

## Reading Aloud, Reading Along

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I would bet that most teachers of kindergarten, first-, and second-grade children set “reading aloud” as a daily priority. But is it still a priority in third grade? After all, students by this age need to be writing more, and they have times tables to learn. What about fifth grade? What if those boys and girls are just too unfocused today to deserve a story? Reading aloud becomes more of a curiosity than a priority in middle school; rare, indeed, by high school—where is the *time*? And college? College students need to be treated like adults, right? I am sure you see where this is going: don't *all* of these older students need to learn functions of print, the link between sounds and letters, the link between spoken and written language, the nature of reading, structures of stories, types of books, book care, characters, copyright, dialogue, facts and opinions, figures of speech, indirect quotes and direct quotes, inferences, information about authors, literary genres, moods, passages written in the first person and the third person, plots, points of view, predictions, settings, summary passages, symbols, themes and morals, titles and subtitles, phonemic awareness, the alphabetic principle, phonics, structural analysis, sight words, and context clues?

So many children have never been read to. I know—they grew up to be members of my college developmental reading classes. The ones whose questionnaires are checked “NO” next to “When you were little, did anyone in your family often read to you?” are the ones testing at a third-, fourth-, or fifth-grade reading level. Do you teach upper-grade students? Any practice that melds nurturing and learning (such as reading aloud) is surely most effective when begun young, yet reading aloud to students, regardless of their ages, is a powerful teaching tool—one that needs to remain a priority.

In addition to the substantial academic benefits listed above, perhaps correlative value lies in the clement atmosphere of being read to. Reading aloud to students, then, coincides with one of the most-honored principles of reading theory, a safe environment. The concept of safe environment has always been ascribed to Smith's philosophy of overcoming tunnel vision. “Neither comprehension nor learning can take place in an atmosphere of anxiety. [As related to reading] . . . reassurance must be the basis of ‘remedial’ instruction for readers experiencing difficulties at any age” (Smith, 1997, pp. 29-30). If human beings are pleasure-centered (Trelease, 1995; Zemke & Zemke, 1984) the necessity of safety is confirmed, because there is no pleasure in attempting a complex task in an emotionally untrustworthy arena. Learning, in general, and

learning to read, in particular, require courage and perseverance on the part of the learner and safety and support from the environment, if students are going to overcome “the enormous amount of time required to learn to read and [the] feelings of failure and depression during learning plateaus” (Balmuth as cited in Chall, 1987).

A fascinating instance of reading aloud to adults unfolded in the late 1800's in Ybor City, a section of Tampa, Florida. This intellectual oddity is documented in *The Immigrant World of Ybor City*, by Mormino and Pozzetta, and pithily summarized in “Reign of the Reader,” which may have caught your attention in the December 2001/January 2002 issue of *Reading Today*. Imagine rows of wooden tables and chairs laden with tobacco as Cuban immigrant craftsmen (and women) rolled it into the once-popular Cuban cigar, while above the huge workroom sat *el lector*, the reader. His services were requested and paid for by the cigar makers not merely to assuage their cerebral boredom, but to hone and deepen their political and literary scope, thus strengthening their collective political and intellectual solidarity. They knew that knowledge is power. *El lector*, a talented and well-respected audio-artist, read the daily papers, followed by a play or poetry or a novel, the literature “always the most significant act of the day,” according to Mormino. Works of political theory were included in the fare, and a short story or other light work ended the reading day, which lasted several hours. The Ybor City cigar workers were undoubtedly “better informed than most Americans of the time” (<http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/51ybor/51facts2.htm>). With Cuba repeatedly in the news nowadays, I often think of this esoteric example of the power of reading aloud. Yet, clearly, *el lector* received more bounty than did his listeners because he could also see the text.

So what does this mean to us? I am sure it has occurred to you, as you read this article, that all the mental cultivation linked to reading aloud to students is similarly linked to sustained, silent reading (SSR), sometimes called “extensive reading.” I would like to suggest that combining SSR and reading aloud to students equals an especially helpful (albeit not-so-silent) learning tool. In other words, if the students can silently read the same text that is being read to them for a sustained amount of time, at least 15 minutes, their vocabulary, pronunciation, rate, comprehension, and reading confidence all improve. When both the visual and auditory styles interact, think of the learning-modality symbiosis!

Anecdotally, my own trial of “Sustained Not-So-Silent Reading” has been quite remarkable. In my community college classes of mixed-age, under-prepared adult readers, I always use a novel for vocabulary building, personal-response journaling, practicing various levels of thinking, recognizing main ideas and supporting details, for a version of literature circles, and . . . for fun! As I try to select *just the right book* for each class level (I do realize that the important

feature of self-selection is missing from the students' experience when I choose for the whole class, but the results are still very positive), I always make sure there exists a book-on-tape or book-on-CD that I can bring to "read" to the students. I enjoy reading aloud, probably most of us do, but the students need a break from my voice, and, typically, like *le lector*, a skilled actor brings his or her dramatic sensibilities to these recorded books in a way the classroom teacher cannot. Also, using tapes or CDs adds a technological component to the class that does not require a computer—just a "boom box." At some point in the lesson plan, I set aside time to read while listening to the tape or CD, which I preview ahead so that the excerpt corresponds to the set of chapters we are covering and so that it is a really *juicy* section. We get out our books, I introduce the section, reminding the students of the rewards of active reading, play the tape, and read along with them. Truly, every time I do it, I suppose the whole class will just lay their heads down and go to sleep or will spend the whole time looking out the window or finishing their algebra. Doesn't happen! What does happen is that everyone *appears* to be reading with interest, we all seem to hate to stop, and, after class, there are always students who come up to ask me where they can get a copy of that tape. They say that they often feel confused when they try to read the book on their own, but when I play the tape it all becomes clear. They are amazed, and so am I. And for second-language learners? Hearing the just-right pronunciation and inflection as they simultaneously view the print is invaluable.

These recorded books have been made for hundreds of terrific titles, and a good public library should have them, although I prefer to own my own—most bookstores can order any existing title. I have used *Call It Courage*, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (every time I hear Maya Angelou reading her own work, I am absolutely awed), and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. This summer I also previewed *Cold Sassy Tree*. There are many, many children's picture books on tape, as well as chapter books, classics, and young-adult fiction. For my students' reading improvement I always advise *both* reading and listening. But for additional teacher prep I love popping that tape or CD into the car system.

We are all wondering how to work into our academic day everything our students need to know. There is no time for frills. But there is sufficient research to nudge all of us to try Sustained Not-So-Silent Reading, trusting the literature and the human voice to immerse our students in the structure and ideas of text.

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