

# ***The effect of the teacher's reading aloud on the reading comprehension of EFL students***

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*Although reading aloud receives considerable emphasis in English as a first language, it is traditionally discouraged by EFL teachers and methodology specialists. Reading aloud, in fact, is particularly important for EFL learners at the early stage of learning. Beginning readers tend to read word by word. Reading aloud helps them read larger semantic units rather than focusing on graphic cues. The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of the teacher's reading aloud on the reading comprehension of EFL students reading a story. Seventy-five students participated in the study. The experimental group had a story read aloud to them by the teacher, whereas the control group read the story silently. Two dependent measures were used: a multiple-choice test and a story frame test. Results showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group on both measures. This indicated that reading aloud by the teacher may have a significant positive effect on learners' reading comprehension.*

## ***The controversy about reading aloud***

Reading aloud, or 'oral reading', is traditionally discouraged by EFL/ESL teachers and those concerned with EFL/ESL methodology. An extreme view is that of Hill and Dobbyn (1979: 69) who see reading aloud in class as 'merely a way of passing 45 minutes or so with as little trouble as possible for the teacher: it does not help the pupils'. Another view is expressed by White (1982: 22), who points tentatively to potential benefit: 'In the early stages of learning to read, it may be helpful for the teacher to read the passage aloud to the class while the pupils follow the text in their books.' However, recent research has provided substantive empirical evidence indicating that reading aloud to native English-speaking children improves their comprehension and encourages them to read (Flesher 1988; Manning, Manning, and Cody 1988; Ross 1986; Yaden, Smolkin, and Conlon 1989).

Reading aloud by the teacher can, in fact, be equally important for the EFL/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 (Dhaif 1990: 458). The focus of

student attention on surface details rather than communicative substance encourages word-for-word reading habits. Such habits discourage both pleasure reading and self-reliance in using foreign language texts (Swaffar, Arens, and Byrnes 1991: 24).

Reading aloud by the teacher helps EFL readers discover units of meaning that should be read as phrases rather than word by word. It also helps readers to see reading as a continuous, meaningful process of building larger semantic units rather than focusing on graphic cues. With appropriate practice readers gradually realize that they can achieve a higher level of comprehension by reading larger meaningful units of texts rather than focusing on individual units. The proper production by the teacher of punctuation signals, stress, and intonation, may play an important role in this process.

**Some research findings**

The role of reading aloud in EFL/ESL learning has rarely been investigated, but some studies exist. May (1986: 74), for instance, investigated the effect of the teacher's reading aloud in English on the reading comprehension of Spanish-speaking children. He concluded that the findings favour the use of reading aloud with EFL learners, regardless of linguistic level. Another study with Spanish-speaking learners (Santos 1987: 69) revealed that reading aloud has a significantly positive effect on ESL learners' reading comprehension, particularly their ability to inter-relate, interpret, and draw conclusions from the content. Working with Arabic-speaking university students, Dhaif (1990: 463) concluded 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 purpose of the present study was to answer the following question:

**Design of the experiment**

What is the effect of the teacher's reading aloud on the reading comprehension of sixth-grade EFL students reading a narrative text?

Reading aloud by the teacher is particularly significant with narratives. Narratives are characterized by the frequent occurrence of certain communicative elements (e.g. direct speech and dialogues). The proper oral production of prosodic features in these elements helps EFL learners to realize the feelings, mood, and emotions of the characters in the text. This, in turn, may facilitate their overall comprehension of the text, and enhance their appreciation of narratives.

**Subjects**

Seventy-five 6th grade male students at an intermediate school in Cairo participated in the study. They were divided into two classes. The experimental class consisted of 39 students, while the control class consisted of 36. The students had been studying EFL for six years.

**Material**

The story used in the study was *The Perfect Pearl* by Osborne (1989). It is a very short story with pictures, published in a series for the Arab world.

**Procedure** The story was divided into four meaningful parts. Each part was taught every other day in one 50-minute session. The two groups were taught by different teachers. I trained the teacher who taught the experimental group to read the whole story aloud meaningfully. In each session, as a pre-reading activity, the key vocabulary in the part to be read in the classroom was discussed and explained. Next, the teacher read that part aloud. In order to engage learners in the reading process, they were asked to follow and read silently while the teacher read aloud. In order to keep their attention, the teacher paused at random spots in the text and asked them to read the following word. The teacher then asked students several comprehension questions. The same procedure was followed with the control group, except that students read the text silently with no oral reading provided.

