



Do the Voices: Reading Aloud in the Primary Classroom

Reading aloud in the classroom can be a lively and enjoyable activity for the teacher and the pupils, says **Martin Galway**.

'How do I know you'll keep your word?' asked Coraline.

'I swear it,' said the other mother. 'I swear it on my own mother's grave.'

'Does she have a grave?' asked Coraline.

'Oh yes,' said the other mother. 'I put her in there myself. And when I found her trying to crawl out, I put her back.'

(Coraline by Neil Gaiman)

Cue a (loud) gasp from one of the girls in my class when I got to this part of our then current read aloud. This was followed by a moment of silence and then a collective collapse into giggles: a shared reading experience of the best kind. We were on the field enjoying some outdoor summer reading; not because it was something recommended to me when I was training to teach and not because it was a strand of our school's drive to raise the profile of reading for pleasure. It was because I could still remember the times when Mrs Jessop – a masterful storyteller and my 3rd year Junior teacher – picked up *THE BOOK* and eyed the door. Those sessions with Mrs Jessop positioned reading exactly where it belongs – as pleasurable, thrilling, scary, funny and compulsive. Also,

as an act that's liberating, unifying and something that extends far beyond the boundaries of the classroom, both physically and figuratively. Just as we as a class saw divisions and cliques dissolve into shared and carefully-manipulated emotions, here was my very own class shocked in the one moment and laughing in the next. Connections were being formed not just with the text and our individual lives, as is the aim in terms of comprehension, but with each other. One of the most satisfying rewards of a tough profession is the journey that you get to share with the children in your class and reading aloud can take hold as a life-long memory. Whether it's a book at bedtime, a gripping story shared in class or a poem that reframed your thinking or turned your head towards literature, everyone deserves to have these milestones set out for them along the way.

At the very least, I owe Neil Gaiman a word of thanks for somehow engineering that exchange: this special memory of a very special class. I'd also like to thank him for his continued advocacy of reading. Here he is on reading aloud to children in a lecture to The Reading Agency back in 2013:



'We have an obligation to read aloud to our children. To read them things they enjoy. To read them stories we are already tired of. To do the voices, to make it interesting, and not stop reading to them just because they learn to read to themselves. Use reading-aloud time as bonding time...when the distractions of the world are put aside.'

[Neil Gaiman: Why our Future depends on libraries, reading and daydreaming, reprinted on The Guardian website at http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/oct/15/neil-gaiman-future-libraries-reading-daydreaming?CMP=share_btn_tw]

“The audience response guides you and the encouragement that meets a funny voice, or the stillness that measures a menacing whisper can carry you along, or divert you.”

Do the voices

That's one of the best bits, or it can be. It's when you lick a finger and hold it to the air to see which way the wind is blowing – the audience response guides you and the encouragement that meets a funny voice, or the stillness that measures a menacing whisper can carry you along, or divert you – have you re-form your performance as it takes heed of the reciprocal authorship of a reading aloud performance. But it can also be one of the most daunting elements – more on that later. You'll just have to trust me when I urge you to think of the advice we give to the *“my lips are moving, but I'll be damned if I'm singing in assembly”* brigade. That is – you'll just look sillier if you don't try.

Want some great texts to flex your expressive chops? For EYFS and year 1, you've got Kes Grey's *Oi Frog!* a book that is now finding a much bigger audience than its initial print runs assumed. Just how will we bring to life and do justice to the attempts of one pioneering frog to resist the rhyme-based maxim that frogs must sit on logs? Year 2 will love the joys of *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus*, which in fairness can be successfully deployed in any year group. For punchy, fool proof, short texts to secure the story time bug in KS2, look no further than *Mini Grey*. Mini is awesome – it's a simple as that. I recently had the unique pleasure of watching her speak at a conference led by Nikki Gamble in Cambridge. It's an experience. Mini's thought processes and points of inspiration are unique and they come at you in machine gun bursts of crazed invention. Thus we have the Dish

and the Spoon of Hey Diddle Diddle fame once again on the run, only this time told using the voice, codes and conventions of classic Hollywood crime narrative. If you're going to share this book, best start honing that Bogart impression now. Of course these texts are fun, but they have qualities that go beyond entertainment, providing insight into character, voice and genre.

It's not just expression and vocabulary that weaves the magic in a read aloud session. It's also rhythm and patterns and refrains. At last year's NATE conference, Anthony Wilson set out how one poem, and one teacher, changed the course of his life. A transcription of his talk is available at <https://anthonywilsonpoetry.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/the-power-of-poetry-nate-conference-20141.pdf>. In this inspiring talk, he recalled how he had shared *Red Boots On* with his Year 1 class, inspired by the snow falling outside. The poem is reprinted here too, but the transcript is interrupted with commentary setting out the children's responses:

'You notice that a child in row three has started to twitch, her shoulders invisibly flexing, her forearms and wrists following suit. She starts to nod her head, shyly at first, out of time, then vigorously bouncing, as though yanked by an invisible string. The boy next to her joins in, adding a handclap. You think: they seem to be enjoying it. You read the chorus again.'

