

Effects of Oral Reading on EFL Reading Comprehension

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The present study compared two reading modes of oral and silent reading to investigate which mode was more advantageous for EFL reading comprehension. The participants were thirty-three Japanese university students. In the experiment, the participants read narrative passages orally and silently. After each reading, a comprehension test was given to see if they comprehend the contents of the passage. The scores of the test were analysed using a 2 x 2 repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) with repeated measures on reading mode (oral or silent) and with proficiency (high or low) as a between-subject factor. The analysis yielded no significant main effects for reading modes and proficiency. No significant interactions between the two factors were revealed. The findings suggest that there is no major difference in reading comprehension performance between oral and silent reading.

1. Introduction

Oral reading, which may broadly be defined as reading a text aloud, has been widely conducted in reading classrooms. Concerning the effects of oral reading, one of the focal points of controversy is whether reading aloud enhances or prevents comprehension.

In first language (L1) reading research, many studies have investigated the influence of oral reading on comprehension performance. While some studies argue the superiority of silent reading over oral reading (e.g. Mori 1980), other studies support the potential superiority of oral reading. Fletcher and Pumfrey (1988), for instance, found that oral reading was conducive to better comprehension for 7- and 8-year-old children. Other studies which examined the effects of reading modes on comprehension also found that young readers tend to comprehend better after reading orally (e.g. Swalm 1972; Elgart, 1978). These findings imply that oral reading does not have a negative impact on reading comprehension for children in an early developmental stage of reading ability.

There also are a number of studies suggesting that language or reading ability, as well as the age and grade level, may affect comprehension performance under oral reading condition. One of them is Miller and Smith (1985), in which an experiment was carried out on 7- and 8-year-olds. They found that low ability readers had significantly higher comprehension in oral reading, while medium ability readers had significantly higher comprehension in silent reading. High ability readers

did not differ in performance. This suggests that reading aloud may help low ability readers to achieve better comprehension and that higher ability readers may benefit more from silent reading.

Do the arguments in L1 studies apply to second or foreign language (L2/FL) reading? Unfortunately, there are not many studies empirically examining the relationship between reading mode (oral versus silent) and comprehension. Moreover, the empirical basis for determining the effects of oral reading on comprehension is equivocal. Some reports the superiority of silent reading in comparison with oral reading. Takanashi and Takahashi (1987) conducted an experiment on Japanese EFL university students. In the experiment, they were required to read a text orally and silently. When reading aloud, they are instructed to read with special attention to pronunciation. After each reading, they answered multiple-choice questions about the contents of the text. The result suggested that, regardless of one's proficiency level, one did not have higher comprehension in oral reading than silent reading. Several other studies obtained similar results. (Hatori, 1977; Bernhardt, 1983).

Other research indicates that oral reading is potentially facilitative or that no difference exists between oral and silent mode. Matsumi, Ikeda and Mizuhara (1995) investigated the effects of oral and silent reading on memory of text in a second language reading. The experiment was carried out on Japanese intermediate learners of EFL. Two types of passages (easy and difficult) were used here and the subjects were required to read them orally or silently. The results showed the dominance of oral reading over the other in the literal retention of the sentences in the easy text. The results also indicated that silent reading led to better performances in retaining and recalling the contents of the difficult text. Turumi (1997) demonstrated the following two points: (a) for the expository passage, silent reading was superior to oral reading in recall performance and (b) for the dialogue, on the other hand, no significant difference between oral and silent reading existed in recall performance. Although this is a study on learners of Japanese as a second language, this implies that some textual factors, including style, register, and so on, may affect reading comprehension performance while reading aloud. They may have either positive or negative effects on performance.

The present study examined the influence of oral reading on comprehension in comparison with silent reading. Two questions were posed for investigation:

1. Does oral reading prevent or enhance comprehension?
2. What is the effect of language proficiency on comprehension under oral and silent reading conditions?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants of this study were a group of thirty-three Japanese EFL students (11 were female and 22 were male) at Waseda University. To characterise their language proficiency, the WeTEC-mini test, a computer-based placement test, was administered. Their proficiency levels were confirmed to be comparable to a range of 500-700 (and over) in the TOEIC test score. Based on the scores of this test, two distinct proficiency groups were formed for data analysis.

2.2. Materials

Two narrative passages were identified for use. The passages were drawn from Hill (1982), which was intended for EFL/ESL readers. Passage A was a story about twins and their homework at their school. Passage B was a story about a five-year-old boy who got a haircut for the first time at a barber.

The vocabulary used in Passage A and B is based on a 750-word vocabulary in Hill (1982). The length of the passages was 124 words and 119 words, respectively. The readability of the two passages measured at approximately the fifth grade level according to Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level. In addition, Flesch Reading Ease for Passage A was 82.1 and that for Passage B was 85.0. Thus, their difficulty levels were considered equal on the headword-level, length, readability scores. Expert judgement also verified that no difference existed in text difficulty between the two passages.

