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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses whether there is a place for reading aloud (RA) in the modern foreign language classroom, and if so, when and how it should be used. It concentrates on English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) learners of elementary level and upward who have mastered the skill of assigning sounds to letter-combinations in English. The article asserts that RA can be used to raise awareness of and provide practice in certain phonological aspects of English and certain strategies used to facilitate the production of spontaneous speech and communication. The first section looks at the perceived utility of RA, focusing on RA as reading, speaking, and pronunciation practice and RA as a skill. The next section discusses the use of RA in planning, describing goals, text types, general guidelines, prerequisites, phonological features, and strategies facilitating spoken production and communication. The final section presents activities for using reading aloud. The activities involve reading transcripts of items from radio and television news, pretending to be actors auditioning for a role with an unrealistic script that must be improved, and acting as storytellers and judges of storytellers. (Contains 31 references.) (SM)

READING LOUD AND CLEAR*
Reading Aloud in ELT

INTRODUCTION

By *reading aloud* (RA), I mean the learners' activity and not the reading out of texts by the teacher. RA is probably the single technique in ELT which is not explicitly associated with any of the 'modern' teaching methods - there is no reference to RA in Howatt (1984), which is the most recent historical account of ELT. I use 'modern' in quotation marks as it seems to me that a large number of principles and techniques associated with teaching methods developed in the last 50 years are rooted in older approaches and practices in ELT (e.g. see Howatt, 1984; Sweet, 1899)[1].

Nevertheless, for a large number of teachers worldwide RA constitutes a staple of the classroom diet and takes up a fair amount of lesson time. I have come to this conclusion not only through my experience as a teacher educator, but also through the many instances where the use of RA is mentioned by researchers (e.g. Hosenfeld, 1984: 236) and writers on ELT methodology (e.g. Peck, 1989: 32), as well as the frequent appeals by writers of ELT textbooks (e.g. Lewis & Hill, 1992: 110; Nuttall, 1982: 3) against its overuse or misuse as a technique for developing reading skills.

I would like here to draw your attention to an interesting controversy. For EFL teachers trained in modern teaching methods, and particularly for those trained in communicatively oriented courses, RA is one of the few outcast teaching techniques, because they seem to associate it with 'traditional' methods. I have encountered quite a few instances of teachers ascribing RA to Grammar-Translation. I am not sure how this misconception has been formed since there is no mention of this technique in accounts of Grammar Translation (e.g. Howatt, 1984, Ch.11; Richards & Rogers, 1986: 3-5). On the other hand, RA still remains one of the techniques most widely used by 'traditional'/untrained language teachers.

'Who is right, then', you may ask. The way I see it, teaching procedures themselves cannot be described in such absolute terms as 'right' or 'wrong' outside a specific teaching/learning context. Therefore, I would like to put the question more constructively: *Is there a place for reading aloud in the modern language classroom, and if so when and how should it be used?*

AIMS & CONTENT OF THE ARTICLE

RA is widely used in first-language teaching at the initial stages of reading programmes in order to help children match sounds with the symbols of written language; either by combining the sounds of single letters or letter clusters, or decoding the whole word (e.g. Eysenck, 1990: 297-299; Eysenck & Keane, 1990: 329-330; Rayner & Pollatsek, 1989).

In this article I concentrate on EFL learners of elementary level upwards, who have mastered the skill of assigning sounds to letter-combinations in English (with the possible exception of the occasional 'difficult' or 'irregular' word). My aim is to show that RA does have a place among modern teaching techniques, provided it is used in a principled way. What I mean is that teachers need to have both the teaching aims and the limitations of the technique clearly in mind. My view is that RA can be used to raise awareness of, and provide practice in the following:

- Certain phonological aspects of English.
- Certain strategies used to facilitate the production of spontaneous speech and communication.

