

A Pilot Study: The relationship between reading-aloud performance and reading proficiency in English

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This pilot study investigated whether there is a correlation between English reading proficiency of Japanese EFL learners and their ability to read aloud properly. The former was measured through a reading comprehension test under the format of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), whereas the latter was evaluated in terms of (1) the use of correct breath/sense groups, (2) rate of reading, and (3) comprehension of a read-aloud passage. The subjects were 25 university students whose level of proficiency in English ranges from 'intermediate' to 'advanced.' They were given two tasks: the reading-aloud of a short passage and a TOEFL-type reading test. The analysis of the obtained data implied that the recognition of correct breath/sense group does not always facilitate comprehension while reading aloud. Also implied were that the ability to read aloud fast did not necessarily contribute to comprehension while reading aloud.

1. Introduction

The objective of this research is to examine the relationship between English reading proficiency of Japanese EFL learners and their ability to read aloud properly. For this purpose, we will first define the terms 'EFL reading proficiency' and 'the ability to read aloud properly.' Then, we will describe an experiment to investigate a correlation between EFL reading proficiency and the ability to read aloud properly.

2. Definition of Terms

2.1. Breath/Sense Groups

Sense group refers to a meaningful unit of words that are grammatically and semantically related with each other. (Crystal, 1997) The clue to understand it is the pause (or silence) that occurs before and after it. In principle, no pause appears within a sense group. Sense groups are introduced by grammatical words, e.g. relative pronoun, conjunction and preposition.

Meanwhile, a breath group refers to a stretch of utterance produced within a

single expiration of breath. A boundary between breath groups is usually signalled by a short pause for catching a breath. Where and how often one breathes while reading aloud may vary with the individual. However, the place where such a pause occurs agrees with a boundary between sense groups. (Crystal, 1997) Thus, in this study, a meaningful unit identified with the pause is called a **breath/sense group**.

A short pause as a signal of a boundary between breath/sense groups, appears basically at such positions as (‘ / ’ indicates a position where a pause is placed.):

- A sentence end, before and after a coordinate clause
e.g. *Mary came at four. / She looked very happy.*
He came at three, / left at four, / was home by five, / and in bed by six.
- Between a subordinate clause and a main clause
e.g. *When he comes, / tell him I'm out.*
- Before the conjunction *that*
e.g. *My mother said / that she would come soon.*
- Before and after a relative clause.
e.g. *The man, / who was dressed in a raincoat, / came towards me.*
(*non-restrictive use*)
The man who was dressed in a raincoat / came towards me. (*restrictive use*)
- (Before and) after a parenthetical expression
e.g. *Each one of the children, / I insist, / will have to go.*
In England, (/) however, / the ground floor means the first floor.
- After (or before) a sentence-modifying adverb
e.g. *Fortunately, / he wasn't injured at all.*
John can speak English, / naturally.
- After (or before) an adverbial phrase
e.g. *In spite of my frequent advice, / he would not listen to me.*
Yesterday / I saw John in the bookstore.
- After a subject
e.g. *The fact that the earth is round / is hard to explain.*
- Before and after a object and complement
e.g. *The important thing is / whether we can manage to meet the deadline or not.*

(The above examples were from Suiko [1985] and Koyanagi [2002])

2.2. EFL Reading Proficiency

In this study, reading proficiency in English is operationally defined by the scores on a

reading test. The format of the reading test accords with the reading section of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) examination.

2.3. Reading-aloud Ability

In this study Reading-aloud Ability is defined as follows: it consists of (1) the ability to read aloud in correct breath/sense groups and (2) the ability to read aloud with comprehension. The former refers to the ability to correctly recognise boundaries between breath/sense groups based on grammatical and semantic cues and reflect it on reading-aloud performance. The latter refers to the ability to comprehend and retain the information in the text while reading aloud. These were measured by a reading-aloud test, which will later be described in detail.

3. Method

3.1. Subjects

The participants of this study were twenty-five Japanese EFL students (14 were female and 11 were male) at Waseda University. Among those students, four were in the first year, three were in the second year, eight were in the fourth year, seven were in the third year, and three were graduate students. Before the experiment, their proficiency levels were determined through a computer-based placement test. They were comparable to a range of 500-800 (and over) in the TOEIC test score.

3.2. Procedures

3.2.1. Reading Proficiency Test

To measure the subjects' reading proficiency, a paper-based TOEFL-type reading test was administered. The test material was taken from a practice test in Philips (1995), a preparatory workbook for TOEFL. The test required the examinees to read 5 passages and answer 50 questions on each passage, including reading comprehension questions and questions about the meaning of words and ideas. Time for the test was 55 minutes. The test procedure was in line with the ETS rules for the reading portion of the TOEFL test. The subjects' scores were worked out by counting the number of correct answers.

3.2.2. Reading-aloud Test

The test is intended to evaluate the reading-aloud ability, the use of correct breath/sense groups, and comprehension of the text while reading aloud. The test involves these two tasks: (1) the reading aloud of a short passage and (2) a comprehension quiz after the reading. The reading was tape-recorded for later analysis.

The subjects were asked to read a short passage on communication problems between Japanese and foreign people. The passage was adapted from a textbook for high school students. The length of the passage was around 150 words. Upon reading aloud, the subjects were instructed to read the passage aloud while paying attention to meaning rather than pronunciation. This aims at preventing eye-mouth reading, reading-aloud with no comprehension. The subjects were required to read the passage *at sight*.

