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CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF ORAL AND SILENT READING

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The traditional common-sense way to teach reading has been viewed as a process of helping individual children "sound-out" unrecognized words as they read orally with their peers and teacher following along in a text. If a word is miscalled or not attempted, both the teacher and children are eager to offer the pronunciation. Besides the embarrassment which accompanies such a practice (Holt, 1969), this simplistic mechanistic approach tends to condition children to view reading as a word-centered oral activity. Perceiving reading as a visual meaning-centered process is the last thing many children think of (Doake, 1976; Tovey, 1976).

This problem is not a new one. Similar concerns were voiced by Huey in 1908:

"Reading as a school exercise has almost always been thought of as reading aloud, in spite of the obvious fact that reading in actual life is to be mainly silent reading. The consequent attention to reading as an exercise in speaking, and it has usually been a rather bad exercise at that, has been heavily at the expense of reading as the art of thought-getting and thought manipulating."

Even though these understandings have been available since the beginning of this century, indiscriminate oral reading practices (where the reader's purpose is other than communicating an author's message to an audience) continue to be used in many classrooms. In a recent study, Tierney (1976) compared Australian and American reading teachers. One of the conclusions of that study was "Oral reading, in lieu of silent reading, was the most frequent, directed, instructional activity in both the Australian and American classrooms." Obviously, children must become aware of the relationships that exist between their oral/aural language and the visual patterns they see in print. It would appear, though, that this is best accomplished by the teacher reading orally as the children follow the text, not the reverse (Smith, 1979).

Why does "round-robin" reading continue to be so popular in spite of research results dating back approximately three-quarters of a century? Do we doubt that beginning readers have the ability to process print silently? Such questions seem to imply that silent reading is more difficult than oral. Goodman (1971), however, claims the opposite. He views silent reading as a one-step process of associating meaning with print, while oral reading requires not only the derivation of meaning but also the encoding of the author's message into oral language. In written language, meaning is triggered by visual patterns, not sound.

Therefore, it would appear that beginning readers need many opportunities for observing/processing the visual features of written language as they listen to someone else read the text orally (Doake, 1979). In this way, meaning is emphasized as children silently utilize their nonconscious language-learning abilities to associate the visual information they see on the page with the oral-aural language rules they have already acquired.

Much has been written about the appropriate use of oral and silent reading. Few researchers, however, have considered students' thoughts related to this issue. The purpose of this exploratory study then was to determine certain boys' and girls' perceptions of oral and silent reading. In order to ascertain their thoughts, the following two questions were used:

1. Would you rather read "out loud" or "to yourself"?
2. Do you think it is easier to read "out loud" or easier to read "to yourself"?

Each of these questions was followed in turn with a "why-question" to determine why students believed as they did.

In order to generate data regarding the questions, the following procedures were followed:

1. The researcher interviewed 18 first-grade and 12 third-grade children the first week of October. The first-graders were being taught to read by the use of individual dictation stories and preprimers with a strong emphasis placed on silent reading. Third-graders were involved in a basal reading program. During these interviews, children were asked the questions of the study. Their responses were written on a prepared form.

2. Following these interviews, preservice teachers worked with the given children in language arts and reading in groups of three from 12:30 to 2:00 PM each

Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday for eight weeks. During this experience, first-grade nonreaders dictated two stories each meeting and were involved in many silent activities related to their dictation stories and books. In addition, they were encouraged to take a number of books home for their parents to read to them. Readers on the other hand were encouraged to read as many books as possible, reading only those books they wanted to read and were able to read. Other than the initial echo-reading of dictation stories, the only time children in either group read orally was when they wanted to share a particular passage with someone. Teachers, however, read to students every day. Great emphasis was placed on meaning, i.e., communicating with an author visually/silently.

3. Following eight weeks of such instruction, the children were interviewed again, using the same questions and procedures employed during the first interview sessions.

4. The data were then analyzed.

5. Implications for instruction were stated according to the findings of the study.

The subjects involved in this study were not randomly selected but were students of teachers who would allow university students to work with their children. These children lived in an above-average socio-economic community near a midwestern city of 55,000 residents.

Question 1: Would You Rather Read "Out-Loud"
or "To Yourself?"

