

Reading Aloud as a Means of Improving Oral Fluency

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Abstract :

This study examines the effectiveness of using reading aloud practice as a way to help students improve their expressiveness, ability to speak phrase by phrase (instead of word-by-word), accuracy, and speed. Students were given a short passage to read aloud and record, and were then given the audio file to use along with the printed text to be used for practice. Seven weeks later, students again read and recorded the passage aloud, and also read and recorded a second, previously unseen/unheard passage. Both a native instructor of English and a Japanese instructor of English evaluated the students' recordings. Results indicated that students improved in all areas examined, and that those improvements were also apparent when reading the new passage.

Introduction :

In March of 2009, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) published the High School Curriculum Guidelines (新学習指導要領). In these updated guidelines, MEXT mandated that educational institutions improve the quality of students' English language education. While they want the well-balanced teaching of the 4 skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking), they also wanted the overall theme of English language classes to be that of students developing better communicative ability.

When it comes to reading, the general view is that this is necessary more for the gathering and understanding of ideas rather than aiding one's spoken communicative ability. The predominant opinions on reading are that it should be done silently, with the goal of attaining a quick understanding of the writer's intent (Waller & Mackinnon : 1979). As Gardner (1986) described it, reading aloud not only wastes time in the classroom, but also does not help students actually learn to read. With this viewpoint, the point of reading is to come to an understanding of the written text. From this stance, reading aloud is unnatural, and thus has no place in the language classroom.

With a focus solely on the skill of reading, these viewpoints are understandable, however, when broadening one's view of reading, and thinking of it as a tool that can help with the other skills as well,

reading aloud can have some benefit to students. Kailani (1998 : 287) wrote about the benefits to be gained from reading aloud, one of which was “students can learn how to utter a statement, a question or an exclamation accurately, where the voice rises or falls, what words to stress or unstress, and where to pause in the sentence,” all key factors in becoming an effective speaker. Ro and Matsuda (2009) also found that reading aloud helped to improve students’ speaking abilities.

The most important things for being an effective English speaker are the intonation and rhythm specific to English, which are quite different from spoken Japanese. Because Japanese is a syllable-timed language, all syllables receive roughly the same amount of stress. On the other hand, English is composed of both stressed and non-stressed syllables, making the timing and rhythm of spoken English much different from Japanese. Without knowledge and experience in stressing the stressed syllables and reducing the non-stressed syllables, students will be unable to develop any type of natural sounding spoken fluency.

With this study, we aimed to effectively use a reading aloud activity as a means of making students aware of these characteristics of spoken English. In order to furnish students with an accurate model, they were also supplied with the audio version, spoken by a native speaker at natural speed.

The Current Study :

Research Questions :

- 1) With practice, would students be able to improve their expressiveness, phrasing, accuracy, and speed, when reading aloud?
- 2) If there were improvements in these areas, would they carry over to previously unseen material?

Participants :

Fifteen students participated in this study. All were all third year English majors. All students were members of the same seminar class.

Methodology :

- 1) On April 18, 2011, students were given a 152-word passage about honor taken from the American Armed Forces Network (AFN). (Appendix 1) While not provided with a model to listen to, students were given time to look up unfamiliar vocabulary, and ask their teacher for clarification of parts they didn’t understand. Once all students indicated that they understood the passage, they recorded themselves reading it aloud (HONOR 1).
- 2) Once they were finished reading, they were supplied with the original audio file, and a copy of the text, and instructed to listen to the audio while reading the text at least once a day.

- 3) Every week, students were reminded to practice reading the passage while listening to the audio file.
- 4) On June 6, 2011, students again recorded themselves reading the passage about honor (Honor 2). (Appendix 1) Upon finishing that, they were given an 81 word passage, about exercise (EXERCISE 1), also taken from the AFN. After having time to look up vocabulary and ask questions to clarify the meaning of any parts they did not understand, they then recorded this passage, without ever having listened to the original model.
- 5) Once collected, all recordings were evaluated in terms of expression, phrasing, rate, and accuracy. Evaluations were carried out by one native instructor of English (NI), and one Japanese instructor of English (JI).

