Reading Aloud as a Technique for Developing Teachers’ Awareness of English Phonology

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Abstract
This paper describes an exploratory qualitative study that is part of a larger research project into the impact of experiential learning on teacher proficiency and practice. It focuses on how, through a process approach to developing and evaluating their own oral skills, trainee teachers at the National Institute of Education in Singapore became more aware of features of spoken language that relate particularly to reading aloud in class. Such awareness is important because when these teachers enter school, they will work with primary school children and follow the Strategies for English Language Learning and Reading (STELLAR) program, which takes a shared-book approach and involves both teachers and students in reading aloud activities. This paper demonstrates how increasing awareness of features of their own spoken English and reflecting on the implications for reading aloud helped the teachers improve their own delivery and relate what they had learned to the classroom.

Reading Aloud in the Development of Literacy
The primary literacy education task of preschool and early school years is not teaching children letter-sound correspondences but reading to them. If a child is experiencing difficulty in learning to read, we should not ask if he or she knows the sounds of letters but if he or she has been read to extensively.

(Moustafa, 1997, p. 78-79)

The importance of being read aloud to in the development of literacy has been extensively documented (Fox, 2008; Krashen, 2004; Trelease, 2006), and promoted through national literacy initiatives such as Becoming a Nation of Readers in the U.S.A. or through the National Literacy Trust in the U.K. A short article by McQuillan (2009) summarizes the benefits of being read to. These include learning the purpose of reading, exposing learners to different text types and to vocabulary and language patterns not part of their everyday repertoire, helping learners to imagine, and laying the foundation for good writing skills. Of particular relevance to this discussion is that it also enables learners to hear the phrasing, inflections, and expressions that good readers use.

While much of the research has focused on reading aloud in the child’s first language, in today’s multicultural world, many children come to school with home languages other than the school language. Similarly, children are learning foreign languages at ever-younger ages (de
Lotbinière, 2011). For such children, being read to in the new language may be a critical aspect of their literacy development. Being read to is not just for young children, however. Krashen (2004), for example, reported a study showing that college students benefitted from listening to stories and then discussing them, while Amer (1997) found that learners of English as a foreign language who were read to outperformed their counterparts on reading comprehension tests.

Given the importance of being read to for learners of different backgrounds and ages, ensuring that teachers have the skills to read aloud effectively can be seen to be an important aspect of their professional development. At the word level, teacher readers need to be able to decode written language and recode it as spoken language just as their students do. This means being able to translate graphic representations into sounds, which in English means understanding sound-spelling relationships and word stress patterns. Resources such as the phonetic alphabet and dictionaries can further help native and non-native speaker teachers alike with the pronunciation of unfamiliar words. Reading aloud effectively goes beyond the word level, however. Above all, it requires the reader to have understood what is being read and then to parse language meaningfully, stress relevant words, pause at appropriate points and for an appropriate length of time, and maintain the rhythm of the target language. Peha (n.d.) outlines some further skills effective readers employ when reading aloud, such as changing pitch, volume, rhythm, and tone. All these elements are subsumed under the term **phonology** as used in this article.

A final and important consideration is that language teachers, whatever their teaching context, are expected to be good models of the target language; they are still in many cases the primary, and sometimes the only, standard models their learners hear.

**Background to the Study**

Singapore is a multicultural country, and there are four official languages: English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil. Education is conducted in the medium of English, but children entering school have varied levels of exposure to this language through their home or preschool backgrounds. In addition to different home languages, the use of colloquial versions of English, broadly categorized as Singlish, means that some may have little exposure to Standard Singapore English outside school. The primary school English Language syllabus is delivered through the Strategies for English Language Learning and Reading (STELLAR) program. This program was developed based on research in Singapore schools and “is designed to cater to a diverse range of EL learners in our school system” (Ministry of Education, 2012, para. 4); under STELLAR, “EL is taught through stories and texts that appeal to children” (para. 4) with the goal of building confidence in both speech and writing. As part of the program, both teachers and students read aloud target texts. Throughout school, reading aloud is also used to assess students’ oral skills; for example, the critical Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) Oral Communication paper includes reading aloud.

