Reading Aloud Allowed?

Henry Hepburn
University of Malaya

Reading aloud is still a very controversial issue in language teaching, especially in the field of TESL. Many teachers in different parts of the world use the technique of reading aloud every day and an oven greater number of students adapt to it quite readily. Sheila Been, for example, describing the teaching of English in her country writes:

In the third year of English... the reading-to-learn stage has been reached.... The first reading is usually done aloud by the teacher; this is followed either by reading aloud around the class or in response to comprehension questions the answers to which can be lifted directly from the text (1979:93).

However, many teacher trainers and language teaching 'experts' are hostile to the idea of reading aloud and have expressed their objections to it.

....ordinary reading aloud is not merely a useless exercise for foreign language learners: it is likely to be harmful, because it tends to produce just that evil which the teacher is most anxious to prevent - parrot talking without thought of any meaning (West, 1969:90).

Despite such objections as expressed by West, teachers still use the technique on the grounds that 'There is nothing wrong with reading aloud. After all it gives good pronunciation practice'. And indeed support for that view is found among theoreticians and textbook writers. These lines are taken from a fairly recent book. 'In practice, the phenomenon of reading aloud is a pragmatic necessity.... There is often a strong theoretical and practical case for reading aloud in intermediate foreign language classrooms' (Davies of Whitney, 1985:71). As a result, there appears to have developed a marked difference between theory and practice, possibly a hangover from 'colonial' times. This divergence, however, poses a difficult question for newly trained TESL teachers bound for secondary schools. They will be concerned with developing the skills of the students who have already passed the elementary stage of reading. 'What shall we do?' they ask. 'The pupils expect it (i.e. reading aloud) and the class teachers use it.' The teachers are thus caught in a dilemma. 'To read aloud or not to read aloud? That is the question.' Any attempt to resolve this dilemma will have to take account of the views of both sides in the controversy, It is, after all, always possible that the practioner at the 'chalkface' may have rather more intuitive knowledge of his subject *vis-à-vis* classroom work than the theoretician sitting in his 'ivory' tower somewhat removed from the 'cut and thrust' of the chalk-face, pronouncing on what should or should not be.

Those in favour of reading aloud (the pro-group) claim certain advantages for both the teacher and the student. It is considered profitable for the teacher to engage the students in reading aloud around the class as:

1. It affords a basic form of classroom organization and discipline, especially in dictation-type exercises where everyone has to concentrate to try and spell the words correctly (Davies and Whitney, 1985:70).
2. Students can use the technique as a vehicle for examining the meaning of the texts; '...and to express clearly the ideas to get over to the listeners' (Gray, 1956:139).
3. Students can correct each other's mistakes in pronunciation (Manypractising teachers).

For the learner, reading aloud gives the opportunity:

a. to say SOMETHING is class (Practising teachers).
b. to develop pronounciation skills; 'To do oral reading well, a student must first speak well' (Raja Nasir, 1969:79).
c. to sort out relationships between continual strings of words. '...to find out how different parts may best be read to make the meaning closer to others' (Gray, 1956:139).
d. students enjoy it and expect it (Practising teachers/teacher trainees).

Those hostile to reading aloud (the anti-group) point out that reading aloud:

1. prevents successful (silent) reading, especially of long texts;
2. confuses the skills of reading and listening;
3. invites false comparisons between spelling (the printed word) and pronunciation (the spoken word);
4. encourages 'bad' habits which will inhibit successful reading.

To these objections the pro-group reply that:

a. the objections are based on research into first language learning and not second language learning;
b. the research work was concerned with unsuccessful Li learners;
c. the objections ignore the needs of the successful learners of the second language;
d. the objections against reading aloud are contradictory. Though criticism is raised about reading aloud passages meant for reading comprehension, no such objection is raised at the reading aloud of dialogues written in text books.

The controversy seems to revolve around what is meant by reading. The pro-group seem to view the matter in terms of the oral skills while the anti-group appear to emphasize the decoding skills. It might, therefore, be useful to examine the views of three reading specialists on the matter.

