

Stories of Teaching and Learning Practices

学習・教育実践の成功談・失敗談

“Bridging today’s course requirements and tomorrow’s autonomous learning”: Reading aloud as a means to develop fluency and memory



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INTRODUCTION

Before applying to university, I was torn between whether to major in English or sociology, and chose the latter and to study English on my own. As a self-taught English learner, I pulled out all the stops and tried every strategy I could think of. As a result, I have come to believe that reading aloud, along with extensive reading, is one of the most effective ways to develop English proficiency. After getting into teaching, I was very shocked when I was once asked by a student in the English Department this question: “*Ondokutte nandesuka* (What is reading aloud)?” I couldn’t believe that, after having learned English for at least six years, he had never been briefed on what reading aloud was, let alone practiced it. As a matter of fact, not many other students were familiar with reading aloud either; however, by incorporating reading aloud into my class, I was able to increase their motivation for English and improved their ability to have a conversation in English. These experiences led me to the belief that English teachers should not only teach the content of the course, but also introduce varieties of ways of learning that students can choose from to help them become autonomous learners. Although it is up to the students whether to adopt/adapt these strategies, I believe that it would be wrong not to expose them to diverse learning strategies. Who, as an English teacher, would not want their students to continue to learn English after graduation?

This year, I was to teach a course on reading, listening to, and discussing English texts about social issues, and the course had two requirements: giving a final presentation and getting good scores on TOEIC vocabulary tests. Getting students to present with confidence is easier said than done, and so is having them study for weekly vocabulary quizzes. After careful consideration, I decided to set aside a weekly learner-training segment to help students successfully complete those course requirements and thereby open their eyes to strategies that can pave the way for sustainable, autonomous learning. Learning strategies, such as cognitive, metacognitive, memory, affective and social strategies, refers to “a range of specific learning techniques that make learning more effective” (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 95) and learning strategies training “aims to make everyone more capable of independent learning” (Dickinson, 1992, p. 13). Research indicates a tight relationship between the amount of teacher support of student autonomy and an increase in student autonomy (Noels et al., 1999).

The learner-training segment for my class was twofold: one was an introduction to reading aloud and practice. Some researchers dispute the effectiveness of reading aloud, casting doubt on the claim that it contributes to improved pronunciation in spontaneous speech because the controlled texts usually edit out all the redundant features of natural conversation (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996). However, Gibson (2008) contends that there is no evidence that some texts’ unspontaneous speech is transferred to learners’ speech and that as long as a long text, instead of a short unnatural one, is used with sensitivity, reading aloud helps students learn prosodic features of the English language. Herman (1985) actually found that as a result of repeated reading, the improvement in fluency, was

transferred to previously unread materials. Birch (2002) and Underhill (1994) claim that reading aloud texts is useful in giving students feedback on their decoding skills and comprehension. Stanovich (1991) also suggests that connecting a letter and its sound helps learners improve pronunciation and learn new words. Among some types of reading aloud, Kuhn and Stahl (2003) support assisted repeated reading, in which students read aloud a text repeatedly with help from the tape-recorded model, as it can provide scaffolding. As someone who has improved his English proficiency by reading aloud, I have to wholeheartedly agree with the benefits of reading aloud as pointed out by these researchers.

In response to the doubts about the effectiveness of reading aloud, I would say that students who are not good at speaking English are likely to fall into a vicious cycle: they do not practice speaking because they feel reluctant (e.g., they are not confident about their pronunciation); their proficiency never improves; and they still remain poor at speaking English. It is true that the texts used for reading aloud are usually not authentic ones and that reading aloud training can be boring; however, with some ingenuity, these shortcomings can be remedied by the following:

- letting students know that real conversations are not exactly like written English read aloud
- teaching students how to use fillers
- telling students that English speech is acquired through physical exercise (The mouth muscles used in English and Japanese are different)
- giving the students an opportunity to apply their improved pronunciation in their conversation with partners toward the end of the class

As for the possibility of boredom, what I did are these:

- dividing the training part into several short segments (repeating, overlapping, eye-shadowing, and shadowing)
- having students hold the script up while looking at their partner's face and having them read aloud to each other with emotion while making eye contact
- providing more than one type of text (e.g., conversation texts and monologue texts) so that students did not have to keep using the same one.

These are exactly the techniques that were incorporated in this class.

As I planned to introduce reading aloud in this way (so that it would help students utter words with confidence and memorize TOEIC vocabulary), there was another issue that needed to be covered: students' anxiety toward the final presentation. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), foreign language anxiety has three components: 1. anxiety related to communicating with people that is attributed to learners' incapacities to appropriately state their thoughts; 2. anxiety of being negatively evaluated by society that stems from the desire to look good to others; and 3. test anxiety, anxiety of being evaluated academically. With these in mind, I paid close attention to the following in this class.

