

## **14 Exploring the use of silent and oral reading with young learners**

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### **1 INTRODUCTION**

Reading is a basic skill that learners of English need to acquire. Our goal as language teachers is not only to enable readers to read for the purposes of the work they do in the classroom, but to help them develop reading skills they will be able to use in life more generally. Much has been written about the range of strategies teachers can use to achieve these goals. This study examines two of these in particular – silent reading and oral reading.

### **2 BACKGROUND**

The teaching of first language and foreign language reading in Oman has, as in many countries round the world, traditionally relied heavily on oral reading – defined as reading aloud and sometimes using a finger to track words (Anderson et al. 1995). This is changing with the introduction of the new Basic Education curriculum, where greater emphasis is being placed on silent reading. The motivation for this study came from my interest in learning more about how these different reading strategies affected my learners. My experience had suggested that learners seem to comprehend better when oral reading is used.

### **3 SILENT & ORAL READING**

There is a vast literature on the teaching of reading in a foreign language (e.g. Aebersold & Field 1997; Urquhart & Weir 1999; Wallace 1992; Nuttall 1996). Here I focus specifically on the use of silent and oral reading.

#### **3.1 Silent Reading**

Several benefits of silent reading have been highlighted. Hopkins (1997), for example, argues that silent reading offers learners opportunities to read texts at their own speed. In addition, silent reading can also build learners' confidence in their abilities to work through and understand a text independently. In this sense, silent reading is seen as a strategy that prepares learners for life-long reading

A report by the National Institute of Child Health & Human Development (NICHD 2000), however, concluded that it was not clear from the evidence available whether silent reading helped to improve reading fluency. Although hundreds of studies have shown that the best readers read silently to themselves more frequently than do poor readers, the report

concludes that “these studies cannot distinguish whether independent silent reading improves reading skills or that good readers simply prefer to read silently to themselves more than do poor readers”. The report recommended that if silent reading is used as a classroom technique, intended to develop reading skills and fluency, it should be done in combination with other types of reading instruction, such as guided oral reading.

### **3.2 Oral Reading**

Nuttall (1996) argues that, when reading aloud, learners may focus their attention on pronouncing the words correctly but not on the meaning of the text. She also argues that it is not a practical classroom strategy because only one learner can read at a time. A more positive view of oral reading comes from the review of experimental studies conducted the National Institute of Child Health & Human Development (NICHD 2000). This found support for the use of oral reading, particularly what they described as guided oral reading:

“The panel also concluded that guided oral reading is important for developing reading fluency-the ability to read with efficiency and ease. In guided oral reading, students read out loud, to either a parent, teacher or other student, who corrects their mistakes and provides them with other feedback. Specifically, guided oral reading helped students across a wide range of grade levels to learn to recognize new words, helped them to read accurately and easily, and helped them to comprehend what they read”.

Several other benefits of oral reading have been identified. For example, Guignon (2001) points out that oral reading provides learners with a reading role model. It also builds confidence. Also, through listening to learners’ oral reading, a teacher can gain valuable insights into their reading abilities. As Cameron (2001: 142) says:

“It is very important that children regularly read aloud individually to their teacher, since it is only by listening carefully to how children are making sense of written words that we can understand their progress in learning”.

## **4 METHOD**

The aim of this study was to compare learners’ reading comprehension when oral and silent reading were used. The participants in this study were in Basic Education Grade 5 and were 10-11 years of age. Data were collected through reading tests administered to learners after they had read a text silently or orally. I also interviewed learners to find out how they felt about reading silently and aloud.

### **4.1 Reading Tests**

Ten girls were selected with similar levels of reading ability (as shown on tests during the year). The learners were divided into two groups of five. I selected two reading texts to use in the study which I judged to be of the same

level as those which learners meet in their course book. Text 1 was an e-mail while text 2 was a story. The sequence of texts and reading strategies was as follows:

- Group A read Text 1 orally
- Group B read Text 1 silently
- Group A read Text 2 silently
- Group B read Text 2 orally

For oral reading, the group did some pre-reading work (e.g. discussing the pictures) then the text was read aloud by the teacher. Each learner then read out one paragraph. For silent reading, the group also did some pre-reading work, then learners read the text silently. For both oral and silent reading, learners received a test containing four types of question to respond to: scanning, comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar. I chose these types of questions because my learners were familiar with these from the work in their course book. There was one test for Text 1 and another for Text 2 (see Appendix 1 for Text 1 and the questions on it).

