

# Reading Aloud (Out Loud) in Conversational English Classes

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First, I tried using the standard conversational dialogues method of teaching "Conversational English," then I tried the natural language acquisition method. Bothered by the lack of substantial success, I turned to reading aloud, both by me and the students, and have since then reaped amazing results.

## The Problem Situation

According to the natural language acquisition method, Language 1 (L1) linguistic competence develops in the following natural stages:

1. Hearing (and listening), followed by
2. Speaking, followed by
3. Reading (matching sounds to symbols), and
4. Writing (matching symbols to meaning).

Presumably, those people who wish to learn a second language (L2) should, ideally, follow the natural language acquisition method by (1) actively listening to spoken (or read aloud) language (e.g., English), followed by (2) active speaking when someone is "ready." Reading and writing are high-level skills that can be developed subsequently.

What does one do, however, if L1 is Chinese and L2 (English) was learned by reading (and dictionaries) allied with massive drilling in grammar, leaving the learner able to read English silently very well, but unable to speak intelligible English?

The answer for many schools in China is to employ "native" speakers (from e.g., USA, Britain, Australia, and New Zealand) to teach "Conversational English" to their students. The idea is, supposedly, that a student will "listen" to native speakers and then eventually learn to "speak" aloud.

The methods used in "Conversational English" range from the bizarre to the mundane. The strangest method I have heard is of a "teacher" who would enter class, sit down and wait, forever if necessary, for students to open their mouths and begin speaking. Mundane methods consist of reading short dialogues (or phrases) and repeating them over and over, practicing in pairs or larger groups, until the phrases can readily be understood and used. So, just about every child (and many adults) in China can greet a foreigner with: "Hello, how are you?...I'm fine." Anything more than that, however, usually elicits a blank stare. Many textbooks use this method to "teach" a wide variety of situational dialogues, such as what to say on the phone, how to greet customers and visitors, how to respond to complaints, and the like.

## Analysis

When I first came to China to teach Conversational English two years ago, this dialogic method was the one I resorted to after perusing some ESL sites. I had never studied English or any other language (I knew English and Haitian Creole, French and some Spanish, from the natural language acquisition method), knew nothing about teaching conversation, and arrived to my duties armed only with the accident of having been born a "native" English speaker.

The dialogic method worked after a fashion. At least it gave the students the illusion of learning to speak. All of my students

were adult engineers who had studied English for from 10 to 15 years--but who could utter hardly an intelligible word out loud. With some practice, some elementary "conversations" took place.

During the spring break following my first semester, I researched the natural language acquisition method and adopted the strategy of reading aloud to the students (for listening) followed by some conversation on the topic of the day. This method, too, seemed to have some effect, or at least gave us the illusion of some effect, and I used it throughout the second semester.

Something, however, was amiss. While I could detect subtle improvements in pronunciation and conversation in many students, there was never any real breakthrough experience when students could engage in "real" conversations on their many interests. In L1, their interests and conversations ranged from the mundane (Do you like Chinese food?) to the abstract (global warming), but L2 conversations always seemed to remain at the relatively elementary level (food, travel, and what did you do over the weekend).

Was I expecting too much? Should I be satisfied with tiny steps towards conversational fluency? Should I be satisfied if my hosts were satisfied? If far more experienced and skilled linguists have used the methods I have mentioned with success, shouldn't I just follow along?

If we look at the situation in China, we find that most of the students over twenty years old have studied English, mainly grammar and vocabulary, for many years but have had little exposure to spoken English (listening or interactive). Hence it makes sense, initially, for Chinese educators to seek out native speakers to help improve the spoken English and listening capabilities of their students. The case is different today for middle school and high school students many of whom have been exposed to "natural" English (through movies, songs, TV, and, of course, native English speakers hired by their schools).

## **Reading Aloud**

For those students over twenty or so, however, who "know" their English and can read very well (silently) for comprehension, what is the best way to develop them into fluent speakers?