1. Goodman described reading as '...a psychological process by which the reader reconstructs as best he can, a message which has been encoded by the writer as a graphic display' (1971:135).
2. Francoise Grellet answers her question 'What is reading comprehension?' with these words: 'Understanding a written text means extracting the required information from it as efficiently as possible' (1981:3).
3. 'The view of reading that we have offered sees it as essentially concerned with meaning.... The transfer of a message from writer to reader' (Nuttall, 1982:18).

Reading may thus be summed up as being 'the ability to take meaning from the written word'. If this is an acceptable description of reading, then the use of pronunciation has little bearing on the development of that ability. If pronunciation work is necessary, then spoken and not written work should be used. If the pronunciation of certain words is the teacher's concern, then students need practice of each word either in isolation or in a phrase, but not somewhere in the middle of a text. If oral fluency is the aim, then what will be obtained at best is reading aloud fluency. It is noted that there exist written texts which are meant to be read aloud and listened to, but these are few (TV and radio news bulletins); and the vast majority of students will not be required to become efficient news readers.

Consider the following texts as examples of 'reading' material.

Text 1

```
Kong Say Fong        18 JIn Badam 7 Cheras        03-605 7323
Kong Seap Yit        Fl 933 JIn Stesyen B. Arany   03-605 1084
Kong See Chew        96 Tmn Hijau 4 Kajang         03-833 2503
Kong See Fook        58 JIn 79 Kepong Baru         03-634 3725
Kong See Kuan        15172 Lrg Bt Pantai KL        03-757 9696
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Text 2

Mazda 323 1.5 '84 3500km. Aircon, stereo, alarm, great condition. Gim Bee 2545972.
Mitsubishi Sigma 1978 aircon, radio cassette, excellent condition, low mileage 6800 $ono Call K C Goh 7828943
Toyota Corolla KE 20, 1200 type 1973, petrol 45 mpg. Cash price 3800 $ono tel: 9059998 or 8334457.
Range Rover model 1984. 1 owner. Price $55,000 ono Call 4235081 or 4235091. Contact Mustaffa office hours.

Text 3

<div align="center">

'A' - Level Meeting
Geography Section

</div>

Date: 3.10.1985
Time: 3.00 pm (prompt)
Place: A-V room
Topic: Field excursion to the Karak Highway.

Text 4

Iowans Thrilled by Cultural Show put up by Malaysian Students in Farm Aid Project.

The words of a Malay folk song that echoed through a packed theatre at Iowa State University here on Saturday night, said it all; 'Rasa Sayangah' or 'I've got a loving feeling'.

The singers were the cast of about 80 Malaysian students in a performance called 'A Night in Malaysia'. But their audience of Iowans was just as enthusiastic about the song, standing and clapping aloud. (*Malay Mail*, 2.2.87)

Text 5

Resident of Taman Muda, Cheras, is not pleased with the growing heaps of rubbish in this housing estate. He claims 'The developer has stopped collecting rubbish because some of the house buyers are not paying the maintenance fee.

As I have been paying the fee, I don't have a problem with the garbage collection service,' he says. 'However, rubbish is accumulating in many areas and this is unpleasant.'

He hopes the developer can come up with a better solution to the problem. A spokesman for the developer, Metroplex Development Sdn Bhd., says the firm is looking into the problem. There will be further discussions of the situation soon and Resident can rest assured that a better solution is on the cards. (*Malay Mail*, 3.2.87).

It is highly unlikely that in reading these texts the reader is interested in the pronunciation of what he has read. He wanted something from the writing, i.e. the message the writer had expressed. It is very rare for even snippets from such items to be read aloud; and then there is a very special reason, e.g. having forgotten one's spectacles etc.

Despite the claim that students enjoy reading aloud, many learners are very poor at it. Hesitations, mistakes, inappropriate intonation and stress make a poor model for others to listen to. For the most part, such 'readers' are simply making sounds or at best mouthing words which may be traced back to lack of rehearsal time and time to comprehend what has to be read aloud. More often than not, a reading aloud lesson assumes a form not unlike the situation outlined below. Many teachers will recognize the scenario from their own experience.

