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# On the Horns of a Dilemma: Is Reading Aloud Bad Pedagogy?

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*In this anecdotal article, the author asks whether reading aloud in the classroom is an appropriate student-centered method of teaching reading. To answer this question, the article describes how using this method to study Steinbeck's novel *Of Mice and Men* provides structural, sociolinguistic, cultural, and stylistic knowledge through a combination of explanation (in which the teacher provides necessary background information) and active engagement (in which the students answer questions and perform tasks). The author concludes that his initial concerns over the theoretical appropriateness of reading aloud are unfounded as the method encourages students to be active participants in the reading and learning process.*

*Dans cet article qui repose sur une expérience vécue, l'auteur se demande si la lecture à haute voix dans la salle de classe constitue une méthode d'enseignement de la lecture centrée sur l'étudiant. En guise de réponse à sa question, l'auteur explique que le recours à cette méthode pour étudier le roman *Of Mice and Men* de Steinbeck permet la transmission de connaissances structurales, sociolinguistiques, culturelles et stylistiques par le biais d'explications (fournies par l'enseignant) et l'implication active (de la part des étudiants qui répondent à des questions et exécutent des tâches). L'auteur conclut que ses préoccupations initiales sur la validité théorique de la lecture à haute voix n'étaient pas fondées puisque la méthode incite les étudiants à participer activement dans la lecture et l'expérience d'apprentissage.*

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Instead of trying to be trend followers, we are better off going with what works for us, perhaps in spite of expert advice ... Our own definition of good teaching should be what works best under the circumstances. (Wheeler, 1999, p. 75)

## Introduction

A dilemma had long plagued me in my early years as an ESL teacher about my struggle to be a good teacher with student-centered lessons. Before entering the field of ESL, I had lectured for several years in undergraduate courses in linguistic anthropology. However, my subsequent TESL training made it abundantly clear that the teacher-centered lecture style I was used to was no longer the done thing. As a novice ESL instructor, I tried my best to

develop and deliver student-centered lessons, but I often worried that my classes were still too teacher-centered. The pedagogical ghost of teacher-centeredness haunted me even more strongly when I undertook an experiment with an advanced reading class: I read aloud to them. The technique succeeded in surprising ways, but it placed me the teacher at the center of the lesson. It took some time for me to reconcile the dilemma of a teaching method that worked, yet seemed to violate the principles of communicative pedagogy.

I offer my reflections on reading aloud to those who are new to the field of ESL and to those who still experience doubts about the quality of their teaching. Sometimes these doubts prevent us from seeing that our methods are sound, even if they seem to go against the grain of what we are taught is “proper and right” for the communicative classroom. In my case I imagined a dilemma where there was none, but the experience of unpackaging that dilemma was informative.

### *An Experiment*

The curriculum of the advanced reading class (our level 6) at Okanagan University College (OUC) is academically oriented, preparing international and domestic students for admission into full-time, first-year enrollment at OUC or elsewhere. Those who gain full-time status, however, are required to take two first-year English courses alongside native speakers. The first of these is basic essay-writing; the second involves the study of literature, mostly short stories. Most of our international ESL students come from China, Korea, and Japan, and almost all have taken university courses in their own countries. However, many are uncomfortable with English literature; learning grammar to write university entry exams seems to be the predominant form of English lessons they have taken. Although they are often familiar with literature in their own languages, this familiarity does not always translate easily into literary analysis in English, because understanding literature requires knowledge of specific cultural and sociolinguistic details that our ESL students have rarely had the chance to develop.

In the attempt to prepare the students to deal with the content of a university English class, the advanced reading course aims to provide the students with the tools needed for active and critical reading and includes informal reading passages, academic essays, short stories, poetry, and a novel. The novel we use is Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, chosen because it is a beautifully structured work, deals with a number of relevant social issues, and is a moving story—in addition, it is short and not too frightening.

Nonetheless, reading a novel is a major task for ESL students, even at the advanced level. Recognizing that it takes a long time for them to work through such an opus, I initially left the novel study until the end of the course, expecting that students would have finished it by then. When I first

taught this course, I set up a reading schedule for the students and held regular update seminars where questions had to be answered and discussions held. It did not work: students more often than not fell behind in their reading. Similarly, attempts to have individuals or groups take responsibility for specific chapters and present them in seminar format was problematic: it quickly became apparent that they were struggling both with the language and with the content of the work. They were missing out. It was not a happy task.

