

# Does Reading Aloud Improve Foreign Language Learners' Speaking Ability?

Sueyon Seo

**Abstract—** The purpose of this study is to find ways to enhance foreign language students' speaking ability. Many such students are anxious about speaking the target language because they are conscious of their imperfect pronunciation and feel strange about their own voice pronouncing the unfamiliar sound. This paper is to explore whether the practice of reading aloud in the classroom addresses this problem. The result shows that reading aloud activity can improve students' pronunciation of the target language and eventually it helps enhancing students' speaking ability.

**Keywords—**Foreign language education, Japanese, LCTLs, Reading aloud

## I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to find ways to enhance foreign language students' speaking ability. For learners of foreign languages especially LCTLs (Less Commonly Taught Languages), the greatest obstacle is the shortness of the time during which they are exposed to the target languages. Since there are not many native speakers of LCTL, students can rarely apply what they have learned in the classrooms to real life. This leads to a lack of speaking practice. Consequently, students suffer from a rather low level of speaking ability. Every textbook has CDs and many internet websites offer various audio materials in different languages; however, the question is how to utilize them appropriately in the classrooms. Just listening to CDs may get the class easily bored and it may diminish students' interest in learning languages. The other audio materials may be hard to adjust to the level of the class. Many students are anxious about speaking the target language because they are conscious of their imperfect pronunciation and feel strange about their own voice pronouncing the unfamiliar sounds. Thus they may lose confidence in speaking the target languages.

In order to improve students' speaking ability, I wish to explore whether the practice of reading aloud in the classroom addresses this problem. The rationale of the study is based on two presumed benefits of reading aloud. First, it should make students get used to their own voice pronouncing the target language and thus reduce anxiety. Second, students' articulatory mechanism will be trained by pronouncing the unfamiliar

sounds of the foreign language and eventually students can speak the target languages with confidence.

## II. READING ALOUD

Among the four skills of linguistic ability, speaking and writing skills are classified as active skills while listening and reading are categorized as passive since the two skills do not involve any production. The main goal of reading is grammar instruction and comprehension. The methods of teaching reading are reading aloud and silent reading. However, compared to silent reading, reading aloud has been less encouraged in the normal classrooms because it may hamper comprehension and thus, the method has not been popular. Green [1] stated some negative effects of reading aloud in her classroom: students focus only on the very activity of reading itself and fail to pay attention to the content. In addition, reading aloud has not been encouraged in current communicative-based language learning classrooms either since it has not been seen to be genuinely communicative [2].

Under the current performance and communicative based foreign language teaching trend, activities related to reading have been greatly decreased. However, Price [3] claims that motor activity such as vocal ones are greatly involved in thinking and learning. Danesi [4] refers to earlier work that shows that in a non-immersion learning environment such as LCTL classrooms in America, reading comprehension is considered to be the only way to acquire language skills. He also notes that even though the originators of the reading method emphasized grammar instruction, it also promotes proper pronunciation. Khatib's study [5] supports the claim that reading aloud contributes not only to the comprehension of the text but also to phonological processing and this way, the two purposes are working interactively.

Although the reading method has not been generally welcomed in the classrooms, its effect has been evaluated differently in second language learning. As Danesi [4] mentioned, in cases where there were fewer chances to be exposed to second language conditions, reading aloud could be used to compensate for the lack of speaking practice. One piece of evidence comes from Japan. Miura [6] suggested reading aloud as one of the ways to master English including dictation, writing journals, reading magazines, watching movies, and practicing shadowing. Many bloggers have been uploading their

experiences with the effects of reading aloud in learning languages and have been strongly recommending the method. Gibson [2] conducted a survey of the reading aloud method and found an interesting fact: students themselves used the reading aloud method for practicing pronunciation and intonation, speaking practice, diagnosing pronunciation problems and improving fluency. Moreover, the method was widely used by Asian students in learning English. They evaluated the reading aloud method as very useful because the pronunciation of their native languages are very different from that of English.

### III. RESEARCH QUESTION

Given that reading aloud plays a role in improving students' pronunciation and it has a positive effect on enhancing speaking skill for Asian students who learn English, it may also influence American students who are learning Japanese in a positive way. Focusing on pronunciation by reading aloud while disregarding comprehension, students may concentrate on familiarizing themselves with the different sounds of target language and thus improve their speaking ability.