```
T:      Open your books at page 57. Fatimah. You start reading please.
F:      Mr Jones was a widow....
T:      Mrsi Mrs Jones was a widow.
F:      Her husband had died in nineteen four four....
T:      forty-four!
F:      forty-four. The follow year she decide....
T:      following....
F:      .... The following year she decide to go to Austeralia.
T:      Decided ... and it's Australia, not Austeralia.
F:      ... she decided to go to Australia.
T:      Thank you Fatimah. Zul, go on, please.
Z:      Her husband had died....
T:      NO, no no. We've already read that. We're at line 27. Pay attention!
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One result is that the learner becomes bored. Another is that the teacher gets irritated. It is difficult to see how in such a situation a 'reader' can 'sort out the relationship between continual strings of words' (Davies & Whitney, 1985:70).

It is hard to see how such a technique can help students become better readers. They have to listen to English being badly pronounced with poor stress and intonation by student after student. Such a practice merely serves to confirm them in their existing unfortunate habits. Listening to inaccurate peer' models reading aloud in the classroom is a dubious technique for teaching' reading skills. In any case, such techniques are testing and not teaching devices.

If students have to rely on the reading lesson for the opportunity to say something, then it suggests that the development of oral fluency is being neglected. If the student is to learn a language by using it (how else does one learn a language?), i.e. develop oral fluency, then noise is a necessary accompaniment. By noise is meant the noise of work emanating from activities such as pair work, group work, discussions and other activities which promote oral fluency. Does reading aloud really promote oral fluency?

It is also considered rather dubious the claims that dictation can assist in developing readly fluency. Such a claim seems to confuse the skills of speaking and writing with that of reading as does the charge levelled at the practice of reading dialogues aloud. A dialogue is the spoken form of English and as such is meant to be spoken. The fact of putting spoken material into written form and then using it as spoken material does not constitute reading as defined earlier.

For example, an actor has to learn for a particular performance the lines of a play. These lines are written down in the form of a dialogue. During rehearsals he uses these lines in their written form until he has

memorized them and has no further need of his script to remind him of the lines. During rehearsals and in performance, he has to give expression to the ideas embodied in the lines and he does so by saying the words aloud. Can the actor's performance be termed 'reading aloud' or is he speaking?

Any development of a skill demands practice and an inventory of the reading processes would be helpful in formulating activities to promote the skill of reading. However, learners' processes are not easy to document. The wealth of work on error analysis initiated by Selinker (1972), Corder (1981), Richards (1974) and many others has provided some insight into how ESL learners cope. This work was mainly in the field of spoken and written skills. Since the mid-1970s, more and more attempts have been made to study second language reading processes. Hosenfeld (1976) examined American secondary school children reading French and Spanish while Seliger (1972), Cziko (1978), Lambert and Tucker (1972) and Yorio (1971) also made valuable contributions. Of particular significance is the work of Smith and Goodman (1973). Though mainly concerned with L1 readers, their work to date suggests agreement as to what is thought to constitute the known process of reading. Goodman explained reading in the following terms: 'Reading is a selective process. It involves partial use of available minimal language cues selected from perceptual input on the basis of the reader's expectation. As this partial information is processed, tentative decisions are made to be confirmed, rejected or refined as reading progresses'. (1970:26).
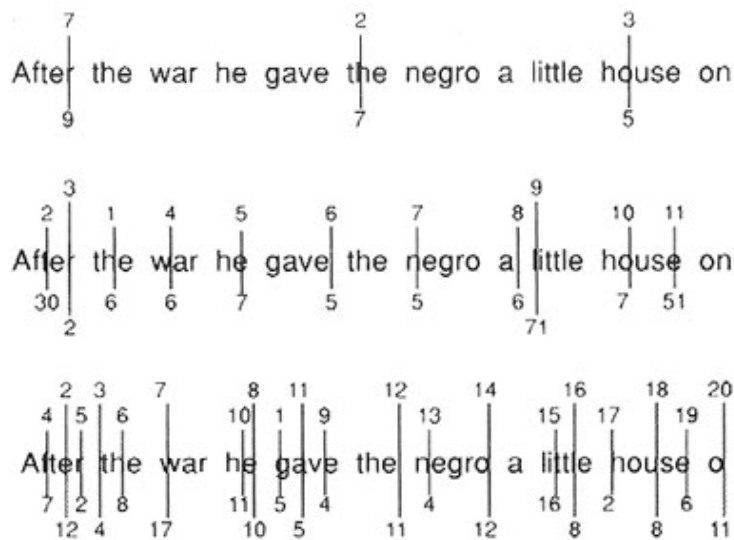
Reading, therefore, involves the use of information to determine meaning and the technique used (among others) is bound up with the patterns made by the movement of the eyes. Consider the following extract from Gray (1968:47):

