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ABSTRACT

Although printed materials have taken over a good part of the communicative functions of language, and although book club sales show that young people read widely and frequently, still there is much to be said for the place of oral language in society. Three media which bring oral language to the young are radio, television, and record players. Teachers should plan oral language experiences utilizing these media, which have such tremendous influence on young people, rather than forcing a dichotomy between the kinds of language met in school and in other places. The acceptance by teachers of dialect, modes of expression, and particular vocabulary will put students at ease with school materials, making enjoyment of them much more likely and creating motivation toward further acquaintance with books and reading. References are included. (MS)

Reading in Our Oral Language Culture

Nancy Larrick

The term "oral language culture" goes back to the time, long ago, when there were no printed books and all ideas were recorded in the human mind and passed on by word of mouth. We can easily assume that we have grown out of that period, now that printing presses produce millions of volumes every day and overcrowded libraries are compelled to reduce books to microfilm. When we hear that Scholastic Book Services distributed no less than 50 million paperbacks through its children's book clubs in the school year 1968-69, we can easily assume that written literature prevails today.

Yet social anthropologists are warning that, despite these marvelous books and despite the fact that children do read them, the printed word is now only a small silent voice often smothered in the mounting flood of voices that saturate our air waves. The onslaught of oral language continues all day for many and often into the night. Many children must sleep with the electronic voices going at top volume on radio, television, or record player.

These three are the media of the young in particular. By the time a child enters kindergarten, he has had 4,000 hours of television, which may be more than some adults have had. Few television hours are designed for young children so this youngster has been hearing and seeing the extremes of adult advertising, love-making, and violence for most of those 4,000 hours.

The rate of TV viewing tapers off somewhat as children move into

the teens, but by this time the transistor radio fills in breaks from the television screen. The total listening time is only slightly lower for teen-agers than for younger children.

At this stage, too, recordings add their voices to the tumult engulfing the young. Record industry spokesmen report that 80% of all single records are sold to those under 25. Most of these record the voices of folksingers whose words, words, words pour forth relentlessly.

Perhaps we can understand our own oral language culture more fully if we look back to the early 15th century before Johannes Gutenberg developed the movable-type press and froze language into print. In pre-Gutenberg days, only a few people could read, and they had very little to read. But there was communication. Traveling musicians and storytellers went from village to village, entertaining their listeners and spreading the news. Peddlers distributed news and gossip with every sale they made and were no minor link in this human communications system.

Informal and impromptu as all of this had been for centuries, it is significant to recognize that it was the breeding ground for a rare and beautiful body of oral literature which found its way into print centuries after it was developed in an oral language setting. Myths, legends, folktales, fairy tales, ballads and even heroic epics took shape in the minds of those who never saw a written word. With each retelling, a plot was sharpened, words and lines were polished, and the cadence emerged.

Frequently village life seemed to center around this word-of-mouth entertainment. Young and old gathered, not only as listeners, but as participants who joined in the singing of familiar choruses, sometimes chanting favorite lines and improvising new stanzas for old tunes. Group involvement in oral language was common, particularly with young people whose singing games have survived even to this day.

Now, in 1970, we have the most elaborate education system in history, but there are still 10 million Americans classified as functionally illiterate. And despite the mounting store of printed matter, there are untold millions of homes without books, magazines or newspapers. Yet, in 1967, 16 out of 17 homes had television sets which reached 96% of the people of this country. The number of color-TV sets doubled in the five-year period 1962-1967. For a total population of 201 million (1968), there were 268 million radios, 81.5 million TV sets, and 51 million record players.[1]

Even these figures fail to show what seems to be one of the most significant features of the new mass media, and that is the kind of involvement they exact from their audience, particularly the younger segment.

The transistor radio, for example, is a traveling voice that goes with the teenager as surely as your watch goes with you. The two are seldom separated. If you watch youngsters as they listen to a rock record, you see evidence of participation in nodding heads and tapping feet. Their involvement clearly suggests that of the 15th century villagers singing and clapping to the music of a wandering minstrel.