It seems to me that we cannot return to a "natural" language acquisition method for these students; we cannot return to a "natural" state and work on listening and speaking. We need to use the skills they already possess in reading (silently) and writing to help improve their listening and speaking capabilities. The hypothesis I formed, then, was that if I used their reading skills and allied that with listening and speaking activities, greater progress in developing oral fluency could be achieved.

And what better way is there to combine silent reading skills with listening and speaking than reading out loud (as we American say) or aloud (as the British say)? If you're going to listen as a way to speak a language, you must speak aloud. If you're going to read as a way to speak, you must read aloud. So, for the past year I have been using reading aloud (by me, the teacher, as well as by the student) as a method of developing oral fluency. From my anecdotal and probably biased observations, I think this method works better than the others.

## **What I Do in Class**

Here is what I have done, the reasons and the results.

Most of my "lessons" consist of readings from English-language newspapers (for example, China Daily, Xinhuanet, People's Daily, and 21st Century), as well as articles drawn from science magazines (e.g., Science Daily, Space Daily) and travelogues, for an occasional break.

The lessons are usually in three parts. We begin with some questions to set the tone for the topic and to get the students thinking. Then I read the item for the day out loud, explaining terms, idioms, and phrases as I go along. Then I have the students read and I correct only the worst mistakes in pronunciation. I also may urge them to read sentences again and again until they say them "naturally." In the third section of the lesson, we will talk about the article sentence by sentence.

## **Reasons for Reading Aloud**

My reasons for adopting this approach are as follows:

- One, we read articles about topics that the students may already be familiar with from their L1 (Chinese) reading. The subject matter is thus familiar; what they need to learn are the words and phrases--not the concepts or ideas. The students can thus use their already large store of background knowledge to understand the topics of the articles. Introducing students to, say, the Amish (a religious sect in Eastern US) way of life, something with which Chinese students are totally unfamiliar, would be less than intelligent. The subject matter of the topics should be more-or-less familiar to the students.
- Two, instead of learning words in isolation (lists of words), we learn the meaning of words in context. The students can read items showing the "natural" use of words, phrases, and idioms. Background knowledge can also be brought in to assist in the comprehension of what is being listened to and then read. Students can guess at the meaning of new words from the context, something they cannot do when just learning words in isolation. By reading aloud in L2 from knowledge areas with which they are already comfortable in L1, they can develop their content area subject matter L2 vocabulary.
- Three, when I read to the students, I in effect show them what a well-read piece of writing is all about, complete with the proper stress, intonation, and quite often the physiological signs (body language) that goes along with them. When reading silently, people need to decode words to help them understand. L2 students often also resort to translation into L1 and back. Reading aloud adds the sound dimension (which is critical to listening and speaking) to silent reading, thus bridging the gap between the eyes (sight) and the ears (hearing and listening). Reading aloud also connects the eyes and ears to the tongue as well as to the entire body, which is involved in body language.
- Four, when the students read aloud, they do at least two things: they listen to themselves and they improve their reading skills. When reading aloud, you cannot skip words the way you do when reading silently. Every word, particularly the collocations, must be spoken. The students learn to correct themselves because they can hear the way they say things aloud and can compare that to the way a native speaker reads. I think that fluent reading goes along with and, in the case of the Chinese students I'm talking about here, is a precursor to fluent talking. If you can read fluently, this can be transferred to speaking fluently.
- Five, when students listen to what I read out loud, then practice reading aloud themselves, then must talk about what they have read, this forces the student to "think" aloud, which is a critical step in learning to "think" in English. By moving from reading aloud to talking aloud in the third part of each lesson, students learn to think aloud--in L2. The next objective could be to have them "write" aloud, though I haven't tried that yet.

One student who has endured this method with me has become a fluent English speaker who is able to converse fluently and intelligently on just about any subject under the sun, from food to travel to Linux to the Big Bang--and any subject that a typical graduate student or polymath could converse about. Other students are also much improved; another few months and they should be just as fluent--I hope.

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