Classroom Oral Reading and its Needs or Restraints

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AND ITS NEEDS FOR RESTRAINTS

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Few deny the beneficial effects of prose or poetry read aloud by a fluent and expressive reader; imparting reassurance, delivering entertainment, dispensing information or explanation, arousing curiosity, diffusing inspiration (Trelease, 1982). Apart from these advantages as we shall see, oral reading has the capability to engender literacy among individuals, more particularly our schoolchildren (Hoffman, 1982).

First, when oral reading is provided regularly, either on a one-to-one basis or before a group of boys and girls, with consistently high standards for reader performance and listener participation, the activity subtly but effectively works to promote language and reading competence. Then, too, reading-skills needs are assessable, at least in part, when oral reading is put to some diagnostic use. Nonetheless, as concerns these educational benefits, one question is bound to arise: Are there operational restraints in using oral reading in the classroom? Let us examine this query, first within the context of correspondences between oral and written language, then within the perimeters of existent models of oral reading and the roles those models play in meeting student needs.

Prosody and Fluency: Essentials of Oral Discourse

To communicate written matter <u>viva voce</u>, a reader must faithfully convey its prosodic features (juncture, pitch, and stress) and adhere to its fluency demands (word-recognition accuracy and rate of reading). Though a strong link exists between spoken and written language,

the tie-in is far from perfect (Spache and Spache, 1986; Witte, 1980). Junctures or pauses in speech constitute a case in point. Many of these are represented in written discourse by commas, periods, and the like; others have no such proxies. Consider, by way of example, the elusive pause which identifies the boundary between subject and predicate in spoken utterances. Recognition of this unmarked juncture is absolutely essential if textual materials are to be read with proper expression.

While pauses in oral language signal a division of words into meaningful groups, it is pitch, the rise and fall of voice, that furnishes a cue to the meaning assigned each group. In written language, however, the only available markers of pitch are punctuation marks. Think about the question mark and the rising tone it prompts, as when asking, "What's for supper?" In contrast is the falling intonation pattern, induced by the period, in the statement, "We're having hotdogs and sauerkraut." From these illustrations, it is clear that graphemic cues alter the contour of intonation.

Stress is still another aspect of articulated expression. This prosodic feature not only identifies pronunciation emphases within words, but it accords prominence to certain words within our oral discourse. Because of these roles, stress is rightly considered a major indicator of meaning in speech. Nonetheless, when it comes to written words, there is a change in scenario. Though readers of text require a good working knowledge of accentuation principles, their only cues to word emphasis are capital letters or boldface type, italics or underlining, quotation marks or exclamation point. An amplification of this point is found in the simple sentence, "His failure surprised everyone." Here, the underlined "his" testifies to a deliberate stress. On the other hand, what might happen to intended meaning should the sentence have no marker for emphasis, and the stress shifted arbitrarily to "failure" or another word?

Obviously, a reader cannot rely on prosodic cues alone, but must employ semantic, syntactic, and other constructs of language, as well, if script is to be read with meaning and expression (Ross, 1986). If for no other reason than the recurrent incompleteness of our

prosodic analogues, silent reading must precede all instructional uses of oral reading. Employment of this restraint justifiably affords the reader and opportunity ". . . to supply those portions of the signals which are not in the graphic representations themselves" (Fries, 1963, p. 130). But, there is more to oral reading than a skilled use of prosody. There is also fluency.

According to Schreiber (1980, p. 177), fluent reading ability is ". . . that level of reading competence at which nontechnical textual materials can be effortlessly, smoothly, and automatically understood." While most clinical and empirical data point to a decidedly strong relationship between fluency and general reading ability (Allington, 1983), the views articulated about fluency are typically couched in terms of its decoding and comprehension requirements (Aulls, 1982; Buehner, 1983). These views, in turn, are reflected in the popular contention that reading fluency is best served when children use materials and techniques geared to an assuagement of difficulties in word attack or comprehension. Those subscribing to this line of reasoning ar numerous, yet there are others in education who insist that fluent reading ability is achievable by a much less pedantic means. Teachers of the latter persuasion are convinced that the halting, expressionless word-by-word reading of poor readers-- lamentably punctuated by hesitations, repetitions, and other signs of difficulty--is correctable by a modus operandi quite different from the usual approach: competent modeling of oral reading and, when possible, concomitant silent reading and group discussion. It is this same premise that now directs our attention to the various paradigms of oral reading in the classrooms.