Firstly, to reduce the first type of anxiety, the standard presentation structure was explained in detail orally and on an Internet bulletin board, together with three elements of a presentation, namely, delivery, visual aids, and presentation script (the teacher explained about what to say at what stage of the process). Secondly, to alleviate the second type of anxiety, yet another training session was incorporated that took place at the end of each class throughout the midpoint of the semester and beyond: a pair presentation session that is expected to make students feel comfortable speaking out by starting with an audience of only one person (for the first few weeks, students were allowed to look at the standard presentation structure shown on the screen). And again, to lessen the third type of anxiety (one student actually mentioned the pressure from the teacher to perform well), I reassured the students that their presentations would not be evaluated harshly. When I was in university, I was too shy to speak in public. Therefore, I made these plans assuming that there must always be some shy students in a class.

LEARNING FROM STUDENTS ABOUT HOW THEY CAN DEVELOP A SERIOUS ATTITUDE TOWARD LEARNING NEW TECHNIQUES AND CONCEPTS

I decided to do this action research to prove that my belief that knowledge of learning strategies helps students and is applicable in the field of university education. There were 28 sophomores enrolled in my English conversation class this year. Half were women and half were men. The class met once a week. The conversation course is elective and this particular class is a group of students who score between 400 and 500 on the TOEIC test. The purpose of the class is to read, listen to and discuss social issues. There are two requirements in this class: 1. a TOEIC word test that takes place every week, and 2. a poster presentation on a social issue (e.g., food loss) of their choice as the final exam. Many of the students at this university are characterized by the fact that they do what they are told, but are not good at doing something on their own initiative; in other words, they want to do their best in English, but would like to be pulled along by their teachers if possible. In light of this reality, I decided to introduce training to promote independent learning among students.

In the first class, a questionnaire consisting of five Likert-scale items measuring motivation, attitudes and habits of English learning was administered (see Appendix). Then, a lecture (with fun, visually attractive slides) was conducted about the following in order to incorporate stress and rhythm into students' speaking: 1. the difference between Japanese and English prosody (syllable-timed language vs. stress-timed language), 2. the distinction between content words and function words (and how to stress the former and unstress the latter), and 3. how (introduction of repeating, overlapping, eye-shadowing, and shadowing) and why (e.g., to make their speech comprehensible to others) it is beneficial to read aloud.

The point here was that I introduced the reading aloud with enthusiasm and humor to motivate students who find reading aloud tedious. The students were to practice reading aloud using excerpts from the TOEIC test (dialogues and monologues from the Listening Section Part 3 and Part 4) at the beginning of each week's class. Introduced at the same time was the practice of reading aloud example sentences containing words that would be on the following week's test. What was emphasized here was that the purpose of listening to and reading aloud the sample sentences from the TOEIC vocabulary book was not only for a short-term goal of getting good scores but also, and even more importantly, for a long-term goal of improving their overall English proficiency.

Then, a few weeks later, I introduced the basics about how to give a good presentation. What was explained in detail was the standard presentation structure and what to do at each stage (Introduction, Body, and Conclusion) as well as body language and how to create visual aids. The students were to practice three-minute pair presentations on the day's topic from the class textbook at the end of each week's class. For the first three weeks, students were allowed to look at the standard structure shown on the screen. In the practice, the audience of one was asked to give applause before and after the presentation, and give mostly positive feedback to the presenter (with some feedback on negative points to help improve the performance). The students listened intently to every explanation on reading aloud and making presentations.

At the end of the course, students were asked to complete a second questionnaire (identical to the first with additional questions) to see how the students' attitudes had changed.

EXPLORING STUDENT RESPONSES

It is always good to see changes in students.

Analyzing the results of Question 9 about change in attitude toward presentation, 16 of the 28 students selected "I was not confident in the beginning, but now I am" in their presentation ability with 11 of those 16 having presentation experience, indicating that their lack of confidence was due to a lack of proper knowledge about presentations; This is based on the fact that all the students said instruction on standard presentation structure was useful.

To my delight, seven students, who did not like English due to lack of vocabulary, came to like English more than before precisely because they became accustomed to memorizing vocabulary by the use of reading aloud.

CHANGES IN STUDENT CONFIDENCE, ABILITY AND BEHAVIOR

The following are comments from students who have become more confident in their presentation skills and whose home study has changed to include reading aloud more often than before.

“Reading aloud gave me a chance to realize where to put the accent when speaking. Also, I was happy to learn the structure of the presentations.” - Yasuyuki (pseudonym)

It is assumed that what worried Yasuyuki at the beginning of the course was that he did not understand the flow of the presentation and that he was anxious about his pronunciation.

To some, assisted reading aloud has led to a change in their pronunciation.

