Reading Aloud in EFL Revisited

Dr. Taiseer Zaid Kailani
Al Quds Open University, Amman, Jordan

This paper highlights the functions of reading aloud and gives various reasons justifying its practice in the foreign language classroom. In this connection, the paper suggests a dual approach for practising both reading aloud and silent reading. The paper is mainly concerned with ELT in the Arab world, but its findings are relevant to foreign language teaching in other countries as well.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article has developed out of my 16-year experience as an inspector of English Language Teaching (ELT) and later as an instructor of applied linguistics for 14 years. Through my observation of English classes, I have noticed that the time students are involved in reading aloud is very little; whereas silent reading has the lion's share of the teaching/learning time. Moreover students are, generally, deficient in reading aloud. This paper will justify the teaching of oral reading in the foreign language programme, in particular within cultural contexts which place a high value on the skill of reading aloud.

Reading aloud effectively is characterised by the clear articulation of words, flexibility in rate, volume and tone, adequate phrasing and effective use of pauses and these are inadequately developed in classes I have observed. Moreover EFL teachers do not insist on a high standard when their students read aloud, which results in poor reading skills overall.

The question is, then, how can students develop smooth and intelligible oral reading in the absence of the opportunity to practise this skill sufficiently? This situation becomes more serious when we know that English is taught in our area as a foreign language and in a foreign context where students have very few occasions for exposure to the language. It is relevant to consider aspects of the local culture which underlie the present study and which are largely typical of English language teaching in the Arab world.

1.1 ELT IN THE ARAB WORLD:

a) English is taught in schools as a foreign language, mostly for instrumental purposes.

b) All state schools, at all levels, use the same syllabus and the same textbooks assigned by the Ministry of Education.

DR. TAISEER KAILANI is a director of language programmes at Al Quds Open University in Amman, Jordan, and has had sixteen years experience as an inspector and teacher in Applied Linguistics and language teaching.
Dr. Taiseer Zaid Kaitani

there is little here to help students become efficient readers or to give them effective training in the process. This is because students' involvement in this kind of reading technique is very limited. For example, there are no reading tasks that "develop a personal response to the text on the part of the student" (Morrow and Shoccer, 1987: 251-3). In other words, tasks are not included which require students to respond individually. This drawback is probably due to the lack of time devoted to reading follow-up activities. It is observed that much of the teaching time is geared to the presentation of new vocabulary, or the clarification of concepts, or the practice of linguistic exercises; this leaves little time for concentration on the teaching of reading skills (oral or silent) as an objective in its own right. This teaching routine reflects a dreary and stereotyped classwork process which results in insufficient reading experience.

In this article I offer some explanations and reasons as to why reading aloud should be practised in the English classroom, and then suggest a dual procedure to develop reading skills: "reading for language/ reading aloud" coupled with "reading for meaning/ silent reading". I demonstrate how these two processes (which may actually inter-relate to each other) might be implemented. What we need are alternative strategies for improving the teaching of reading including the teaching of reading aloud which is frequently ill- treated or ignored EFL.

2 RELATED LITERATURE

When reviewing the literature on the development of reading skills in a foreign language, we find that great emphasis has been placed on silent reading, whereas reading aloud is de-emphasised. Considerable research has been done to support the value of silent reading as an important language skill. Much of the literature is aimed at a more effective methodology for silent reading pedagogy as we see in the theories of Goodman (1973), Smith (1973), Coady and Silberstein (1977). These and many others consider reading as an active psycholinguistic process in which meaning is central. In addition to this psycholinguistic perspective of reading, interactive reading approaches such as Adam and Collins (1979), Ruemler (1977), Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) Eskey (1987), and Grabe (1985) also give importance to silent reading. These writers view reading as an interactive and interpretative process in which meaning is central to but not fully presented in the reading text since it is created through the interaction of text and reader.

On the other hand, little attention is paid to reading aloud in this literature; it even attracts adverse criticism. For example, Waller and Mackinnon (1979: p128) maintain that "reading aloud is of minor importance compared with the ability to understand quickly and directly"; Greenall (1981) remarks that reading aloud is not a valuable long-term goal for English language learners. Dwyer (1983) supports this view. She has the following objections to the teaching of reading aloud:

1.2 CURRENT CLASSROOM READING PRACTICE:

A typical English lesson in Jordanian state schools includes the following procedures:

1. The teacher presents new vocabulary, structure and language functions through a variety of techniques. They are usually drilled extensively before the students encounter them in the reading passage or text.

