

# Assessing children's silent reading

Valerie Yule, Department of Psychology, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen AB9 2LJB'

## Summary

Less is known about how children read connected text in silent reading, and the range of reading strategies used in an ordinary primary school classroom, than about the reading of single words, oral reading and reading by skilled adults. This paper describes and evaluates a method of testing children's silent reading in which they are their own judges.

In this experiment a technique is tested that could complement the existing methods of assessing children's silent reading with comprehension questions, cloze procedures and observation of eye movements. Children's self-scoring of all the words which they believed they could read silently is compared with their teacher's scoring of how they read the same texts aloud.

In the first classroom experiment subjects were 26 primary school children aged seven to 8.5 years in a mixed-ability class. Their reading ages' four months previously ranged from 0-10.9 years on the Holborn graded sentences test and from 5.9 to 9.3 years on the Schotiell word test, seven months previously.

Materials were two texts of 104 and 110 words, sufficiently difficult to result in a spread of scores because few if any subjects could score perfectly. One was a fairy story with difficult spelling around a nine-year reading level but with a strong story line (Appendix 1), and the other was a slightly modified version of a Wordsworth sonnet, renamed 'Very early in the morning on a bridge in London', with shorter words and more 'predictable' spelling, but more difficult since vocabulary, syntax and word usage were less familiar (Appendix 2). The subjects were matched on the Holborn reading test scores, and one group read the story and one group read the poem, these conditions being part of a further experiment not reported here.

In class all the children read silently through either the story or the poem, marking with a slash every word in it that they considered that they *could* read. Later, during other class activities, each child read aloud from an unmarked copy of the same text that had been read silently, while the teacher underscored on their original marked copy all words that were read aloud correctly, and noted the time taken. The children were told that the teacher would not give any clues for any words, so that if a word was difficult they should 'just have a shot at it and then go straight on'. After the reading, open-ended questions were asked to find out what the children had understood, and they were shown their marked copies: 'See how much you could read, even though it was a very difficult piece.'

Results (Table 1) show the close match between children's self-scoring of their silent reading

with the teacher's scoring of their oral reading. There was not a word-for-word correspondence of accuracy in reading, however. Table 2 shows that children could read some words aloud that they had missed in silent reading, and they had scored some words that they could not read aloud correctly. The group was too small for any generalizations to be made about specific words that were easier one way or the other since all the more difficult words were failed by some children orally, and by others silently.

Four almost discrete categories of readers could be discriminated from analysis of scores.

1. 'Good readers' were a third faster than average readers. Few words baffled them completely, and they tended to score better silently than aloud, where pronunciation of words in their reading vocabulary sometimes caused difficulty. They could not use all their greater reading vocabulary in spoken language.

2. 'Average' readers read well over three-fifths of both story and poem, silently and aloud. There was less discrepancy in words they could comprehend in silent reading but not pronounce than for the good readers.

3. Four 'poor' readers read very slowly, averaging over 2 seconds a word. They could decode less than two-thirds of either story or poem, and were usually completely baffled by words they did not already know -- either not attempting them at all or guessing wrongly from a few clues. However, the preliminary silent reading appeared to assist the accuracy of their later reading aloud.

4. Two children who were 'non-starters' on the Holborn tests recognized only a few sight words, and showed no decoding ability at all. They had difficulties in attention and were more interested in the procedures, such as the stopwatch, than in actually trying to read. They were not included in the analysis.

The children who were 'good' and 'average' readers and who could decode more words and read them more accurately had quite a good understanding of the fairy story, despite its difficult vocabulary. They found the complete message and much of the detail of the poem beyond them: 'It's about morning freshness'; 'It's about looking down on a nice clean place'. But they liked the poem: 'It sounded lovely.'

The technique has been replicated with a slightly older class, but almost half of these had perfect scores. Rather than slashing each word, it was found to be less effortful for them to run a wavy line through the words. However, again their own estimate of silent reading was justified by the teacher's check of oral reading; again there was the slight mismatch, as children could comprehend in silent reading words they could not pronounce, or could work out the second time what they could not decode on first reading.