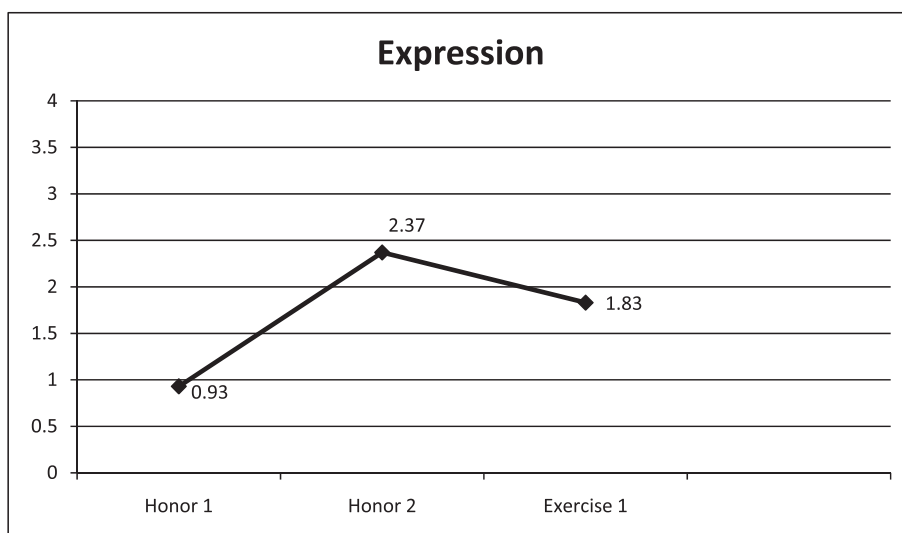
Evaluation :

Students' recordings were evaluated in 4 categories on a scale of 0–4, based on the Oral Reading Rubric developed by Julie Santello, and posted on [http : //www.share2learn.com](http://www.share2learn.com).

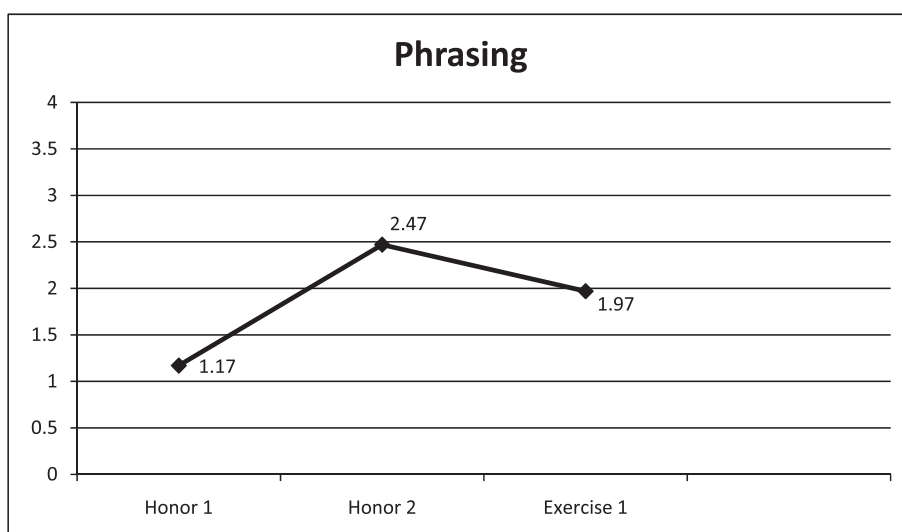
	4	3	2	1	0
Expression	Very expressive throughout the entire selection	Expression throughout most of the selection	Some expression in parts of the selection	Very little expression	Not yet
Phrasing	Meaningful phrasing throughout the entire selection	Some phrasing ; pays attention to punctuation	Phrases known expressions ; rest are word-by-word	Mostly word-by-word ; pauses at end punctuation	Not yet
Rate	Greater than 110 words per minute	90–110 words per minute	70–90 words per minute	Less than 70 words per minute	Less than 50 words per minute
Accuracy	96–100% accurate	90–95% accurate	86–89% accurate	Under 85% accurate	Under 60%

Results and Discussion :

The results listed in the following graphs look at the participants as a group, and are based on averaging the scores of the NI and JI. For individual student results, please refer to Appendix 2.