“By trying to pronounce English aloud and then listening to the audio on the CD, I was able to notice that some parts of the English are not pronounced in native speakers’ speech and that some sounds are connected to each other. I was inspired to read English out loud more often from now on.” - Takaki

“I got used to TOEIC level speed. Not only by listening to native speakers’ pronunciation but also imitating them, I can notice the difference from my own pronunciation. I spoke too fast during my final presentation, and it was then that I realized the importance of intonating my speech” - Eiichi

Generally speaking, a lot of students tend to procrastinate and have a hard time starting what they believe they should do to improve their English proficiency (such as reading aloud), but some have the courage to take the first step. Akiko is one such example.

“I knew that reading aloud was important for developing listening skills, but as a result of my hard work in reading aloud during the semester, I was made aware that it was effective for listening. I had not been able to learn English effectively because I did not know how to, but now that I know how to learn English (e.g., reading aloud), I feel more motivated about learning English. - Akiko

Other students went out of their way to give specific, vivid examples of changes in their attitudes toward English in their daily lives.

“The many opportunities to speak in English, including presentations, made me realized the joy of communicating in English. I started listening to Western music and naturally came into contact with English more often. I had not had many opportunities to present in front of others, but through this course, I learned the structure of a presentation and what is important when presenting, which I was able to apply in practice. The at-home classroom atmosphere allowed me to present without being overly nervous. I was able to give my presentation in a loud voice so that others could understand. - Kaoru

“I had never done much reading aloud before and was very reluctant at first. At the beginning of this course, I learned the importance of reading aloud, and I started to read aloud on my own. I still have some resistance to reading aloud together in class, but I feel that it has become easier to memorize words since I started reading aloud. Before taking this class, when I met foreigners, I relied on a translator and did not try to talk to them. However, recently, when foreigners come to my part-time job, I am able to go talk to them myself. I want to make it a habit to speak English more. As for giving a presentation, I initially was not confident at all, but through weekly presentation

practice, I gained some confidence. I was very nervous when giving the final presentation, but I was glad that I could speak English better than I expected. - Ayano

As Ayano mentioned, some admitted that reading aloud contributed to them memorizing new words. As for the TOEIC vocabulary test given at the beginning of each week, it was a pleasant surprise that most students received perfect or near-perfect scores. The test was a fill-in-the-blanks test of example sentences, with no Japanese translation provided, and was a test where students who had repeatedly read sentences aloud would have an advantage.

WHAT I HAVE LEARNED FROM THIS ACTION RESEARCH

Learning strategy training was introduced for two purposes: One was for students to address immediate course requirements, and the other to help them improve their sustainable home learning. In terms of types of learning strategies, I introduced different kinds: 1. cognitive strategy (reading aloud in unison by the use of repeating, overlapping, eye-shadowing and shadowing); meta-cognitive strategy (understanding the difference between Japanese and English prosody and why knowing it helps improve students' English proficiency); memory strategy (memorizing new words from the TOEIC vocabulary book by the use of assisted reading aloud); social strategy (reading aloud a dialogue in pairs facing each other; pair presentation practice; peer feedback); and affective strategy (presentation practice with an audience of only one person; allowing presenters to refer to the presentation structure shown on the screen during a pair presentation practice).

I would also like to note that a pattern (in this case the standard presentation structure) for the purpose of scaffolding seems to be necessary in learning, and even more so when it is done in a foreign language. I must confess that because their first small presentations were so badly done, I initially regretted having set the poster presentation as the criterion for the final evaluation. However, I appreciate the hard work that the students put into the final presentation.

In the second questionnaire, quite a few students commented favorably on different activities covered in class. Some discussed the usefulness of reading aloud itself, while others noted its effectiveness as a strategy for memorizing vocabulary. Some stated that reading aloud helped them with their speech during presentations. Some said they would not have felt confident without a detailed explanation of the structure of the presentation. In reality, the amount of time that can be spent with students is limited. With so much to do in the classroom, there is not much time to impart knowledge about useful learning strategies to students to help them improve their out-of-class learning, much less to help them to continue to learn English in the future. What is encouraging is that the students saw this strategy training as a chance to improve their learning. To illustrate this, when asked what in-class activities they thought would be useful for their future English learning, 20 out of 28 students responded "learning how to read aloud." While it is impossible to track their future learning, it is pleasing to see that their motivation has improved, at least at this stage. I believe that being exposed to students' desire to improve is what gives teachers more energy to move on to the next step, more than anything else.

If I were to imitate the famous saying, it would go like this: "We should not only give them fish, but also teach them how to fish." Unfortunately, a short time after graduation, most students will have forgotten most of what their teachers said and the details they learned (Sad, isn't it?). But if there is at least one thing they have adopted in terms of independent study methods, isn't that good enough?

This is just an aside, but a student who had been absent from the middle of the course suddenly showed up only on the last day and asked to give a final presentation, saying she knew she would not receive a credit. I was impressed with her eagerness and glad to think that her courageous decision was probably attributed to the good atmosphere the whole class and I had created. At times like this, I am glad I became a teacher.