DIFFERENCES AMONG ADULTS IN SILENT READING

Unfortunately, all adults who have been taught to read do not acquire equally efficient habits. Striking evidence of this was obtained by Buswell (1937:55) who arranged the silent reading records of eight adults in order from best to poorest.

Those presented in the figure below are the first, fifth and eight in the series, the first record is that of a very efficient reader. It shows that he recognized two or more words at each fixation and that his eyes moved regularly from left to right along the lines. As they did so, the meanings of the words recognized were fused into the idea or ideas represented by the sentence. Such a reader is able to make wide use of reading to meet practical needs, and also for pleasure.

The Teaching of Reading.

```
       7                    2                    3
       |                    |                    |
After  the war he gave the negro a little house on
       |                    |                    |
       9                    7                    5


            3                             9
    2   1   4   5   6   7   8   10  11
    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
After the war he gave the negro a little house on
    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
    30  6   6   7   5   5   6   7   51
    2                         71


    2 3   7      8 11      12      14      16      18   20
   4|5|6  |     10|1|9    |  13   15|17   |19  |
   | | |  |      | | |    |  |    | | |   | | |
After the war he gave the negro a little house o
   | | |  |      | | |    |  |    | | |   | | |
   7|2|8  |     11|5|4    |  4   16|2 |   8|  |
   12 4   17     10 5     11     12   8    8   11
```

Silent reading of three adults

In this figure the vertical lines represent centres of fixation. The numbers above the lines indicate the serial order of fixations; those below indicate duration in thirtieths of a second.

The second line shows the record of a less mature reader, whose eyes made frequent fixations. However, there was only one regressive, or backward, movement of the eyes. This procedure in reading maybe described as slow and careful. Apparently, the words had not been mastered well enough to be recognized instantly in units of two or three. A reader of this type can comprehend simple material fairly well - though he is not able to compete with superior readers in speed - and he encounters many difficulties with more complex material. He needs much practice before he can read fluently, easily and with satisfaction.

The third line is that of a very poor reader. It shows that he made many fixations per line, focused on each word from one to three times and moved irregularly back and forth along the line in search of clues to pronunciation and meaning. The first fixation was too far from the beginning of the line to permit him to recognize the first word - hence the backward movement to the second fixation. His performance from that point on shows that he was encountering much difficulty. This is often due to lack of systematic training in reading, inadequate emphasis on the skills of word recognition. or failure to develop a thoughtful reading attitude. Whatever the cause, this adult is poorly prepared to use reading as an aid in meeting the demands of everyday life or in attaining the goals of fundamental education.

From the diagram it is clear that in efficient reading the words are processed in groups and not as single lexical items. It is accepted that the above study was concerned with the L1 but Goodman (1971) claims that learning to read an L2 should not be more difficult for someone already literate in another language. This contention is supported by Lambert and Tucker (1972) who found that American children learning to read in French displayed a dramatic transfer of this ability to read in English.