2.3. Procedures

Participants were tested together in a language laboratory. They were given test booklets containing two passages. They read one passage aloud and read the other silently. Immediately after each reading, the participants worked on a comprehension test, which required them to answer six open-ended questions in Japanese. They were not allowed to refer to the passage when answering the comprehension questions.

Student performance was operationalised by the scores of the abovementioned comprehension tests. The number of correctly answered questions comprised the total comprehension score.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data was first analysed using simple descriptive statistics. Means and standard deviations were computed for comprehension scores by proficiency groupings and mode of reading.

To determine if significant differences existed for any of the main effects or interactions, a 2 x 2 repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed with repeated measures on reading mode (oral or silent) and with proficiency (high or low) as a between-subject factor.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for comprehension scores by proficiency groupings and mode of reading. Results from the ANOVA are given in Table 2. The analysis revealed no significant main effects for proficiency level and reading mode. Also no significant interactions were found.

When reading orally, students with high proficiency got lower comprehension scores ($M = 10.5$) than those with low proficiency ($M = 11.06$). When reading silently, students with high proficiency got higher comprehension scores ($M = 10.69$) than those with low proficiency ($M = 10.18$). However, as the results from ANOVA demonstrate, the differences were not statistically significant.

For the high proficiency group, comprehension of passages read silently ($M=10.69$) was faintly higher than that of passages read orally ($M=10.5$). For the low proficiency group, comprehension in oral reading ($M=11.06$) was higher than comprehension in silent reading ($M=10.18$) Here again the differences were not statistically significant.

Table 1

Mean and Standard Deviations for Comprehension Scores by Proficiency Groupings and Reading Mode

Proficiency	Mode of Reading				
		Oral		Silent	
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
High	16	10.5	1.36	10.69	1.04
Low	17	11.06	1.31	10.18	1.47

Table 2

Table of Analysis of Variance for Comprehension Scores

source	SS	df	MS	F	p
A:Proficiency	0.0094	1	0.00941	0.005	0.9456 ns
error[S(A)]	61.748	31	1.9919		
B:Reading mode	1.9898	1	1.9898	1.207	0.2804 ns
AB	4.7171	1	4.7171	2.862	0.1007 ns
error[BS(A)]	51.101	31	1.648		

+ $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .005$, **** $p < .001$, ns=not significant

No significant main effects for reading mode suggest that this factor does not have a major

impact on reading comprehension performance. Concerning oral and silent reading, we cannot say which is superior to the other. This is inconsistent with Hatori (1977), Takahashi and Takanashi (1987), and Bernhardt (1983), all of which point to the superiority of silent reading. There may be some possible reasons for this conflicting result. First of all, the passages used in this study were quite easy to the participants. Besides, unlike Takahashi and Takanashi (1987), they did not have to attend to pronunciation. Instead, they were instructed to focus on the contents of the passages. Attention was not consumed too much to correctly utter a text loud.

The ANOVA revealed no significant main effects for proficiency. Interactions between reading mode and proficiency were also not statistically significant. From these findings, the argument seen in first language reading studies may not always apply to EFL reading comprehension. In other words, we cannot assert that students with high proficiency will benefit from silent reading whereas students with low proficiency will benefit from oral reading.

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Appendix: Passages Used and Comprehension Questions

Mary and Mark were twins. They were ten years old, and they were in the same class at their school. A few weeks ago, their English teacher said to the children, “I haven’t given you any homework for two weeks. Now this week, write a composition about ‘Our cat’, and give it to me next Monday. Do you all have a cat at home?”

“Yes, Miss Jones,” all of them answered.

All the pupils did the composition, and they gave it to the teacher on Monday. The teacher read all the compositions and then she gave them back to the pupils on Tuesday.

“Mary,” the teacher said, “your composition is the same as your brother’s.”

“Yes,” answered Mary quickly. “It is the same cat!”

- (1) How old are Jean and Mark? What is the relationship between them?
- (2) What kind of homework did their English teacher give a week ago?
- (3) When was the deadline of the homework?
- (4) When did the teacher give the homework back?
- (5) What did the teacher say to Jean when giving the homework back
- (6) And what did Jean answer?

Mr. Green went to the barber every month to have a haircut. He sometimes took his small son Philip with him, and Philip sat and looked at magazines during his father’s haircut. But at that time, the barber did not cut Philip’s hair. Mrs. Green always cut it at home.

Then, one day, Mr. Green said to his wife, “Philip is five now, and the barber is going to cut his hair next time.”

He took Philip there the next day, and first the barber cut Mr. Green’s hair. Then the barber put Philip in the chair and said, “How do you want your hair, young man?”

“Like my father’s,” answered Philip, “With a hole in the middle.”

- (1) How often did Mr. Green go to the barber?
- (2) How often did Mr. Green take Philip with him to the barber?

- (3) What did Philip do during his father's haircut?
- (4) Who cut Philip's hair at home?
- (5) Why did Mr. Green have the barber cut Philip's hair?
- (6) How did Philip want his hair?