The subjects' reading-aloud performance was analysed in terms of (1) Breath/Sense Group Score (BGS), (2) Comprehension Quiz Score (CQS), and (3) Reading-aloud Ability Score (RAS). The first was worked out by counting the number of pauses placed at inappropriate positions. The second was the number of the correct answers in the comprehension quiz after the reading-aloud. The third was the sum of the z score of BGS and that of CQS.

4. Results and Discussion

Pearson product-moment correlations were computed to determine the strength of the relationship between each variable. The result is shown in TABLE 1. Also given in TABLE 2 are the descriptive statistics for the subjects' performance on the reading proficiency test and the reading-aloud test.

TABLE 1
Relationship between each variable in this research

	Reading Proficiency (RP)	Reading-aloud Ability Score (RAS)	Breath/Sense Group Score (BSG)	Comprehension Quiz Score (CQS)	Reading-aloud Rate (RR)
RP	1				
RAS	0.7437***	1			
BSG	0.4800*	—————	1		
CQS	0.6250***	—————	0.1039(NS)	1	
RR	0.3199(NS)	0.5771**	0.6248***	0.2326(NS)	1

*p < .05 **p.<.01 ***p.<001

TABLE 2
Descriptive statistics for the subjects' performance on the reading proficiency test and the reading-aloud test

Min	Max	Mean	Median	Mode	SD
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RP	22	47	36.68	38	45	7.31
BSG*	-9	0	-4.12	-4	-2	2.32
CQS	0	3	2	2	2	0.87
RR	70.5	150	113.1	115.6	106	19.94

*BSG was worked out by *deducing* one point per incorrect pause. Thus, full marks are zero point.

The correlation analysis shown in TABLE 1 indicates a significant positive correlation between the subjects' reading proficiency in EFL, as measured by the standardised reading test, and their reading-aloud ability, as demonstrated in the sum of BSG and CQS. This appears to indicate that reading aloud in correct breath/sense groups while comprehending the text means the high proficiency in EFL reading.

However, it seems premature to conclude that the higher reading-aloud ability, the higher reading proficiency in EFL. Looking at the RP-CQS relationship and the RP-BSG relationship, we notice that the correlation for the former points to a significant positive relationship ($r = 0.6250$, $p < .001$), while the latter indicate a significant but moderate relationship ($r = 0.4800$, $p < .05$). CQS may demonstrate EFL reading ability in general (as well as the ability to read aloud with comprehension). This may affect the value of the correlation between EFL reading proficiency and Reading-aloud Ability score. Thus, great care should be taken to interpret this result.

Let us take a look at the relationship between the components of the Reading-aloud Ability, i.e. BSG and CQS. Interestingly, these two has no significant relationship with each other. This implies that some participants in this study did not pay enough attention to meaning while reading aloud. This also implies that the recognition of correct breath/sense group does not always facilitate comprehension while reading aloud.

There is a positive correlation between RR and BSG ($r = 0.6428$, $p < .001$) This indicates that one can read a text aloud faster if he or she recognise breath/sense groups correctly. However, no significant correlation was confirmed between RR and CQS, which implies that the ability to read aloud fast does not necessarily contribute to comprehension while reading aloud.

5. Conclusion

The above analysis showed Reading-aloud Ability correlated with EFL reading proficiency, though the correlation should be interpreted carefully. From the BSG-CQS relationship, reading aloud in correct breath/sense groups may not lead to

comprehension while reading aloud. The RR-CQS relationship implies that one may not read aloud with comprehension even when he or she is able to read aloud fast.

References

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Appendix

The passage for reading aloud

A survey | asked foreign students living in Japan | how they felt | about living here | for a while. | According to the survey, | many of the students | complained | about Japanese attitudes | to foreigners. |

Some of the students, for example, | feel | that only a few Japanese people | are interested | in students with different languages and cultures. | In fact, | very few Japanese students | speak to foreign students | in class | and ask them | about their countries. |

Foreign students | want more social opportunities with Japanese people, | where they can learn | about Japanese culture. | Japanese people | need to become more interested | in foreigners | as individual people. | This is an important part of “internationalization.” |

* ‘ | ’ represents a boundary between breath/sense groups. Pauses placed there are

considered “acceptable.” Pauses at the other places are regarded as “inappropriate” in the reading-aloud task.

Answer the following questions on the passage. (You cannot turn to the passage for the answers.)

1. What is the topic of this passage?
 - a. The results of a survey on how foreign students in Japan feel about living there for a while.
 - b. The results of a survey on how Japanese students behave toward foreign students.
 - c. The results of a survey on what foreign students think about “internationalization.”
 - d. The results of a survey on Japanese students’ interest in different cultures.
2. According to the passage, Japanese students
 - a. are generally eager to mingle with foreign students.
 - b. are unhappy with foreign students’ attitude toward them.
 - c. have a great interest in foreign languages and cultures.
 - d. are often reluctant to speak to foreign students.
3. According to the passage, foreign students want
 - a. cultural exchanges with students from different countries.
 - b. more social opportunities with Japanese people.
 - c. opportunities to introduce their own cultures to Japanese people.
 - d. a good command of Japanese.