

# Reading Modality and Student Engagement During Whole-Class Readings

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August 1999

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*\*Note — Please see MLK for related materials, such as tables, that are not included in the web version of this paper.*

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"A story must have some points of contact with the reader to make him feel at home in it." —  
John Steinbeck

This sentence from one of John Steinbeck's lesser-studied novels, *The Winter of Our Discontent*, might be his most valuable contribution to the teaching of literature. For without "(feeling) at home" in a story or having "some points of contact" with the text, what can a student accomplish in the English classroom? This engagement, or "entering into literature," as Robert Probst (1988) puts it, is essential for any type of learning (4). Whether it is comprehending a new vocabulary word or acquiring an increased awareness of self and others, readers must involve or interlock themselves with the literature in order to prosper from the reading experience.

In their 1991 study, Martin Nystrand and Adam Gamoran assert that such "substantive" engagement with literature has a positive effect on student achievement (282). Their definition of substantive engagement is "a sustained commitment to understanding the world of a story or poem, as well as literary and other issues raised by the work itself" (262). As English teachers, we try to foster such substantive engagement, for the sake of student achievement, or simply the enjoyment a good story. But how can we best encourage this engagement? Nystrand and Gamoran link instruction with student engagement. The instructional choices teachers make can affect the level of student engagement. For example, Nystrand and Gamoran contend that teachers who dominate class discussions, leading students down a narrow pre-planned avenue of discussion, do not encourage a high-level of student engagement. Teachers who pay attention to and build on the substance of students' responses during class discussion, however, are more likely to increase student engagement (264).

One of the first and most important instructional decisions a teacher must make is how to read a piece of literature in the classroom. Do students read the story silently, orally, or listen to the teacher reading it? There have been many studies that have attempted to find the mode of reading that will produce the greatest level of student comprehension. These studies, however, have produced few definite conclusions. While comprehension is seemingly easier to assess, student engagement with literature is the preferred goal. Will silently reading a story cause more students to connect with it? When the teacher reads the story will the majority of students "enter into the literature," at a higher level than when students read the story aloud? The purpose of this study is to explore the role of reading modality on student engagement and comprehension with three short stories read in a ninth-grade English classroom.

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## A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The initial debate over reading mode focused on silent vs. oral reading. From the start, it's important to note that most research studies have measured comprehension, not engagement. Albeit a much easier trait to measure, mere comprehension should not be the only goal of teachers of literature. In order for the reader to share the experience the writer was attempting to relate, the reader must do more than understand the story and its characters. Readers must make some emotional "points of contact" with the story; they must feel close to the story. While studies have not measured engagement, they do provide some insight into the discussion of choosing a reading mode for the classroom. As many of these studies reveal, results on the issue of a superior reading mode are contradictory. According to a few studies, oral reading fosters greater comprehension than silent-reading (Collins, 1961; Elgart, 1978). Other studies indicate silent-reading produces superior comprehension (Pinter, 1913; Mead, 1915; ). Miller and Smith assert that comprehension varies according to the competency levels of the readers. Poor readers understand more when they read orally. Average readers comprehend more when reading silently. Good

readers comprehend at the same levels whether reading silently or orally (1990). Other studies have mixed findings; they were unable to determine which method --silent or oral-- yielded a higher level of comprehension (Jones, 1932; Sheldon and Hatch, 1950; Mullen, 1971; Swalm, 1971; Glenn, 1971; Poulton and Brown, 1967; Rogers, 1937; Swanson, 1936-37).

When listening becomes another option to oral and/or silent-reading, the decision as to picking a reading mode becomes even harder for classroom teachers. Here the research studies appear more consistent. Readers, especially good readers, comprehend better when they are silently reading rather than listening (Durrell, 1969; Many, 1965; Swalm, 1976). One reason silent-reading may yield superior comprehension is because it allows for faster reading, thus allowing the processing and recalling of more information (Pinter and Gilliland, 1916).

As contradictory as these studies are, even if they could pin down one mode of reading as superior to another, there are still questions that need to be answered. Collins (1961) and Elgart (1975), who tested students individually, concluded that the students who read orally comprehended more. But what about the comprehension of the rest of the class, those students listening to the student-reading orally? The students who are listening and also reading silently, following along in the text, are interacting with the text in a manner that is much different from that of the oral reader. Does this condition affect comprehension or engagement?