## **4.2 Interviews**

In order to gain some insight into how the learners felt about silent and oral reading, I also interviewed them briefly. These are the questions I asked:

1. Which reading do you prefer - aloud or silent, and why'?
2. What do you read at home in English and Arabic?
3. How do you read at home in English and Arabic- aloud or silently?

The interviews took place straight after the reading tests.

## **5 FINDINGS**

### **5.1 Reading Tests**

Each set of questions – scanning, comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar – is discussed in turn here. In the comprehension questions, the maximum mark was 10, in the other three tests it was five. The maximum score on each test was therefore 25. Overall, silent readers' average score was 12.9 while the average for oral readers was 18.4.

#### **5.1.1 Scanning Questions**

All learners scored maximum marks on the scanning questions, no matter which texts they had read and whether they had read orally or silently.

#### **5.1.2 Comprehension Questions**

Figure 1 summarises the learners' scores on the ten comprehension questions. Learners 1-5 were in Group A (Text 1 orally and Text 2 silently). learners 6-10 were in Group B (Text 1 silently and Text 2 orally).

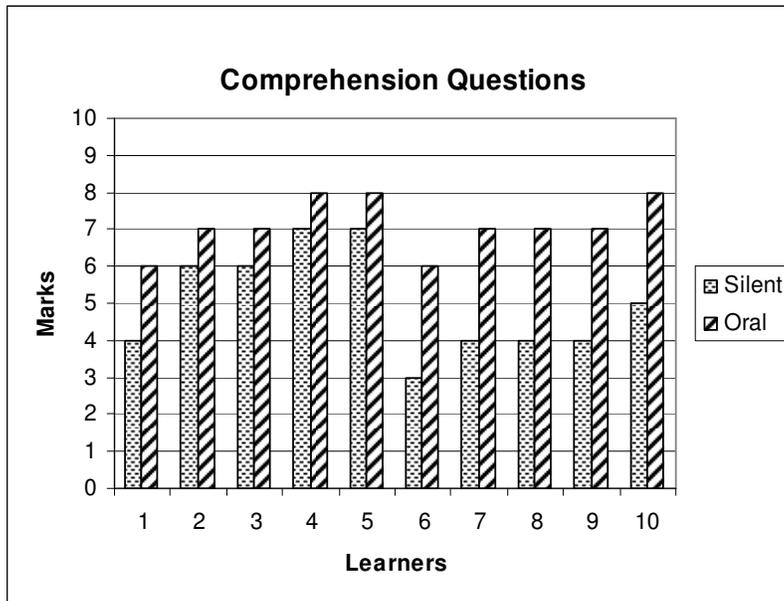


Figure 1: Scores on comprehension questions

Overall, learners who read orally scored an average of 7.1, compared to 5 for learners who read silently. Oral reading was thus also associated with higher scores on the comprehension questions.

### 5.1.3 Vocabulary Questions

Figure 2 shows the scores for the vocabulary questions. Learners who read orally scored an average of 3.1 compared to 1.2 for learners who read silently. Oral reading was thus again associated with higher scores.