The Teacher-to-Pupil Model

In this country, children require models of English which mirror the language expected of them in their speaking, writing, and reading in school and later, in their functioning as responsible adults. As a pedagogical position, this is particularly apropos where language minority students are involved (Hough, Nurss, and Enright, 1986).

Although the role of the teacher, as language exemplar, has been voiced time and again, perchance no more convincing statement exists than that of the Commission on the English Curriculum, still valid despite the passing of near thirty-five years and its use of pronoun forms denoting feminine gender only:

"Throughout all of the school day, the boys and girls have one paramount example in speech--the teacher. In everything she says to them--and she must say many things--her voice, her pronunciation, her articulation, her inflections, her simple and clear ways of expressing her ideas influence the members of her class more strongly than she realizes"(NCTE, 1954, p. 128).

If it is also true that today's educator is ofttimes a surrogate for other adult models, then there should be little basis for disagreement with the conclusion that quite a few youngsters in school ". . . speak the language primarily as they have heard it spoken" (Tre-lease, 1982, p. 11) by their teacher. But of what real consequence is this deduction, within the context of oral reading to inform or serve some other instructional goal? It is precisely through the day-to-day modeling of a skillful teacher that students garner explicit and implicit information about acceptable language which, in turn, they utilize for their own communication needs. Indeed, as a conduit for language instruction, oral reading serves the teacher well (Butler, 1980; Heilman, Blair & Rupley, 1986; McCormick, 1977).

On each day of school, opportunities abound for children to hear their teacher read. There are bulletins about upcoming events, decisions, and expectations; letters which send a "thank-you" message or other communique; printed directions for tests and exercises; and reference works which unveil a mosaic of facts and concepts, to mention but a few. Still, it is probably in the sharing of poems and stories that most teachers project their best models of language to students. Whether the selection is Rose Fyleman's "Mice," a few pages from Katherine Paterson's Bridge to Terabithia, or the lines of another literary favorite, youngsters learn immeasurably about the reality and potential of language--provided their teacher makes the necessary preparations to assure fluency and correct expression

in the oral reading.

    To do a competent job of reading aloud, the teacher
must first silently peruse the materials s/he wishes to
use. Oral rehearsals may be necessary in some cases
but, for most, prereading is the only major need (Burns,
Roe, and Ross, 1988). Nevertheless, this facet of pre-
paration is absolutely essential if an educator is to
be apprised of the fluency and prosodic requirements of
text read aloud. To the teacher, prior silent reading
becomes the <u>sine</u> <u>qua</u> <u>non</u> for effecting a smooth, artic-
ulate rendition of script--and conveying a pattern of
language which reflects the standards expected in the
speech, reading, and writing of youth.

The Pupil-to-Pupil Model

    Through their use of stories, poems, and plays--to
mention but a few literary genre--students, too, become
paragons of oral expression (Groff, 1985). And, just
like their counterpart, the teacher, youngsters who
read orally (1) must know all words at sight, (2) must
have mastered the prosodic elements necessary for
accurate interpretations, (3) must comprehend the
intended meaning of selections, and (4) must speak
clearly and forcefully enough to be heard by others.
Apart from a perennial need for listening amenities,
the foregoing criteria are indispensable to the success
of an oral presentation. Without rereading, and rehears-
al by some, young oral readers incur needless errors
that bring humiliation and possible ridicule from peers
--not to mention the likelihood of a strong dislike for
reading itself. Should the above standards not be
attainable by children (barring limitations imposed by
learning disabilities), the materials to be read are
probably too difficult or, perhaps, certain programmatic
requirements stand in need of adjustment. On the other
hand, if the performance criteria are achievable, but
for one or more reasons have not been met, oral reading
should be postponed until such time that success can be
assured. Realizing at this juncture that the above-
mentioned restraints address both the group's need of a
model for emulation and the students' need for self-
esteem, let us proceed with the pupil-to-pupil model
and its versatile role in oral reading.