What emerges is that an efficient reader is not limited to the string of words as he passes along the line of writing. His eyes jump back and forth, taking in cues to anticipate what is coming next, skipping back for more information if a decision on meaning has to be rejected or refined. Smith quotes studies which show that the fluent reader's eye-fixations are places where they will yield optimum information, i.e. 'the eyes move down, across, up and back' (1972:24).

Reading aloud, however, treats reading as a linear activity. The student's eyes follow the words as they read and hence follow the text linearly which technique is markedly different from that employed by an

efficient reader who 'chunks' many words or expressions in his eye movements. He goes back to check something or forward to confirm or reject his hypothesis. Such techniques are not possible when reading aloud and as a result the student is prevented from developing or practising effective reading strategies.

In addition, reading aloud requires that every word be understood not only visually but orally as well, leading to what Sheila Been calls 'mediated word identification' (1978:94), the effect being to slow down the speed of reading. Smith (1971:90-4) suggests that in order to understand meaning, reading must be fast. The reader must 'see' as large a chunk of visual information as possible. Ferguson also supports this contention (1973:30-4) as in slow reading, the overall picture may be lost owing to attention to detail and unfamiliar vocabulary which may halt any reading at all, a fact demonstrated by the extract from Gray above.

Sackville-Troike suggests that 'selectiveness in perception is an important factor in fluent reading in that the reader has to recognize the important meaning-carrying elements at a glance and not give each word equal attention' (1979:32). Recognizing groups of words is one way of recognizing redundancies in the language and using them to predict what follows - an essential step to fluent reading. This point is further echoed by Yogi who says the reader has to recall unfamiliar cues, his memory span is short, and he therefore forgets the cues he has already stored. 'These two factors make associations insecure, slow and difficult' (1971:110).

As a result, reading aloud has a negative effect on reading speed. A skilled reader is able to read faster than an unskilled one as he is able to chunk the material into sense units, thus affording him a higher reading speed than an inefficient reader who reads more slowly. Skilled readers read at a speed of between 400-800 words per minute. Reading aloud operates at a speed of between 120-400 words per minute, the speed of unskilled readers. Reading aloud therefore can inhibit improvements in reading speeds which is a pity as there exists evidence that increase in the L2 reading speed can lead to a parallel improvement in the L1. As early as 1941, M. West claimed the following: 'The resulting improvement in the rate of English reading was 232% while the Bengali reading (in which to practice had been given) was 266%' (1941:7).

However, any reading programme should include authentic reasons for reading, i.e. reasons that are not concerned with language learning but with the uses to which reading is put outside the classroom. As writers expect their work to be read and not heard, most reading is done silently. The question 'How much time is spent reading aloud outside the classroom?' therefore becomes an important one for the teacher, especially as reading aloud is an extremely difficult exercise and a highly specialized skill. How many students will need this skill?

Consider the following charts and fill them in by putting a tick in the appropriate box.

		Never		Sometimes		Often		always	
		L1	L2	L1	L2	L1	L2	L1	L2
1.	(a) Do you read aloud?								
	(b) Do you read aloud when you are alone?								
	(c) Do you read aloud when you are with a friend?								
	(d) Do you read aloud with a group?								
	(e) Do you like reading aloud?								
	(f) Do you feel worried when you read aloud?								
	(g) do you feel upset when your reading is corrected?								

L1 = your own language.
L2 = English.

2. For which of the following do you think reading aloud in English is useful? Put a tick in the appropriate box.

(a) understanding the text ☐

remembering the text ☐

memorizing the text ☐

understanding pronunciation ☐

(b) improving pronunciation ☐

practising intonation ☐

practising dialogues ☐

practising dictation ☐

If you have put more ticks in the never/sometimes columns in Chart 1 and in group (a) in Chart 2, you may find Christine Nuttall's words very apt.

'If you think of the percentage of time most adults spend on reading aloud compared with the time spent on reading silently, you may feel you should adjust the proportion of time spent on each' (1982:3).

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