2. The teacher reads the text aloud while the students listen. A tape recorder is sometimes used instead, especially if the teacher does not read aloud well enough.

3. The teacher then re-reads the text aloud while the students follow in their books. Sometimes in lower levels, the whole class or individual groups read out after him or her.

4. He/she may ask them one or two questions about the text.

5. The students, read the text silently for a few minutes, and try to remember as much as they can. Then the teacher asks further questions. These are mostly comprehension questions, the answers to which can be taken directly from the text.

6. If there is any time still left in the teaching period, the teacher may ask individual students to read aloud two or three lines of the reading text. The teacher usually selects only the best students for this practice.

One of the principal merits of this classroom procedure is that the students are coping with a familiar text which helps them understand what they read. However,
"It reinforces the idea that reading and pronunciation are related, thereby strengthening the tendency to subvocalise when reading silently.

- It slows down reading by forcing the student to focus on each word.
- When reading aloud, a student may lose all sense of the meaning of what he is reading, a fact that defeats the very purpose of reading.
- When students mispronounce and misread some words, the teacher interrupts the reading to correct miscues, thereby further impeding the flow of meaning extraction".

Gardner (1986) believes that reading aloud as a language activity in the foreign language classroom is time consuming, not real reading and does not assist in the process of learning to read.

It is clear then, that there is almost a consensus of opinion among theorists and linguists that reading should be a silent activity, and reading lessons should be devoted to the silent practice of reading in intensive exercises accompanied by comprehension questions.

This negative attitude towards the teaching of reading aloud is also emphasized in the English Language Curriculum, 1995 for General Education in Jordan and in many other Arab countries (e.g. Egypt, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates and Bahrain) where English is taught on a large scale. According to the English Curriculum of Jordan (pp. 72-75), for example, silent reading is stressed throughout the eight years of English schooling; whereas reading aloud plays a minor role:

"at all times the teachers must maximize the time available for the pupils to read silently, since it is only through constant practice in silent reading that the pupil can develop his reading skill and attain a reasonable reading speed" (English Language Curriculum, 1995:75).

Reading aloud is practised in the English language classroom only in the first three years (i.e. grades 5, 6 and 7) of English.

This emphasis on silent reading reflects the cognitive theory on which the communicative approach is based. This approach highlights the centrality of meaning in the reading process. The goal of reading then, is to understand the ideas of the writer. The skilled reader interacts with the text using existing knowledge as well as the information on the page to negotiate the meaning of the text. So, under the influence of this psycholinguistic trend, silent reading has a greater part in the classroom practice.

Reading aloud, on the other hand, is influenced by the structuralist school of linguistics which placed a high priority on oral skills. The audio-lingual method

with its emphasis on oral communication tends to stress accurate word identification and oral language practice paying little attention to meaning cues (Been, 1975). Reading aloud was recognised as an important language skill that should be practised intensively to produce fluent readers. To meet this objective, textbooks were designed to be read aloud by students who were in the process of learning to identify words correctly and to say the sentences adequately, paying attention to word features alone. Other cues available to the reader were, at best, given secondary treatment.

3 IN DEFENCE OF READING ALOUD

There is no question that students have less need for reading aloud than for silent reading. In real life we rarely have to read aloud- it is only done in certain specialised activities. Nevertheless, there are occasions in and out of school when reading aloud is required. So in defence of reading aloud we are not trying to swim against the current of silent reading with its varieties (skimming, scanning, detailed reading, etc.) but to highlight the valuable functions of reading aloud in terms of foreign language learning. These factors are relevant to our situation in the Arab World, and probably to foreign language teaching in other countries as well.

1. In our case, developing reading aloud is imperative partly because English and Arabic have two different sound systems as well as two different orthographic systems, and partly because English is a syllabic (i.e. phonemic) language while Arabic is a phonic language. In other words, there is no one-to-one correspondence between letters or group of letters (e.g. car, city, through, enough and nation) and sounds in English; whereas most Arabic words are pronounced phonetically. So reading aloud in the English classroom is one way in which students can be systematically trained to recognise new words and articulate them correctly.

2. Reading aloud and silent reading are two aspects of the reading skill. They are mutually dependent in terms of functions. On the one hand, reading aloud deals with the surface structure of the reading skill in the sense that it focuses on the form of language (e.g. vocabulary, sentence structure and pronunciation) and mechanics of reading. These are essential for developing the reading process because they help the reader grasp the meaning of the piece of discourse.