## **Discussion**

### *Measuring silent reading*

As shown in the Schools Council report *Extending Beginning Reading* (Southgate, Arnold and Johnson, 1981), most reading progress occurs in classes in which least time is spent listening to oral reading and most on uninterrupted private reading - but some check on individual progress is required to ensure that none are struggling or wasting their time. One method can be to ask children to tell what they have been reading about, or to ask them to make their own comments on what they are reading. This can be an excellent way of ensuring that they are reading for meaning, as long as the teacher knows all the texts well and no child feels traumatized by inadequacy in

speech or expressive skills.

As a method of assessing actual decoding skills in silent reading there are many advantages in the technique of asking the children themselves to mark the words they can read in disposable test passages that are too difficult for them, as long as it is a stratagem used sufficiently rarely to remain a novel and interesting treat and not become a boring chore.

First, the children in the trial tasks enjoyed the experiment. They were being respected as independent assessors of their own work. When they were marking what they *could* read rather than what they could not, then even for a weak pupil the result looked impressive, since they used dark blue pencils, which soon made a page appear covered with marks of what they were able to

Table 1: Children's self-scored silent reading and teacher-scored oral reading (Mean percentage of text marked as read and mean oral reading rate in words per minute)

		Readers of story (n=12)		Readers of Poem (n=12)	
		Silent %	Oral %	Silent %	Oral %
Good readers	N 6	96.0	95.8 60.0 wpm	97.2	95.7 61.8 wpm
Average readers	N 4	84.5	84.8 41.3 wpm	90.5	87.0 44.4 wpm
Poor readers	N 2	63.0	65.0 26.6 wpm	58.5	62.5 25.0 wpm
Mean	N 12	86.7	86.8 49.0 wpm	88.5	87.2 49.9 wpm

Note: Two pupils who could barely read at all are not included

do - the reverse of when a page is marked heavily with mistakes. It showed them how little really still remained for them to achieve. Self-scoring can provide information on silent reading that cannot be obtained in other ways. It clarifies the degree to which children may be answering comprehension questions by guessing or by acquiring dangerous habits of relying on single words as clues rather than using total context. It can be used with much more interesting reading content than it is possible to test with 'cloze'. 'Cloze' procedures would not be much use for Wordsworth's sonnet, for example, and much really good reading for children is not suitable. The more platitudinous or trite a text, the more suitable it is for use in a 'cloze' test.

Table 2: Mean number of words that children could not read, in self-report of silent reading and in oral reading

Words	Good readers N12	Average readers N8	Poor readers N4
Read silently but not orally	1.7	4.6	3.0
Read orally but not silently	0.8	3.0	6.0
Not read in either mode	2.6	9.5	33.2

The unusual assessment, with its free hand for self-testing and the content at or above the children's mental age rather than (as usual) commensurate with their usually younger resulted in some surprises about reading age, their real reading capacity. Their class reading books were limited to their estimated 'reading ages'. But given the more intellectually stimulating reading and the interesting task, one child read the story with 90 per cent accuracy and the poem 93 per cent correctly, yet he had scored at only 6.6 years on the Schonell word test seven months before and at 7.90 years on the Holborn test four months before. Six of the eight children in the 'average' group had scored at under 6.10 years in the Schonell test and 7.3 in the sentences test, and the teacher had no idea that they could now function above an eight-year level when they were really motivated, and had silent practice before oral reading.

Some children like to use this self-scoring technique in reverse. When weaker pupils read through a text before they read it aloud to a teacher, they can be helped in confidence and meaningful reading if sometimes they can use a clear acetate sheet over their pages during the silent reading. They can then mark on the acetate sheet with felt pens all words for which they need help because they think they *cannot* read them. Then the teacher or other reader can give them those words *before they* begin the oral task, showing them the strategy used to work them out. This 'second time around' also has the advantage of developing habits of faster reading fluency since by secondary school speed of reading is often a habit rather than dictated by real potential. Good readers develop this fluency through private re-reading of favourite books, but other children never reach the stage of pleasure in re-reading enjoyably because their experience of reading has always been stumbling, and tripped by their own errors. For weaker pupils silent reading plus later assistance with difficult words *before* reading again has an advantage over assistance with those words *during* an oral reading session, and so disrupting the sense of the text and often increasing the child's discomfort and feelings of public incompetence. Focusing on accuracy of word recognition in this situation can also help to prevent one of the worst problems of weaker secondary school pupils and adult readers - their continued habit of guessing from too few clues - and guessing wrong. However, marking unknown words is a good idea only when a few words will be unfamiliar. For really weak children it can be better for morale if they mark the words that they consider that they *can* read, so that they can feel pleased with the effect of so many marks on the page, and want to be able to make more. Most of the simple words they know will recur again and again, so that with a 100-word reading vocabulary up to half of any text can be marked as readable. Confidence and morale can be so boosted by the appearance of the marked text that children feel encouraged to then use those words to help work out the rest in context. (The underlined words in this last sentence give some idea of the effect. It also highlights the importance of the function words in giving meaning which poor readers, even adults, often overlook, with consequent misreading.)