* First published in two parts as 'Reading Allowed (?): Reading aloud in TEFL' in *Current Issues* 8 & 9, February & May 1996. In this version (March 2002) I have incorporated most of the endnotes in the text, made some changes in phrasing, and added an argument in the section 'Reading aloud as reading practice'.

Here is a map of the article:

- Discussion of misconceptions about the utility of RA.
- Outline of principled uses.
- A framework for its integration into lessons.
- Detailed examples of teaching procedures and activities.

PERCEIVED UTILITY OF READING ALOUD

Through discussions with teachers who use RA I have come to understand that it is perceived as providing practice in the following areas: (a) reading for comprehension, (b) speaking, and (c) pronunciation. In this section I examine:

- Whether RA is a valid technique for these aims.
- RA as a skill in itself.

RA as reading practice

I would like to start by distinguishing between 'reading for comprehension' as opposed to 'sounding out the words' (Richards et al., 1992: 306). In this section I discuss the effectiveness of RA as a technique to practise/improve reading for comprehension.

Learners may read aloud fairly competently in terms of pronunciation of individual words, but fail to understand the meaning of what they are reading (see Wallace, 1992: 54 & 56). The following is an example of correct pronunciation without comprehension: in experiments on reading processes subjects could pronounce non-words correctly (i.e. words that do not exist), particularly if there was regular spelling-to-sound correspondence; for instance, if the non-word was similar to a known word (Besner, 1990: 75-76).

Reading for information or pleasure (e.g. reading a newspaper or novel) is a silent process in real life. We may of course read out an excerpt to a friend if we believe that it can be of interest, but in that case we are *not* be reading out for our own comprehension. It is also true that in silent reading there is a process of sounding out the words in our mind, but for skilled readers this is more a by-product of the comprehension process (Just & Carpenter, 1987: 93-100; Seidenberg, 1990: 45-49). Some readers even move their lips or subvocalise (i.e. murmur the words) while reading. Conscious recourse to the above processes is indicative of either non-skilled readers, or the level of difficulty a reader has in understanding the text; skilled readers rarely need to employ them (Just & Carpenter, 1987: 93 & 98; Seidenberg, 1990: 48). Finally, RA requires equal attention to *all* the words in a text (as they all need to be read aloud for the benefit of the listener). On the contrary, in sight reading, skilled readers focus mainly on content words (i.e. nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs). They may even gloss over some content words, as they use their knowledge of the context and relevant background knowledge to fill in the gaps. This strategy helps them increase their reading speed.

It seems that RA is not an effective technique for improving learners' reading skills. In a way, learners will be implicitly guided to deal with all words in a text as if they were difficult or important. In fact, RA can prove detrimental to the development of reading skills for the following interrelated reasons:

- RA (or subvocalising) draws the learners' attention to matters of pronunciation with negative effects on comprehension.
- RA (or subvocalising) is considerably slower than sight reading. Use of this technique will have a negative effect on reading speed (a skill particularly helpful during exams).

Reading aloud as speaking practice

Again, we need to make a clarifying distinction, one between RA and speaking spontaneously. RA only requires the speaker to deliver what is written on a page in such a way that the content is (at least) easily understood by the listener. Spontaneous speech is much more demanding. Speakers need to think of what they want to say and, almost simultaneously, of how to formulate it. Moreover, if we consider the more usual case of oral interaction, the speaker also has to take into account (i.e.

remember and process) the incoming spoken message. Finally, "speech is not spoken writing" (Bygate, 1987: 10); spontaneous speaking differs from writing in a number of ways, for example in terms of syntax, vocabulary and organisation (for an outline see Brown & Yule,1983:15-19). Therefore, if we use RA as 'speaking practice' we run the risk that the learners may misunderstand RA as a model for spoken production. The danger is greater when the texts to be read aloud are narrative or expository ones.

The negative results of using RA as the only technique to practise 'speaking' will be threefold for learners:

- Since they will not be receiving practice in 'speaking-while-thinking', their fluency will suffer.
- They will speak in an unnatural, 'bookish' style, as if addressing a large audience in a formal situation.
- They will tend to engage in monologues and will have problems functioning naturally, appropriately and effectively in an interactive situation.

