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ABSTRACT

Oral interpretation should be an integral part of a reading program as it teaches the reading skills while providing students with experiences in literature and opportunities for creative self-expression. Both reading teachers and content area teachers will benefit from an understanding of: the relationship between reading and oral interpretation, the purposes for oral interpretation, the functions of oral reading and silent reading, the occasions for oral reading, the development of the ability to interpret orally, and the instructional implications of oral interpretation. (JM)

Incorporating Oral Interpretation into a Reading Skills Program

Johnny Renardo Anderson

Reading is a complex of skills that the individual uses to derive meaning from the printed page. A balanced reading program has as its long range goals the well-adjusted student who knows how and where to seek knowledge and information and may appreciate good literature for its own sake.[1]

Oral reading or interpretation has long been advocated as an integral part of a reading program. Literally any periodical or textual reference to oral reading either states or implies that the major function of oral reading is to communicate to listeners by voice the thoughts and feelings of a writer.[2] The author usually proceeds to explain how oral reading should be taught to carry out that mission. Yet very little has been stated as to the procedure a reading teacher should follow in implementing this skill into their reading program. This paper will focus on five major factors in the relationship between reading and oral interpretation: (1) the purposes for oral reading, (2) oral reading vs. silent reading, (3) occasions for oral interpretation, (4) developing ability to interpret orally, and (5) instructional implications. Although this paper is specifically designed for the reading teacher, content area teachers may also benefit from it in an effort to enable their students to have a greater depth of understanding, to improve their fact-getting techniques, to increase their ability to evaluate what is read, and to adjust their reading habits to different situations. In short, this paper can benefit not only the poor reader, but also the good reader who is simply not literature oriented.

Oral reading as an exercise in word pronunciation is one of the most useless instructional practices that a teacher can carry out. It is the perseverance of a practice from the past that has no justification in a modern classroom. Word perception, though necessary, is only peripheral or incidental to the main and only reason for reading aloud - which is to interpret to interested listeners the ideas, information, feeling, mood or action that is in printed or written form. It is an act of interpretation. Obviously the interpretation is more effective when the words are perceived rapidly and accurately, but pronouncing words is only the means to the end of communicating a message that a writer has to convey and a reader wishes to transmit. In fact, Heilman questions whether oral reading for diagnostic purposes represents a true oral reading situation "since pupil purpose, informing an audience, is not paramount."[3] There will be occasions when a teacher or clinician wishes to test a child's ability to perceive words in context. This may be done through the use of an informal inventory.

The teacher, then will select some continuous typical passage of moderate length (200 to 300 words) from the text he plans to use, count the number of words in the selection, and have the student read it orally. If no more than one or possibly two out of every ten words is unknown to the student or cannot be recognized without great hesitation, the text is not too difficult from a word-recognition standpoint. If the student is unfamiliar with more than this number of words, the teacher repeats the procedures with a selection from a book intended for the next

lower grade. Oral reading is continued in this fashion until the criterion for about 90-per-cent accuracy is met.[4]

Oral Reading vs. Silent Reading

One can hardly discuss oral reading or interpretation apart from silent reading. Each serves a particular function -- silent reading to reconstruct the writer's ideas, to sense the mood or feeling; oral reading, to interpret what the writer says or feels to concerned listeners. Figuratively speaking, one is a 'getting' task, the other a 'giving', and the two should not be confused as to purpose.

W. S. Gray, in his seminal paper, "Characteristics of Effective Oral Reading," states that there are four significant tasks involved in effective oral interpretation: 1) grasping an author's intended meaning, 2) sensing the mood and emotional reactions which the author intended to produce, 3) conveying the author's intended meaning to a listener, and 4) conveying the mood and feeling. In other words, silent reading serves as a foundation for oral interpretation, for it is there that the reader concentrates on meaning, on the reconstruction of the writer's ideas, on the mood or emotional tone that is implied. This the reader must do before he can transmit those ideas to others.