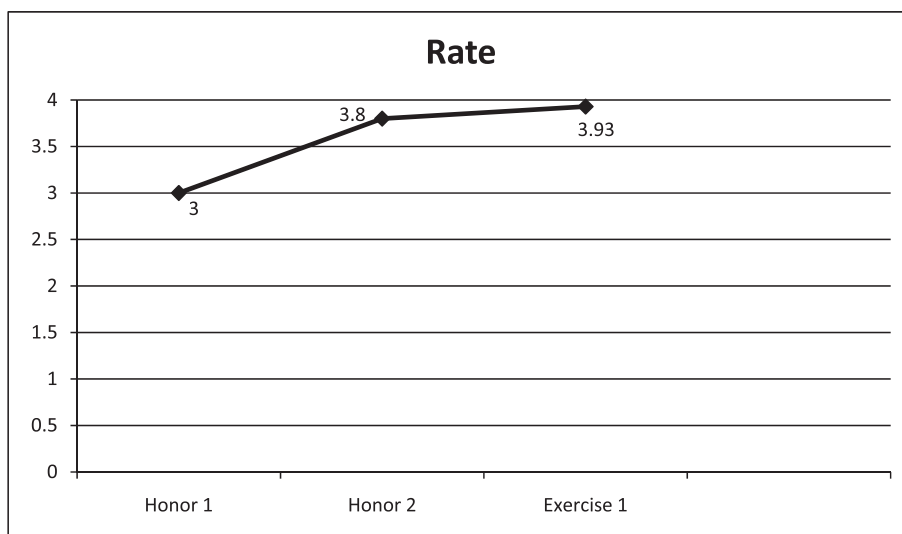


Overall, the students' expressiveness improved between recordings HONOR 1 and HONOR 2. They showed more awareness of keywords, and it was apparent that they were trying to base their performance on the model they had been provided. When looking at their recordings for EXERCISE 1, we see that for the most part, students were much more expressive than they had been on HONOR 1, despite them not having seen or heard the passage before. Even if students were not quite able to match their expressiveness on HONOR 2, they were at least able to improve upon their expressiveness from the initial recording.



With the HONOR 1 recording, it was apparent that most students were unable to read aloud with any

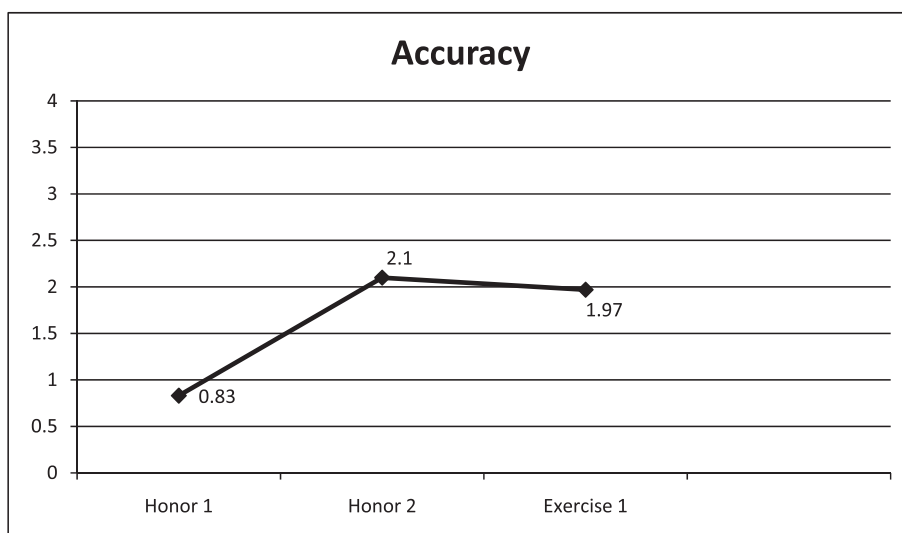
meaningful parsing by phrase. While punctuation was usually recognizable, for the most part, they read word-by-word. As with their expressiveness, their ability in this area also improved. With HONOR 2, all of the students showed signs of improvement over HONOR 1. This phrase recognition also carried over to their readings of EXERCISE 1, as most students were at least scored at a level 2 on the evaluation rubric.