TV involvement is more subtle and more pervasive. Marshall McLuhan explains that, unlike the still photo and moving picture, the television screen never shows a fixed picture. Instead, it offers a constantly moving stream of dots--three million to the second--from which the viewer must select in order to create his own image. The viewer becomes a maker and participant, a process completely different from photographic and movie viewing. "The movie viewer remains quite detached and is engaged in looking at the screen," writes Dr. McLuhan. "The TV viewer is the screen." This sense of involvement is what enthralls children, according to Dr. McLuhan.

Whatever the technical explanation, there is no doubt that the communications revolution has drastically changed the language patterns of the young and their expectations of the printed page. The oral culture of the mass media on which our young people have been reared is often in direct conflict with the traditional culture of the school. In no area does this conflict prove more threatening than in the teaching of reading. Methods and materials devised in the days of a silent language culture are still used; we make almost no effort to capitalize on children's involvement with oral language. Let me cite a few examples.

From homes and streets where the sounds of language prevail, children suddenly find themselves the prisoners of enforced silence at school. The teacher does most of the talking in the classroom. One child may speak at a time--not directly facing another child as any good conversation demands, but almost invariably talking into

the back of the head in front. Children are punished for talking, rewarded for being quiet.

One Head Start teacher reported that the main goal of her summer's work was to teach the children to sit quietly. In a school in Spanish Harlem, the rainy-day lunch hour finds every child in the auditorium in enforced silence waiting for the bell which will release them to march like mutes to their classrooms. Yet quiet is the last thing the modern child needs or feels comfortable with.

The language encountered at school may be drastically different from anything the child has heard or seen before. This is particularly serious for children from the ghettos and from foreign-language families. The way a child speaks may bring laughter or jeers from his classmates and reprimands from an unsympathetic teacher. In either case, he soon finds it prudent to keep quiet, thus removing himself from the language he must learn to read if he is to succeed in school.

Even children who speak the language of the teacher find that words they learned via television have completely foreign meanings in the classroom language. For example, halo, which any child knows is the stuff you wash your hair with, turns out to mean something totally different at school. And a gremlin isn't necessarily a low-cost compact car despite all the advertising to that effect. For many children, the language of the classroom is as strange as it is limited.

When the child meets stories in print, he again moves into an

unfamiliar world. Instead of following the harrowing experiences of astronauts in a disintegrating space ship, he may face the colorless tale of Sally and Spot. His television world asked, "Will the astronauts make it?" and he hung on breathlessly. His teacher asks, "Can Dan fan Nan?"

From radio, television, and recordings, and from the noise and events of his city streets, children have come to expect novelty, sensation, immediacy, impact. These are missing at school. Pupils learn to tune out or behave like automatons from nine to three.

In those six hours of the school day, the child is expected to move when an adult pulls the strings. He speaks only when told to speak, using the language prescribed by someone else. Usually involvement is not part of the school experience.

If these youngsters are to achieve their full potential as readers, we must re-evaluate our traditional teaching methods and materials and then revamp them to capitalize on the oral language culture of today. This means providing an abundance of the sounds of language--through talking, singing, chanting, storytelling, reading aloud, listening to recordings, making tape recordings and playing them back. The classroom with a hubbub is the classroom with hope.

Reading materials must use the language of modern children, not the stilted and artificial language commonly found in primers and first readers, and not the circumlocution of pre-television literature. Most important, there must be new ways to involve the children themselves. Instead of motivation--which has come to mean the adult's scheme for promoting the subject he has chosen to discuss or the activity

he has planned--we need involvement which springs from within the child and impels him to think, to verbalize, to create because of his own inner drive.

Many recent studies confirm the value of the oral language approach to reading. For example, a Gallup survey for the Institute for Developing Educational Activities (I/D/E/A) shows that preschoolers of two or younger--whose parents have read to them regularly--do better in school reading than those who have not had this experience.[3] In one experiment, low-income mothers were paid to read aloud to their infants for ten minutes a day. According to reporter Maya Pines, "their children forged ahead of a control group and showed significant differences in all phases of speech by twenty months of age."[4]

In Miami, where many first graders have a heavy dialect of Cuban Spanish or Southern Negro, six weeks of intensive speech lessons have preceded beginning reading with splendid results. Those who speak distinctly and fluently read more easily.

Dr. Thomas Horn tells of a project in Wakulla County, Florida, where elementary school children do not read printed materials until they have learned them orally.[5] Once the sounds of language are racing through their heads, they can more readily cope with the same words and sentences in print. No conclusive results have been drawn from this project, according to Dr. Horn, but the findings to date are encouraging.