Red boots on, she's got red boots on, kicking up the winter till the winter's gone.

Another three children, then another four. And a silent child, who never joins in with anything. She is even smiling.'

The poem is a virus of the best kind, the rhythm and words infecting the children and taking over the group. This, again, is part of the magic of reading aloud.

But what of the learning?

Reading aloud to children has too often been seen as an adjunct to “real teaching”. Something that is difficult to fit in around packed timetables. Something that might and has, in my experience, led an observer to ask: *“but where is the learning?”* (I will remain diplomatic and move on). Nikki Gamble, in her highly recommended book, *Exploring Children's Literature: Reading with Pleasure and Purpose*, sets out the range of educational benefits that you might want to arm yourself with if the value of your reading sessions is ever questioned. These include: *developing vocabulary; understanding stories beyond [the children's] reading ability; improving concentration and attention span; allowing interaction and the asking of questions; improving knowledge and understanding through the sharing of complex stories; providing models of fluent and*

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expressive reading. It's also going to help encourage more children to read. Whatever your position in the reading wars, extreme or neutral, it seems that embedding literacy instruction in a language and literature-rich environment is increasingly seen as common ground, with sharing stories as a key component of good English provision.

Let's just linger a while longer on one of those benefits listed above: developing vocabulary.

It's important that we keep in mind the opportunity that reading aloud provides us to further extend vocabulary and how a carefully planned, increasingly challenging read aloud programme can mitigate against some of the difficulties we face in deciding what vocabulary to teach and when. Thus in year 6 we might well enjoy a top notch Shaun Tan or David Wiesner, but so too we might utilise the wonderful Poetry for Young People Series and share the works of Yeats, Frost, Angelou and more besides. We will plunge into the good and the great of our literary heritage (you might want to check out the book by Bob Cox listed below for practical guidance here) and in doing so, we will deliberately explore language.

We know that vocabulary knowledge has a huge bearing on comprehension. It's plain from what we see in the classroom; in fact it is so plain and apparently self-evident that E. D. Hirsch suggests that *“...it might seem pointless to discuss vocabulary in a brief review on reading comprehension...”* [Hirsch, 2003]. Yet he does just that, stressing the central importance of intelligent design around accelerating rates of vocabulary acquisition. Hirsch himself is quite the academic hot potato of the moment, so let's now turn to Aidan Chambers whose Read Me was clearly regarded with respect at this year's conference in Gateshead. He tells us that *“all reading is dependent on what has been read, the greater the variety of words, sentences and texts the brain has in its archive the better able it is to make sense of new texts. The more references you have stored in your memory bank the richer you are and the better you can read.”* [Chambers, 2011, p.62] Children must read for themselves, but the more reading of every kind, the better.

So have we convinced our enquiring visitor? Here! Here is the learning.

No?

Let's change tack. Let's get regulatory.

The new curriculum not only gives you licence to provide these opportunities, it makes them a statutory requirement. References to reading aloud are sprinkled liberally across the programmes of study (POS). It starts in the introduction to the year 1 POS, where children *“need to hear, share and discuss a wide range of high-quality books...”* and continues with the statutory teaching requirement to *“Listen to and discuss a wide range of poems, stories and non-fiction at a level beyond that which they can read independently.”* This carries on as an evolutionary process across the years as, all being well, the children develop fluency and the reading bug, until we hit the POS for years 5 and 6. At this point, the statutory requirements for comprehension describe the behaviours of an independent and willing reader yet still, in the non-statutory guidance, we see the following caveat: *“Even though pupils can now read independently, reading aloud to them should include whole books so that they meet books and authors they might not choose to read themselves.”* Stepping away from the formal instructions

of the reading requirements set out here, the curriculum allows itself a giddy slip away from the curricular speak to share this gem in the general introduction to the Primary English POS:

Reading...feeds pupils' imagination and opens up a treasure house of wonder and joy for curious young minds. [National Curriculum Document 2014, Language and Literacy]

**“So please, oh please, we beg, we pray,
Go throw your TV set away,
And in its place you can install
A lovely bookshelf on the wall.”** Roald Dahl

There's your licence. Take it. Run with it. Just do your best to take your pupils with you.

So reading aloud is something that not only might we want to do, we have to. Once again, going back to the very opening of the English section of the Primary curriculum and we are swiftly met with this pretty bold statement: *“Schools should do everything to promote wider reading.”*

Everything

That's a very broad remit, and we do have to draw some boundaries around that one – if nothing else, it suggests a lack of design in addressing this critical aspect of what we do and all too often the cry of *“We've tried everything!”* is rightly followed with *“Ah now, that may well be the problem.”* But frequent reading to your class should certainly form part of this drive. If you're given to thinking story time is a lesser academic pursuit, and not a priority, try to think of reading aloud as just another form of modelling, of reading skills but perhaps more importantly of reading habits. We want children to appreciate that reading can be relaxing, scary, funny, and can turn the screw on a range of other emotions. How can children be realistically asked to write for specific effect if all too often they are not necessarily aware of how they should react to what they hear or read? You only have to share an especially sad story with your class to see who is and who isn't feeling the character's pain.