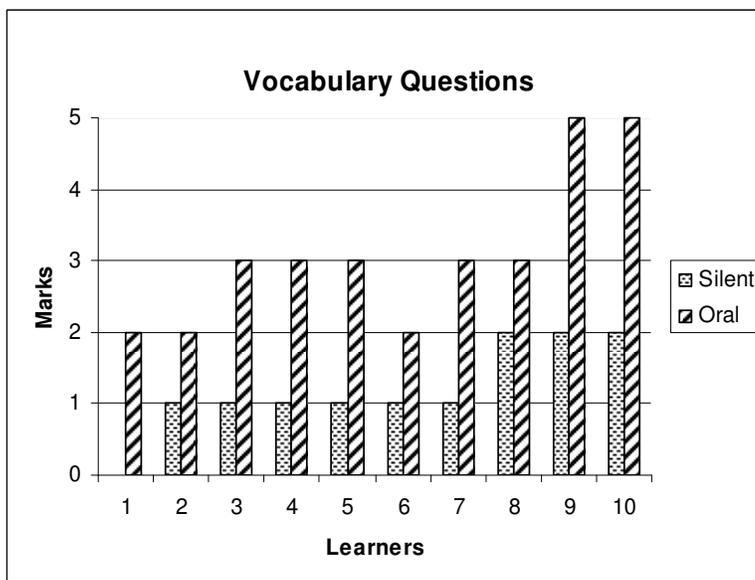


Figure 2: Scores on vocabulary questions

### 5.1.4 Grammar Questions

Figure 3 shows the scores for the grammar questions. Learners who read orally scored an average of 3.2 compared to 1.7 for learners who read silently. On the separate texts, silent readers averaged 2.2 on the e-mail text and 1.2 on the story text. For the oral readers, the corresponding scores were 4 and 2.4. Grammar scores were thus higher for oral readers.

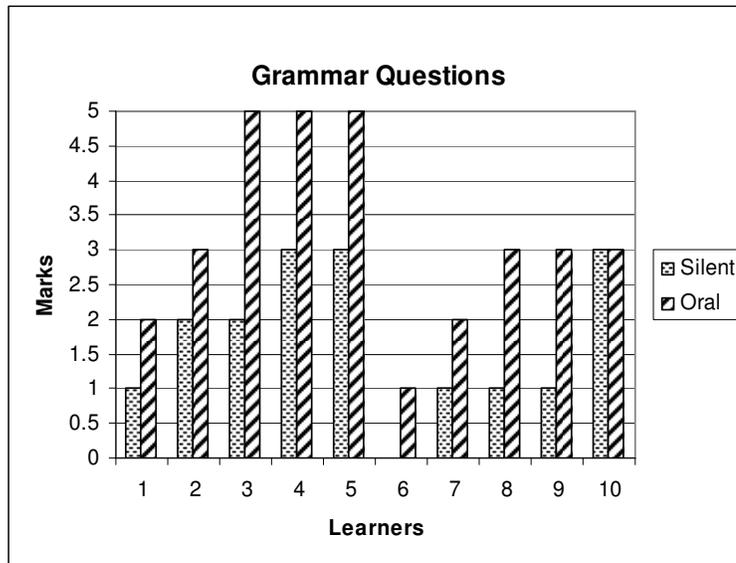


Figure 3: Scores on grammar questions

## 5.2 Interviews

The first question I asked learners was 'which reading do you prefer - aloud or silent, and why'? Seven out of ten learners said they preferred oral reading. They explained that it gave them more support to understand the text. They said that during oral reading they understood the text better because it forced them to pay attention. During silent reading, in contrast, their minds wandered. A related point was that oral reading forced them to read whereas in silent reading they could skip parts of the text. The learners who preferred silent reading said that it is less stressful because they can take their time to work things out, they do not have to read every single word, and they are not worried about making mistakes in front of their peers. These learners also felt that silent reading allows them to read at their own pace. The second question was 'what do you read at home in English and Arabic?' Answers here were brief: learners read school books, prophets' stories and comics in Arabic but only stories in English. The final question was 'how do you read at home in English and Arabic- aloud or silently?'. Seven learners said they read aloud in Arabic and English, two of them read silently in both Arabic and English (unless they wanted to share their reading with their younger brothers and sisters), and one of them read silently in Arabic and

aloud in English. Overall, these brief interviews suggested that learners have positive views of oral reading.

## **6 DISCUSSION**

The results of this study suggest that, for the learners studied here and the texts and tests I used, there was an association between oral reading and higher levels of comprehension. This was true overall as well in terms of learners' performance on the comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar questions. There was no difference between oral and silent readers on the scanning questions.