Probably the most dramatic and controversial program to strengthen the oral language skills of disadvantaged children is that under the direction of Bereiter and Engelmann at the University of Illinois.[6] To the horror of traditional play-school teachers, these two young

Turks provide a daily schedule of three 20-minute periods of oral drill for four- and five-year-olds so they may develop verbal abilities. The teacher asks a question -- "What is this?" -- and demands a complete sentence from the children who shout in unison: "This is a ball." Then, she says, "This ball is big" and the children repeat her words several times with mounting volume. Continued questions and answers bring out differences between singular and plural and show relationships and causality. Singing, chanting, shouting, even screaming, in unison, seem to give confidence to the shy and new skills to the inarticulate. Bereiter and Engelmann report four-year-olds gaining 17 points in IQ and scoring at first-grade level in arithmetic, reading, and spelling after this rigid patterning in oral language.

In a different setting and with completely informal and unstructured procedures, participants in the Poetry Workshop at Lehigh University are finding that a rich oral language experience draws children to more thoughtful and enjoyable reading of poetry. We begin with folk songs, where there is a great deal of repetition and opportunity for improvisation. "Bought Me a Cat," "Old McDonald Had a Farm," and "Aiken Drum" pull in even the very shy and inarticulate. First graders who have sung "One Wide River to Cross" and added another dozen stanzas to bring in every animal they can dream up have no trouble reading the same lines recorded in a class-made book.

From group singing we go on to chanting poetic lines read first by the teacher or a student leader. Sometimes small groups elect to dramatize favorite poems. Taping, listening, and retaping reinforce the experience and the involvement.

All the while we encourage children to write or dictate their own poetic images. Sometimes this results in a group poem which children delight in reading and rereading. One morning after a heavy rain storm, a first-grade group in Easton, Pennsylvania, poured forth these lines recorded by their teacher:

RAIN ON THE HOUSETOPS

RAIN ON THE TREES

Rain taps on your windows,
Giants running on the clouds
Flashing their flashlights.

Drip drop on the roof
Like little rocks thrown up there.

Rain in the street
Like a lake for ants.

Rain on the grass
Like a machine gun.

Thunder is a running horse.
Thunder is giants bowling.
When it lightens
A giant gets a strike.

Rain on the windows
Like silver stones,
Like bullets

Heading toward your windshield,
Like silver dots on the glass,
Like people walking tippytoe
On your car roof.

When rain drops on flowers
It makes a little noise
Like a ladybug walking on grass.[7]

The class poem was printed in bold letters on a strip of shelf paper and displayed prominently. For days groups of children gathered around their poem, reading and rereading, utterly fascinated by the sound of their own words and rhythm.

Sylvia Ashton-Warner tells of remarkable progress made by her Maori pupils when they write or dicate their own books, using the vocabulary and cadence which is uniquely theirs:

We play, eh?
Me and you, eh?
You stay by me, eh, Daddy?

Hearing the children read these lines was, she said, "a sound for sore ears. Where has all the droning got to?"[8]

It is interesting to note that many widely different, but very successful, methods of teaching reading encourage children to dictate or write their own stories almost from the beginning. The Montessorri schools do this; Omar K. Moore does it on his talking typewriter; and, of course, the ITA program does, too. In all of these, children use the words and sentence patterns which are natural for them. The result is their own oral language caught on paper.

When you listen to the sounds of language recorded in print for children, you realize how much of it is ridiculously unnatural. For example, Catherine Woolley writes of a nine-year-old girl who "ran to gather the ball to her bosom." A few pages later she describes a small boy going to wash his feet and says he went "to perform these ablutions." Can you imagine this kind of language in a book published as recently as 1968?[9] Although this book was written for modern children, the author has indulged in a strange mixture of condescending patter and Victorian vocabulary and syntax. With this kind of language, reading becomes dull and difficult for any child.

For the ghetto child, the standard English of the teacher and printed book is a discouraging hurdle. Vocabulary, syntax, and cadence are so different that he finds little resemblance to the language of home and street.