    Serving as a comprehension check for teacher and

students alike, questioning is a common sequel to a variety of assignments involving silent reading. And, because this questioning requires the giving of answers, oral reading emerges as a viable alternative to the pencil-and-paper type of response. Though many queries in the classroom are geared to factual recall, the teacher is duty bound to ask and encourage questions involving higher planes of thought, particularly at the critical and creative levels. Therefore, while some of the questions to elicit oral reading may begin with who, when, where, why, or how, there is also a need for requests to begin with compare, show, contrast, what clues, and the like. Phrases and sentences--even whole paragraphs--may be read aloud by children to supply factual data, or to support the reasons behind their conclusions and opinions (Alexander, 1988: Johns, 1982). An interesting spin-off of questioning, by the way, is the written report of upper-primary and inter-mediate youngsters. Frequently read aloud to inform or persuade classmates, these reports usually stem from issues and problems under consideration by a group, or in connection with some special assignment from the teacher.

It is clear that pupil-to-pupil oral reading, at times, may be induced by inquiries or requests. On other occasions, however, it is wholly unsolicited. An example of the latter might be the child who mentions having learned "something big" about dinosaurs, and asks permission to read a line or two to others in the class. Imagine the group's wonderment as the following is shared (Lopshire, 1980, p. 32): "Brachiosaurus was probably the heaviest dinosaur that ever lived. People think it weighed more than seventeen elephants. Luckily for us, the last one died over a hundren million years ago!" In this case the children were fortunate to have one in the midst who was anxious to share information with them. Yet, for many girls and boys, there is a strong desire to share something else--not a snippet, but a choice poem or story. Entertainment becomes their objective, as in an oral reading of "Jane Grows a Carrot" (Schwartz, 1982, pp. 40-43):

Jane and Sam were walking home from school. 'I have a secret to tell you,' said Jane. 'I won't tell any-

body.' said Sam. 'There is a carrot in my ear,' said
Jane. 'It has been growing there all week.' 'That
is <u>very</u> strange,' said Sam. 'How did that happen?'
'I don't know,' said Jane. 'I planted radishes.'

There are other equally delightful moments when
school children demonstrate their grasp of language.
One such occasion resides in play or script reading,
which ranges from the simple and unpretentious perform-
ance--as in Readers Theatre (Groff, 1978)--to the more
polished production, with its concerns for setting,
action, and character development (Manna, 1984). What-
ever the mode, opportunities are legion to learn about
language, whether from the perspective of oral reader
or that of attentive listener. Besides, the narration
and dialogue of fairy tales, legends, fables, and
stories take on new meaning and impressiveness when
read aloud by capable readers, especially by those in
the primary and intermediate grades.

The students' underlying language competence influ-
ences their reading behavior in choral reading, as well
(Pennock, 1984). Nonetheless, in utilization of the
pupil-to-pupil model, the two literary vehicles--script
reading and choral reading--have their distinctions.
Whereas the oral reading of plays or scripts revolves
about single individuals, each striving to interpret a
number of story lines, the lifeblood of charal reading
is contained in verse and rhythmic prose that is inter-
preted by an entire group, by subordinate groups in
turn, or by single students whose lines interchange
with those read by groups. When skillfully orchestrated,
using refrain, antiphonal, combined voices, line-a-child
or line-a-group arrangements, choric reading becomes a
totally entertaining instructional tool. As such, it
affords a likely option to dramalogue, for modeling the
elements of language that educators seek to develop in
the speech, reading, and writing of their pupils.

