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ABSTRACT

Two main points are stressed in this essay: (1) Reading literature aloud to students is not only educationally sound, but for many youngsters, necessary; and (2) In order to help his students become critical listeners of the literature that is read to them, a teacher must build bridges between the youngsters' experience and that in the literature. Three types of spoken language are listed: reading aloud, monologue, and real conversation. The differences between the first two and conversation include: (1) The intonation patterns of spoken prose are highly standardized; those of conversation are not; (2) Spoken prose is even in tempo; conversation is not; and (3) The pauses of spoken prose are closely related to the grammatical structure of these sentences; in conversation, they are frequently unpredictable. To attune his ear, a student not only needs to hear his teachers read aloud a great deal, he also needs occasional practice himself. Listening comprehension in slow-learning children far exceeds reading comprehension for the following reasons: the speaking voice brings to interpretation pitch, stress, pause, rhythm, tone--audible clues to meaning which slow youngsters are unable to infer from print alone. It is suggested that television and film be used more often than they are to help slow learners, as these media combine visual and auditory clues to meaning. (CK)

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Listen, My Children, and You Shall Read. . . .

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I DO NOT remember when I was first read to. Like most children of the middle class, I was subjected to pictures similar to those found in little Golden Books for pre-readers, pictures accompanied with the usual inane parental patois regarding doggies, horsies, mama cows and kitty cats. But beyond providing me with a working vocabulary which could ease me into the frivolous, antiseptic world of Dick and Jane, my parents, as I recall, did not do much. Certainly they were not people who eagerly held *Alice in Wonderland* and *Winnie the Pooh* in ready alert for their latest offspring, upon whom they could expend winter evenings reading aloud in Victorian leisure by flickering firelight.

No, I believe it was in elementary school that I first heard stories and first fell in love with literature. Though I now have only kaleidoscopic impressions of my first few years in the parochial school I attended and can no longer remember which good and gentle nun taught me what in which grade, I do recall the quiet times, the periods after sweaty recesses when, shirt tails hanging and hair rumpled, we would be required to put our heads down on the desks and listen until a story or poem had performed its magic, and the savage beasts were once again soothed. It was during such periods that I first rambled with slow-witted Little Red Riding Hood to her grandmother's, that I first discovered that someone had been sleeping in our bed, that I first clambered the bean stalk with Jack and bested a giant. Enroute I learned some valuable moral lessons—that a cheap tract home can be huffed and puffed down, that one can get mighty hungry if all he touches is turned to gold, that stepmothers aren't to be trusted. But the morality was oblique, incidental, not sententious like that in the Puritan hornbook or the McGuffey Readers. What I mostly learned were the creative joys of visualizing a setting, having an empathic response to a character, feeling the heart-tingling excitement of a suspenseful plot. Too, I began to learn the sound of literature, to develop an inner ear to guide me in my attempts to discriminate between the shoddy and pretentious and the valuable and true in all writing, including my own.

Since elementary school, I have not been read to much, and the times I was read to have not always been memorable for the same reasons. Certainly I shall never forget the woman who in the

twilight of her teaching years read aloud *Tale of Two Cities* to the sophomore class in which I unfortunately sat. After six solid weeks of hearing her intone like a full-bosomed thrush whose days are numbered, I was ready to put the axe to Carton, myself. Then there was the school-marmish professor who, in a course in advanced Shakespearian criticism, seated over a hundred of us alphabetically and proceeded to simper and whimper his way through four tragedies and a comedy, climaxing his performance by asking on the final examination such fruitful questions as, "What are the width and depth of the outer alcove stage of the Globe Playhouse?" "What are the width and depth of the inner alcove stage of the Globe Playhouse?"

Balanced against these, though, have been favorable experiences. No one who ever heard her read in one of her courses in Dickens, Shakespeare, or Restoration Comedy shall ever forget Professor Margaret Bailey. Her chunky body thrust haphazardly into a severe gray dress that trailed near the floor, her feet shod in high-button black boots, her white hair pulled in a bun away from a face that belonged on Mt. Rushmore, Dr. Bailey simultaneously terrified and enraptured the undergraduates who flocked to her courses. Able to sever tongues with a glance and lacerate ignorance with a phrase, with her voice alone she sprang literature to life, made it grovel in the mud, prance in the sunlight, soar to the heavens. She *was* Falstaff and Uriah Heep and Hamlet and Mrs. Margery Pinchwife; she was an institution and deserved to be. After she retired, she continued to read for small groups along the San Francisco Peninsula. Before her death a couple of years ago, I took a high school class to hear her read from Nikos Kazantzakis' *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*, an evening, I warrant, they shall never forget.