The diversity of the students’ language exposure outside school underscores the need for English-medium teachers to be role models of good language use. Indeed, the expectation is that “school leaders . . . must set high standards of spoken English for the whole school” (Wong, 2011, para. 7). As one way students are expected to demonstrate their skills is by reading aloud, this too is something teachers need to do well and model in their lessons. To help improve teachers’ language awareness and their own language skills, in 2009, a supplementary program, the Certificate in English Language Studies (CELS), was introduced for students on diploma or degree courses at a university in Singapore. This program is for those training to
teach English in primary schools. It aims to help develop the English language content knowledge and skills of the participants. The primary focus for the skills enhancement component is a two-week intensive program which is followed by a series of personalized tasks.

This intensive program takes an experiential approach to learning (Kolb, 1984) and models process approaches (Tompkins, 2010) that teachers are expected to use in school. Through the process of developing a digital story (Ohler, 2008), participants first write and record a script. Using a process writing approach to composing the script helps increase their awareness of their writing skills, while preparing the recording is an opportunity to focus on aspects of phonology. The program has been discussed from the course tutors’ standpoints in Hanington, Pillai, and Kwah (2013), and this discussion inspired a qualitative study into the impact of the approaches used on the course on the participants’ learning the next time it was conducted.

Methodology

The subjects for this exploratory qualitative study were the students who took the course in May 2013. After the course was over and grades had been awarded, they were asked for permission to use data they had generated in the normal course of the program for research purposes.

Of the 70 participants, 61 gave their consent. Only data from those giving permission were included in the study, and the names used throughout are pseudonyms.

The data for a main study comprised the self-reports of the preservice teachers’ prior experience of such process approaches to learning and of process writing in particular, their reflections during the course on each stage of the process of creating a digital story, and their reflections on the application of what they had learned during their subsequent practicum period. The course participants loaded these items onto the course website and they were collated from the site for research purposes. For this smaller study, data relating to the phonology component, which comprised peer feedback on the recorded narratives (see Appendix A for the peer evaluation checklist that guided feedback), the participants’ reflections on the two days of work on oral skills, and their final reflections (see Appendix B for the prompts for these items) were explored to identify themes relating to two research questions:

1. Does helping these preservice teachers recognize and practice features of phonology with the goal of reading stories aloud increase their awareness of good oral skills?
2. Are they able to relate what they have learned to their future classroom practice?

Classroom Approaches

The phonology component of the program, effectively one day of classroom input and activities followed by a day during which the participants applied what they had learned or reviewed to their own reading and received feedback on this from their peers and tutors, took a broad-brush approach to the topic.

Tutors started by introducing the sounds of English through the phonemes on charts such as the British Council’s Phonemic Chart (2010). Since the majority of participants could produce most of the individual sounds, though they had some issues differentiating specific vowel sounds such as long and short vowels and some voiced and unvoiced consonants, this was presented primarily as a resource and a way to check the pronunciation of unfamiliar words in dictionaries. Participants were also shown how to identify word stress indicators in phonetic transcriptions. To practice applying these segmental elements, the participants were given lists...
of words commonly mispronounced in Singapore and used dictionaries to check and practice saying them in isolation and then in sentences which they might use in a school context.

Tutors then reviewed suprasegmental features of phonology such as linking, sentence stress, and intonation and practiced these using well-recognized activities including rhymes, jazz chants, and limericks. An amusing and effective limerick for this purpose is:

There was a young lady of Niger,
Who smiled as she rode on a tiger;
They came back from the ride
With the lady inside,
And the smile on the face of the tiger.
(This limerick is generally attributed to W.C. Monkhouse, who was writing in the late 19th century.)