The issue of listening vs. reading raises a number of questions. First, Swalm tested students who listened to tape recordings of stories (1976). Will listening to a tape recording and listening to a live teacher-reading produce the same levels of comprehension and engagement? Also, although it is not stated, presumably because it is also referred to as an "article," (1976) these stories were non-fiction. Are students more likely to be engaged with fiction or non-fiction? In his 1965 study, Wesley Many claims that reading, rather than listening, fosters a greater comprehension under these circumstances (110). Would his claim hold up in a setting where a fictional story is read dramatically by an English teacher? Surely students comprehend and engage with *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* better when they listen to a dramatic presentation of the play rather than when the play is silently read. Secondly, for Swalm's and Many's listening studies, students did not have a text in front of them as the stories were being read. If they had the text in front of them, would their comprehension levels be different than if they were only listening? Also, it is important to note that these studies investigated modality as it relates to comprehension, not to engagement. In this study I will investigate the effect of reading mode--students reading silently, students reading aloud, or students listening to a teacher-read story-- on students' engagement with, as well as their comprehension of, literature.

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## **METHODS**

### *Subjects*

It is important to note that this is a limited, personal replication study by a teacher-researcher. The sample groups for this study were also limited; I needed to work with students for a prolonged period of time over a three-day period. As such, I worked with students from only my assigned classes. I was not able to work with students of different races, from different grade levels, from smaller schools, or urban settings. The fifty-seven students who participated in this study, thirty-one girls and twenty-six boys, came from my three ninth-grade classes in a large junior high school in Central New York. Ninety-six percent of the students who participated in this study are Caucasian. Four percent are of mixed racial background. The students were Regents level. Higher-tracked students, placed in a separate Honors class, and lower-tracked Regents Two students, formerly known as Basic, were excluded from this study to keep the focus on the average student.

### *Materials*

Three stories from Edgar Allan Poe, "The Black Cat," "The Tell-Tale Heart," and "The Cask of Amontillado," were used in this study. These stories are part of the school's ninth-grade curriculum. Poe's stories were chosen for use in this study in an attempt to keep as much consistency as possible among the reading material. This consistency was necessary in order to minimize the variables affecting student engagement. These three Poe stories are similar in plot, theme, character, mood, and style. "The Tell-Tale Heart" is Poe's original version while both "The Black Cat" and "The Cask of Amontillado" are adaptations with simplified vocabulary. Although somewhat controversial, adaptations for these two stories were chosen due to research-related limitations. Past experience teaching these stories to ninth-grade students has told me that the original versions of "The Black Cat" and "The Cask of Amontillado" require a fair amount of pre-reading vocabulary study and during-reading discussion and clarification, two

helpful teaching strategies, which in this research setting, could not be used. Without such additional instruction, student comprehension and, consequently, engagement would be affected in a presumably negative manner. (Inexplicably, students do not seem to have comprehension problems with the original version of "The Tell-Tale Heart.") By using adaptations that simplify vocabulary, yet stay true to Poe's style, plots, themes, characterizations, and moods, students can come close to experiencing the original story without needing the additional teaching methods. In addition, adaptations were used in an attempt to keep story length similar for each title. There was a concern that students would respond differently to these two longer stories. I felt further justified in using adaptations when it was determined that reading levels for both the original story and the adapted stories were reasonably similar. Approximate reading levels were calculated according to the Fry Readability Formula, found in Thomas H. Estes and Joseph L. Vaughan, Jr.'s *Reading and Learning in the Content Classroom* (23-24). The original "The Tell-Tale Heart" was determined to be on a seventh-grade reading level, while the adapted "The Black Cat" was on a sixth-grade reading level, and the adapted "The Cask of Amontillado" was on a fifth-grade reading level.

### *Procedure*

The study occurred during a two-week unit on Poe. Every attempt was made to follow established class practices. Class lengths were forty minutes. Lessons for each of the three stories began with a question on the board to get students thinking about thematic issues in the day's story. Students then took three or four minutes to respond to this question in their English notebooks.

Next, they began reading the story. The sequence of stories to be read and reading modality was varied, according to the chart below:

### **(See) Sequence for stories chart**

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Reading modality was varied so classes read in all three modes and all stories were presented in each of the three modes.

Each student had a copy of the story for each of the three reading modalities tested. When a story was read aloud by students, seven students from each of the three classes were randomly selected to read approximately one page each. All students had read aloud in class prior to this study. The teacher-researcher read the stories to each class when they were to be teacher-read. The teacher-researcher presented a dramatic reading of each story, typical of previous readings in these classes. Students were told that we would not be able to stop and discuss or clarify the stories as we read them, due to the nature of the study.