Another indelible experience was hearing Robert Frost, in his early eighties, hold an audience for two hours as he recited from memory poem after poem in his unmistakable New England twang. And of the 60-odd conferences of teachers of English I have attended during the past decade, certainly one of the most memorable was that at which Mark Linenthal, a professor and poet at San Francisco State College, read "Tract" by William Carlos Williams, a poem which I twice readily recalled, once when Jessica Mitford's *The American Way of Death* was being widely discussed and the other when my father died two years ago.

CONDITIONED by many favorable memories of literature read aloud well and negatively guided by the few remembrances of it read poorly, I frequently used to read aloud to my high school classes. Sometimes I worried because I did so, assuming as many teachers do that I had no right to occupy center stage much of the time, that my reading to the students did not better prepare them to read for themselves. Had I then known what I now know, I would have spared myself whatever guilt I felt; for there is mounting evidence that the practice of reading aloud to students is pedagogically sound, particularly for culturally disadvantaged or slower students.

In the April 1965 *English Journal*, Marjorie B. Smiley, Director of the Project English Center at Hunter College, comments:

> Some of the difficulties underprivileged children face in learning to read is in the early stages of associating what is heard with the printed symbols for these sounds. One of the most interesting findings of recent research has been the evidence of a high degree of correlation between hearing (auding, as it is called in these studies) and reading. This is a difficulty that many such children have not yet overcome by Grade 7 or 8. These children are unlikely to have had parents

with time to read aloud to them in their early years. We do not do nearly enough reading aloud to children in elementary or secondary schools. We do not make nearly enough use of the increasingly rich store of records of poetry, stories, speeches, and plays. . . .

David Abercrombie, author of "Conversation and Spoken Prose" *(English Language Teaching*, October 1963), indicates that there are three broad categories of spoken language: reading aloud, monologue, and real conversation. The most obvious differences between the first two kinds of spoken language—reading aloud and monologue—which he labels "spoken prose," and conversation are these:

1. The intonation patterns of spoken prose are highly standardized; those of conversation are not.
2. Spoken prose is even in tempo; conversation is not.
3. The pauses of spoken prose are closely related to the grammatical structure of these sentences. In conversation they are frequently unpredictable.
4. Spoken prose does not make use of silences the way conversation does—silences meaningfully filled by gestures and grimaces.
5. In spoken prose stammers and errors of articulation are rare and conspicuous; in conversation they attract little attention.
6. Spoken prose has probably fewer phonetically different speech sounds than conversation has. It is important to note here that most phonemic analysis carried on through the use of informants is derived from spoken prose rather that from conversation.
7. Conversation is generally more structurally incomplete than spoken prose because part of the meaning communicated is derived from context. Sentences in conversation may lack verbs, objects, or even subjects. The sentence as traditionally defined is really a unit of prose, not of conversation.
8. Conversation has a great deal of repetition whereas spoken prose has little.
9. Conversation has many apparent meaningless words and phrases which serve to establish rapport between speakers and to act as silence fillers while a speaker thinks of what to say next.

The implications, I believe, are obvious: if youngsters are coming from backgrounds in which they never hear what Abercrombie calls spoken prose, in which even the conversation they hear is impoverished, consisting most often of commands and categorical statements lacking intellectual content and casual reasoning, then we must read to them if we ever expect them to be able to read by themselves; for the act of reading literary prose is the act of silently speaking to the printed page, or, if one prefers, of hearing the page silently speak. Such a subtle concept as tone in writing could never be taught unless one were first trained to hear and discriminate among the sounds of the written language. Here I am not speaking merely of what correspondences exist between phonemes, or basic sound units, and graphemes, the written symbols for sound units. By the sounds of the written language, I mean the total flow of the language, its rhythms, its syntactical as well as lexical clues out of which we derive speech clues—stress and pitch and juncture—and, ultimately, meaning.