Without doubt, use of the pupil-to-pupil model
fosters the acquisition of any number of linguistic
understandings, even when the entertainment motive for
oral reading shifts to another stimulus, the building
of self-esteem. It should come as little surprise that,
of pedagogues who sanction this motive for oral reading

by students, the most vociferous are probably the kindergarten and first-grade teachers. The preponderance of oral reading in early grades, they point out, is but a sensible adaptation to the dominant oral language pattern of youngsters just starting school. "Oral reading thus makes for a natural learning environment for the beginning stages of reading instruction" (Groff, 1985, p. 202). Nevertheless, pupil self-esteem is at the core of teacher efforts--and rightfully so. Once five-and six-year-olds have learned to read with ease and expression, it is natural for them to want--indeed, seek--repeated opportunities to validate their newly acquired ability (Burns, Roe, and Ross, 1988; Taylor and Connor, 1982). After all, the achievement is long awaited by some, and prized as the capstone of schooling by many.

As reading, per se, becomes less novel as a personal goal in school, one notices a corresponding decrease in need for learners to verify its attainment. This phenomenon is a common manifestation as children progress into upper primary and intermediate grades. As a rule, however, their earlier desire "to prove" ability in reading is replaced by an equally strong desire "to advertise" proficiency. Teachers capitalize on this egocentric motive for oral reading, and why should they not? Those wanting to read aloud--more often than not, the better readers in a group--profit from the activity in at least three ways: enhancement of self-concept, practice in using word-recognition skills, reinforcement of syntactic, prosodic, and semantic understandings of language. Less capable youngsters, on the other hand, are provided peer models with whom they can identify.
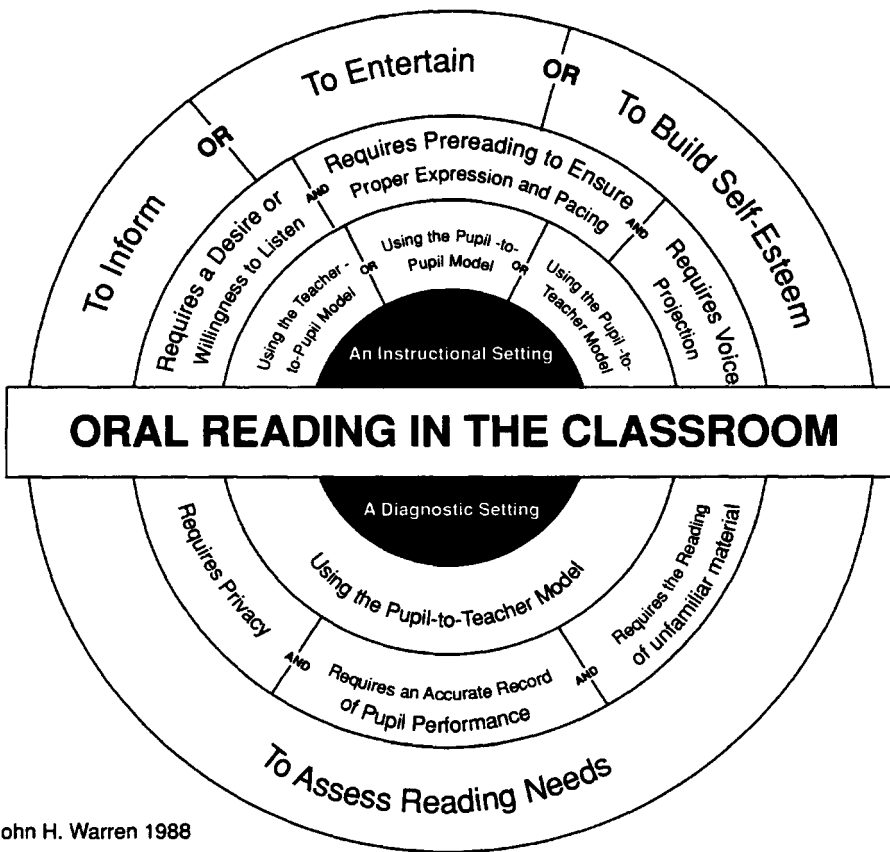
If, and when, the oral reading is from a common textbook, listeners assimilate both visual and nonvisual features of written language, provided they follow the script being read and participate in learning experiences that complement the reading. Granted, the acquisition of fluency and prosody may progress at snail's pace for some. However, the teacher must remain patient and resolute in his/her attempts to engage more and more children as archetypes, if for no other reason than to elevate their self-concept as readers (Quandt and Selznick, 1984). Pupil-to-pupil oral reading, then,