But even if RA is used only to supplement speaking practice, learners will still be negatively affected, as they will become confused as to what constitutes natural, spontaneous speech.

In view of the above, some teachers might argue that if the text used is a dialogue, RA could be valid as 'controlled speaking practice'. This is true, but not when learners simply read aloud the dialogues as they are; there are certain modifications needed regarding aims and procedures. Apart from the drawbacks discussed above, there are two additional limitations regarding the use of coursebook dialogues, as they stand, for speaking practice:

- As they have usually been constructed to present certain grammatical features and/or lexical items they tend to include these in unnatural density.
- For reasons of simplicity they tend not to incorporate features of natural, spontaneous speech (e.g. pauses, repetition, false starts etc.).

These characteristics make them unsuitable for models of speaking. Acting out dialogues as they stand can be effective more as a means of helping learners commit certain words/ expressions to memory. In other words, the activity will have vocabulary practice rather than speaking skills development as its aim.

Reading aloud as pronunciation practice

I mentioned above that learners may be able to pronounce words correctly while reading aloud. Some teachers might argue then, that RA provides good pronunciation practice. Before addressing this assumption we need to clarify the term 'pronunciation'. The term is sometimes understood by EFL teachers as referring only to the 'correct' pronunciation of individual sounds and words in isolation. In this article 'pronunciation' will be used in a more comprehensive way, to include also the following interacting phonological aspects[2]:

- The stress patterns of phrases.
- The interaction of sounds between endings and beginnings of words.
- The resulting pronunciation and rhythm[1] of these phrases.

As defined above, pronunciation is one of the areas that can be improved through classroom procedures involving RA.

Reading aloud as a skill

RA is a challenging task to perform. Referring to native speakers Bygate (1987: 10) states:

> It is hard work reading aloud from a book. This may be because it is not something we are used to; or because the sentences can be awkward to read aloud - too long, too complex, or too technical. It can be tricky to get the correct intonation, and you may find you often have to re-read bits to make them sound right. Reading aloud tends to require considerable attention.

This view raises two important, and interrelated, questions. *What types of texts are to be read aloud by learners? How should RA be organised and carried out in the classroom?*

In order to answer these questions we need to examine the situations in which a text needs to be read aloud in real life. We can divide these situations into two main categories:

- Reading out excerpts from a text (e.g. an article) to someone you think might be interested in its content, and reading a story to a young child.
- Radio and television reports, readings of literary works on the radio, speeches and lectures.

In both categories there is a clear and realistic purpose for reading aloud, as well as a more or less clearly defined target audience. What is more, in most cases the texts have been specifically written to be read aloud. Finally, in the second category the readers are not only trained professionals, but they have also rehearsed what they are reading aloud.

I am afraid that RA, as it is typically used in the classroom, lacks all the characteristics of real-life situations. Students read out texts irrespective of their type and purpose. They read out to the teacher with the sole aim of 'reading correctly' (in the mere sense of getting the individual words right). In most cases, they are asked to read out texts they are seeing for the first time, which means they know nothing about their content. To conclude, RA seems to be used to achieve aims to which it is not suited, without a clear rationale, or in ineffective ways.

USING READING ALOUD: PLANNING

In this section I outline a general framework for using RA. Teachers can use this framework as a springboard for activities/procedures to suit their own teaching situation.

Aims

Phonology. Making learners aware of and providing practice in the following:

(a) The function of utterance stress in determining the rhythm of English, and the resulting pronunciation of unstressed syllables.
(b) The changes in the pronunciation of individual words in rapid connected speech, particularly between the final and initial sounds in consecutive words.