At the mid-way point in each story, students were instructed to stop for three minutes to record their reactions to the following writing prompt:

#### *(Writing Prompt for Mid-Story)*

At this point, write down your thoughts, reactions, confusions, associations, or anything else that comes to mind from this story.

When they finished reading or listening to the story, they were instructed to repeat this procedure by responding to a similar writing prompt:

#### *(Writing Prompt for Post-Story)*

Now that we have finished reading or listening, write down any further thoughts, reactions, confusions, associations, or anything else that comes to mind from this story.

Immediately after completing this writing, students answered ten comprehension questions (see appendix A). Stories, writing, and comprehension tests that were not finished in class on the first day were continued the next day. Students did not bring any part of the study home with them.

At the conclusion of reading and listening to each of the three stories, all students completed a written survey ( see appendix B). Additionally, two students from each class were randomly selected to participate in a face-to-face interview ( see appendix C)

### **RESEARCHER'S ROLE**

I served as both researcher and teacher for this study in an attempt to ensure consistency among all three sample groups. My duties included those of the classroom teacher including assigning readers, reading stories aloud, and administering comprehension tests. I also handled all researcher responsibilities including reviewing the existing literature, designing and administering the study, analyzing the data, and reaching conclusions.

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## **DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

Students' during-story and after-story writings were analyzed according to Tchudi and Mitchell's Process of Engagement theory (1989). This theory, adapted from the work of Hilda Taba, divides teacher questions into four levels: Level One is Understanding and would include student responses that explained what happened in the story. Level Two is Interpreting and would include student responses that describe their thoughts on the story. Level Three is Relating and would include student responses that might explain how the story relates to their lives. Level Four is Exploring Beyond the Text and would include student responses that touched on any additional outside issues the story brought up. In an attempt to evaluate students' engagement, writings were categorized on a scale of 1-4, according to Tchudi and Mitchell's formula.

Comprehension tests were scored to roughly determine students' level of understanding for each story and reading mode. Comments from student surveys and face-to-face interviews were sorted to determine attitudes regarding reading modality.

Results were corroborated by an experienced English teacher who also scored, categorized, and analyzed the comprehension questions and during-reading and post-reading responses.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### *Observations*

Researcher observations on the first day of the study foreshadowed final conclusions. It became clear that although silent-reading and teacher-reading had many positive similarities, student-reading began to distinguish itself as an obstacle to student engagement.

### *Silent Reading*

Most students who read the stories silently were on task, apparently reading the stories. Only once during the three days of this study did a student disengage from silently reading and put his head down prior to finishing the story. Students who were instructed to read the story silently did so; classes were quiet and orderly. Some students who read stories silently finished reading between five and ten minutes before the rest of the class.

### *Teacher Reading*

The researcher observed similar student behavior during teacher-read stories. Nearly all students were attentive; approximately half of the students had their eyes on the teacher, with the other half following along with the text. One student, Jason, immediately displayed his preference for teacher-reading when he asked, "Are we going to read silently?" When he was told that the story would be read aloud by the teacher, he replied "Yeah!" Teacher-read stories were completed in the shortest amount of time.

### *Student Reading*

Students reacted quite differently during student-read stories. A number of students appeared restless. They could be seen looking at the wall, at their watches, or out the window. One student was observed with his head down. It seemed clear that the students' trouble staying focused was related to their collectively poor oral reading skills. Two words into the first student-read story a student interrupted the reader: "I can't hear!" The majority of the seven readers for each story understandably displayed many problems that plague inexperienced oral readers. When they came to unfamiliar words, they mispronounced them, read malapropisms, or mumbled their way through them. Some asked for the correct pronunciation. Others read too quietly. Many read using a flat, monotone voice. They read slowly, word-by-word, following the text with their pens. They read too fast. They skipped over parenthetical words and phrases. The overall effect was painful, both to the teacher and the students. This view will be strongly substantiated during the discussion of students' surveys.

### *Comprehension*

Results from the comprehension section of this study confirmed the findings of previous studies that attempted to link reading mode with student comprehension: Although teacher-read stories produced

slightly higher scores for each of the three stories (see figure 1a-1d), it is inconclusive as to which mode encourages greater comprehension of the texts.