Gertrude Hildreth, Professor of Education at C.C.N.Y., knows what I mean. In an article "Linguistic Factors in Early Reading Instruction" *(The Reading Teacher,* December 1964), Professor Hildreth writes:

> In teaching "phonics," we have traditionally taught the speech sounds represented by letters and groups of letters. We need now to extend the study of "phonics" to include the speech melodies of phrases and sentences which in print are in part signaled by punctuation marks. That is, we need to teach larger segments of sound than we have traditionally taught. We need further to teach these larger segments of sound in association

> with meaning. Comprehending the meanings of phrases or sentences is the central problem for the reader. The ability to comprehend such meanings is developed by the child's experience primarily and mainly with the oral language. The more extensive the child's experience in the language of speech, therefore, the better equipped he is likely to be in getting an author's meaning.

Later in the same article she comments, "Considerable attention has been given recently to listening as a neglected aspect of oral language comprehension. Listening with acute understanding carries over to reading with understanding."

TEACHING students to develop an ear for written language takes time, often years. To attune that ear, the student not only needs to hear his teachers read aloud a great deal, he needs occasional practice himself, as agonizing as it may sometimes be to an audience, in giving voice to print. Some of this practice should be conscious, that is, the student should be stopped and asked why he read a particular word, sentence, paragraph, or bit of dialogue as he did. He should be taught to locate and articulate the clues by which he interprets, and he should learn to defend reasonably his interpretation against others proffered by either the teacher or his classmates. In this process, the student should discover that there can be no absolute interpretations to written prose, though some interpretations are far sounder than others. Because the written language contains far greater ambiguity than does the spoken language, the act of composing, during which we consciously attempt to reduce the ambiguity, is dreadfully difficult for most of us. Nevertheless, we should remember and be grateful that it is this same ambiguity that enables a Shakespearian tragedy to be reinterpreted and reenacted across the centuries.

On the inadequacies of writing as a system of communication, Morton Botel, former president of International Reading Association, states at the conclusion of his article "What Linguistics Says to This Teacher of Reading and Spelling" (*The Reading Teacher*, December 1964):

> One of the most significant things for the teacher of reading to recognize is that the interconnected systems which carry meaning are only partially represented by our system of writing. Our phonology (that is, the consonant and vowel phenomena) is represented only partially by our alphabetic system. There is no one-to-one correspondence between each phoneme and its graphic representation or grapheme. The intonational patterns, or melody of speech, are poorly represented in writing. Sentence patterns, on the other hand, are represented precisely in written sentences. Two other systems of communication, paralanguage (tone of voice) and kinesics (gestured bodily movements) interact with language to communicate meaning. Writing does not convey these structures except by such feebie devices as underlining words or exclamation points or by creative writing which represents tone and movement by words. In short, the systems of communication which convey meaning are quite imperfectly represented in writing.

Assuming that the teacher's reading aloud does eventually assist most youngsters, including the culturally disadvantaged, to read more ably by themselves, one might nonetheless wonder what value the practice has for youngsters who are truly slow, whose reading proficiency, for example, may never exceed that of third-grade.

Anyone around children or slow learners for very long soon discovers that listening comprehension far exceeds reading comprehension for many of the reasons already suggested: the speaking voice brings to interpretation *pitch*, *stress*, *pause*, *rhythm*, *tone*—audible clues to meaning which slow youngsters are unable to infer from print alone. Too often bogged down deciphering single words

when left on their own, they miss both the melodies and meanings of phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. If a teacher believes, as I do, that SRA kits, *Teen-Age Tales*, and Reader's Digest Skill Builders have only limited value and seldom if ever supply students with valid literary experiences, then he will read to his class often; neither his moral nor his professional conscience will permit his letting students pass through a course in English without their realizing something about what literature is, and does. He may never bring to them *Paradise Lost* or "The Waste Land," but by sensitively reading aloud, he can at least provide them experience with reputable short stories, poems, and plays they would otherwise never know. Too, through discussing the literature he orally interprets, he may indirectly help them become more discerning critics of television and film, the media from which they will obtain most of their future vicarious experience. In fact, because they combine auditory and visual clues to meaning, I believe these media should be used far more than they are in classes for slow learners.