Strategies facilitating spoken production and communication. Learners will be made aware of and guided to investigate the following ways in which speakers try to overcome memory limitations and processing problems in spontaneous speech/interaction:

(a) Beginning again after making a false start.
(b) Rephrasing/improving an utterance they are not happy with.
(c) Circumlocution, that is, trying to express themselves when they cannot recall or do not know the exact words by using alternative ways (e.g. by describing, giving an example, paraphrasing).
(d) Using set expressions (e.g. 'let me see') and repeating their own or their interlocutors' words to gain time to think (Bygate, 1987: 18).

Learners will then practise in a controlled way incorporating features (b)-(d) in their production.

Text types

When the aim is treatment of phonological features, short stories, speeches and transcripts of TV/radio news programmes are more suitable. For treatment of oral communication strategies, short dialogues are more appropriate.

There is a certain dilemma as regards the spoken texts to be used. In specially prepared recordings (particularly in ones for post-elementary to post-intermediate levels) speakers use a slower, more careful style for reasons of simplicity. As a result, some of the phonological features in focus may be

less prominent, or even not present. On the other hand, the language level of authentic spoken texts will pose comprehension problems for the learners. In other words, there is a trade-off between phonological authenticity and level of language difficulty.

I feel that since the focus here is on awareness/practice of phonological features, it makes more sense to use authentic (or authentic-sounding) texts and give learners an easier task to perform. It is, of course, up to the individual teacher to make the final decision on the optimal combination of text and task level.

General guidelines

Before employing the procedures described below, teachers are advised to consult the following checklist.

- Be clear of your aim(s).
- Check that the text(s) used suit your aim(s).
- Check that the texts used could naturally be read aloud in everyday situations.
- Provide learners with a realistic purpose for reading aloud.
- Create conditions in which learners will be reading out to a realistic audience.
- Make sure that learners are clear regarding the meaning of the text they are going to read aloud.
- Always give learners time for preparation/rehearsal before the actual reading aloud.

Prerequisites

In order for learners to benefit fully from the teaching procedures they need first to have been made aware of and familiarised with certain features of spoken English. This can be done gradually by incorporating the following technique in listening lessons. After learners have worked on the information/ideas presented in the text give them a short extract from the transcript and ask them to listen again and make a note of the following (it would help if the text was blown up). Alternatively, you can give learners the transcript before listening and ask them to identify any of the features described below; then learners listen to check and modify. The length of the text will be determined by the number of learners in each group and the time available.

Phonological features

The following procedures are adapted from Brown (1975), Gabrielatos (1996) and Ur (1984:43).

- Indicate the pauses; or in other words, indicate meaningful chunks of language (not necessarily complete sentences). They can also note the relative length of each pause. Pauses can be indicated by strokes or crosses (/ or + for a shorter pause, // or ++ for a longer pause).
- Underline the stressed syllables - not of each word, but of each chunk, as defined above.
- Put unstressed vowels into brackets.
- Cross out vowels/consonants which were not pronounced.
- Circle vowels/consonants which have 'interacted' and produced a new sound, and indicate the nature of this sound.

I will avoid specific notation for long vowels as their actual length varies according to the phonological context (Brown, 1990: 43-48). It is more helpful for learners to get the idea of relative length (i.e. that stressed vowels will be longer and clearer than unstressed ones).

Regarding 'chunking', there is a problem with using authentic news programmes as some newsreaders tend to use pauses in a rather arbitrary way. Crystal (1988: 93) presents a parody of this style from a Guardian editorial:

> The BBC has introduced a. New method of disseminating the spoken word at any rate we think it is new because we don't. Remember hearing it until a week or two ago it consists of. Putting the fullstops in the middle of sentences instead of at the end as we were. Taught at school ....

For this reason, teachers should check any authentic recordings they intend to use as models. Alternatively, they can use such recordings to raise awareness of poor chunking.

Strategies facilitating spoken production & communication

Ask learners to listen to a text and indicate instances of the communication strategies listed above (for examples of activities see Gabrielatos, 1993: 25-26).