The difference from the highest score to the lowest score for the "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat" ranged from 3 to 5 points, a statistically insignificant range. The greatest difference from the highest to the lowest score was for "The Cask of Amontillado," the story students clearly had the most trouble comprehending, achieving an average score of only 25 for each of the three reading modes. (It is likely that students had the most trouble comprehending this story because of a lack of teacher-led discussion and explanations during the story. If students do not follow the intriguing beginning or understand the words "cask" and "amontillado" they are probably going to have difficulty. The research setting precluded such helpful discussions.) Students who listened to the teacher read this story, however, scored 10.4 points higher than silent readers and 13.5 points higher than students who listened to students read the story aloud. This indicates, at least for this group of students, that a dramatic teacher-read story can compensate for gaps in student knowledge.

### *Engagement*

Evaluating students' during- and post-reading written responses using Tchudi and Mitchell's Process of Engagement theory (Level one-understanding, Level two- interpreting, Level three- relating, and Level four - exploring beyond the text) did not yield a superior reading mode. There was no distinct difference in engagement between silent-readings and teacher-readings, but both modes engaged students more than student-readings ( see figure 2a - 2d).

While reading silently or listening to a teacher reading 71-72% of the student responses were at level two or higher. This means most of the time students interpreted the stories they read and gave their opinions. Typical level two responses include Jesse calling the narrator of "The Black Cat" "a real jerk" or Bob's vague assertion that "The Tell-Tale Heart" was "cool and interesting." Nate was a bit more specific in his opinions of "The Tell-Tale Heart," writing, "I like how the intensity builds up in this story and I'm interested to find out what happens at the end."

A few times students wrote level three responses, relating the stories to their lives. Nina identified with "The Tell-Tale Heart" when she wrote, "I think of when I lay in bed at night hearing (noises) of silence." Charlene put herself in the narrator's shoes when she wrote, "If I were him I would have pushed the officers out of the room."

Although the results for evaluating engagement between silent-reading and teacher-reading were quite similar, teacher-readings did produce the only level four responses, responses that explored additional outside issues the story brought up. After listening to "The Black Cat," Maria responded to a broader thematic issue when she wrote, "It shows how you can be cruel and mean when you don't even know what's happening." Amy extended her response to "The Tell-Tale Heart" when she wrote about violence in our society, "I don't think it's right for anybody to kill for any reason but self-defense."

While teacher-reading and silent-reading encouraged 71-72% students to offer opinions, student-reading, however, produced only 52% of responses at or above level two for engagement. Approximately 20% of the level two responses that occurred when a student silently read or listened to a teacher reading became level one responses when the student listened to a student-read story. This means an additional 20% of students failed to respond to these stories personally; instead, they were only able to explain what happened in the story. Typically, students who responded at level one either commented on troubles understanding plot--Charlene wrote that the ending of "The Cask of Amontillado" "was very confusing and made no sense"-- or summarized the plot--Tina paraphrased the first half of "The Black Cat" when she wrote, "The guy cut out his cat's eye and he was mad at his wife. Then he hung the cat from a tree."

Why is it then that students seemed to understand and engage with these stories better when they read them silently or listened to the teacher read? It is clear that the poor oral reading skills of student-readers too often jar the audience away from the world of imaginative literature and into the world of here and now. Poe himself wrote about this in his review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*. He described the "immense force derivable from totality," the power of reading a story in one uninterrupted sitting. He goes on to add that novels suffer because "worldly interests intervening during the pauses of perusal, modify, annul, or counteract, in a greater or less degree, the impressions of the book." He applies this principle to shorter fiction by concluding, "But simple cessation in the reading would, of itself, be sufficient to destroy the true unity." Whenever a student stumbles over a word, or asks for the correct pronunciation, or reads too quietly or too slowly, all problems during student oral reading in this study, it is tantamount to a "cessation in the reading" that "destroys the true unity" and keeps student readers from



engaging with the story. When a student reads silently there are fewer "worldly interests," fewer interruptions; the imaginary world is left intact. The same is true when a teacher reads aloud to a class. In fact, the effect of this imaginary world is often greater when a teacher reads. Literature is brought to life through a smooth reading, a variety of character voices, changes in tone, pitch, and volume; all the subtleties of the oral tradition.

Yet, even when the imaginary world was kept intact during silent reading or brought to life during a teacher-reading, students for the most part failed to respond with Level Three or Level Four responses. They did not connect the story to their lives. They did not explore issues outside the text.

Perhaps these students were not trained to dig beyond the surface, to ask higher-level questions. Perhaps they have spent too many years in elementary and middle school filling in plot-related multiple-choice worksheets rather than responding to Atwellian reader-response journals. These students seem to be much more comfortable with the concrete, the tangible. They want to know the right answer. Consequently, when they are asked to write down their thoughts, reactions, confusions, and associations, as they were instructed in the during- and post-reading writing prompt, too many responded with Level One responses that merely explained what happened in the story or offered general reactions of It's Good or It's Bad. It's as if they were trying to fit their square multiple-choice knowledge into the round reader-response assessment.