### IV. PROCEDURE

The research had been conducted during the fall semester of 2013. 31 second-year students of the Japanese program at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee had been divided into a treatment group and a control group. There were three sections of second-year Japanese and by the random selection, section 1 was chosen to be the control group and section 2 and 3 were chosen to be the treatment group. Each member of the treatment group read out a 1-minute-long passage repeatedly 3 to 5 times. Five minutes were devoted to reading aloud five days a week. Translations of the passage were given to the students in advance with vocabulary list and kanji symbols transcribed into hiragana. Students read the same material for one week. The materials were excerpted from Japanese textbooks which are not used in the school and Japanese short story books. The materials were chosen to be easy to make sure students were comfortable with them. While they were reading, students were told not to focus on comprehension: the point was to make them get used to their own voice while reading the text. The study lasted 7 weeks. In order to gauge student's progress, a pretest and a posttest of speaking was administered to both groups. The tests were assessed by length of the sentences and the richness of grammar.

For pretest and posttest, students were asked 7 questions on line. They were required to answer aloud impromptu and the answers were recorded. The pretest and the posttest questions were very similar, although they were not exactly the same. In addition, students' class test scores were compared to find out if their performance had any influence on the research result. A very short survey for the treatment group

students was also conducted to find out students' reflection on the task.

### V. RESULTS

From among the 31 students, 22 took the pretest and 18 took the posttest. Only 15 students took both the pre and posttest and therefore, the analysis was done on 15 students. Among the 15 students, 7 were in the control group and 8 in the treatment group.

First of all, all students' class performance test scores were compared. Usually the class grading system covers everything including students' attendance, participation, homework, assignments, and presentation. However, in this study, only students' written, oral, and reading test scores were considered. The results are shown in Table 1. There was no significant difference among students regarding their class performance. Next, the two groups' speaking tests were compared. The speaking test was divided into two parts: the length of time of speech and the grammar used. To evaluate the use of grammar, different sentence types were counted. Table 2 shows the results of the comparison of the length of the answers. The results showed a significant difference between the two groups' pretest scores. However, as shown in Table 3, the difference between the pretest and the posttest of the control group was not significant while the treatment group showed a significant difference. Table 4 and Table 5 have to do with grammar. Table 4, just like Table 2, compares the pretest levels of the two groups. It shows a difference between the two groups. Table 5, just like Table 3, compares the pretest and the posttest levels of the two groups. The treatment group's pretest and posttest scores showed a significant difference; however, the difference was not significant for the control group.

More detail is given in Tables 6, 7, and 8. Table 6 is the grammar list and Table 7 is the expressions only used in the treatment posttest answers. Since there is great difference in the number of transition words and adverbials used by the two groups, these word lists are provided in Table 8.

Other than the result, very short survey was conducted to the treatment group students after the study has completed. They answered that they read the text 3 through 5 times every day. All student felt that the reading practice was helped to improve their pronunciation and speaking. One student answered comprehension. All of them felt they could read the material faster.

TABLE I  
CLASS PERFORMANCE SCORES FOR THE TWO GROUPS  
ANOVA

|              |                | Sum of Squares | Df | Mean Square | F     | Sig  |
|--------------|----------------|----------------|----|-------------|-------|------|
| Oral Test    | Between Groups | 15.336         | 1  | 15.336      | 2.268 | .156 |
|              | Within Groups  | 87.897         | 13 | 6.761       |       |      |
|              | Total          | 103.233        | 14 |             |       |      |
| Written Test | Between Groups | 87.462         | 1  | 87.462      | .045  | .835 |
|              | Within Groups  | 25067.219      | 13 | 1928.248    |       |      |
|              | Total          | 25154.681      | 14 |             |       |      |
| Read Test    | Between Groups | 1.509          | 1  | 1.509       | .026  | .874 |
|              | Within Groups  | 748.589        | 13 | 57.584      |       |      |
|              | Total          | 750.097        | 14 |             |       |      |