As a result of this problem, I decided a few years ago to read the first chapter aloud at the beginning of the semester in an experiment to motivate the students to continue reading on their own. This was prompted in large part, I admit, by my own fond memories of elementary school where a particular teacher had set aside Friday afternoons for such a treat. I credit her with having initiated my own love of reading. I was, however, aware that I might be accused of being patronizing by reading aloud to mature students as if they were children. This fear was quickly assuaged when I realized that the first chapter contained a great deal of language (vocabulary, slang, working-class grammar) and background information, both cultural and historical, that needed explanation. There was still a great deal that the students could work on together if the novel was presented to them this way. Besides, they enjoyed the reading sessions so much that they requested that I continue, and so the second chapter was broached in the same manner. I now set aside time in each lesson for this reading, and then, in the last month of the semester, the students are required to finish what remains and begin work on their final essay assignment. The results of this method of presenting literature have been rewarding.

### *Reading Aloud Seems to Work*

Although I have no empirical data to substantiate any claims of success, I do believe that reading aloud is a useful method for developing reading skills. This impression stems from several observations.

First, the students clearly enjoy hearing the reading as much as I enjoy presenting it. Numerous students have told me so, but more telling is that students look forward to the time set aside for Steinbeck and that some even bring their friends. Former students often remark on how much they enjoyed the reading sessions when I meet them years later. In fact two students who completed the course with another teacher who did not read aloud subsequently sat in on my classes because, as one of them put it, "We get so much more when you read it that way." Because both are already strong students, the idea that they understand more from this technique is powerful evidence for me that it is a useful way to present literature. Besides, I strongly believe that when students enjoy a lesson they learn from it.

Second, they get involved in the story. Following along in their books, their facial expressions and body language mirror the emotions that the story is meant to evoke. In one scene, for example, Carlson has led Candy's old blind, toothless, rheumatic dog away to be put out of its misery. Steinbeck builds the tension dramatically; silence reigns as the characters sit tensely in the bunkhouse listening for the shot that ends the dog's life. The tension is reflected in the students' body language as they lean forward and listen intently or follow along in their books, and they are clearly upset when the shot finally sounds in the night; some of them even jump as if they actually heard the shot. Given the fact that the dog is symbolic of Candy, himself old and "useless," that it foreshadows the shooting of Lennie, and that Steinbeck is delivering a message regarding the marginalization of certain members of society, the import of the scene is driven home. Such involvement translates into learning.

Third, the students are motivated to read the novel themselves. Most continue reading the novel at home, and many finish long before the required time because they are anxious to know what happens next. I learned this early—by accident. I began to notice that many students were ready and eager to answer the questions that I ask continually as I read, and that when informed near the end of the semester that they had to finish the novel themselves, several confessed that they had already done so, and others admitted to having read ahead. By reading ahead on their own, then listening to me read, they gained a much more complete understanding and feel for the work than would have been possible simply reading the novel silently on their own. Reading aloud has provided them with motivation, a key factor in learning.

Fourth, the quality of their work on the novel is impressive. At the end of the semester they must write an essay on one of several topics I provide and include research on critical analyses of Steinbeck's work. Their essays consistently reflect a deep understanding and appreciation of the novel.

### *The False Dilemma: But It's Bad Teaching*

Feeling guilty that this approach might be too teacher-centered, I kept it a secret from my colleagues for some time for fear of admonition. Although I had not actually read anywhere in the TESL literature that reading aloud is contrary to communicative pedagogy, it felt as if it should be wrong. After all, there I stood in front of the class orchestrating their reading. I was doing most of the talking. They appeared to be sitting passively staring at their books. The happy results, however, were alluring. What could be wrong with such an approach if the students seemed to get so much out of it? What was wrong, of course, was my own misunderstanding of teacher- and student-centeredness. I had made three overgeneralizations by labeling this technique teacher-centered: (a) I had underestimated the complexity of the

method; (b) I had not appreciated how it is sometimes pedagogically appropriate for the teacher to be front and center guiding the reading step by step; and (c) I had not recognized that a teacher-fronted lesson could simultaneously be a student-centered lesson when it engaged the students' mental and oral participation.

