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Oral Reading in a Developmental Reading Program

by William H. Rupley

Oral reading is a frequently used technique of reading instruction for primary as well as intermediate students. It is not unusual to find a group of children assembled in a circle taking turns reading paragraphs orally from a basal reader, with one child often afforded the dubious honor of reading two paragraphs because one is too short. This practice is not restricted just to reading instruction, but quite often the whole class takes turns reading orally from their science, social studies, or health books.

Is this practice one that develops good reading skills in students? If one logically analyzes the procedure involved in oral reading, the answer may become apparent. Imagine eight children assembled around the teacher for round robin oral reading. As the first child begins to read, the sixth child may be "wise enough" to realize that he will be asked to read the sixth paragraph, and that is most likely where he will focus his attention. However, if a teacher knows that children have a tendency to jump ahead to where they will have to read, he can insist that students follow along in their book reading silently while another child is reading orally. A simple solution to the problem? Hardly. Research has indicated that the eye can move at a much faster rate than the voice; thus a new problem arises — the efficiency of the students as silent readers is being jeopardized, and the consequence most likely will be students who subvocalize (mentally pronounce each word).

If oral reading is not the most productive method of instructing students in reading, why is it used by teachers? An analysis of eight hundred teachers' responses dealing with oral

reading indicated that a substantial number of them used oral reading to instruct their students in reading. Approximately 40 percent of the teachers surveyed used oral reading as a test of the reader's ability to pronounce words; 47 percent felt that oral reading gives all children the opportunity to practice word recognition skills (Artley, 1972).

The use of oral reading should not necessarily be totally avoided in a developmental reading program, but according to Artley, "Oral reading as an exercise in word pronunciation is one of the most useless instructional practices that a teacher can carry out" (p.47). Spache and Spache (1973) believe that there are many legitimate types of oral reading, and that a degree of oral reading practice is necessary in a good reading program. Many of their suggestions are of the type that do not require children to follow along in a book while another child reads orally — for example, sharing information, choral reading, dramatizing a story, or radio plays. Another defensible use of oral reading is for diagnostic purposes. For example, when administering an informal reading inventory a teacher would require the child to read orally while he records his word recognition errors. However, this procedure is used on a one-to-one basis and does not involve asking the child to read aloud daily.

Oral reading in the elementary classroom should be limited to those purposes for which children use oral reading in life (Smith, 1972). Thus, following this admonition, teachers should ask themselves if the oral reading situations with which they provide their students are applicable to life situations.

Some situations in which oral reading could be beneficial are suggested in "Oral Reading: A Bulletin for Language Arts Teachers" (Tulsa Public Schools, 1969). The suggestions are identified in terms of their purpose. One purpose is "For Giving Information" which suggests having students read daily bulletins before the class, read aloud items of interest from newspapers and magazines, read letters to the class, read directions for others to carry out in the classroom, read descriptions of persons in the room and have other students guess the individual being described, visit elderly people or primary grade classes and read to them, and read famous speeches from literature and history.

In a paper presented at the 1970 conference of the International Reading Association, Sylva Quackenbush indicates that, "Improvement in oral reading may be expected when the following technique is used. The pupils will choose a favorite poem, or a selection from fiction, and prepare it for reading aloud in front of the group." However, the teacher should determine in advance the purpose of this activity and how it will improve the students' oral reading skills. If the emphasis of the lesson is placed on such qualities as tone, pitch, volume, and accuracy, then the students should be prepared by discussing these aspects of oral reading in advance of their presentation.

Further examples of the legitimate use of oral reading are suggested by Artley (1972): informally dramatizing a story or portion of a story, interpreting the mood or feeling expressed in a poem, reading a joke or a riddle, and interpreting the characterization or action of a play. In many of these situations the reader is sharing information and has a particular purpose for interpreting the material he is reading.

Most of the aforementioned suggestions for oral reading are of the sharing information type that requires

audience participation, either by listening or by active participation in a discussion following the oral reading. Knowing this, teachers can include among their purposes for oral reading the development of listening skills. The types of listening skills are defined in terms of the degrees of increasing complexity of the act (Petty, 1968). Appreciative listening occurs when the focus of the listener is upon enjoyment and most probably would relate to oral reading activities that are of the dramatization and sharing stories type. Marginal listening is passive with minimal or no apparent response. Teachers should strive to avoid situations that would evoke this type of listening and enable students to discern when marginal listening is apparent in an audience. Attentive listening is required if the purpose for listening is to pay close attention to details, directions, or announcements. Analytical listening involves the critical analysis of such things as the speaker's opinions and persuasion techniques. Petty points out that, "Not all listening skills are needed in each listening act. Evaluative and inferential listening are not always necessary; there are times when we only need to 'half-listen'! At other times we need to listen attentively or with appreciation" (p.45).

If teachers realize the harm that can result from round robin oral reading and also are cognizant of oral reading activities that would enhance their pupils' reading skills, then reading instruction would most likely be more beneficial for students. Also, establishing purposes for oral reading activities is tantamount to establishing purposes for listening; to ignore one is to fail to take full advantage of a teaching-learning situation. Maybe the most important question that teachers of elementary reading can ask themselves about teaching oral reading is, "When was the last time I read something orally outside of the classroom?"

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