The range of children's ability within one class, from almost illiterate to a ten-year-level, shows

once more what demands must be made upon teachers. Often the differences between learners increase rather than decrease, and insistence on progressing stepwise through reading levels' can be a factor in this. However, this silent reading experiment with 'too difficult' material showed what leaps could be made by some children given the chance. It suggests that more opportunities could be given for rapid advance through children's silent or paired reading in the classroom, as follows.

*'Multi-level reading books* which had two or three reading levels of the same story on the same stage, set out in distinctive blocks. Children could choose which level they read, without anyone making invidious comparisons. Weaker readers might start with the lowest level but also try the more difficult for themselves, while others starting on a harder level could revert to the easier to assist themselves when they needed to. Everyone in the class could be reading the same book.

*'Acceleration books*' could provide a permanently available challenge by going from basic elementary text to secondary level within the one book.

*'Turnabout books*' could be used for paired alternate reading, in which simple sentences alternate with complex ones read by a more skilled child or adult, to make it possible to read content more appropriate to poor readers' mental age, not just limited by their reading level'. This is far more encouraging for bright but weak readers than the usual remedial reader, and gives more opportunity for them to make rapid progress as they look on the more difficult sentences being read by their co-reader. *'Puddle Lane'* Ladybird books by Sheila McCullagh dip a toe into this technique, as does a series of Penguin playlets, but I am suggesting a consecutive and complex story-line or factual account. The children's appreciation of the Wordsworth poem in this experiment shows how children's reading diet can contain 'advance organizers' for 'the best'. They need not be limited to exciting, fantastic, trivial, horrifying or supposedly child-centred stories because six- to eight-year-olds have the potential to develop tastes while young for what is peaceful, beautiful and thought provoking. Much that can be of permanent value to them could be made more accessible to them.

However, there is the problem here that until teachers and parents indicate a demand for such books, then publishers will not risk publishing them - and yet the demand cannot be seen until the books are available to try out.

### Conclusions

When children mark on acetate over-sheets any words that they cannot read in their technique is used with more difficult text, and children mark the words they can read, as an occasional novel test, teachers can have a reliable indication of the extent of children's capacity in silent reading, and where limitations may lie.

There are three side-aspects to this technique: the role of the children as their own assessors, the importance for children's developing reading strategies of accuracy in reading words in context and not just guessing; and the value of using worthwhile content even in a reading text. Even a test is a multi-faceted learning experience. They can obtain help for reading the words and teachers can obtain an idea of children's reading progress.

### References

SOUTHGATE, V., ARNOLD, H. and JOHNSON, S. (1981). *Extending Beginning Reading*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.

### **Appendix 1. A fairy story with difficult spelling**

Once upon a time the beautiful daughter of a great magician wanted more pearls to put among her treasures. 'Look through the centre of the moon when it is blue,' said her mother, in answer to her question. 'You might find your heart's desire.' The princess laughed because she doubted these words. Instead, she used her imagination and moved into the photography business, and took pictures of the moon in colour. 'I observe most certainly that it **is** almost wholly white,' she thought. She also found that she could make enough money in eight months to buy herself two lovely, huge new jewels too.

### **Appendix 2 A modified version of a Wordsworth sonnet, with easier spelling but more difficult to understand**

Earth has not anything to show more fair:  
He would be dull of soul who could pass by  
A sight so touching in its majesty:  
This City now does like a garment wear  
The beauty of the morning: silent, bare,  
Ships, towers, domes, theatres and temples lie  
Open unto the fields, and to the sky,  
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.

Never did sun more beautifully steep  
In his first splendour valley, rock or hill;  
I never saw or felt a calm so deep!

The river glides on at its own sweet will:  
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;  
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

### **Acknowledgement**

I am indebted to Mrs May Weston, who tested the children in her class in two consecutive years and made valuable comments about their experience and their responses.

**EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH is the termly journal of the NFER**