On the other hand, silent reading is concerned with getting the meaning or the message the writer has expressed. It is related to deep structure and is not directly available from surface forms. This state of affairs requires that a student should recognise the visual configuration of words and perceive whole sentences in order to comprehend the deep structure (and hence the meaning). So if a student does not have adequate training or practice on the surface structure of reading (i.e. reading aloud) he may be stuck at a particular word
and cannot move on until he identifies the word. This situation would lead to
subvocalisation or to mediated word identification which necessarily slows
down the pace of reading. This could lead a student to focus on individual
details of a text rather than on the text as a whole. Smith (1971: 90-94) argues
that in order to comprehend meaning, reading must be fast, and the reader
must perceive as large a chunk of visual information as possible. Ferguson
(1973: 30-34) likewise supports Smith’s view that fast reading contributes to
the comprehension of meaning. Following this line, Pegolo (1985: 314) points
out that “prosody (i.e. rhythm and intonation) aids the comprehension process
since it is an effective organizing structure”. Pegolo says that “by sensitizing
readers to the prosodic system of the language in question, their decoding
strategies will improve and this will therefore lead to improved silent reading
comprehension.” Fast reading, then, depends initially on acquiring the
necessary basic mechanical reading skills and on sufficient oral reading
practice.

May (1986: 74) and Santos (1987: 69) have concluded in their two studies of
the effect of the teacher’s reading aloud in English on the reading
comprehension of Spanish-speaking children that reading aloud intervention
has a significantly positive effect on the EFL learners’ reading comprehension
skill, particularly their ability to inter-relate, interpret, and draw conclusions
from the content. The same finding is expressed by Flesher (1988), Manning,
Moreover, Dhaif (1990: 458) has indicated that:

“reading aloud by the teacher can, in fact, be equally important for ESL readers,
especially at the early stage of learning the language. These learners, when
reading to themselves, tend to read word by word due to their limited linguistic
competence. Guided by their anxiety to understand each word, they tend to
break sentences into unmeaningful parts while they read. As a result, the
sentences lose their integrity and consequently become meaningless.”

This idea is supported by Swaffar; Arens, and Byrnes (1991: 24). They
recognise that reading aloud by the teacher helps EFL readers discover units
of meaning that should be read as phrases rather than word by word and helps
them see reading as a continuous, meaningful process of building larger units
rather than focusing on graphic cues. In more recent research, Amer (1997)
in his article The effect of the teacher’s reading aloud on the reading
comprehension of EFL Students, emphasises that reading aloud is very
important for EFL learners especially at the early stage of learning; and if it
is made a regular and integral part of the EFL teaching and learning process,
can have a positive effect.

3. Reading aloud can be justified as a useful skill - a skill for use in the classroom
which helps the overall language learning process. In this respect, it can serve
as a catalyst for language learning because it is mainly language focussed.
For example it can be used to:

a) train students to read normally without stumbling or making errors of
tone, emphasis or expression; that is, to develop smooth oral reading;

b) stimulate the rapid association of the sound and of word meaning and to
demonstrate the correct pronunciation of new words in context;

c) understand the mechanics of the English sentence - syntax and
punctuation. Thus, through practising reading aloud students can learn
how to utter a statement, a question or an exclamation accurately, where
the voice rises or falls, what words to stress or unstress, and where to
pause in the sentence.

4. It brings variety to the foreign language classroom by offering an alternative
form of exposure to the target language that enriches both orally and
graphically (Rees, 1976). It can also be used with advanced students (for the
class as a whole or in groups). Individual interpretation of reading passages
(especially dialogues) can be called for, with varying stress and intonation
patterns. The overall manner of reading thereby becomes an indicator of
comprehension (Morris, 1954).

5. Reading aloud in the foreign language can be justified as an excellent way
for a student to improve his/her pronunciation in addition, of course, to
targeted pronunciation activities, and oral fluency tasks. As a classroom
activity, it is essentially a pronunciation exercise, rather than a comprehension
or a communicative exercise. Reading aloud enables the teacher to diagnose
difficulties in word recognition skills and to reinforce the visual image of the
word during the early stages of reading. The teacher should capitalise on this
aspect of reading aloud taking into account stress, intonation, juncture, rhythm,
tone and fluency. However, these features of reading aloud cannot take place
without full understanding, on the student’s part of the text. Otherwise, he
will not be able to convey -through proper emphasis, tone, pace and pause- the
full meaning both stated and implied.