USING READING ALOUD: MATERIALS & PROCEDURES

Activity 1: Newsreaders

Aims

Awareness-raising of, and practice in, the following phonological features of English:

- The function of utterance stress in determining the rhythm of English, and the resulting pronunciation of unstressed syllables.
- The changes in the pronunciation of individual words in connected speech, particularly between the final and initial sounds in consecutive words.

Materials

(i) Transcripts of items from radio/TV news. Enlarge the transcripts so that learners have enough space to use the notation outlined in 'Procedure' below. I would suggest you use short items and not extracts from longer ones, as short items are self-contained and provide learners with a clear context. You can find such news items in both coursebooks and supplementary listening books (accompanied by either audio or video tapes). Of course, you can record and transcribe authentic news items. Alternatively, learners write their own news items and then annotate them regarding phonological features. The example which follows is taken from Dunn & Gruber (1987: 56)

> *Good evening. The Soviet Union said tonight there's been a serious nuclear accident at one of its plants. It said there had been some casualties. It's not known how many or how badly hurt they are. The leak happened at the Chernobyl nuclear plant in the Ukraine and by this evening its radiation had been recorded in Sweden Finland Denmark and Norway. Although higher than normal the radiation was said to be harmless to people.*

(ii) Questions based on the news items. These can be prepared either by the teacher or by each team of 'newsreaders'.

Instructions & Context

Tell learners that they are prospective radio/TV newsreaders about to be examined in their reading aloud skills. Their aim is to read the news clearly, but at a natural speed so that their audience needs minimal effort to understand. Learners are in pairs or groups of three (according to the length of the item). Each group has a different news item.

Procedure

(i) Transcript preparation

Learners (in pairs/groups) read their transcripts and ...

- indicate the pauses; or in other words, indicate the chunks in which the text will be segmented when reading out (these chunks are not necessarily complete sentences). They can also indicate the relative length of each pause using crosses (+ for a shorter pause, ++ for a longer pause).
- underline the stressed syllables - not of each word, but of each chunk, as defined above.

- put unstressed vowels into brackets.
- strike out vowels/consonants which were not pronounced.
- circle vowels/consonants which have 'interacted' and produced a new sound, and indicate the nature of this sound.

It is not necessary to ask learners to deal with all the above features. Particularly during initial stages of training, the activities should focus on one or two features only. Below is an example of the annotated transcript:

> *G(oo)d evening ++ The Soviet Union said tonight + the(re)'s been a serious nuclear accident at one of its plants ++ It said there ha(d) been + some casualties ++ It's not known how many + or how badly hurt they are ++ The leak happened at the Chernobyl nuclear plant in the Ukraine + and by this evening its radiation h(a)d been recorded in Sweden + Finland + Denmark + and Norway ++ Although higher than normal + the radiation w(a)s said to be harmless to people.*

(ii) Reading aloud & listening

Learners (in pairs/groups) read out their news items to the class, who answer the questions set as in a listening lesson. It would help to record the news items so that learners can refer to the recordings during feedback.

(iii) Feedback

- Ask learners to vote for the pairs who should 'get the job' and state their reasons.
- Ask learners whether the stressed words helped them understand the news item, or whether some words were stressed unnecessarily - causing comprehension problems or misunderstandings.
- Ask learners how close the text sounded to an authentic news item and elicit modifications.
- Play the actual recording and ask learners to compare the two versions. Elicit alternative ways of stressing/chunking and their effect on meaning, focus and style. For example, in '*some casualties*' the newsreader stresses both words in order to give the meaning of 'this is what the authorities claim'; otherwise only '*casualties*' would be stressed.

Activity 2: Script Doctors[3] and Actors

Aims

(i) Learners will practise in a controlled manner the following ways in which speakers try to overcome memory limitations and processing problems in spontaneous speech:

1. Beginning again after making a false start;
2. Rephrasing/improving utterances they are not happy with,
3. Circumlocution, that is, trying to express themselves when they cannot recall or do not know the exact words by using alternative ways (e.g. by describing, giving an example, paraphrasing);
4. Using set expressions (e.g. 'Let me see') and repeating their own or their interlocutors' words to gain time to think.