An appropriate speaking speed is necessary for developing fluency. The highest rating on our grading rubric was a 4, given for 110 words or more per minute. With HONOR 1, six students were able to attain that rating. However, of those six, the recording of the student who posted the fastest words per minute pace (172 wpm), was given a 0 in accuracy because it was virtually unintelligible. For HONOR 2 and EXERCISE 1, this particular student had a word per minute rate of about 122, and his accuracy was much improved. For the rest of the students, all were able to increase their word per minute count, with 11 scoring better than 110 words per minute on HONOR 2, and 14 being able to do so on EXERCISE 1. For comparison purposes, the average word per minute rates for the 3 readings are as follows :

- HONOR 1 : 100 wpm
- HONOR 2 : 136 wpm
- EXERCISE 1 : 135 wpm

While an increased pace could be expected for HONOR 2, as they had been practicing for almost 2 months, the almost identical pace for EXERCISE 1 seems to indicate that the students had gained a better understanding of a more natural flow to spoken English. As for the model of HONOR 1 the students were provided with, the pace was 172 wpm, and while the students never heard it, the original recording of EXERCISE 1 was at 168 wpm.



Ratings in accuracy were based on overall intelligibility, correct pronunciation, and proper intonation. As with the other categories, scores in this area showed a marked improvement between HONOR 1 and HONOR 2, and there appeared to be some carry-over of this improvement to the students' readings of EXERCISE 1. It should be kept in mind that according to the evaluation rubric used, the scale was very strict, with a score of 1 referring to an accuracy rate of somewhere between 60% and 85%.

Conclusion and Implications :

In terms of research question number 1 : we found, that with practice, students were able to improve their expressiveness, phrasing, accuracy, and speed, when reading aloud. Students improved in all areas, with the biggest changes coming in expressiveness and phrasing. By the time they recorded HONOR 2, students had had almost 2 months to listen to the original audio while following along with the printed text. By doing so, they appeared to gain some understanding of the presence of proper cadence and intonation, and were able to reproduce it.

In terms of research question number 2 : we found that these skills did indeed carry over. When it came to EXERCISE 1, though unfamiliar with the text, and though never being exposed to the original audio file, students still showed more inclination to follow the punctuation clues for ideas about intonation. There was also a clear attempt, which had been lacking in HONOR 1, to try to parse the sentences into appropriate phrases.

Through this small-scale study, we found that reading aloud could have beneficial effects on students' general understanding on the important aspects of spoken English. However, it must be kept in mind that

students were provided with a proper example to model their reading. It is fair to assume that without a proper model to follow, the students would not have been able to become aware of the expressiveness and phrasing that is a part of spoken English. Furthermore, without the model to follow, students would have had no indication of the relative speed of their own reading/speaking pace as compared to a native speaker. While it is said that practice makes perfect, it is really perfect practice carried out over time that leads to improvement.