6. Although students should be taught to read silently, it is also a useful skill to
be able to read aloud because there are occasions in social life that require
oral reading. For example, it is not uncommon for people to share what they
have read in a newspaper or magazine with others who are interested in the
content by reading orally excerpts to them. It also often happens in social life
that one needs to deliver a written speech to an audience or to read aloud a
circular or some instructions. And if someone wants to make or prove a point, he may find written evidence to support his views and will choose to read it orally. Besides, it is used increasingly by parents and by teachers and other professional people, especially those engaged in radio and television programmes. The requirement in all these situations is the ability to read well enough so that the interest of the listeners is maintained. This objective cannot be achieved unless students have continuous training throughout the eight years of English study on reading aloud in the foreign language classroom. This training is necessary because there is hardly a more worthless and boring activity than having a captive audience listen to poor readers.

7. In addition to what has been said above, there is an important cultural factor that necessitates the teaching of reading aloud. Reading aloud or reciting chapters from the Holy Quran or verses from Arabic poetry is a traditional practice in Arab communities. In the Arabic classroom too, reading aloud is required at all levels as a process of learning. We, therefore, must not make our students feel that an inherited cultural feature is disrupted when they are learning a foreign language. Indeed, in this way we capitalize on a long standing learning tradition rather than discarding it.

8. There is certainly a place for reading aloud in studying literature. Many songs, lyrics, selections from prose and verse, plays and dialogues lend themselves to oral or choral reading. Reading poetry aloud develops sensitivity, rhythm, vocabulary confidence, communication and joy in the human wonders of language. Significant gains in phrasing, expression, and words can also be learnt. In this way, all students, regardless of age, will be brought to enjoy poetry and learn the language in the process.

9. Last but not least, I feel that reading aloud can be a useful skill for improving students' command of oral communication. I conducted a small scale pilot experimental research project in collaboration with some EFL teachers in Jordanian schools that I inspect. This experiment involved twelve English classes (boys and girls) of different levels. The teachers were asked to emphasize reading aloud in experimental classes, and to continue for two semesters (a whole school year). During this period I visited these classes several times to observe or check the progress of the students' oral competence. At the end of the experiment, based on observation, students' command of oral communication improved far more rapidly than those control classes which utilised silent reading as the main learning process. The teachers' reports indicated that the students' ability to read efficiently improved considerably, and so did their ability to communicate orally in the foreign language. Even their motivation to learn the language increased greatly.

In the light of what has been said above, we can now say that the reading aloud component in foreign language learning can beneficially be integrated into language development as a whole with the guidance and assistance of the foreign language teacher. However, this important skill requires, among other things, suitable reading materials that are not beyond the students' capacities for understanding and enjoyment, i.e. they must correspond to their age and interest level.

4 ORGANISING A READING ALOUD PROGRAMME

Against the above background, I propose that the teaching of reading aloud in the foreign language teaching programme (English in our case) be conducted at three progressive levels, namely: dependence, semi-dependence, and independence. The ultimate goal is to develop oral reading fluency which, in turn, leads to the improvement of silent reading.

However, it is worth mentioning here that in describing the common practice of reading aloud in English classes, we will not be concerned with lexical items, patterns or structures presented on the chalkboard or flash cards but with connected pieces of discourse or reading passages usually available in the main reader or selected from relevant supplementary readers.

4.1 THE DEPENDENCE LEVEL

I propose that the first stage would involve the first three years of English study, (i.e. grades 5, 6 and 7; ages 10-12). It would be devoted to the development of the basic mechanical skills of reading such as: letter, word, and structure recognition, pronunciation, meaning and left to right directionality, (since writing and reading processes in Arabic proceed from right to left). A combination of the two traditional approaches termed "Look and Say" and "Phonics" could be used for the identification of words and phrases. The "Look and Say" methodology reflects the philosophy of emphasis on message characteristic of the communicative approach. Flash cards and taped materials are the most common forms used to teach individual words and whole sentences. The phonic method, on the other hand, is closely associated with the theory underlying a more structural approach that begins with the smallest individual unit such as the letter or the sound, then builds up these units into words. For the main part, it is the sound unit which is used.

Other language activities involved at this level would include reading aloud, teaching of new vocabulary and structures, general comprehension questions, mechanics of writing, and all the other activities usually considered part of the "English lesson". Silent reading as such would be used at this mechanical stage because students are developing symbol decoding strategies and, in the case of Arab students learning English, they are confronted with a completely new set of symbols.
In all these activities, the students would be dependent on the teacher for materials and method to develop the basic mechanical skills.

