. Each subject within the second group

read the same easy and hard passages as the first group, but read them silently. Again, the comprehension questions were asked orally after the completion of each story and the results recorded. Both groups were forewarned that their performances would be judged on the basis of the comprehension scores. Students were not told that the difficulty levels of the stories were different.

A 2 x 2 repeated measures, one between-one within design was employed. Reading mode was the between factor. Two levels, oral reading and silent reading, were selected. Material difficulty was the within factor. Two levels, easy material and hard material, were chosen.

Analysis of variance techniques were utilized to carefully examine the data. A .05 level of significance was used as the criterion for acceptance or rejection of the hypotheses.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 reports the means and the standard deviations for the reading mode x material difficulty cells. Table 2 reports the findings of the analysis of variance.

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations for the Reading Mode x
Material Difficulty Cells

Mode	Easy		Hard	
	x	sd	x	sd
Oral	6.25	1.21	6.23	1.49
Silent	5.48	1.25	4.63	1.45

Table 2
Analysis of Variance Table

SV	df	SS	MS	F
<i>Between S's</i>				
Mode (A)	1	28.21	28.21	22.39*
S (A)	78	98.52	1.26	—
<i>Within S's</i>				
Difficulty (B)	1	3.83	3.83	7.23*
AB	1	3.40	3.40	6.42**
BA (A)	78	41.14	.53	

*Significant at .01.

**Significant at .025.

The results of the study indicated that the comprehension scores of the oral readers were higher than the comprehension scores of the silent readers for both easy and hard reading materials. One possible explanation is that the students put more concentration and effort into their reading to impress the investigator and to save themselves from embarrassment. However, it is felt that the results were due to a combination of the following variables:

1. Oral reading forces a student to attend more closely to print. This explanation is supported by the results of eye movement photography which show that silent reading requires fewer fixations, shorter pauses, and fewer regressions. Increased concentration is important to an unskilled silent reader who may skip important portions of a text, stare at a single word, or attend to unimportant cues.
2. Meaning is enhanced through oral reading, since disabled readers are more comfortable and efficient in processing language through their sense of hearing than through their sense of sight.
3. The transformation of the visual input to an auditory form may provide the rehearsal needed for memory to be improved. The use of two modalities may add helpful redundancy.

The study also showed that the comprehension of the hard material was worse than the comprehension of the easy material. This outcome was anticipated, since the influences of sentence length and word familiarity are firmly established as variables which distinguish between levels of difficulty.

A significant interaction effect was obtained. Students did better when reading hard material orally than they did when reading easy material silently. One possible explanation is that students rushed through the silent reading of the easy material because they mistakenly thought that the passage was not challenging. A more plausible explanation is that the difference between the easy and hard materials was not great enough. Since the average subject got only 73 percent of the comprehension questions correct for the easy material, it would follow that the easy material was not simple enough.

Conclusion

The primary implication of the present study for teachers of disabled secondary readers is that oral reading should be encouraged as a possible aid to comprehension. Any technique which helps a student succeed should be promoted, since it is through success that motivation and self-confidence are built.

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