

# Reading aloud for comprehension: a neglected teaching aid

Husain Dhaif

University of Bahrain

Although various studies have emphasised the importance of reading aloud to children in first language teaching situations as a means of improving their comprehension and encouraging them to read, this technique has been neglected in second/foreign language learning situations.

This paper discusses the findings of a research project which was undertaken at the University of Bahrain to determine whether the teacher's reading aloud to learners of English as a foreign language leads to a significantly higher level of comprehension than when the learners read silently on their own. In one session subjects were given three passages to read silently and asked to answer five multiple-choice comprehension questions in each passage. In another session the researcher read aloud three other passages of comparable reading difficulty to the same subjects before asking them to answer the comprehension questions. The results show that the subjects' scores were significantly higher in the second testing session, which indicates that the reading aloud technique had a positive effect on the learners' reading comprehension. In answer to a brief questionnaire, 77% of the subjects reported that they were in favour of the teacher reading aloud to them.

## INTRODUCTION

For several decades now we have been told by those concerned with psycholinguistics, foreign language pedagogy and teacher training that the best and most legitimate approach to teaching reading for comprehension is through engaging the learner in silent reading. Traditionally teachers have been warned not to interrupt or disturb learners when they sit to read either intensively or extensively. Reading aloud by either the teacher or a competent fellow learner is rarely encouraged and is only to be conducted when reading dialogues. The underlying principle governing such a contention is that reading is normally a solitary activity during which only the learner/reader retrieves meaning from the printed word; thus he or she should be the one who should read.

Two points need to be clarified in this connection. First, it should be noted that despite the emphasis which has been placed in various studies on the importance of reading aloud to children in first language situations as a means of improving their comprehension and encouraging them to read (cf. Elley, 1989; Hillman, 1975; McCormick, 1981), this technique has not yet been incorporated in second/foreign language learning situations. As May (1986:10) points out :

“Current research in the area of reading methods and techniques has rendered substantive empirical data indicating the value of reading aloud to native English-speaking children. Unfortunately, similar evidence is not available to support the use of this teaching technique with non-native speakers.”

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Husain DHAIF is Director of the English Language Centre and Assistant Professor in the English Department, University of Bahrain, where he lectures on ELT methodology and trains future teachers of English. His main research interests include CALL and teaching English for science and technology. He has published articles in *FORUM* and *CALICO*.

This neglect of the reading aloud technique as an aid to reading comprehension persists even though it can be argued that in the early stages of learning to read, a non-native speaker goes through similar learning processes as those experienced by a child learning to read in its first language.

The second point is that when we talk about techniques for developing reading we tend, as Eskey (1983) points out, to confuse what beginners do and need when they are learning to read with what fluent readers actually do. We therefore assume that all learners require the same technique despite our knowledge that in EFL situations the majority of learners are not fluent readers. In such situations many beginning non-native readers adopt a bit-by-bit reading technique due to their limited linguistic ability. Guided by their anxiety to understand each word, these readers tend to break the sentences into small parts while they read. As a result the sentences lose their integrity and consequently become meaningless. Reading aloud to learners at the early stage would therefore restore that integrity and present larger semantic units which would lead to better understanding. With sufficient practice and active participation in the reading tasks, the readers would be encouraged to follow a more holistic approach to reading which would be triggered off by their realisation that a higher level of comprehension can only be achieved by reading larger chunks of texts and not by attempting to understand individual words or bits of sentences.

As mentioned earlier, the use of the reading aloud technique in second language learning situations has rarely been investigated. However, two studies which are of direct relevance here are May (1986) and Santos (1987). The findings of the research conducted by May, which investigated the effect of the teacher's reading aloud in English on the reading comprehension of Spanish-speaking children, concluded that the results undoubtedly favour the use of reading aloud with the non-English speaking learners, regardless of linguistic level. (op.cit.:74). One of the questions addressed by Santos (1987), also working with Spanish-speaking learners, was the effect of the teacher's reading aloud of narrative prose on the ESL learners' reading comprehension. The results of this study revealed that reading aloud intervention has a significantly positive effect on the ESL learners' reading comprehension skill, particularly their ability to inter-relate, interpret, and draw conclusions from the content. (op.cit.: 68 - 69). Both studies suggest that further research is needed to investigate the effect of the reading aloud technique on adult learners and learners from other cultures.

With this state of affairs in mind, the present study attempted to answer the following question:

- Would the teacher's reading aloud to learners with basic English proficiency lead to a significantly higher rate of comprehension than when they read silently on their own?

