

Reading Stories Aloud

by Emilio Cortez

Classroom teachers will often read orally to their pupils. This practice occurs in many elementary schools throughout the world, and it is common knowledge that children enjoy listening to stories. Many children look forward to hearing their favorite stories again and again. Thus, the repeated exposure to the same phrases and vocabulary is facilitated and perceived enjoyably.

This article features suggestions for reading stories aloud to children. Several teaching strategies for promoting pupils' attentiveness are also presented.

When selecting storybooks to read to young second-language learners, it is suggested that teachers consider the following:

1. Is the topic of the book suitable to the maturity and age level of my pupils?
2. Is the language of the book too difficult for my students to comprehend?
3. Are the illustrations, if any, large enough for the entire class to see clearly?
4. Does the book include vocabulary and concepts that may serve to reinforce some previously taught items?
5. Do I personally enjoy the story?

Before reading a story to the class, it is important to practice reading the story several times. In this way, fluency and a sense of climax and characterization are better grasped which ultimately contribute to communicating the story more effectively.

Prior to reading a story, it is also suggested that important words, phrases, and concepts be taught so as not to interfere with the natural flow of the oral reading. Upon completion of the story, the new vocabulary can be reviewed and discussed further.

An expressive and well modulated voice is essential for reading aloud in addition

to the judicious use of pauses. Theodore Mueller elaborates on the use of pauses.

Short pauses between word groups give the listener time to interpret the segment and relate it to what has preceded. . . . A long pause is an essential aid until the learner has acquired the habit of detecting the signals which tell him that now is the time to interpret the segment heard. (Mueller 1974:21)

Pupils' involvement in a story can have favorable consequences in terms of increased attentiveness. For example, suppose the word *thunder* appears several times in a story. Several students can be asked to imitate the sound of thunder whenever

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the word occurs during the oral reading. An important advantage of this technique is that students must listen intently to the entire story as they await their cue.

Another way to help promote pupils' attentiveness involves asking them one or two questions about the story before it's actually read. Since the pupils' answers are contingent upon listening carefully to the story, they are compelled to listen purposefully.

Frequent eye contact between the reader and the audience is important for imparting

a story effectively. Alun W. Rees suggests the following:

The reader glances at the words briefly, as he would on a flashcard, holds them in the mind . . . , and then, ignoring the printed page, speaks to his audience. . . . This procedure establishes rapport and actual speaking instead of mere vocalising of disjointed words and syllables. (Rees 1980:121)

In a report on a study, Linda Leonard Lamme found that effective storytellers made it easy for their audiences to see and to hear them.

A surprising number of teachers read in such a way that the book was not clearly visible . . . the children along the sides were straining to see the illustrations. Teachers who did not provide adequately for all children to see and to hear scored lower overall as oral readers. (Lamme 1976:887)

Thus far the following suggestions have been presented:

1. When selecting a story to read aloud, choose a storybook that you personally enjoy in addition to considering its degree of difficulty, the size and clarity of its illustrations, and its general appeal to students.
2. Avoid selecting stories that include stereotypes and cultural misrepresentations.
3. Be aware of the seating arrangements of your students; make it easy for them to see and to hear you as you read the story.
4. Be expressive and use pauses appropriately so as to improve students' comprehension.
5. Before reading a story, introduce and explain new vocabulary that is crucial for understanding the story.
6. Increase students' involvement in a story by having them imitate sounds such as rain, thunder, or wind that may be included in the story.
7. Promote curiosity in the story by asking pupils questions about the story before you actually read it.

(Such questions should be answered by the students upon completion of the story.)

8. Make frequent eye contact with your students as you read orally.
9. Try to avoid distracting mannerisms that may detract from your oral reading.
10. If possible, occasionally have your colleagues read aloud to your class so as to provide your pupils with a variety of oral models.

In closing, consider Sandra McCormick's comments that underscore the importance of reading to children.

Research evidence indicates that reading aloud to children significantly improves their vocabulary knowledge and their reading comprehension. It also demonstrates that hearing literature read can affect reading interest and the quality of a child's language development. (McCormick 1977:139)

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