IF ONE INTENDS to do more than orally share with a class a poem or story for enjoyment alone, then he must structure his lesson carefully. At a recent conference Olive Niles, reading director for the public schools in Springfield, Massachusetts, said that reading specialists are beginning to realize that 90 percent of the reading skills we teach are taught before the youngster ever reads the selection, that the questions that follow most often only evaluate what success he has had in achieving the purposes implied by the questions. Much the same might be said for the teaching of listening skills. Unless we first motivate a student's interest in a selection and establish the purposes for his listening, we teach almost nothing and should not later wonder why our discussion questions, which again are evaluative questions, often go nowhere.

Let me give you a concrete illustration of how *not* to teach a selection.

Last semester I supervised a student teacher who was placed in a class of 18 unruly, culturally disadvantaged youngsters. On a weekly teaching schedule she indicated that on Wednesday she intended reading to the students James Baldwin's "A Fly in the Buttermilk," an essay which first appeared in *Harper's* under the title, "The Hard Kind of Courage," and was later reprinted in *Nobody Knows My Name*. Briefly, the essay concerns Baldwin's interviewing in a Southern town a Negro mother whose only child, G., is the only Negro child in an all-white school. Baldwin wants to know what kind of parents can send their child day after day into a hostile environment and what kind of child can survive the hostility. After interviewing the mother (the father was at work) and ascertaining why, of 45 Negro couples who had applied to send their children to the school, only they had persisted, and after evaluating the effects upon G. of their decision, Baldwin interviews the principal of the school, a Caucasian, a man of good will, a man who loves children and values education, but a troubled man who has been reared in the culture of the Southern white and knows his values are in conflict. For everyone concerned, the essay is compassionate. Thinking it a splendid selection for this particular class, I arrived at the school on Wednesday, took a seat in the back of the classroom, and watched chaos and black night descend.

With no introduction to the material, the student teacher passed out the dittoed pages of the essay in reverse order—page five first, which the students immediately began to read. After she had rectified this procedure, she perched on a stool and read the daily bulletin—like all daily bulletins, no epistolary classic, but unlike most, two pages long. She then asked

the students if any of them had ever heard of James Baldwin. About seven hands went up. Disregarding them, she presented a brief and desultory account of Baldwin's life to date. She then inquired whether anyone had ever read anything by James Baldwin. To my surprise, four hands went up. Disregarding these, she dropped titles plentifully upon the class. Without further ado, she then read *sotto voce*, monotonously, for four pages without stopping to interpolate a comment, ask a question, or summarize an involved passage. After page four, she quit. She had to: the students were noisier than she. She asked them how they liked the essay. Not receiving a response, she informed them they really liked it; otherwise they wouldn't have stayed quiet so long. She then asked whether they thought Baldwin was a good writer. Not receiving a response, she informed them Baldwin was a very good writer; otherwise they wouldn't have stayed quiet so long. More to spare my feelings than hers, I left.

AFTER first reading the daily bulletin and before distributing the essay, had the student teacher provided a number of hypothetical situations which could serve to generate discussion and lead students into Baldwin's theme, the hour would have been far different. For example, she might have said to the class,

> Assume that you live in the deep South, that you are the Negro parent of an intelligent boy who is attending a school for Negro children, a school which has very low standards. You want your child to have a good education. Would you be willing to send him to an all-white school if he were the only Negro child to attend?
>
> Assume now that you are the boy. Would you be willing to attend? If you did attend, how would you behave if students started to pick on you?
>
> Imagine that you are the principal in the school, that you believe in the value of education, that you deeply care about children, but that you have been reared as a Southern white. What might you be concerned about? How would you behave toward the boy?
>
> Finally, assume that you are white parents in this area, that you believe strongly in school integration, but that there have been so many Southern Negroes moving into the neighborhood that your child is now one of only a handful of white children left in his school. You want him to have a good education. Would you continue to send him to the school he now attends, or would you move to a different area?