Graph I  
STUDENTS' CLASS PERFORMANCE

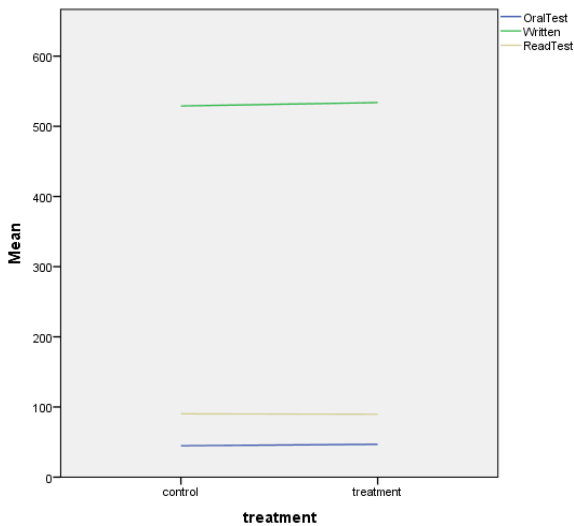


TABLE II  
THE LENGTH OF TIME OF THE PRETEST SCORES OF THE TWO GROUPS

|        |               | Paired Differences |  | t      | df       | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|--------|---------------|--------------------|--|--------|----------|-----------------|
|        |               | Mean               | Std. Dev   |        |          |                 |
|        |               | Std. Error Mean    | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference<br>Lower Upper |        |          |                 |
| Pair 1 | LCPre - LTPre | -58.143            | 23.773   | 8.985  |          |                 |
|        |               |                    |  |        | -80.129  | -36.157         |
| Pair 2 | LCpo - LTpo   | -177.571           | 170.490  | 64.439 |          |                 |
|        |               |                    |  |        | -335.249 | -19.894         |

Graph II  
THE LENGTH OF TIME OF THE PRETEST AND THE POSTTEST OF THE TWO GROUPS

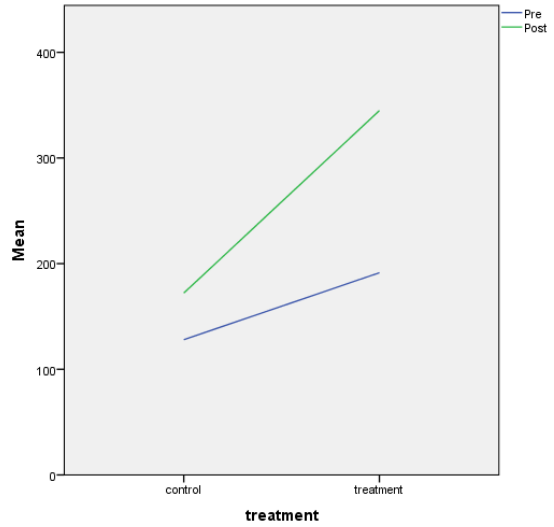


TABLE III  
THE LENGTH OF TIME OF THE PRETEST AND THE POSTTEST OF THE TWO GROUPS

|        |              | Paired Differences |                |                 |  |         | t      | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|--------|--------------|--------------------|----------------|-----------------|--|---------|--------|----|-----------------|
|        |              | Mean               | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference<br>Lower Upper |         |        |    |                 |
|        |              | Pair 1             | LCPre - LCpo   | -44.143         | 78.737   | 29.760  |        |    |                 |
| Pair 2 | LTPre - LTpo | -153.500           | 124.266        | 43.935          | -257.389   | -49.611 | -3.494 | 7  | .010            |

TABLE IV  
COMPARISON OF GRAMMAR USED IN THE PRETEST SCORES OF THE TWO GROUPS

|        |                   | Paired Differences |                 |                 |  |        | t      | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|--------|-------------------|--------------------|-----------------|-----------------|--|--------|--------|----|-----------------|
|        |                   | Mean               | Std. Deviation  | Std. Error Mean | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference<br>Lower Upper |        |        |    |                 |
|        |                   | Pair 1             | ConPre - TrePre | -2.289          | 5.417  | .808   |        |    |                 |
| Pair 2 | ConPost - TrePost | -6.400             | 12.296          | 1.833           | -10.094  | -2.706 | -3.491 | 44 | .001            |