### *How It Works*

The usefulness of this technique lies in the interactions between teacher and students and among the students themselves. This is established by stopping often during the reading in order (a) to explain, and (b) to ask questions. This in turn stimulates discussion and activates the reading skills that are ultimately the object of the reading class. My acting out of characters' parts (and hamming it up, I confess) attracts students' attention and gives depth to the material.

*Explaining.* A non-native speaker of English might encounter a number of problems while reading a novel such as this, including vocabulary, register, culture, and literary devices. Reading aloud provides an opportunity to give background information and information that might not otherwise be easily found in dictionaries or other sources and to review previously learned material.

*Vocabulary.* One of the joys of reading English is an appreciation of the richness of English vocabulary. *Of Mice and Men*, like most pieces of literature, uses much connotative language, the subtleties of which ESL students may not pick up working on their own. Part of my goal as a reading teacher is to make students aware of the semantic richness of such words: their relationship to other words, their appropriate usage, and their emotive impact. Encountering vocabulary in context is invaluable to understanding the meaning, to appreciating how a word differs from similar words, and to developing a critical ability to see through emotional appeal in arguments. For example, the characters in *Of Mice and Men* do not simply *walk*; they *limp*, they *drag* their feet, they *stumble*, they *shuffle*, they *pop* into a doorway, and they *jerk* back out again. In addition, because I act out the words as I read, I can provide a clear and visual definition of new vocabulary, especially the connotative words that crop up everywhere. Seeing me imitate Lennie "lumber" to his feet or Curley's wife "smile archly" and "twitch her body" not only sends my students into gales of laughter, but makes the words real in a visual, visceral way. They cannot get this from a dictionary. Last, as esoteric vocabulary is encountered in the reading, it can be pointed out that certain words are archaic (*tramp*), dialectal (*bindle*), basilectal (*purty*), vulgar (*bitch*), racist (*nigger*), or colloquial (*cat house*); and warnings can be issued regarding their appropriate usage or avoidance. Recognizing the import of words is an essential sociolinguistic skill by which students can learn to identify people's

origins, attitudes, and personalities. Contextualization is a key to getting this across.

*Register.* The characters in Steinbeck's novel are working-class stiff, and their dialogues reflect this. They use nonstandard grammatical constructions such as double negatives: "ain't we gonna have no supper?" past participles as simple past forms: "like you done before"; third person singular suffixes on other verb forms: "the hell with what I says"; the use of *them* as a plural demonstrative: "them guys jus' come"; and other basilect forms. In addition, the novel is replete with contracted forms typical of colloquial speech: *an' (and); gonna; would of; nex' time; jus' come in; mad at 'em; alla time;* and so forth. Such language is not only difficult for ESL students to read, but it might also be seen as a dangerous model for students to imitate. However, reading aloud and stopping to point out nonstandard forms provides an opportunity to explain the social implications of such forms, namely, that certain forms are socially stigmatized and should be avoided. Because some of these forms are typically produced by non-native speakers (e.g., double negatives or the confusion of simple past forms and past participles), I can reinforce the need to avoid such forms—and the concomitant social (albeit discriminatory) judgments many English-speakers make that speakers of such forms are stupid or lazy. Furthermore, reading contracted forms aloud while students follow along in the book provides them with an opportunity to hear how spoken English really sounds. Indeed, this technique has the added bonus of providing listening practice while giving the printed word sound, inflection, and emotion.

*Culture.* Understanding language and literature is inextricably bound to understanding the culture in which it is embedded, and this connection can be explored meaningfully in the context of a novel. *Of Mice and Men* was written in 1937, and a deeper understanding of the story is gained by connecting it to the Great Depression. George and Lennie are itinerant workers trying to survive in a male-dominated and exploitive world during this difficult period in American history. Understanding the culture of the time also makes sense of the racism and sexism in the novel and of the lack of social support for the old, the poor, and the homeless. The time setting of the story also explains the distrustful behavior of the migrant workers, their loneliness and isolation, George's fear that Lennie might be lynched by a vigilante group or confined to the horrors of a lunatic asylum, and so on. This connection between time and society would be lost if students were left to read the novel on their own. The importance of context in understanding texts can also be reinforced: When was something written? Who wrote it? Where was it written? What effect might these factors have on the content and on the biases and attitudes of the writer? Understanding the influence of context on a text develops students' ability to read critically.

