



Reading Aloud: Problems and Benefits

by George Jacobs

Why read aloud?

Reading aloud is a form of communication in which a well-prepared reader reads to an interested audience. Most people do much more silent reading than reading aloud. Nevertheless, there are many occupations and social situations in which people read aloud, e.g., reading a report, the minutes of a meeting, instructions, something from a newspaper. Can you think of the last time you read aloud? Why did you do it?

Teaching is one occupation in which reading aloud can often be useful, and not just with preschool and lower primary students. A key reason for reading aloud to students is to encourage a love for reading, silently or aloud. With specific regard to reading aloud, if teachers read frequently to students, they learn that reading aloud is for the enjoyment and the information of the listeners, not - as many students fear - a test of reading ability. Reading aloud is also one of the best ways of introducing learners to books, stories, and poems that they might otherwise miss.

Teachers are not the only ones who can do reading aloud. When students read aloud, they can improve their fluency and pronunciation. There are many ways to organize students to read aloud. For instance, reading plays affords opportunities for purposeful oral reading.

Oral reading is not the same as silent reading:

- Oral reading is slower;
- Each word is read, and read in order;
- There is no going back;
- Accurate pronunciation is important.

Reading experts' views on reading aloud

Many reading experts caution against having students read aloud. They raise several concerns:

1. It is difficult to concentrate on meaning and pronunciation at the same time;
2. It is possible to pronounce words without understanding their meaning (known as "barking at print");
3. Reading aloud can encourage word-by-word reading, which is inefficient;
4. It is often tedious and unproductive to have students listen to their peers' slow, inaccurate reading;

5. Often, other students are not listening or reading along, but are reading ahead to practise in case they are called on to read;
6. Some students find reading aloud to be very stressful.

The majority view among reading experts seems to be that students should only read aloud after they have read silently and have understood what they are reading. Even Charles Dickens, who was famous for doing oral readings of his stories, would spend five days reading, scoring, and practising his own materials for a reading lasting only forty minutes. An exception to this injunction against oral reading without preparation would be if students' reading level in relation to the particular text being read is such they can read aloud without difficulty or reduced comprehension. Another exception would be unrehearsed individual reading aloud to the teacher when the teacher and a student are working together to diagnose and remedy weaknesses in reading.

Techniques for reading aloud

1. Be prepared to define new words, this does not have to be a formal definition; paraphrases, gestures, and pictures can be used;
2. Give the title and author;
3. Read with feeling and variety;
4. Make sure the listeners can comfortably see the reader;
5. Maintain eye contact;
6. Stop at interesting places;
7. Pay attention to whether your audience is paying attention and understanding.
8. Encourage student participation, e.g., predicting what will happen next, supplying words.

Concluding remark

By way of review, in the Singapore classroom, traditionally teachers read aloud to groups of students. Any discussion that takes place before, during or after the read aloud session is conducted in a teacher-fronted manner, with students directing their input, if any, towards the teacher. However, research and theory in language education and in other areas of education suggest that students can still benefit from peer interaction in addition to the input they receive from teachers and the interaction they have with teachers.