TABLE V  
COMPARISON OF GRAMMAR USED IN THE PRETEST AND THE POSTTEST BY THE TWO GROUPS

|        |                  | Paired Differences |                  |                 |  |        | t      | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|--------|------------------|--------------------|------------------|-----------------|--|--------|--------|----|-----------------|
|        |                  | Mean               | Std. Dev         | Std. Error Mean | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference<br>Lower Upper |        |        |    |                 |
|        |                  | Pair 1             | ConPre - ConPost | -1.267          | 6.114  | .911   |        |    |                 |
| Pair 2 | TrePre - TrePost | -5.378             | 14.314           | 2.134           | -9.678   | -1.078 | -2.520 | 44 | .015            |

TABLE VI

GRAMMAR LIST USED IN THE PRETEST AND THE POSTTEST BY THE TWO GROUPS

|                      | Control |      | Treatment |      |
|----------------------|---------|------|-----------|------|
|                      | Pre     | Post | Pre       | Post |
| AはBです                | 33      | 16   | 54        | 42   |
| ～を～ます                | 19      | 39   | 42        | 94   |
| ～が好きです               | 12      | 3    | 22        | 10   |
| AdjNが好きです            | 5       | 5    | 3         | 24   |
| ～のが好きです              | 9       | 5    | 13        | 12   |
| Adj(N1のN)NはN3です      | 4       | 6    | 4         | 9    |
| V時                   | 2       | 7    | 1         | 7    |
| N時                   | 1       | 3    | 4         | 4    |
| Adj Past             | 1       | 6    | 5         | 5    |
| ～て                   | 13      | 3    | 11        | 10   |
| Repeat,Slow,Pause    | 8       | 11   | 7         | 21   |
| ～たい                  | 20      | 19   | 30        | 35   |
| ～たり～たりする             | 5       | 8    | 1         | 8    |
| ～から                  | 4       | 7    | 8         | 6    |
| ～と (With)            | 1       | 2    | 3         | 7    |
| Particl error        | 7       | 11   | 14        | 16   |
| vocab,grammar errors | 8       | 8    | 15        | 25   |
| ～がある (いる)            | 3       | 8    | 7         | 10   |
| Transition words     | 3       | 6    | 12        | 24   |
| Adverbials           | 24      | 49   | 26        | 103  |
| SentenceFinal～ね、～    |         |      |           |      |
| よ                    | 1       | 1    | 1         | 5    |
| ～つもり                 | 2       | 1    |           | 3    |
| ～と思う                 | 1       | 2    |           | 4    |
| ので                   | 3       | 1    | 3         |      |
| ～そう                  |         | 1    | 1         | 5    |
| てみたい                 |         | 5    | 4         | 9    |
| にいく                  |         | 1    | 1         | 1    |
| ことがない                | 2       |      |           | 1    |
| ～てから                 |         | 1    |           | 1    |
| ～たら                  |         | 2    |           | 8    |
| もらう                  |         | 2    |           | 5    |
| あげる                  |         | 2    |           | 3    |
| ～てくれる                |         | 1    |           | 1    |
| ～が                   |         |      | 3         | 3    |
| ～のあと                 |         |      | 2         | 1    |
| ～すぎる                 |         |      | 2         | 3    |
| ～について                |         |      |           | 1    |
| ～けど                  |         |      |           | 2    |
| ～なきゃいけない             |         |      |           | 1    |
| ～てもらおう               |         |      |           | 1    |
| ～くれる                 |         |      |           | 12   |

TABLE VII

GRAMMAR ONLY USED IN THE TREATMENT POSTTEST

| Expressions |                            |
|-------------|----------------------------|
| Semester2   | 次に、                        |
| Semester3   | ～に～回、なければいけない、くれる、てもらおう、特に |
| No text     | すごい、実は、について、例えば、けど、どうしても   |

TABLE VIII

ADVERBIALS AND TRANSITION WORDS USED IN THE PRETEST AND THE POSTTEST BY THE TWO GROUPS

|           |          | Transition words      | Adverbials   |
|-----------|----------|-----------------------|--|
| Control   | Pretest  | それから、そして、です           | たくさん、一番、とても、全部、たぶん   |
|           | Posttest | でも、それから、そして           | たくさん、よく、毎日、とても、時々、一番、たいてい、全部、いろいろ、みんな  |
| Treatment | Pretest  | でも、それから、だから、          | よく、たぶん、とても、一番、でも、みんな、全部、   |
|           | Posttest | でも、それから、そして、たとえば、だから、 | 特に、たくさん、いろいろ、すごい、そして、全然、とても、ですから、時々、だから、次に、一番、たいてい、だから、いっしょに、実は、あとで、みんな、よく、全部、どうしても、～に～回 |

VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results show that reading aloud does make a difference in students' speaking ability in two ways. First, the treatment group spoke longer after the treatment than they did before while the control group did not show a difference in length of time. Second, the treatment group used a richer grammar after the treatment while the control group did not show progress.