During the first interview, first-grade children indicated a strong preference for reading silently (83%), while the third-graders interviewed were much less enthusiastic about reading to themselves (58%). The second interview revealed an even greater enthusiasm on the part of the first-grade students when all (100%) said they would rather read to themselves. On the other hand, fewer third-grade students (42%) favored silent reading during the second interview.

It should be noted (Table 1) that during the two interviews, first graders generated 32 reasons for preferring to read silently with only 4 reasons given for preferring to read orally--a ratio of 8 to 1. (Children's comments in the first and second interviews were not significantly different and were therefore analyzed together throughout this discussion) Third-graders, however, produced more reasons for reading orally (9) than for reading silently (7) - a ratio of 1.3 to 1.

When first-graders were asked why they preferred reading to themselves, their responses referred to the level of noise in the classroom. Below are sample responses: "Cause you have peace and quiet."

"So other people can get their work done."

"It's nice and quiet."

"So I won't bug nobody."

While 69% of the responses referred to quietness, an additional 16% of these first-grade responses indicated an enjoyment of reading silently ("It's funner", etc.), but only 9% of such responses were defensible ([Defensible reasons were judged to be in keeping with current psycholinguistic understandings of the reading process.] "To learn", "You learn to read by reading to yourself," etc.).

Table 1
Reasons Certain First and Third-Grade Children
Gave for Preferring Silent and Oral
Reading (by Type, Number and Percentage).

Silent			Oral		
Type	No.	%	Type	No.	%
1st "So it will be quiet"	22	69	Indefensible reasons	4	100
Gr. Social reasons	2	6			
"It's funner", etc.	5	16			
Defensible reasons	3	9			
Total	32	100			
3rd "So it will be quiet"	1	14	Indefensible reasons	9	100
Gr. Social reasons	5	72			
Defensible reasons	1	14			
Total	7	100			

Interestingly, 72% (5) of the third-grade reasons for reading silently referred to or implied social concerns related to reading "out-loud." These comments were:

"Sometimes I'm embarrassed to read out-loud."

"So the other kids don't hear me."

"Because I don't like to read out-loud."

"Cause I don't like to read out-loud."

"I don't like to read out-loud."

One third-grader did provide a defensible response, saying, "If I make a mistake, I can figure it out myself."

Note also (Table 1) that none of the reasons children gave for preferring oral reading were defensible. They were:

First Grade

"Want them to hear it."

"So everybody can hear me."

"Because it's easier."

"Because I 'sound-out' words better when I read out-loud."

Third Grade

"Get help."

"Because it's more funner and the teacher tells me when I make a mistake."

"Because the teacher can know whether you know your words right."

"So you can learn to read better."

"That way the teacher can tell me if I make a mistake or not."

"I just like to do it."

"Easier to remember stuff."

"I just like to have kids hear me read aloud."

"So other people can hear you."

Observe that most of these third-grade responses seem to imply that the purpose of oral reading is to give teachers the opportunity to help students with unrecognized words. That is, "sound-them-out."

Question 2: Do You Think it Is Easier to Read Out-Loud or Easier to Read To Yourself?

Most children interviewed in both grade levels indicated that they believed it is easier to read silently than orally. In the first interview, 72% of the first-grade responses indicated that it is easier to read "to yourself." During the second interview, after experiencing eight weeks of instruction which stressed silent reading (described previously), 94% of the first-grade responses supported the belief that silent reading is easier than oral. Conversely, more third-graders believed silent reading to be easier than oral during the first interview (75%) than during the second (67%).

Also note (Table 2) that first graders offered 15 reasons for believing it is easier to read silently, with only 5 given for believing that oral reading is easier--ratio of 3 to 1. The third graders also produced more reasons for believing it is easier to read silently (8) than orally (5)--ratio of 1.6--1.

Table 2 also shows that of those first and third-grade children who thought silent reading was easier, 46% (7) and 63% (5) of their responses (respectively) were "Defensible reasons." Those responses were:

First Grade

"If you make a mistake, you can read the line again and see what it says."

"To learn to read." (Reading process inferred)

"Because your eyes can move faster when you read."

"So you can think about what you're reading."
 "Because you can read more words when you read to yourself."
 "It just seems easier."
 "Just easier."

Third Grade

"Sometimes you don't know every word but you can still go on."
 "Cause you can read faster when you read silently."
 "So when you read silently you can figure out the words yourself."
 "Because if you're reading out loud and get stuck, you're holding up time."
 "Just easier."