**Tests** Two tests were used to measure the effect of reading aloud. The first was a multiple-choice test. It included 15 questions. Split-half reliability was 0.9. The second test was an adapted form of a story frame. Story frame tests (Cudd and Roberts 1987: 74) focus on the story structure rather than specific content. They employ a cloze procedure. However, instead of only one word being left out of a sentence, key phrases or clauses are left out of a paragraph that summarizes the story or highlights some important aspects of the story. I modified the story frame so that every missing key phrase or clause was replaced by a question (word) (see Appendix). Students had to answer these questions in the blank lines provided.

**Scoring** In the multiple-choice test, one mark was given for each correct answer. In the story frame test, a story frame including model answers for questions was used as a guide in correcting the students' answers. The researcher and the teacher who taught the experimental group corrected the story frame test. Any disagreement was resolved through discussion until agreement was reached.

**Pre-testing** Tests were administered in one session three days before the onset of instruction. Students first answered the multiple-choice test, then the story frame test. The means for the two groups on both tests are presented in Table 1. A comparison of the pre-test means revealed no significant differences between the two groups on the multiple-choice test:  $t = 1.6$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ; on the story frame test:  $t = 1.3$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . This confirms that the two groups were essentially equivalent.

**Table 1:**  
Pre-test means (M) and standard deviations (SD)

	Experimental (n = 39)		Control (n = 36)	
	M	SD	M	SD
Multiple-choice test	3.9	1.2	3.4	1.4
Story frame test	3.4	1.0	3.1	1.0

**Post-testing** This was conducted three days after instruction was completed. The same procedure was followed. The interval between pre-testing and post-testing (14 days) was deemed long enough to control for any short-term memory effects.

**Table 2:**  
Post-test means (M) and  
standard deviations (SD)

	Experimental (n = 39)		Control (n = 36)	
	M	SD	M	SD
Multiple-choice test	11.7	1.4	9.3	1.8
Story frame test	11.0	2.0	9.0	1.5

## Results and discussion

Table 2 shows the post-test means for the two groups on both tests. A comparison of these means showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group on both tests: on the MCT:  $t = 6.2$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; on the SFT:  $t = 4.5$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . The results indicate that learners had better understanding of what they were reading in the teacher reading aloud situation than in the silent reading situation. Reading aloud by the teacher may help EFL readers to get rid of the text-based, bottom-up reading style which characterizes ineffective readers. This may help them to develop a positive attitude towards reading, on the one hand, and may motivate them to read for pleasure, on the other.

The pedagogic implication of these results for teaching EFL reading comprehension is that reading aloud by the teacher, if it is made a regular and integral part of the EFL teaching and learning process, can have a positive effect. Unplanned occasional reading aloud may not have a positive effect. Moreover, learners should be consciously aware of the objective of reading aloud. Further research is needed in this area with different age groups and different types of text.

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## The author

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**Appendix** Read the following story and answer the questions in the space provided:

Every year since he was a boy, Wajid, Ahmad's eldest son, had gone diving with his father. Wajid worked as *What?* \_\_\_\_\_. His father's job was *What?* \_\_\_\_\_.

Some days, Wajid had to take his father's place as a diver. *Why?* \_\_\_\_\_.

Wajid wanted to be rich. He dreamed of having *What?* \_\_\_\_\_ that would pay back the money to the boat captain and buy *What?* \_\_\_\_\_.

The next season, Wajid sailed as a diver and his father was the puller. His brothers sailed with him. After a week at the sea, they found the perfect pearl.

Wajid's brothers, eager to see it, jumped to their feet, knocked *Whom?* \_\_\_\_\_ who dropped *What?* \_\_\_\_\_. *Where?* \_\_\_\_\_.

Wajid sadly said: 'Our journey must not be for nothing. Let's catch some fish.'

They caught *What?* \_\_\_\_\_. Just then, the hamour opened its mouth and out came *What?* \_\_\_\_\_. They all were happy.

Wajid went immediately to *Whom?* \_\_\_\_\_ who was showing his pearls to a man in a white robe. The merchant offered Wajid 5000 for the pearl. This was a very cheap price. Wajid said: 'I will keep it rather than *What?* \_\_\_\_\_'. Sadly, Wajid went *Where?* \_\_\_\_\_ to tell his family.

Just then, someone knocked on the wall of the house. It was *Who?* \_\_\_\_\_. The man said: 'I will pay you *What?* \_\_\_\_\_. At last Wajid's dream came true. He and his family became rich.