Sensing fully through silent reading what the writer wishes to say, the reader is now prepared, if the occasion requires it, to convey it to others, hopefully, in the same manner that the writer himself would do were he present. The oral interpreter, in a figurative sense, serves as a stand-in for the author, and

through appropriate inflections, emphasis, pauses, and expression, conveys to others the feeling, action, or information that he has already secured for himself.[5]

Occasions for Oral Interpretation

There are many occasions during the course of the school day, both in and outside the reading class, to interpret material aloud. The following are only examples:

a. dramatizing informally a story or portion of a story
b. conveying the step-by-step directions for playing a game or performing an experiment
c. interpreting an exciting passage from a book being read as personal reading
d. reading a news article
e. choral reading
f. interpreting a portion of a story that the reader likes best
g. interpreting the mood or feeling expressed in a poem
h. proving a point or offering evidence for an idea
i. reading a joke or a riddle
j. interpreting the characterization or action of a play
k. entertaining children on a lower grade level.

Many linguists are pointing out that a special purpose for oral interepretation exists in the early stages of learning to read. That is to develop the concept that printed symbols stand for and may be turned into speech.[6] This reason, however, in no way negates what has been said about functional reading. The point being made is that the young child comes to school already having attained a high level of performance in communicating orally. As he begins to meet language he needs to understand that the words that comprise it symbolize spoken words. In teaching a story on an early reading level the teacher might say, "The first sentence under the picture tells what William did. Read it to yourselves. Now, who would like to read it aloud?" She queries as she guides

the novice reader from sentence, to sentences, to paragraphs. In this way reading becomes the act of making the black marks talk.

Oral reading is always a purposeful activity of interpreting what a writer says to someone who has occasion to listen. If no good purpose exists, if the others in the group already know what the writer has said, then there is no occasion for oral reading. There is no rule in the book that says that every child must read aloud every day.

Developing Ability to Interpret Orally

The act of reading is a four-step process: the perception of words, the comprehension of ideas, the reaction of ideas, and the integration of ideas. To develop this process, a reader must be adept in the developmental areas of reading such as word recognition, meanings, study skills, flexibility, appreciation, and interests.[7]

The relationship of oral interpretation in this process is a unique one. Standard texts of reading methods frequently list the competencies that contribute to effective oral interpretation. Lists frequently include such abilities as the following: a) facility in the perception of words; b) flexibility in voice pitch, volume, and rate; c) ability to phrase or group words in thought units; d) ability to identify with story characters and give proper expression to action and feelings; e) ability to pronounce and articulate acceptably; and f) ability to use appropriate body movements and facial expressions.

In general such abilities can be developed more effectively by an indirect approach than by a direct one. That is to say rather than teaching a 'style' or dramatic expression the teacher might more profitably spend his time helping readers comprehend the writer's ideas and perceive the dramatic quality, feeling, emotion, or the mood and tone of the passage. In interpreting printed material aloud, the reader needs to understand that in a sense, words are being placed in his mouth by a writer to express a particular idea or emotion. He needs to do in a make-believe manner what he does normally all the time. Gray confirms this contention in these words:

> "The training of pupils to convey meaning effectively is an insightful but subtle art. The teacher should have a good understanding of the techniques or skills involved. However, he does not center attention on them as such. . . The teacher relies far more largely on helping the child to grasp clearly the idea to be presented than on formal directions concerning modes of expression."[8]

Further in the article Gray adds:

> ". . . If the reader senses mood and feeling vividly and appropriately and is eager to read to others, he will need little guidance in these techniques."

Instructional Implications

The instructional implication is to direct the readers' attention to what the writer is saying, to the ideas he is trying to express, and in the case of a story or poem, to the feeling or emotional tone he desires to convey. For example, assume that the instructional group has just completed the silent reading of J. D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye.[10] Because the story

has a great deal of dramatic conversation on the part of Holden Caufield, the main character, it lends itself admirably to interpretive reading.

To enhance the action and humor of the story the teacher asks the students if there is a part they would like to interpret to the others. One student selects the episode showing Holden and his roommate, Stradlater, talking about the new date that Stradlater has for the Ziegfeld Follies. Holden is very anxious to find out who the secret date is as he excitedly pumps the nonchalant Stradlater until he screams out the girl's name in a moment of release. Though in his reading the student identifies all the words correctly, he interprets the action in only a matter of fact manner. At this point, the teacher should have the student repeat the exercise so that each time he reads the passage, he becomes more aware of the interpretation aspects. This is a lesson in role playing as the student must put himself in Holden's as well as Stradlater's place and do what is natural to him.