All well and good, but...there's no doubt that some obstacles can get in the way. These obstacles can be overcome with a determined approach and the right support around you. So let's look at some of the pitfalls.

It is very difficult to find enough time for a worthwhile reading session

This is something that has to be looked at a whole school level. Scheduling will need to fit in with the policies and procedures of the school, but it is also important to have some agreement around the level of commitment to the reading for pleasure agenda. Coming to a whole school agreement will also allow for a creative and flexible approach to addressing this issue: reading weeks with guest readers; flexibility around guided reading sessions (could one session at specified intervals be given over to reading aloud?); using the greater freedoms around text types to have a Take One Book unit that is driven by a book that you love and will love to share. (See the Herts for Learning suggested Long Term Plan at http://www.thegrid.org.uk/learning/english/ks1_2/nat_curriculum/documents/english_primary_planning.pdf) Remember, too, that reading aloud will occur



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during shared reading, particularly in phase one of the teaching sequence, at points in guided reading, and during some assemblies.

I tried reading aloud but they just cannot cope with sitting and listening...are too immature... are not interested.. etc.

This most likely refers to reading aloud from a book on the carpet (or outdoors hopefully, when the weather's on our side). It can be hugely frustrating and distracting when we have a frantic wriggler in our midst or uproar over whose fingers touched whose knee. It can also feel like a judgement on our delivery of the book. It mustn't. They're children. You're the boss. In this instance you certainly know what's best for them. And it's giving them space. And a bit of time. First of all, make sure that they know to, and are able to, get comfortable. Explain that you want them to relax and take in the story; to give it a try. The more forceful or restrictive we are around books, the more likely they are to run for the hills from them (Daniel Pennac's *The Rights of the Reader* remains the last word on this aspect of reading provision). If a child cannot sit and attend when they can be reasonably expected to, and given that we have played fair and been upfront with the children in our expectations, have them sit away from the group but within earshot and certainly in plain sight of you. They might doodle – I like to doodle when I listen – but they should not engage in anything likely to distract the group. In most cases, the magic of the text and the responses of the children will prove irresistible and a slow shuffle back into the group is likely to occur.

I don't feel confident in reading aloud/it's an area I wish to develop.

You might want to head to memfox.com. Mem is a well-regarded authority on reading aloud and a published author (her *Possum Magic* and *Koala Lou* have been read aloud favourites with some of my former pupils). Her site is dedicated to reading and reading aloud is a particular area of focus. The site provides hints,

tips and even commandments for a reading aloud session (which can help in creating a parents' reading guide or training session). It also contains reading aloud recommendations and modelled sessions. It is so important to choose a text that you love, that you know you can bring to life. Keep your audience in mind, but remember, some revered children's books make surprisingly dull read-alouds. Try a chapter out loud and see what you think. Recording yourself in action can be very helpful (and you might be pleasantly surprised at some of the clever, unplanned ways in which you manage the reading behaviour of your group without losing the thread of your reading performance).

Reading aloud to a group of children is one of the most immediately gratifying things you can do as a teacher. You most likely deserve to enjoy something that is immediately gratifying and that reaffirms the true purpose of what we do, day in day out. Best of all, it's good for them when it's handled well. You only have to experience the shared delight of a full-on reading of *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus* to a nursery class, or a year one class, or a year 6 class, or even your colleagues at a twilight session on reading to know the truth of this. If you really go for it, and I mean wild-eyed pigeon abandon, it works like a charm every time. Maybe then the book bug, the infection of Red Boots On, might spread that little bit further.

References

Chambers, Aidan *Tell Me: Children, Reading and Talk*, Thimble Press, 2011
 Hirsch E D, *Reading Comprehension Requires Knowledge – of Words and the World* published in American Educator, Spring 2003.
The National Curriculum In England, Key stage 1&2 Framework Document, DFE, 2013.

Further reading

Opening Doors to Famous Poetry and Prose by Bob Cox, Crown House, 2014
[Memfox.com](http://memfox.com) for passionate advocacy of reading aloud to children
Shakespeareandmore.com has a page on reading aloud and some wonderful book lists.
<http://www.goodreads.com/list/tag/read-aloud> a comprehensive guide to great books for reading aloud.

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Martin is an experienced teacher, leading teacher and English subject leader with a proven track record in supporting teachers and subject leaders in developing their practice within their schools. Martin now works as a Teaching and Learning Adviser for Primary English at Herts for Learning. He has taught across KS1 and KS2 and has also lectured in Film Studies.