Oral readers scored better results on the test irrespective of the group they were in, the text or the test. It is interesting to consider, therefore, what may be behind these results. Firstly, from the interviews it would seem that oral reading is a practice these learners are more familiar with than silent reading. This familiarity may have allowed them to cope better with reading aloud and to feel more confident in responding to the test questions. At the same time, learners may have felt less secure when they were asked to read silently and to answer the questions without the kind of support they are used to. Second, it is clear the oral reading gives learners certain types of support which they do not get through reading silently. For example, when the teacher reads the text out aloud, they can use their voice to highlight important points. If learners notice these they may find it easier to answer comprehension questions. The teacher's modelling of how to read the text also gives learners an overall understanding of it before they are asked to read themselves. And by the time they came to answer the questions, oral readers had heard the text twice – once by the teacher and once by the learners. Silent readers did not have this support.

### **6.1 Limitations**

This study involved a small group of learners in a particular context, working with two texts and with a limited range of test items. I am not suggesting therefore that the better performance of oral readers found here is true more generally. There are also aspects of reading (e.g. fluency) which I did not study here and one of the arguments against oral reading is of course that by forcing learners to read every word it makes the reading process slower than it should be. A final limitation to highlight here was that the interviews with the learners were not as productive as I had hoped. Interviewing children presents certain challenges (e.g. encouraging them to relax and talk freely) which researchers need to be mindful of.

## **7 CONCLUSION**

Our new English language curriculum emphasises the use of silent reading. This is in line with much current thinking in our field. However, although I am not suggesting that oral reading be the only strategy that

teachers use, my experience and the findings of this study indicate that reading aloud can play a beneficial role in helping learners to read. And, if we return to the findings of the National Institute of Child Health and Development (2000) study referred to earlier, it also suggests that the most effective strategy for teaching reading is to use a combination of approaches amongst which oral reading is an important one.

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## Appendix A

### Reading Text 1

Beth is an Italian student of English. Read her e-mail to Sally and answer the questions.

To: sally@igc.com  
From: beth@igc.com  
Subject: Visiting London

Dear Sally

How are you? I'm fine. I'm in London of the International School of English. I'm in class 3 with eight other students. They are from different countries- Spain, France, Japan, Argentina, America, and Canada. Our teacher's name is Mr. White. He is very nice. He is funny and he is very good.

I live with an English family, the Browns. Mr. and Mrs. Brown have three children. Tom is fourteen, Lynn is twelve and Roberto is seven They are very friendly.

London is very big and very interesting. The weather is good- cold and sunny- and the parks are beautiful. Hyde park and green park are both in the centre.

About meals in Britain, people have for breakfast cereal with milk and sugar or toast with jam or honey. Their traditional breakfast drink is tea with cold milk. For many people lunch is a quick meal such as a sandwich, a drink, some fruit or some crisps. Dinner meal is the main meal. They usually have it early, between 6.00 and 8.00 o'clock. English food is OK, but the coffee is horrible.

Write to me soon,  
Beth

### Scanning

1. Match the pictures to the paragraphs (each paragraph was numbered and there were four pictures, not shown here).
2. Who is the e-mail from?
3. Who is the e-mail to?
4. What is the subject of the e-mail?

### Comprehension

Are these sentences true (T) or false (F)?

1. Beth is Italian
2. She's in Tokyo.
3. She's happy in London
4. She's on holiday
5. It's a very big class.
6. The students in her class are all from Britain.
7. She doesn't like her teacher.
8. Mr. and Mrs. Brown have two sons and a daughter.
9. The food in London is horrible.
10. She likes the British coffee.

### Vocabulary

Match these words with the meaning from the box.

- a) food that is eaten at a certain time
- b) potatoes that are fried in oil, dried, and sold.
- c) most important or big.
- d) persons who are studying at a college or a university
- e) thin piece of bread.

- 1. **students** in line 2.
- 2. **meals** in line 12.
- 3. **toast** in line 13.
- 4. **crisps** in line 15.
- 5. **main** in line 16

### Grammar

Complete the sentences with a word from the box.

is    are    both    but    or    and

- 1. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ Mrs. Smith have three children.
- 2. London \_\_\_\_\_ a big city.
- 3. I like British tea \_\_\_\_\_ I don't like British coffee.
- 4. Hyde Park and Green Park are \_\_\_\_\_ in the centre.
- 5. The parks \_\_\_\_\_ beautiful.