One could have additional fun with this episode by asking several students to interpret the same passage to see which could make his voice sound more convincing. A tape recorder would also be a helpful device in this situation, for students like to hear their own voices. One person might record the same passage several different ways, so that he could note how much more effective one was over another. Any kind of activity that would help the reader identify with the situation and provide an opportunity to project the action and feeling through his voice

would be effective and useful -- puppetry, informal dramatization of a story with younger children volunteering for parts, choral reading where the shy student can lose his voice with those of others, turning a story into a play with stage instructions for action and interpretation, are all variations of this technique.[11]

Another effective way of teaching oral interpretation is through the model the teacher presents through his own interpretative reading. From the teacher's reading the students can gain further insight into the use of punctuation, suprasegmentals, pausing at the right moment, pitch, and effective modulation of volume and tempo.[12] All these skills can be exercised by the student through the neurological impress method of teaching. This method is simply the simultaneous reading by the student and the teacher. It enables the student to hear the rhythm of the teacher and develop a natural rhythm of his own. The method also has a built-in success factor since the teacher continues reading even if the student stumbles over a certain word, thereby eliminating the frustration level which often becomes associated with oral reading.

Finally, in the lower grades, a teacher can frequently give additional effectiveness to his interpretation by 'reading-telling' a story, that is by reading several paragraphs and then by telling in his own words the next dramatic episode, changing voice to characterize the various speakers. The story goes that a teacher was reading-telling the story of the three little pigs to a group of young children. Apparently she was giving a very dramatic rendition as she said, "The bad, old fox crept up to the first

little pig's house, and do you know what he did? He huffed and he puffed and he blew that little pig's house all to pieces." Whereupon she heard one liffle ragamuffin say disgustedly, "That damned old fox!"[13]

Conclusion

Many oral interpreters may object to using oral interpretation to teach the skills of reading. However, Richard A. Earle answers:

> "If the literature is subjugated to the teaching of reading skills, if we leaf through a short story to find paragraphs which lend themselves to main idea practices, if we use a short story for some skills lesson this week to prepare for a short story unit next week, then the literature is being prostituted.
>
> "On the other hand, if the skills instruction stems directly from the content objectives and is achieved as part of the process of encountering the human experiences in literature then this use of good literature is not only promising but also essential."[14]

Oral interpretation is not unlike art, the dance, or music in providing students with the opportunity for creative self-expression. As such, it becomes in its own right an extremely important objective in a well-rounded reading program.

Teachers of English, speech, and reading should realize that all are seeking the same goal which is eloquently described by Conrad in his preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus:

> "My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel -- it is, before all, to make you see. That -- and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm -- all you demand -- and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask."[15]

FOOTNOTES

[1]Robert Karlin, Teaching Reading in High School (New York: Bob Merrill, 1972), p. 1.

[2]A. Steve Artley, "Oral Reading as a Communication Process," Reading Teacher (October, 1972), p. 46.

[3]Arthur Heilman, Principles and Practices in Teaching Reading (Columbus: Charles Merrill, 1967), p. 178.

[4]Karlin, op. cit., p. 75.

[5]William S. Gray, "Characteristics of Effective Oral Reading," Oral Aspects of Reading, Ed. H. Robinson, Supplementary Educational Monographs, No. 82 (December, 1955), pp. 1-9.

[6]Artley, op. cit., p. 48.

[7]William S. Gray, On Their Own Reading (Chicago: Scott-Foresman and Company, 1960), pp. 10-12.

[8]Gray, op. cit., p. 9.

[9]Gray, op. cit., p. 10.

[10]J. D. Salinger, The Catcher in the Rye (New York: Little, Brown and Company, Inc., 1951), p. 214.

[11]Morton Botel and Alvin Granowsky, "Guided Reading Activities to Nurture the Literary Experience," Reading Teacher (January, 1974), p. 349.

[12]Richard Ammon, "Reading Aloud - - - for What Purpose?", Reading Teacher (January, 1974), p. 345.

[13]Artley, op. cit., p. 51.

[14]Richard A. Earle, "Using Literature to Teach Reading," Reading Improvement, Vol. IX (Fall, 1972), p. 37.

[15]Walter F. Wright, ed., Joseph Conrad on Fiction (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), p. 162.