(ii) Learners will practise in a controlled manner ways in which native speakers contribute to the development of a conversation:

1. Using expressions showing interest or encouraging the speaker to continue (e.g. *'I see', 'really?'*)
2. Commenting and asking questions.

(iii) Learners will also have hands on experience of the following features of spontaneous speech and/or oral interaction:

1. We don't usually speak in full, neat sentences (but in 'chunks').

2. We don't conveniently stop at points where commas or fullstops would appear in writing.
3. As active listeners, we may interrupt and/or continue the speaker's utterance.

Materials

A short dialogue, preferably one that resembles more informal written than spoken language so that there is room for improvement. The extract below is from Nolasco (1991: 13). A reporter (Alison) is interviewing a model (Jason) about a typical day of his.

JASON:	*I got up and had breakfast at 6.00 a.m.*
ALISON	*And after you'd had breakfast?*
JASON	*I telephoned the agency to see if there had been a change of plan.*
ALISON	*And after you'd telephoned the agency?*
JASON	*I went to look for the photographer's studio. It wasn't easy, but I found it in the end. After I had found the studio, it was time to do my make-up. It took two hours.*

Instructions & Context

Tell learners they are actors auditioning for a role in a play/ film. Unfortunately the script (i.e. dialogue) they are given is not very realistic. They need to improve it before acting it out in order to make it as natural as possible. Each time the rest of the class are the producers who are going to decide who to hire.

Procedure

(i) Dialogue improvement

Learners work on the dialogue and try to make it more natural by incorporating features of spontaneous speech. The table overleaf shows a possible modification of the dialogue.

JASON:	*Well, I erm + got up at + I think it was 6.00 + and erm had breakfast.*
ALISON	*So early? ++ and erm then you left for ...*
JASON	*Erm, no + not immediately + you see I usually telephone the agency to see if there's a change or anything + you know.*
ALISON	*Oh I see + and then you ...*
JASON	*Then I went to + I looked for the studio + erm the photographer's studio ++ It wasn't easy, but I found it in the end ++ Erm + then it was the make-up ++ it took + well + it took about two hours.*

Note that not all features outlined in the aims are exemplified in the improved version. Trying to cram examples of all possible features into such a short dialogue would make it unrealistic. When giving instructions, you should alert learners to that fact.

(ii) Acting out

Learners act out their 'lines'. It would help if the learners' performance was recorded for reference during feedback.

(iii) Feedback
Learners vote on the more natural performance, discuss their reasons and suggest improvements.

Activity 3: Story Tellers

Aims

This is a freer, more global activity. Learners practise mainly the following:

- Chunking, that is using pauses to break down the text being read out in units shorter than a sentence ;
- Stress placement in chunks, that is selecting which word(s) in a chunk will be more prominent.

Both elements help listeners follow the story easily as well as maintain their interest.

Materials

Short stories, fairy tales or jokes. You may choose to select and assign texts yourself, or ask learners to write their own. Longer stories can be prepared and told by pairs/groups of learners.

Instructions & Context

Again use the context of a competition. Learners alternate at being story-tellers and judges.

Procedure

The procedure is similar to the ones in the previous two activities. I would not suggest giving any questions as we listen to stories for pleasure - not for information.

NOTES

1. You may want to take a short quiz on 'modern' ideas (Gabrielatos, 1998).
2. For a comprehensive account of these features see: Connected speech: Brown (1990, Chapter 4), Gimson (1989: 297-306); Stress & rhythm: Brown (1974: 45-47), Brown (1990, Chapter 3), Giegerich (1992: 258- 260 & 284-285), Gimson (1989: 263- 269). For a brief outline see Gabrielatos (1995: 15).
3. 'Script doctors' are specialists hired by film studios to improve existing scripts when the work done by the official scriptwriter(s) is considered unsatisfactory.

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