It should be indicated, however, that what is meant here by reading aloud is not giving the learners a listening role, but rather engaging them in the reading process by asking them to follow and read silently while the teacher reads aloud. In the present study this was achieved through random checks by the researcher: for example by intentionally reading a word wrongly and being corrected by the subjects, or by pausing at random spots in the text and asking them to read the following word. However, in order to maintain similar testing procedures in the two types of reading sessions, no discussion of meaning of any vocabulary items or general meaning of the text was provided in the reading aloud sessions.

## **SUBJECTS**

A total of 140 male and female first-year students were chosen randomly at the University of Bahrain during the first semester of 1990. These students represented the five colleges at the university, namely the Colleges of Arts, Science, Business, Education and Engineering. All students had completed the university orientation English programme, which offers English language instruction at what can roughly be characterised as intermediate level and which is a pre-requisite for enrolling in the first-year English courses. At this level, students are normally capable of securing an average score of 200 - 250 on the TOEFL. At the time of the study all subjects were enrolled in at least one first-year English language course in which development of the reading skill is an integral part. No language proficiency tests were administered prior to the study. This was felt unnecessary since the subjects were going to be tested against themselves.

## **MATERIALS**

The six reading passages used in the study were selected from various course books that have been commercially produced to provide practice for the Cambridge FCE examinations. The passages chosen represented three different textual types:

- a) a narrative passage with an inbuilt dialogue designed to illustrate the effect of phonological features such as stress and intonation
- b) a straight narrative passage
- c) an expository passage containing factual information about a certain subject.

Minor changes had to be made to certain items of vocabulary in order to bring them within the vocabulary range of the subjects. The average length of each passage was about 3,000 words. In order to ensure that all the passages were of a similar level of reading difficulty, Fry's Readability Graph (Fry 1965) was used. Although Fry's system and other statistically-based systems have been criticised by Carrell (1987) and others, I believe that the bulk of the criticism is justified only when such systems are used to measure the readability of longer texts. As the current study is concerned

only with short pieces of text, I believe that Fry's system can be considered to be both objective and practical and has been used in various other studies to determine readability of texts (e.g. Weidner 1976; Gould 1977).

Fry's system involves the measurement of both sentence complexity and word difficulty. Following this system, the readability of each passage was determined by counting the total number of sentences in the first 100 words in each passage, and then the total number of syllables in those words. The result for each passage was then plotted on Fry's readability graph, which showed that all the passages fell within the same band of readability as that of the Oxford grade 5 readers.

## **METHOD**

Two testing sessions were held during each of which subjects had to read three reading passages and answer five multiple-choice comprehension questions after each passage. In the first session, subjects were asked to read each passage in turn and then attempt to answer the questions, while in the second session the researcher read each passage aloud and then asked the subjects to answer the questions. In the second, subjects were told that they had to read silently while the researcher read the passage aloud. They were also told that their silent reading would be checked by the researcher by either randomly reading a word wrongly and requiring them to read the word aloud correctly, or by pausing at random spots in the passage and asking them to read the subsequent word aloud. In both sessions each passage was dealt with separately and was introduced briefly in one sentence or two giving the subjects a very general idea about what they were about to read. No discussion of the general meaning of the passage or vocabulary explanation was conducted in either session.

In order to determine the length of time to be allowed for dealing with each passage, three similar passages were piloted. It was found that on average, students needed 5 minutes to read each passage and about 7 minutes to answer the five multiple-choice questions. Consequently, in the first testing session, subjects were allowed 7 minutes to read each passage, while in the second session the researcher read each passage aloud in 5 minutes and allowed the other 2 minutes for the subjects to recapitulate. The time allowed proved to be optimum for reading the passages at a normal speed with the necessary pauses at full stops and the end of paragraphs. In both sessions, subjects were allowed 7 minutes to answer the five multiple-choice questions after each passage. A normal marking procedure was applied whereby a subject was awarded one mark for each correct answer, making a maximum score of 15 marks.

In order to substantiate the findings of the study, the subjects were asked at the end of the second testing session to indicate whether they preferred the teacher to read the text aloud to them or not. Five legitimate reasons were provided in each case

from which the subjects had to choose only one. In the case of a positive response, the subjects had to choose one of the following reasons:

1. It helps you to associate sound with symbol.
2. It helps you to understand the overall meaning of the text better.
3. It helps you to read better and faster by following the teacher.
4. It helps you to recognise the pronunciation of certain words, and the stress and intonation of sentences.
5. You cannot read and you prefer to be a listener.

In the case of a negative response, the five reasons given were:

1. You feel insulted.
2. The teacher normally reads quickly and you cannot follow.
3. You cannot concentrate when someone else reads for you.
4. You normally need to go over the sentences more than once.
5. It makes you dependent on the teacher.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents the relevant data in respect of the reading comprehension tests. It will be observed that the performance of the subjects in the second test was higher than their performance in the first, indicating that comprehension did actually improve with the help of the teacher reading aloud to them. A t-test was applied to the results of the two tests and it was found, as illustrated in Table 1, that the difference between the mean scores was statistically significant in all cases ( $p < 0.005$ ).

