

SILENT VERSUS ORAL READING WITH ONE HUNDRED SIXTH-GRADE CHILDREN.

CYRUS D. MEAD,
University of Cincinnati.

It is not at all uncommon to enter a schoolroom and hear what the "layman" would call excellent reading on the part of the pupils. The author lately visited a class in English for foreign children and heard them glibly pronounce the words of a Greek myth. When asked to tell in their own words what the paragraph meant to them, not a single one had an idea, yet the teacher had accepted their efforts as "good reading."

What is the purpose of reading? Is it to pronounce and express orally the printed word? This is only the smaller part. The getting of the thought which the writer wishes to express is the main purpose for our reading. Do we as adults attack our evening paper, magazine or story-book by the oral method? Probably 99 per cent. of our reading in after life is done silently. Why do so many of our teachers insist on spending this same per cent. of time on oral reading with their classes? They may claim it is to train the pupil in expression, enunciation, and the like. Let this be done, then, by oral composition. A mechanical pronouncing of every word on the printed page may form in the child habits of articulation that will carry over into his later silent reading and cause him to become a slow reader. The author feels this from his own experience.

If we admit that thought-getting is the primary purpose of reading in adult life, and we must so admit, by which method, oral or silent, can we glean the greatest number of points? If in the same time limit we read more lines silently than orally, we would probably remember more points; but do we remember a greater percentage of possible points when material is read silently than when it is read orally? In a test

with 23 fourth-grade children Professor Pintner's findings in the June, 1913, JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY would point to the affirmative side. In the same spirit of inquiry the author had several members of his seminar¹ test five different groups of sixth-grade children in oral versus silent reading.

The material consisted of stories from "Alice in Wonderland" in a 32-page pamphlet form. The lines were numbered, and agreement was made as to the number of points given each line or paragraph. Each teacher had a similarly marked key book. Six tests of two minutes each were given to the children of five different sixth grades by each method, silent and oral. In the silent tests the children were taken each time as a group. They were each supplied with a copy of the stories. No pupil had recently read any part of the stories, and as far as could be ascertained, not one was familiar enough with any of them to cause his elimination from the tests. The following directions were given:

"1. Open your book at page—— and turn it face down on your desk. At the signal 'Get ready' (which was given five seconds before the minute), take hold of the booklet ready to turn, but do not turn until I tell you.

"2. When I say 'Begin reading,' you are to turn and read silently, beginning at the place marked. (To avoid confusion, the teacher was to hold the booklet up before the class a moment to show them where the mark was placed.)

"3. When I say 'Stop,' place your finger on the last word read and quickly draw a circle around this last word, and then close the book immediately. (The time limit was two minutes.)

"4. You are then to write all you can remember of what you have read. When you are sure you have finished, you are to raise your hand and your paper will be collected." (Children were given what time they needed.)

The books were collected each time and entry made as to the number of lines covered by each pupil. At the beginning of the next test the teacher read to the class the story between

¹The following teachers of the Cincinnati schools: Miss Isabel Sears, Miss Lottie Wiedemer, Mr. Elmer Haehnle, Mr. Charles Rounds and Mr. E. C. VanWinkle.

the points of the slowest and most rapid reader of the previous test. This latter place had been marked by the teacher in each booklet, and it furnished the place to begin on the following test. Enough was read by the teacher to make the beginning each time at a new paragraph. The papers of each pupil were scored as to number of points reproduced. In the six oral tests the pupils were heard separately, the number of lines being noted by the teacher. The children wrote immediately, however, in an adjoining room what they remembered.

TABLE I.

		Silent.				Oral.							
		Average age, years.	Average No. lines read.	Average No. points reproduced.	Per cent. of points reproduced of points read.	Average No. lines read.	Average No points reproduced.	Per cent. of points reproduced of points read.	Per cent. difference oral as base.				
No.									Total.		Average.		
Class I.	20	13.0	39.6	10.5	25.22	33.9	9.2	25.12	+	2.0	+	.10	
M. V.9	9.7	2.7	6.6	4.8	2.4	6.2					
Class II.	24	13.0	47.7	25.2	48.6	39.6	20.7	47.3	+	31.0	+	1.30	
M. V.6	12.1	9.3	11.9	5.6	6.3	13.4					
Class III.	20	11.9	51.6	17.2	29.9	39.1	11.6	27.3	+	54.1	+	2.70	
M. V.6	8.7	4.4	7.5	5.9	3.5	6.8					
Class IV.	24	12.4	30.7	16.3	48.2	25.4	10.4	39.8	+	214.3	+	8.93	
M. V.7	6.7	2.8	9.2	5.9	2.4	8.7					
Class V.	24	12.2	27.4	11.2	41.6	30.2	8.4	25.1	+	401.0	+	16.70	
M. V.8	9.6	2.3	10.7	5.6	1.9	4.5					

Table I gives the averages by classes, with the mean variation in each instance. The six attempts of each pupil by each of the two methods were averaged. The class average is derived from these. The per cent. of difference between the two methods, using the oral as a base, shows in the last two columns. The plus sign means the silent method gave the better results. The record of Class II, for example, could be read as follows: There were 24 pupils with an average age of 13.0 years, mean variation .6 year. This class, by the silent method, read an average of 47.7 lines. Of all the points, the class made an average reproduction of 25.2 points. This was 48.6 per cent. of the total possible points. The record for the oral attempts is read in the same manner.

With one exception, Class V, each class read a greater number of lines silently than orally. Without exception, each class reproduced a greater percentage of possible points by the silent method of reading than by the oral method. This varied from .1 per cent. for each pupil of Class I to 16.7 per cent. for each pupil of Class V. Of 112 pupils of the sixth grade, 80 did better silently than orally, while 2 did equally as well by either method. From the results with these five classes we are more convinced than ever that our schools devote altogether too much time to oral reading and too little to silent. Not only does the pupil as a rule show us he can gather more thoughts by the silent method than by the oral, but by too much oral work we are fixing bad habits of articulation which will prove a hindrance in after life when it comes to silent reading. Teach the child the method he is to employ in adult life, and we conform to the very best theory (the neurone theory of the brain and its separate connections) in educational psychology today.

Qualifying Factors in the Test.

In favor of oral:

The silent tests were given first. This might have the result that—

(a) Practice effect would show more in the oral attempts which came last.

(b) Maturity entered; from two to four weeks later. The customary method of every-day school reading was oral.

In favor of silent:

There was a more disturbing element or unnatural setting in the oral than in the silent series. The pupils were taken singly into the hall or dressing-room.

The novelty was less in the oral series.