Limericks allow a discussion of syllable-timed versus stress-timed languages and the impact of the latter on the pronunciation of content words, such as nouns and verbs, and on function words, such as articles and prepositions. This idea is quite challenging for speakers of Singapore English, where there is less differentiation in vowel duration and there are fewer vowel reductions than in British English (Ling, Grabe, & Nolan, 2000). Jazz chants also help reinforce these points, and there are many chants that allow for discussion of how stress and emphasis on key words help convey meaning. A useful jazz chant for adults is Scrivener’s (2005, p. 418) dialogue about some missing keys. Here, course participants can be asked to consider the relationship between the two speakers and how this would be reflected in the dialogue. This makes the activity more meaningful and more amusing, and encourages the participants to convey emotion by using their voices.

To encourage critical evaluation of the features reviewed, participants next listened to and analyzed recordings of students reading aloud. Finally, they read aloud extracts from books they might read to their own students and considered how to project meaning, emotion, and different characters. They were given feedback by members of their study group and the tutor.

After this exposure, albeit very brief, to an area some had never previously consciously considered, the participants focused on reading their own scripts aloud. Reading one’s own story has the huge benefit of removing any burden of comprehension. What the participants knew they needed to do was to engage their listeners and convey to them the meaning they intended with their stories. This was done first in class to get some immediate feedback. The next day, an e-learning day, they practiced and recorded their scripts using the Audacity online audio editor and recorder. The recordings were uploaded onto the course wiki, and study group members and the tutor gave each participant feedback. Based on this feedback, the scripts were rerecorded to create the final version which would be part of the soundtrack for their digital stories. To round off this two-day stage, the participants wrote a reflection on their experience.

Findings and Discussion

Peer Feedback
In class, the participants first practiced being detailed in their feedback and also looking both at positive aspects of the narration and at areas for improvement. Their later online comments indicated that they recognized improvements from the initial readings and were able to direct
their peers to specific features of the narration, either to praise their performance or to highlight possible issues.

The two examples that follow show some of the feedback given to Philip, the first item pointing to earlier classroom discussion and the second considering impact on the listener:

I liked the pausing which you used in this recording. Like Fatimah, I think you have taken into consideration our feedback yesterday. One pronunciation improvement would be on the word “table.” In particular, the last syllable “ble.” Other than that, job well done! (Tony)

Hi Philip! Very nicely done. I especially like paragraph 2 where you have really placed emphasis on the sentences with exclamation marks. I can hear the excitement in your voice as you were reading the sentences. Your voice is very nice and the pace you read at was appropriate to the listener. (Lakshmi)

The next comments show a student giving her peer, Jin Hong, a resource that will help him check an issue with his pronunciation and other students providing input focusing on aspects of tone and sentence stress as ways to convey meaning (the narrator responded to his peers and then revised his recording):

Hey Jin Hong, good reading, great pausing! I really love the part you added in some sound effects, e.g., the echoes. I agree that with visuals and more sound effect, it will definitely be awesome. The only part I find weird was the pronunciation for the word “attire.” I felt it didn’t sound very right. I checked the pronunciation with this website. http://www.howjsay.com/index.php?word=attire&submit=Submit. But, I think it is still better if you can check it out. :) (Doreen)

Thanks!! I was pondering for quite a while on how to pronounce it haha, thanks for the suggestion! I’ll see how I can work on it! :P :) (Jin Hong)

Liketed the change in voices throughout the reading! Haha the effect really brought out the story better. The pausing was good too :) I guess you could add a little more excitement in the “I did it, I did it” part, you just won the race!! (Mandy)

I like your reading too! And yes, the effects really brought out the story. I just felt that for para. 2, “knowing you have an important day ahead,” should stress on important instead of you, para. 5, “the announcement that somehow you are dreading to hear,” could give more emphasis on “dreading.” Just my suggestions though. I can’t wait for the final product with your visuals and victory song! (Roslina)

These examples indicate that once the course participants had become more aware of features of phonology and the relationships between phonology, meaning, and the impact on listeners, they were able to guide others in their performance and make detailed recommendations. Many of the participants, including the recipients of the comments above, noted in their reflections how much they had benefited from peer feedback and how this had helped them when rerecording their narration. Indeed this process of noticing, with others’ help, and reflecting seemed critical to their development.
Reflections

**Research Question 1: Awareness of oral skills.** The first set of reflections immediately after the sessions on phonology focused the participants on their own performance and addressed the first research question about increasing awareness of good oral skills.