Table 1: Means and standard deviations for the reading tests

College	1st Test		2nd Test		Values of t
	M.	S.D.	M.	S.D.	
Arts (n=21)	4.53	1.84	7.90	2.63	4.83
Science (n=24)	5.29	2.05	9.54	2.48	6.47
Business (n=26)	6.16	3.43	8.78	3.16	2.87
Education (n=36)	3.75	1.18	6.52	2.40	6.21
Engineering (n=33)	6.54	2.41	8.81	2.75	3.57
Overall	5.35	2.58	8.13	2.91	8.30

(The maximum score possible is 15)

It is perhaps interesting to note that the highest scores in both tests were achieved by subjects in the College of Business and the College of Engineering, followed by the College of Science. This was rather to be expected since English is the medium of instruction in these colleges. However, the technique was most effective with subjects in the College of Arts and the College of Education. The mean scores for these subjects improved by about 74% in the second test. The fact that these students are the weakest group in the population as indicated by their mean scores in the first test ( $M= 4.52$  and  $3.75$  respectively) is a good indicator in itself that poor readers could benefit from a more "supportive" technique whereby they are helped with the identification of graphic symbols by being given their sound representations. In fact, it was observed by some colleagues teaching in the orientation programme at the University of Bahrain that on many occasions during exams, their students would ask them simply to read certain words to them in order to help them grasp their meaning.

As stated above, one passage in each testing session contained a dialogue. The purpose of this type of text was to determine whether the proper interpretation by the teacher of certain punctuation signals, including stress and intonation markers, would lead to a higher level of comprehension. The results shown in Table 2 indicate that, although this was the case in three of the five colleges, there was no conclusive evidence to substantiate a generalisation, despite the fact that certain questions pertaining to this type of text were related to the mood of the characters in the dialogue as indicated by the type of stress and intonation employed. One explanation might be that the printed punctuation marks, such as question marks or exclamation marks, are sufficient in themselves to convey the intended message of the speaker/writer. This observation is substantiated by the fact that only three subjects out of those who preferred that the teacher read aloud to them indicated that their reason was because it helps them to recognise the pronunciation of certain words and the stress and intonation of sentences.

With regard to the questionnaire, the analysis of the responses substantiated the test results since 77% of the subjects indicated a preference for the teacher's reading aloud technique. Among these, 47% indicated that their reason was that it helps them understand the overall meaning of the text better.

Two further observations might be of interest here. First, it was noticed that after reading the second passage, students felt bored and some of them showed signs of fatigue and stress. This was a clear indication that the concentration span of these readers was limited to 25 - 30 minutes. Secondly it was observed that some students approached the reading exercise in a task-oriented manner. In other words, they would read the first paragraph and then turn immediately to read the first question to see whether the paragraph actually contained the answer. If it did, then they

would choose the answer and proceed to repeat this technique with the rest of the text. This, in my opinion, is a direct consequence of the approach fostered in our institutions in dealing with the reading skill. Reading comprehension is normally measured by the marks obtained by the students in reading comprehension exercises rather than by the degree of enjoyment derived from what they read, or by their ability to discuss it intelligently.

Table 2: Means and standard deviations for the dialogue texts

College	1st Test		2nd Test	
	M.	S.D.	M.	S.D.
Arts (n=21)	1.61	0.72	2.76	1.30
Science (n=24)	1.95	0.88	3.12	1.23
Business (n=26)	3.00	1.35	2.19	1.41
Education (n=36)	1.66	1.13	2.25	1.29
Engineering (n=33)	2.96	1.42	2.48	1.35
Overall	2.26	1.32	2.52	1.37

(The maximum score possible is 5)

## CONCLUSIONS

In general, the results of this study suggest that learners with only a basic level of proficiency in English have a better understanding of what they are reading in a teacher reading aloud situation than in a silent reading situation. The implication for teaching reading comprehension is that whenever possible teachers should set aside lesson time for reading selected texts to their students, especially to those poor readers who are normally unable to read fluently and hence always have reading comprehension difficulties. It is hoped that the reading aloud technique will help such learners to improve their level of reading comprehension and consequently encourage them to read, thereby breaking the vicious circle in which weak readers tend to be trapped: they do not enjoy reading because they do not understand, and because they do not understand, they do not read. Naturally, it would be wrong to argue that the learners should be provided with life-jackets throughout their learning-to-read process, but it would be equally unreasonable to throw them in at

the deep end while they are still experiencing difficulties in developing their reading comprehension skills. It should also be recognised that further research is needed to determine at what level the teacher's reading aloud begins to interfere with rather than assist comprehension.

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