Only after such a preliminary discussion would I introduce the essay. I would give the students a chance to tell me what they know about Baldwin, I would have ready for them a sequence of questions to consider as they listened and followed along in the text, and I would read interpretively, pausing from time to time to ask a question or make a comment. After the reading, the prepared questions would be discussed. These questions would not invite personal opinion as did the preliminary discussion questions; they would focus directly on the content and style of the essay.

If I were asked what the most serious shortcoming is of the student teachers I observe, I would reply, "Their failure to motivate interest in a selection, to build bridges between students' concerns and experiences and the experiences recorded in the literature. Student teachers don't realize that assigning a selection and teaching it are not synonymous."

I can't tell any teacher, student or otherwise, what bridges to build, for what he constructs depends upon what he knows about himself, his students, and his material. I can only provide brief illustrations of what I have done:

There was the morning following the All-Star Game that I asked a group of sophomores at the University Summer Demonstration School to name the starting line-ups for me. I then asked what the opening batteries were the year be-

fore. I inquired whether anyone could remember the teams in the Rose Bowl year before last. Finally, I challenged the group to name four All-Americans from four years back. When they laughingly conceded that they couldn't name one, I pointed out that these athletes once had had considerable notoriety and asked whether it was possible, then, for one to achieve the peak of his fame when quite young and to live out the rest of his days a forgotten has-been? Under such circumstances, I inquired, wouldn't it be far better if the athlete died before he saw his fame fade? Obviously, I was leading into Housman's "To an Athlete Dying Young."

There was the class of college preparatory juniors in which I asked whether anyone had done homework for any class the night before. After the agonizing moans had ceased, I asked how many of them would have preferred watching television or cruising around. When most of the hands arose, I asked the students why, then, they bothered to do the homework, why they didn't just go enjoy themselves. I was leading into the tension all of us feel between duty and pleasure, the tension at the heart of the poem I wished to teach, Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."

There was the class of regular sophomores in which I disarmingly asked, "How many of you ever feel lonely?" After the diffident, numerous hands had been put down, I asked the students what they did when they were lonely. When many revealed that they sought the company of friends, I asked them to consider what it might be to be a king. Were kings more lonely than other people? If so, why? Eventually they were led into discussing the terrifying alienation of the regal Richard Cory.

I HAVE purposely enraged classes to get them into a story. At the beginning of one hour in a slow class, I passed out small pieces of paper and requested each student to write his name, fold the paper, and pass it forward. I took the pieces, placed them in a recipe box, asked for a volunteer to draw three names. When the students, dutifully docile till then, wanted to know what it was all about, I told them I had finished reading their last examinations, that almost all of them had done well, but that it was my policy in a class this size to fail at least a few students. Because I wanted to be fair, I thought the best procedure was that of drawing names. Within seconds all hell broke loose. I was shouted at, threatened with both administrative and parental power by those who were going to report me *right now*, had my sanity and I believe my parentage questioned by the toughs in the back row. I temporarily soothed ruffled tempers by saying I would reconsider my policy since it seemed so disturbing; now, though, I wanted to read them a story. I distributed the dittoed questions, and when it came, they were ready indeed for Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery."

In short, though the bridges into literature are many and varied, one must be built for nearly every selection to be taught. When I am unsure about how to build, I inevitably fall back on the one constant we have, the emotional experiences of the youngsters. No matter how slow the class, the students will have had some experience with hate, with fear, with loneliness; some bent, albeit warped at times, toward honor, toward courage, toward love. Intellectual traditions change from century to century, decade to decade, and with the explosion of knowledge in our time, often from year to year. There nevertheless remains a continuity in human experience, a continuity provided in the heritage of all men: we are born, we feel, and we die. And though we do die, our literature remains behind, reminding those who follow what it was, and is, to be human.

In concluding, allow me to summarize

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Listen My Children, and You Shall Read. . . .

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my two main points: First, reading literature aloud to students is not only educationally sound but for many youngsters, necessary; second, if one wishes to help students become critical listeners and if he intends *teaching* the literature he reads orally, he must plan his lessons carefully, building bridges between the youngsters' experience and that in the literature and providing sequences of questions that set the purposes for listening.

Above all, the teacher who reads to his classes should not feel he is wasting the students' time. Guilt is better saved for evaluating compositions or marking report cards.