



## The Relationship Between Reading Aloud Strategies and Comprehension Among the Iranian EFL learners in Pre-Intermediate Levels

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### Abstract

However different studies have focused on the importance of reading aloud to children in the first language teaching situations as a means of improving their comprehension and encouraging them to read, this technique has been neglected in foreign language situations or teaching techniques. This paper have done in one of the English Language Institute in Sabzevar, a city in Khorasan Razavi province, in order to find out whether the teacher's reading aloud to learners of English as a foreign language leads to a higher level of comprehension than when the learners read silently on their own. In one session of the class, students were given three passages to read silently and asked to answer five multiple-choice comprehension questions in each passage. In another day the researcher read aloud three other passages of comparable reading difficulty to the same students before asking them to answer the comprehension questions. The results show that the students' scores were significantly higher in the second testing session, which indicates a positive effect of the reading aloud technique on the learners reading comprehension. Moreover, in answer to a short questionnaire, 73% of the subjects reported that they are interested in the teacher' reading aloud strategy.

**Key words:** Reading aloud strategies; Comprehension; Teaching techniques

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### INTRODUCTION

In past decades 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 and silent reading makes helps learners to focus on the reading strategies better. Teachers on those days have been never interrupted or disturbed learners when they sat to intensively or extensively read. Nowadays, also the teacher or a competent fellow learner is rarely encouraged to use Reading aloud it is only to be conducted when reading dialogues is happened. The only reason for this discussion 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.

There are two important points which should be clarified about this opinion. First, it should be explained that also there are various studies on the importance of reading aloud to children as a means of improving their comprehension and making them eager to read in their first language situations (c. elley, 1989; Hillman, 1975; McCormick, 1981), this technique has not yet been totally supported in foreign language learning situations and there are lack of supporting studies in this field. In the case of this subject May (1986:10) believed: "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."

This kind of ignorance in reading aloud technique as a useful mean to reading comprehension persists event 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. This kind of ignorance in reading aloud technique as a useful mean

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Another important 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 also know that all learners require the same technique in reading despite our knowledge that in EFL situations most of learners are not fluent in reading. In this situation many Pre-intermediate non-native readers adopt a bit-by-bit reading technique due to their limited linguistic ability and capacity. Because of their anxiety to get each word completely, these learners tend to break the sentences into small parts while they read. So as a result, the sentences lose their integrity and they become meaningless. Reading aloud to EFL learners at the Pre-intermediate stage would 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 eager to follow a more holistic approach to reading which would be triggered off by their realization that a higher level of comprehension can only be achieved by reading larger chunks of texts and not by attempting to understand individual word or bits of sentences.

As the researcher mentioned before, using of reading aloud technique in EFL situations has rarely been investigated. However, May (1986) and Santos (1987) have done two studies which are directly related to this technique. The findings of the research conducted by May, which investigated the effect of the teacher's reading aloud in EFL classes on the reading comprehension of Spanish-speaking Pre-intermediate EFL learners, showed that the results undoubtedly favour the use of reading aloud with the non-English speaking learners, regardless of linguistic level (op.cit., p. 74). Santos (1987), a teacher who works with Spanish-speaking learners, presented a question that was about the effect of the teacher's reading aloud of narrative prose on the ESL learners reading comprehension. This study also revealed that reading aloud intervention has a significantly positive effect on the ESL learners reading comprehension skill, specially their ability to inter-relate, interpret and take conclusions from the content (op.cit., pp. 68-69). These two related studies suggest that further research is needed to investigate the effect of the reading aloud technique on adult or Pre-intermediate learners and learners from other cultures and countries.

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## RESEARCH QUESTION

According to the explanation above, the present research is going to answer the following question:

- Would the teacher's reading aloud to EFL learners in Pre-intermediate levels of English proficiency lead to a significantly higher rate of comprehension than when they read silently?

Reading aloud is not giving the learners a listening role, it should be indicated at first. What is meant here is engaging them in the reading process by asking or forcing them to follow and read silently while the teacher reads aloud. In this 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 and all parts of two sessions were the same.

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## SUBJECTS

A total of 70 male and female Pre-intermediate EFL learners were chosen randomly in Farhang English Language Institute during the first semester of 2012 in summer. These learners were students of high schools from the first to third grades and their average age was 16. All the learners had completed the elementary levels of learning English before coming to pre-intermediate level. In the time of research, all subjects were enrolled in at least one first-year English language course in which development of the reading skill is an integrate part. Also, no language proficiency tests were administered prior to the study. This was felt unnecessary since the subjects were going to be tested against themselves.

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## MATERIALS

All 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.

Some little 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 2500 to 3,000 words. Also, the readability of each passage was measured 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 all done by the researcher.

## METHOD

During a semester two testing sessions were held and during each of them, 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 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 find out the length of time to be allowed for dealing with each passage, three similar passages were piloted. It was found that on average, learners 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 being 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 recognize 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 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**

Subjects	1st Test		2nd Test		Values of t
	M.	S.D.	M.	S.D.	
Male EFL Learners (n: 31)	6.16	3.43	8.87	3.16	2.87
Female EFL Learners (n: 39)	6.54	2.41	8.81	2.75	3.57
Overall	6.35	2.92	8.84	2.96	3.22

(The maximum score possible is 15)

It is perhaps interesting to note that the gender of learners does not play an important role in this study. As the table shows, in the first session of the test, female learners get an average score of 6.54 which is higher than the male ones. On the other hand, in the second session of the test, male learners get an average score of 3.16 which is higher than the females.

With regard to the questionnaire, the analysis of the responses substantiated the test results since 73% of the subjects indicated a preference for the teachers 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 degree of enjoyment derived from what they read, or by their ability to discuss it intelligently.

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## CONCLUSION

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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 recognized 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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