Let us now look at some detail in the grammar that the students used in the tests. First, in both groups, the "N is N" pattern decreased in the posttest while the SOV sentence pattern increased but this was probably the result of the initial question of the pretest which called this pattern in the answers. The "N is N" pattern is the simplest structure in Japanese and they learned this structure at the beginning for self-introduction. The first question of the pretest asked students to introduce themselves and all of them used this sentence pattern. Second, the treatment group used more adjectives, adverbs, and transition words such as "then" in their speaking. Even when they used the same sentence patterns as in the pretest, the treatment group students used more adjectives before nouns, sentence final particles, and transition words. Furthermore, as you can see in the list, the number of adverbials used by the treatment group is significant

as compared to the control group. Interestingly, most of the adverbials that were only used by the treatment group were not in the textbook although instructors used them in class many times. 6 out of 12 expressions only used in the treatment posttest were not taught in the class. The rest of the expressions were all taught in the third semester. The reading text used in the study had only three words: “くれる”, “なければいけない” and “けど.” Third, in both groups, students paused after particles. This seemed to be a habit for students to think before they would speak the next part of the sentence. They paused mostly after the object particle and after the special expressions. The students of the treatment group made more errors in grammar than those in the control group. I assume that they tried to say more sentences and tried to self-correct. Fourth, the results of the responses of the survey support the fact that the practice gave students confidence in their speaking ability. All students thought the practice was useful and helpful to improve their pronunciation and speaking skill. Lastly, it is interesting that the pretest scores of the two groups were significantly different even though their class performance did not show any significant difference. The reason is unclear.

Although many other factors such as class performance and activities, individual differences, students' personalities and their motivation in learning languages may impact the study results, it is reasonably clear that reading aloud can be a good method for students learning foreign languages in non-immersion setting.

In conclusion, even though their early stage speaking level was not the same, reading aloud resulted in progress in students' speaking level and their usage of grammar. By reading aloud repeatedly, students were able to get used to the unique sounds of Japanese pronunciation and produce more natural sentences. This also boosted their confidence in speaking Japanese. Considering that the practice had been done only for 5 minutes daily in class as a warm-up activity, the positive effect is particularly promising.

## REFERENCES

- [1] M. Green, “Rapid retrieval of information: Reading aloud with purpose.” in *Journal Of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 41<sup>st</sup> ed. vol. 4, 1997, pp. 306.
- [2] S. Gibson, “Reading aloud: a useful learning tool?” in *ELT Journal: English Language Teachers Journal*, 62<sup>nd</sup> ed. vol. 1, 2008, pp. 29-36.
- [3] H. Price, and J.B. Stroud, “A note on oral reading.” in *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 31<sup>st</sup> ed. vol. 3, 1945, pp. 340.5
- [4] M. Danesi, “*Semiotics in language education*” . Berlin New York, Mouton de Gruyter, 2000 Ch.1.
- [5] M. Khatib, and J. Fat'hi, “On the Role of Phonological Processing in L2 Reading.” in *Journal Of Language Teaching & Research*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. vol. 1, 2012, pp. 66-73.
- [6] 三浦 省五. (2013. Feb 19) 英語の学び方—何をどの程度のように. TSS 文化大学の講演 [www.geocities.jp/hirodai\\_ob/tushin/miura\\_sanpo.pdf](http://www.geocities.jp/hirodai_ob/tushin/miura_sanpo.pdf)

**Sueyon Seo** was born and raised in South Korea. She received her MA in linguistics and PhD in Education at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee WI, USA in 2012. The major interest fields are SLA and foreign language education. She has been teaching Japanese at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, WI, USA for 10 years. Currently she has conducted research related to foreign language methodology especially for the classrooms of LCTLs (Less Commonly Taught Languages) and students' motivation. S. Seo is presently with the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, WI 53212, USA and can be reached at [sseo@uwm.edu](mailto:sseo@uwm.edu).