The course participants found listening to and evaluating their recordings a useful exercise, and several noted later that they would like to use the same approach with their students. One noted that “teachers may get students to record their reading via Audacity and both teachers and students can listen to their own recording and reflect on the strengths and weaknesses in their reading” (Gene). They commented principally on three aspects of their oral skills in their reflections. The two aspects receiving most attention were how to use their voices to convey their characters’ emotions or the mood of their pieces and how to pace their delivery, pause appropriately, and emphasize important words. The third aspect was using resources to check the pronunciation of individual words.

The second reflection question included a reference to audience. In many instances, when responding to either of the reflection questions, the course participants commented on their performance and the improvements they made in terms of making their stories more accessible to their target audiences:

- I focused on speaking slowly and clearly, being mindful that my readers and those listening could be from the lower primary. They would take longer to process information. (Lily)
- I brought in humor with different intonation. I brought in varying tones to build a sense of drama and to kill monotony. I felt that it might help keep the audience engaged. (Siva)

The respondents also commented on their own pronunciation and found listening to themselves an effective approach because “as we seldom hear ourselves speak, we don’t usually know when we make mistakes while reading and conversing” (Annie). In evaluating their pronunciation, some commented on specific sounds, some talked generally about articulation and enunciation, and some discussed researching and noting sounds and word stress. Roslina, for example, said, “I need to be very careful with my articulation, especially the end sounds as it would make a lot of difference, especially for words in the past tense, e.g., learn vs. learned”; while Pi Ying realized she was not sure of the correct pronunciation of some simple words in her text and commented, “This was a good learning point for me as I had to research the standard pronunciation for these words.” A number of respondents, such as the following one, recognized that speaking too quickly had a negative impact on the articulation of words and addressed this when they rerecorded their texts:

- I also did many revisions of my narration as only when I listened to my recording did I start to find errors in pronunciation and pace. I also found out how muffled some words would sound if I rushed through the narration. (Shawn)

Critiques of themselves were not all negative, however. Some of the participants found the exercise an affirmation of their oral skills: “I have learned that I have good pronunciation skills. My friends as well as my tutor had great confidence in my pronunciation” (Ainah). Others commented positively on the impact of the activities:
Through the narration and dialogues, I had the opportunity to practice my oral skills. I became more aware of my pronunciation and articulation as I kept on replaying to hear for mistakes, and rerecording the narration over and over again to get the right pronunciation. At the same time, having the chance to receive constructive feedback from my classmates and tutor has helped to boost my confidence in oral skills. (Jean)

Research Question 2: Relating learning to classroom practice. The second research question was answered primarily through the reflections at the end of the program. Here the participants could choose to highlight any aspect of the course when linking what they had learned to their future teaching contexts, and many wrote about process writing and the software they had learned to use. Virtually all the respondents also chose to write about oral skills in their response to this task. Some talked about implications of the course for themselves as teachers, while others looked at how they could use some of the approaches from the course with their own students.

Comments about themselves as teachers ranged from immediate practical considerations, particularly relating being able to read aloud more effectively and in ways that would engage their students, to a recognition of themselves as models of target language:

The pronunciation activities allowed me to learn the accurate way of pronouncing words, which will be useful when I start teaching. I have particularly chosen this item as this would be important when it comes to oral practice and examination for the children. By modeling the right way of pronouncing and enunciating words and sentences, my pupils will be able to emulate and learn the accurate way of speaking. (Chee Chen)

Some talked about continuing to use resources that had been introduced:

Now that I am more aware of the International Phonetic Alphabet, I want to continue to learn more about it so that I am teaching my students the right thing. Especially when students are in the lower primary, I feel that it is my duty to teach them the correct Standard English pronunciation. (Sharifah)

A few respondents extended the application of what they had learned beyond the immediate context of reading aloud:

In schools, we rush through a lot of items when we speak to students as we want to get as much content to the students as possible, but now, I will take a step back to ensure that instructions are given clearly and content is delivered to students in a way that they will understand. (Philip)

While a significant number of respondents commented on implications for themselves as teachers, many focused on how the approaches they had been exposed to during the course could transfer to their own classrooms. Several participants talked about the phonemic chart being useful to both themselves and their students, because “when students are able to pronounce and articulate correctly, they will develop into confident speaking individuals” (Ruo Shin), and about its helping increase their autonomy in working out how to pronounce words. In a similar vein, others felt getting students to record stories and evaluate their own performance would help them become less dependent on the teacher for feedback. Jin Hong felt that having the students create and then narrate a story as a podcast was a very useful
procedure as “by listening to themselves they would be able to pick out their own flaws and work on their own improvement,” adding that “[t]his helps to ensure that the learning ownership lies with them.” Another advantage respondents saw in having students record themselves was getting peer feedback. Finally, some participants made a link with students’ performance during oral examinations and felt that learning to read aloud more expressively would help them perform well.

**Conclusion**

The comments above seem to indicate clearly that the approaches used on the course and having to read aloud and record their own narratives did, at least in the immediate term, raise the participants’ awareness of their own oral skills and of the requirements of good oral skills when reading aloud. They also indicate that, while different participants took different insights from the course, they could readily see the classroom relevance of what they had learned, both in terms of their own performance as teachers and in terms of helping their students in similar ways.

Although the activities and approaches described above were selected and tailored specifically for this program, the author has integrated many of these ideas into courses for non-native speaker teachers from Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, and China. Such courses tended to take place over more extended periods and focus on the different aspects of phonology in more detail, but it is possible that some of the findings from this study are applicable to wider contexts.

**Limitations**

Although the findings from this study seem very positive, there were a number of limitations. Firstly, it was a very short program, and as trainee teachers are exposed to many other aspects of language and teaching during their studies and early school career, this study can indicate a potential to transfer learning from this course to the classroom but not confirm that this will happen. The researchers involved in the larger study on the impact of experiential learning on teacher proficiency and practice, of which the current research is a part, hope to conduct a follow-up study with some of the course participants, once they start teaching, to establish this. A second limitation was that the reflections that constituted the data for this study were done as an integral part of the course, which limited the questions that could be asked and which may also have affected the nature of the responses to a certain extent. Thirdly, the program focused on aspects of phonology through reading aloud; it did not address wider methodology issues relating to reading aloud, such as integrating discussion of language and content and vocabulary exploration. Finally, approximately a third of the participants in this study were taught by the author. Being a tutor on the program and having a vested interest in its success may have influenced her interpretation of the data. Nevertheless, the overall impression was that the course was impactful in ways intended. A final reflection underscores this impression:

I can safely admit that my whole perception of reading aloud has been changed! I’ve always had problems when it comes to reading and felt that I need to work hard in order to read well. I realize that it takes time and practice. I am more comfortable and much more interested in reading aloud with expression. Since I am more aware of the different aspects to reading like word stress on content words, sentence stress etc, I feel a renewed confidence. I feel better equipped to read to my students. (Sharifah)
References


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### Appendix A
Peer Evaluation Checklist: Audio Recording

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voice</td>
<td>• Is the voice quality clear and consistently audible throughout the story?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Does the narrator sound natural?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronunciation</td>
<td>• Are the articulation and pronunciation clear?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Are there words / sounds that are incorrectly enunciated? Give specific examples.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacing</td>
<td>• Does the narrator speak too fast or too slow in some parts?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Does the narrator engage the listener by using appropriate rhythm and pausing?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tone</td>
<td>• Is there good modulation of tone to express feelings or emotions?</td>
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Appendix B
Reflection Questions

Audio Recording
1. What have you learned about your oral skills in the process of narrating and recording your story?
2. What did you do to improve the narration of your story to engage the audience?

End of Course
Give examples of three things you learned or practiced on the course that you particularly hope to use when you start teaching. Explain why you have chosen these items.