*Literary devices.* As the story progresses, numerous opportunities arise to point out, review, and discuss literary devices such as plot structure and development, setting, characterization and character development, symbolism, foreshadowing, and flashback. Because Steinbeck fashioned this novel to act as a play in novel form, the class can also explore how the various scenes and settings might be interpreted as a theater piece or movie. Furthermore, this is an opportunity to compare the structure of novels with that of short stories or other novels and to explore how English literature is similar to or different from the literature of the students' cultures.

### *Asking Questions*

Good readers are not passive, but actively engage with the text. By reading aloud, the teacher can model active reading and encourage the students' participation in the process. Stopping to ask questions allows the teacher to engage in Socratic dialogue with the students. As a simple example, the teacher can ask the students for the meaning of a word before defining it; this allows them to participate in the teaching while it allows the teacher to discover where individual students might have misinterpreted the meaning of certain words in their linguistic development or where the class as a whole has progressed in its vocabulary acquisition. Other questions require that students:

- Give opinions: do you think Curley's wife is really a tramp?
- Discuss issues: is the sexism in this story worse than sexism today?
- Predict: do you think Lennie will get one of Slim's puppies?
- Summarize: what happened in Weed?
- Describe: what is it about Curley that makes us dislike him?
- Analyze: what is the symbolism of Candy's dog?
- Focus on details: how do Curley's clothes mark him as different?
- Visualize: picture the river. what feeling does it evoke?
- Read inferences: why does Candy note that the Black man has books?
- Compare: how are Candy, Lennie, Curley's wife, and Crooks alike?
- Contrast: how are George and Lennie different from the other hands?
- React: what is your impression of Slim?

Students can also be active by performing tasks such as:

- Drawing the bunkhouse or organizing the classroom to resemble it;
- Acting a part;
- Researching the Great Depression;
- Listing the characters and their appearance, personalities, and so forth;
- Graphing the plot structure;
- Summarizing chapters or scenes;
- Designing the stage scenery and figuring out the props needed;
- Renting the video and comparing it with the novel;
- drawing a timeline of the major events of the novel.

## Resolution

As a result of these frequent interruptions to explain, to ask questions, to set tasks, and to encourage discussion, I do not often progress far in a given reading session, but the students are engaged in how to read, how to ask questions as they read, and how to think about what they are reading. This is reflected in the quality of their responses in class and in their final essays. I now realize that such instruction can make an important contribution: through my simultaneously modeling and explaining how to engage the text, the students can develop the tools to do it themselves. Furthermore, by reading aloud I can present reading material that is challenging yet, through exegesis and exploration, comprehensible.

Because I also teach a support seminar for international students enrolled in the two mandatory first-year English courses at OUC, one of which involves literature, I have the opportunity to see how well some of my students do. By and large they succeed as well as the Canadian students in the class; that is, some do not do well, a few do very well, and most are average. It is difficult, however, to assess how far their ability to survive first-year literature is due to my added support or to their having taken my advanced ESL reading course. I would like to credit myself with having taught them how to analyze English literature, but that is both naïve and vain.

My reading course is only one step in a progression of developmental steps to read independently and critically; it is really only a foundation for future reading fluency. Furthermore, the novel *Of Mice and Men*, although rich in language, culture, and literary skill, is short and vivid and much easier to handle than other literary works that students must read in first-year English. Nonetheless, I believe that they are able to cope with the more difficult texts on their own and to strengthen their reading skills further.

Upon closer inspection, then, my concerns about reading aloud as bad pedagogy disappear. Perhaps our cultural tendency to reduce complex issues like teaching to simplistic oppositions like teacher-centered versus student-centered had blinded me to what was really happening in the classroom. Perhaps I was obsessing about my teaching style. I was, after all, relatively inexperienced in this type of teaching. Whatever the source of my angst, I ultimately came to realize that reading aloud is not necessarily teacher-centered. Certainly it is at times, but when accompanied by questions, discussion, problem-solving, tasks, and so forth, the method can encourage students to become active participants in the reading and thus in their own learning.

## The Author

Rick Goulden received a doctorate in linguistic anthropology in 1987 based on his research in Papua New Guinea. In 1990 he completed his TESL Certificate at the University of Toronto and worked for two years at Mohawk College in Hamilton, Ontario before joining the ESL Depart-



ment at Okanagan University College in Kelowna, BC in 1992. Rick currently teaches advanced level ESL, support seminars for international students in first-year English, and two TESL courses.

### *Reference*

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