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## **STUDENT SURVEYS AND INTERVIEWS**

### *Surveys*

Post-reading surveys seemed to confirm the comprehension and engagement findings: teacher-reading and silent-reading were preferable to student-reading. Students were asked to list the best things and the worst things about each reading method.

Students wrote that the benefits of silently reading stories were that they were "easier to understand," allowed them to "read at their own pace," and afforded them the opportunity to "go back and re-read" a passage if they had difficulties. They stated that the disadvantages to reading silently were that "it takes longer to read," they "couldn't understand some of the words," and it was "boring" and "harder to pay attention."

Students found fewer advantages to student-readings. A few students stated that it gave "everyone a chance to read" while others wrote that it meant "they didn't have to read." They were able, however, to find a number of drawbacks to student-reading. They stated that there were "poor readers" who couldn't pronounce the words. This, they said, caused them to have trouble understanding the story. The fear of being called on to read was also listed as a disadvantage.

Many students wrote about the benefits of teacher-readings. They wrote that teacher-read stories "were understandable" and teachers knew the "correct pronunciation" of the words. They also appreciated the enthusiasm and expression a skilled teacher puts into reading a story. Teacher-reading continued to distinguish itself as a superior reading modality when analyzing how students responded to the worst things about teacher-reading. Fifty-two percent of the students could not find anything bad to write about teacher-reading. Thirty of the fifty-seven students surveyed either left the space blank or wrote things such as "I did not dislike anything," "Nothing that I can think of," or "???" Students who did find faults with teacher-readings stated that a teacher "read too fast or too slow," they were "not able to read at (their) own pace," and they were "not able to go back and re-read" difficult passages.

### *Interviews*

Face-to-face interviews with students confirmed many of the same research study and survey findings: silent-reading and teacher-reading had more appeal to students. It's again interesting to note that students seemed most concerned with how reading modality affected comprehension, not the more ambiguous engagement. Nick said that silent reading was "easier to understand," while Charlene said, "(Student-reading) was harder because we didn't understand anything (the student readers) were saying. If they read slower than you, and you read ahead, then you don't know where they are." James concluded that teacher-reading was "like, the easiest to understand because we didn't have to pronounce the words." Maria also saw the benefit of teacher-reading, at least to comprehending vocabulary, when she said, "I know what a word means but I don't know what it looks like and then when you say it, I'm like, 'Oh yeah.'" Again, the students' preoccupation with simply understanding the texts, Level One-type reactions, brings back the question of how students are expected to respond to literature in the earlier grades. It

would seem to point to a history of reading for "the Right answer," not the "What If?" question.

### **LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

As mentioned in the Methods section, this study had a number of limitations. It was conducted in only one school, using only fifty-seven students, a relatively small and homogenous sample. A much larger and diverse population would prove more revealing. Only three stories were read by the students. A larger and more varied group of stories would provide richer data. It was also hard to control the quality of student-readings. Although they were picked randomly, student-readers might have been very poor or very adept. This might have skewed the results in the student-read modality. In a natural classroom setting, a teacher might select only students who are competent oral readers. Also, unlike a typical English class, during this study the teacher was not able to stop and clarify vocabulary or other confusions related to the story. Perhaps the ability to offer such clarifications signifies the value of reading aloud.

While more research needs to be completed before we acknowledge one reading modality as superior, this study might help to rule out student-reading as a primary whole-class reading modality. Instead, oral reading skills could be practiced during individual reading projects, poetry recitations, or other class presentations. Determining which method or methods are most often unproductive could eliminate a portion of student apathy and lack of engagement.

With no clear superior reading modality emerging from this study's data, surveys, or interviews, the answer might lie in Icarus's wise warning of moderation. If we want to keep students consistently engaged in literature we should avoid relying on one method of reading and instead vary our methods. A mix of teacher-reading, silent-reading, and yes, even the occasional and well-chosen student-reading might be the best course of action. We cannot ignore the students who say they prefer to read silently, the students who literally beg to read aloud, or the those who hang on our every word during a reading of "The Tell-Tale Heart."

Perhaps this study will cause teachers to examine how their students respond to different reading modalities. Perhaps, through such reflection and further research, we will then be able to provide those "points of contact with the reader to make him feel at home in (a story)."

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