4.2 The Semi-dependence Level

I propose that this level include the last three years of English study at the basic education stage, i.e., grades 8, 9, and 10 in the Jordanian education system. At this level, the emphasis would change slightly. The mechanics of decoding would continue to be taught. Reading for meaning (i.e., silent reading) and appropriate supplementary reading would be introduced. Hence the two skills of reading aloud and silent reading would be practised ‘hand in hand’ in the English classroom. The first reading would usually be carried out aloud by the teacher, or by a tape-recorder in order to encourage normal reading both oral and silent. In this reading modelled by the teacher, the passage must not be too long; if it is, the students’ attention will wander. This would be followed either by individual reading aloud or by silent reading. However, it is preferable to begin reading activities by silent reading in order to help students understand the text’s messages and ideas. This would prepare them for the skills of reading aloud. These skills include:

- paying attention to correct pausing, whether indicated by punctuation or not
- reading complete phrases (not word by word)
- adopting an appropriate speed and rhythm
- not distorting pitch, stress and intonation
- reading in a relaxed manner that avoids over-precise enunciation and the artifice and mannerisms of oratory.

This reading ability can be realised if students are given special instruction and training and are provided with meaningful texts. The presentation of unfamiliar vocabulary and structures as well as the clarification of difficult concepts would make reading aloud (and silent reading too) less burdensome and more meaningful than it would be without this treatment. If students read aloud to the teacher at regular intervals, their reading fluency will improve considerably since they have already absorbed the basic mechanical reading skills during the dependence stage.

To enhance reading aloud, the teacher can assign passages from the relevant textbook to be read aloud by students at home. As a follow-up he might check on the assignment. Successful completion of the task will improve silent reading because silent reading and reading aloud are complementary processes.

4.3 The Independence Level

This stage would involve the final two years of English schooling (i.e., grades 11 and 12) when students have grown intellectually and learnt a great deal of the language. In terms of teaching reading, this means that the students now have the ability and means to read by themselves to attain and extend knowledge. In other words they read for meaning. This encourages teachers to allow more silent reading exercises in English classes.

Reading aloud would continue at this advanced stage, though to a lesser extent; it could also be used as an extra speech exercise especially in reading passages containing dialogues, interviews, debates or role-playing where students can vary stress and intonation patterns.

As a pedagogic activity, silent reading at this stage could be divided into two components: intensive reading and extensive reading. The former would be a classroom activity and would include practice in reading aloud; whereas the latter would take place mostly out of class. Extensive reading would involve analysis of the text in class. This could involve either a study of the language itself (in the same way that reading aloud does) or it could be primarily a discussion of the content of the text. In the first case it functions as a service skill for learning the language, while in the second case it is reading for the sake of grasping meaning or ideas or for interpretation.

Extensive reading is complementary to intensive reading. It includes reading in quantity for interest, for pleasure and as a habit. Therefore, supplementary readers should be pleasant to read and slightly more advanced and more authentic in order to enable students to teach themselves. In addition students could read stories they themselves have written. However, the students would be given “context support” by means of key words, notes to structural problems, translation of some parts, pre-reading comprehension questions, etc.

In conclusion, we can maintain that the teaching of reading skills in the foreign language programme would proceed systematically from the beginning of learning the language till final years at school.

It might be interesting to note that, for reading aloud to achieve its purpose, certain specific techniques might be deployed, the most significant of which are stated below:

1. As mentioned earlier, it is preferable to conduct the reading aloud exercise after the students have read the passage or story silently and practised related focus activities and exercises, and, of course, after presenting new vocabulary and clarifying structural items or language functions. This step is important as it gives students an idea about the subject-matter of the reading-passage and makes the activity of reading aloud more meaningful.

2. The teacher reads the passage through (or he may use a tape-recorder) while students listen carefully; he then re-reads it in small sections which the whole
class read after him in “quiet chorus”. It is essential that the students copy the teacher’s or the model’s correct pronunciation stress and intonation. To maintain their interest, the teacher may ask them some comprehension questions. Indeed relevant question-and-answer practice adds variety to the reading session.

3. Individual reading aloud follows, working from the better students to the weaker ones. This technique will give mediocre or reluctant students a chance to improve their ability to read aloud. Not all students will have the opportunity to read aloud each time. Dialogues and dramatisation can be acted out. This will help to develop oral competence and confidence.

4. If recording facilities are available in the FL classroom, the teacher may record the efforts of some students each time, then play them back. This technique will add a sense of fun and interest and encourage students to try their best to improve their oral reading abilities. To enhance good habits of faster reading, the teacher should insist on a high standard: mumbling or half-heard reading is not acceptable.

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