is perceived and handled as an activity that is within the grasp of most boys and girls. One child, for example, might model a textbook reference that confirms an opinion about a character or happening; another, a sentence containing a newly discovered figure of speech or a paragraph holding some special appeal. The possibilities are practically endless. The only distinction in actual performances, once the youngsters model, is in the quantitative, not qualitative, aspect of their modeling.

The Pupil-to-Teacher Model

In the classroom where children's words are accepted as contributions having worth, students seize upon opportunities to read a good joke, a short news article, a vignette to their teacher. In doing so, they betray their desire to entertain, inform, show mastery of reading--or succeed at some combination of the three. Whatever the motive, pupil-to-teacher oral reader serves the student well. Yet, it is within the sphere of assessment that this model exhibits its greatest utility for the teacher.

Since "oral reading provides a window to students' reading behaviors" (McCormick, 1987, p. 124). its assessment will reveal, more often than not, the typical reading habits, miscues, and comprehension difficulties of schoolchildren (Briggs, 1978). There are provisos to this approach, however, and one of these demands the oral reading of only unfamilar material. Without this restraint, the teacher gains little, if any, information about the techniques her/his students first apply in recognizing words. Moreover, since the proverbial "window" attests to reading behavior that is either efficient or faulty, the teacher must attempt to diagnose girls and boys in a private manner, on a one-to-one basis, to minimize attention to any chagrin that may result from a poor or awkward performance. Then, too, the need for accountability--and limitations of short-term memory--constrain the teacher to make accurate and complete records of children's reading, for use in analyzing difficulties and determining the procedures best suited to overcome patterns of error (Ekwall & Shanker, 1985).

ORAL READING IN THE CLASSROOM

An Instructional Setting

A Diagnostic Setting

To Entertain OR To Build Self-Esteem

To Inform OR

Requires a Desire or Willingness to Listen AND Requires Prereading to Ensure Proper Expression and Pacing AND Requires Voice Projection

Using the Teacher-to-Pupil Model OR Using the Pupil-to-Pupil Model OR Using the Pupil-to-Teacher Model

Requires Privacy AND Using the Pupil-to-Teacher Model Requires an Accurate Record of Pupil Performance AND Requires the Reading of unfamiliar material

To Assess Reading Needs

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An acceptance of Groff's generalization that ". . poor oral readers are poor silent readers, while good oral readers are good silent readers: (1985, p. 201) could lead to the deductions that (1) oral reading miscues usually transfer to silent reading, (2) oral reading comprehension tends to approximate the under-standing that results from text read silently, and (3) errors in silent reading typically decrease as oral reading improves. The inverse relationship of the latter conclusion, one must agree, lends further support to this writer's original and persistent line of argu-ment: when offered regularly, with high standards for reader performance and audience participation, oral reading effectively works to promote language and reading competence.

In Brief

To inform, to entertain, to build self-esteem, to assess reading needs--each is a rational basis for oral reading. Actualization of each goal, however, is contin-gent upon a number of restraints. By adhering to these conditions, a classroom community may come to realize the multiple benefits of oral reading, as a tool of instruction and as an instrument of appraisal.

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