Table 2
 Reasons Certain First and Third-Grade Children
 Gave for Believing That It Is Easier to Read
 Silently or Orally (by Type, No., & %)

		Silent		Oral			
		Type	No.	%	Type	No.	%
1st	"So it will be quiet"		1	7	Indefensible reasons	5	100
Gr.	Social reasons		1	7			
	Other indefensible reasons		6	40			
	Defensible reasons		7	46			
	Total		15	100			
3rd	"So it will be quiet"		1	12	Indefensible reasons	5	100
Gr.	Other indefensible reasons		2	25			
	Defensible reasons		5	63			
	Total		8	100			

In addition, Table 2 shows that of the reasons for believing that silent reading is easier than oral, 40% (6) and 25% (2) of such responses (respectively) were Other indefensible reasons. Most of these responses (given below) failed to deal with the question, but rather referred to feelings about reading silently--reasons for not reading orally (first grade) and to socially related concerns (third grade).

First Grade

"Cause it's nice."
 "Cause it's still funner."
 "I like to read to myself."
 "I really don't feel like reading out-loud."
 "Because my mom and pop won't correct my mistakes."
 "Other people make noise and you don't hear too good."

Third Grade

- "If I read out-loud and get mixed up on some words, they'll laugh at me."
- "Cause I 'screw-up' and I don't like to in front of people."

Note once again (Table 2) that all children who believed it is easier to read orally gave indefensible reasons for believing that way. These responses were:

First Grade

- "Because I get mixed-up when I read to myself."
- "Then other people can hear you."
- "People can help you if you have trouble."
- "Because you can talk."
- "Because my mother helps me."

Third Grade

- "When you read by yourself you skip some lines."
- "Because you're saying it out."
- "You can say the words better and it helps you learn to read."
- "Can spit it out."
- "I don't skip as many lines."

Becoming "mixed up" or skipping lines while reading silently might reflect children's lack of experience with silent reading rather than the difficulty of the task.

In Conclusion

The degree and dramatic increase of the percentage of first graders preferring to read silently (83-100%)—as indicated in the first two interviews—becomes even more striking when compared with the third-graders' lesser and decreasing desire to read silently (58-42%). It is equally impressive to note the ratio of the number of reasons first graders gave for preferring silent reading to oral—ratio of 8 to 1. Third graders, on the other hand, gave more reasons for reading orally than silently—ratio of 1.3 to 1. Qualitatively, the particular reasons children in the two grades gave for preferring to read silently did not seem to be significantly different, except for first-graders' preoccupation with "So it will be quiet" (69%), and the embarrassment third graders apparently associated with reading orally - "Social responses" (72%).

However, of the reasons given for preferring to read orally, the third-grade responses did seem to be significantly different. Responses such as "Get help" and "That way the teacher can tell me if I make a mistake or not", seem to suggest that the third graders had been conditioned to view oral reading as "sound-it-out" process which gives teachers an opportunity to correct their "mistakes"—not a communicative meaning-centered activity.

Even though most children in both grades believed that it is easier to read silently than orally, the percentage of first graders holding that point of view (72-94%) surpassed

the percentage of third graders who believed that way (75-67%). There was also a significant difference between the ratios of the number of reasons first and third-graders gave for believing that it is easier to read silently than orally (3 to 1 and 1.6 to 1 respectively). The specific reasons children in each grade gave for believing it is easier to read silently/orally, though, were not significantly different.

What implications do these findings hold for reading instruction? It would appear that if teachers encouraged their students to process print silently, as the first-grade teacher and college students did in this study, children would not only learn to read silently but would prefer reading that way. Perhaps the third-graders' confidence in silent reading regressed because the silent reading stressed by college students did not match the "sound-it-out" view of their "real" teachers.

Doak (1979) stated: Many children have survived what we have done to them in the name of reading instruction because of an intrinsically motivated drive towards achieving literacy and because they have refused to allow their already well-developed language learning strategies to be distorted and destroyed. Those who fail to achieve a functional level of literacy are frequently those who have tried to follow the teachers' instructions precisely. Their "sounding-out" skills simply do not work for them.

More teachers need to understand and appreciate the phenomenal language abilities children possess for silently processing print. Furthermore, it would appear that if learning to read were viewed as a nonconscious language-learning task rather than "sounding-out" letters and words, more children would perceive reading as a silent process.

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