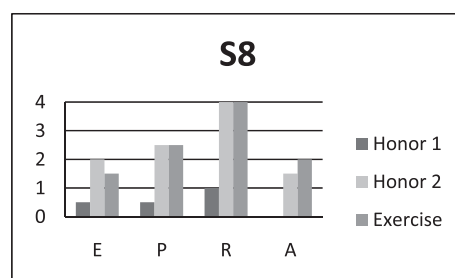
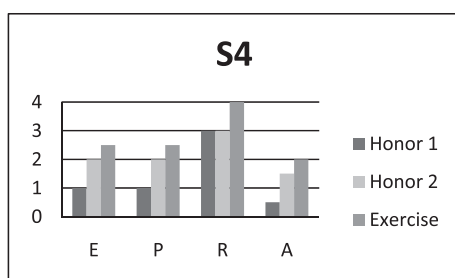
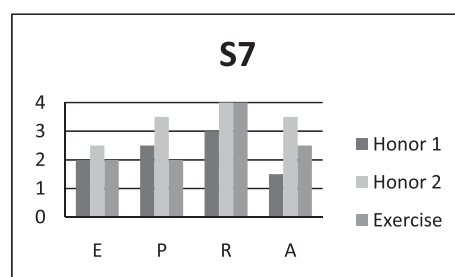
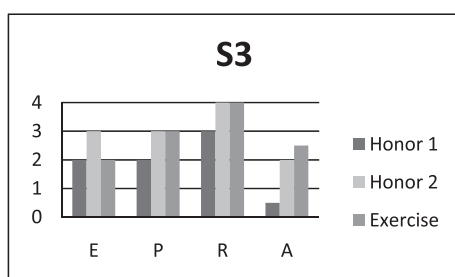
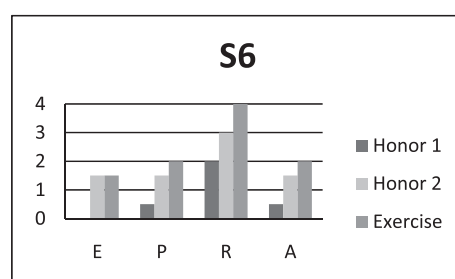
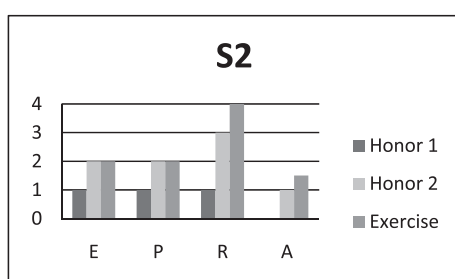
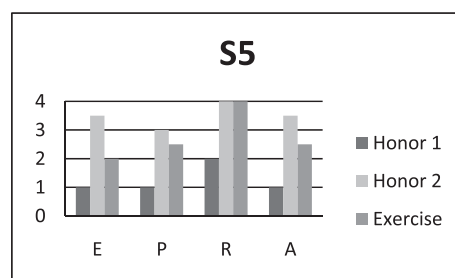
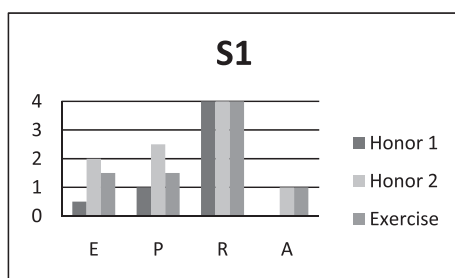
Limitations of the current study :

While all students in our study showed improvement between readings HONOR 1 and HONOR 2, the small sample size makes it impossible for us to say if this would hold true for all learners. Furthermore, HONOR 1 was recorded in at the very beginning of the 2011 spring semester. For most of the students, this was the first time in over 3 months that they had been required to speak aloud, let alone read aloud, in English. By the time they recorded HONOR 2 and EXERCISE 1, students had been back at school for almost two months, and had been exposed to a variety of English related activities, all of which could help account for their improved performances.

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Appendix 2 : Individual Results



E: Expression

P: Phrasing

R: Rate

A: Accuracy