Many very bright children in the ghetto are stumped by such a sentence as "He has been sick." Even the child who can read these four words balks at this combination. It doesn't sound right to him so he translates to the language he knows by ear and reads: "He be sick." Actually this is a more complicated linguistic achievement than simply reading the four words as they are printed. Guided by his experience, he has corrected what was obviously an error in print.

The April issue of Today's Education tells of the ghettoese translation of "The Night Before Christmas," made by the linguist, William A. Stewart, who turned it over to Lenora, a "problem reader" in the inner city:[10]

It's the night before Christmas, and here in our house
It ain't nothing moving, not even no mouse
There go we'all stockings, hanging high up off the floor,
So Santa can full them up, if he walk chrough our door.

Says Stewart: "Lenore was one of the problem readers of the public schools; she read school texts haltingly, with many mistakes and with little ability to grasp the meaning of what she read. Yet, when she began to read the non-standard version of the poem, her voice was steady, her reading accurate, and her sentence intonation was natural. . . . I then had Lenora read the standard English version of the poem . . . When she did, all the 'problem reader' behavior returned."

In the past year, several publishers have brought out books which catch the oral language of city children in print. One of the most interesting is Mother, these are my friends, consisting of the wishes of city children in their words. A five-year-old puts her wish this way:

I wants to be the teacher
and make all the teachers go to school like childs.
And I will make them do their number work
and read stories to them.
And I will let them have snacktime and playtime
if they be good.

and from a seven-year-old:

I wish everybody would leave me alone
and stop fighting on me.
And I wish nobody would fight no more
and my big brother in Vietnam would come alive again.

The Hip Reader by Dr. Cecelia Pollack and Patrick Lane uses the slang of the ghetto and photos of inner-city teenagers in what is basically a linguistic reader.[13] But instead of the usual twaddle about Dan fanning Nan, this tells of "Mat the sad cat from 46th Street" who "got mad at his Dad, and left his pad." A glossary for teachers explains such terms as "cracked up," "give each other five," and "soul sound." For city kids, the meaning is obvious.

During the past six months I have read several thousand poems written by city youngsters about their city. In many of the poems, the subject matter violates our conventional patterns, the language is bluntly vulgar by textbook standards, the grammar is disjointed. But these poems have immediacy and impact that no reader can ignore. As young inner-city poets read their poetry, one hears an earthy message--perhaps about littered streets and rat-infested pads--in a conversational lingo that would send Catherine Woolley to the nut house. But it is the oral language of a different generation from hers--a generation that has grown up hearing the sounds of contemporary voices in language patterns every chick and cat can dig.

If we really want to teach children to read, we must open up the classroom to the oral language culture which prevails in the real world of children. This means we will keep them talking, individually and in groups. To encourage them we will provide things to talk about and question. With tape recorder, record player, TV, and radio we will bring in the oral voices of the mass media and record the children's voices to be played back for all to hear. We will write down this oral language for the same children to see on paper while they listen.

Using the language of modern children--with its rich vocabulary and conversational idiom--we will encourage the kind of involvement that modern youngsters have learned to expect.

Let them create written materials to be read in class. Let them select published books for the library.

Invite them to tell you how they would like to have their reading class organized. When they ask for the radio to be turned on while they read, be ready to give it a try. When they dictate a story loaded with words like ain't and dasn't, keep your cool and remember this is a standard English to them. When they reject Secret of the Andes and take over Malcolm X or Black Like Me, rejoice that they have become involved in reading.

1. Figures from 1969 World Almanac and Book of Facts.

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3. /I/D/E/A Reporter, Winter Quarter 1969.

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7. Larrick, Nancy, Editor, Green Is Like a Meadow of Grass. Garrard Publishing Co., 1968.

8. Ashton-Warner, Sylvia, Teacher. Simon & Schuster, 1963. P. 71.

9. Woolley, Catherine, Chris in Trouble. William Morrow & Co., 1968.

10. Raspberry, William, "Should Ghettoese Be Accepted?" Today's Education, NEA Journal. April, 1970. P. 31.

11. Gross, Mary Anne, Editor, Mother, these are my friends. City Schools Curriculum Service, Inc., 1969. P. 19.

12. Ibid. P. 9.

13. Pollack, Cecilia, and Patrick Lane. Hip Reader and Teacher Manual. Book-Lab, Inc., 1969.