

# [Ⅲ] ORAL READING IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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## A Introduction

There are many people who can read silently rather difficult English material such as novels and essays, though they cannot understand the spoken language or speak English well at all. Why is this so? They read the materials as signs and decipher them, but this will not enable them to read aloud in natural English. Quite often they can grasp the meaning of sentences one by one, but not as a continual flow, and are not familiar with the particular rhythm, stress and intonation of foreign languages, either. It is also doubtful if much attention is given to the whole discourse. In such a case, when they have to write a coherent narrative, they are likely to be unsuccessful, though they know many words and structures.

My hypothesis is that an improved ability to read aloud could be transferred to improved listening, speaking and writing if reading aloud were taught as a means of communication and as narrative. And this might be the best and most fruitful technique in TEFL—more than in TESL, which is a different situation.

I am going to discuss the importance of the voice in human beings, language as a connection of meanings and sounds, and reading as a form of communication. I also intend to suggest oral reading as a partial remedy for weakness in foreign language skills.

## B Significance of the Voice

Generally speaking, not much importance is given to projecting the voice, but it plays an important role. When we sing, correct breathing through moving the diaphragm is basic, and we have to use the whole body as a musical instrument. When singing, the body should therefore not be stiff. Thus we cannot say only the vocal organ matters, because the whole body does. The same thing can be said when we speak. Takeuchi says that our voice reveals us and liberates us. As Reid points out, "We neglect our speaking voice ..... Let the voice sound like the meaning, and let this sound help to convey the emotion you feel" (Reid, 1965, p. 330). Spoken words have an effect on others and reveal the speaker to others. Takeuchi writes:

If the language ability is not that of grasping the facts and expressing oneself and searching for the future, even rich vocabulary will be shallow and empty.

(Takeuchi, 1983, p. 18. Translated by Kubo)

Language aims at communication and has two functions: to express the facts and provoke emotions. In studying foreign languages, the former is concentrated upon and sometimes language activities are entirely restricted to this aspect alone. However, from the viewpoint of language education, the latter is also indispensable and should be taken into account as well. It will be of advantage to students in cultivating their human growth. That is why we should give more importance to the voice and to the affective element in language.

Many people think those who have not mastered basic grammar or sentence structure should con-

concentrate on learning such basic things, and need not listen to good reading or try to read aloud well. However, a monotonous tone in reading does not stimulate us at all, while really good oral reading inspires students by making the text easy to understand, even if it is at a beginning stage. Kohl says,

From the start it is crucial to join the study of sentences to the study of voice and rhythm. .... There was no problem getting even the youngest students to understand that written words expressed voices that could be discovered and played with. Reading when it is just considered a matter of mastering some mechanical skills becomes a dry and often boring activity. When it relates to the voice of the reader or to other people's voices it becomes communication.

(Kohl, 1978; p. 58-59)

## **C Objectives of Oral Reading**

### **1. Pronunciation Practice**

It goes without saying that it is necessary to learn accurate pronunciation for each word. It is, however, no less important to become familiar with the real pronunciation as part of a series in a flow of sentences, where we find weak and strong forms as well as rhythm and intonation. Words are usually used in a sentence and in a coherent series. "A word or phrase may be clearly enunciated in isolation but is slurred or distorted when read in meaningful context" (Fessenden et al, 1968, p. 241). Japanese students can profit from knowing the difference in breathing between English and Japanese, because even if we try to articulate English just like native speakers, breathing differences make it hard to do so. Therefore, we should pay attention to breathing, articulation, resonance, rhythm, intonation, tone, pitch and speed, since by mastering these, English narratives sound more colorful and true-to-life.

Reading aloud greatly contributes to pronunciation practice. Moreover, when we read, we should read just as if we were talking to somebody – sometimes it may be to a large audience and sometimes to oneself alone. As Omi points out, "All writing is narration in the general sense that we expect to find a narrator behind it" (Omi, 1984, p. 61. Translated by Kubo).

When we are used to reading aloud, we will find it easier to pronounce English properly when speaking. By the same token, if we cannot speak properly, it shows that our reading aloud is probably nonexistent or deficient.

### **2. Deeper Meaning**

What is language? It may be defined as a connection of meaning and sound, and its basis is communication. When we mention communication, we are usually apt to think of conversation, but reading and writing should not be forgotten either.

When we non-English-speaking people learn reading, we often translate sentences into our own language. Ando says, however, that "the ability derived from the translation method cannot easily be transferred to other abilities." The nuances of the original text are lost, but in order to foster sensitivity to a given language, the nuances of that language are indispensable. Moreover, the flow of the whole narrative should be understood. When we stick to minute details we may miss some important message. We should also realize not only denotation but connotation.

To express a text orally we have to clarify in our own minds the ideas it contains. This necessarily demands deep understanding of the material. Fessenden et al. stress this as follows:

..... the ability to read well orally is a distinct aid to comprehension in silent reading. The good oral reader learns to interpret meaning, to recognize word groupings and relationships, to spot key words and phrases, and to sort out the important ideas. He also acquires an appreciation of the rhetorical skill of the writer. His perception is deeper and fuller, generally speaking, than that of the silent reader.

(Fessenden et al, 1968, p. 240)

In order to understand the full meaning of a text, our sensitivity must be used. We have to feel empathy with the writer through our voice, body and heart. The more we are involved, the easier it is to understand and experience the full meaning he intended:

In addition to the practical uses of oral reading in motivating interest or conveying information, it has one important psychological value in learning. In giving vocal expression to ideas through reading, you are not only seeing words; you are saying them and hearing them. Your perception is reinforced by additional sense stimulation. Vocal enunciation triples your sensory intake.

(ibid, p. 238)

Thus, when we aim at total mastery of a language, the fusion of meaning and sound is extremely important. We can therefore utilize the oral interpretation method here to analyze and understand better the meaning of written texts.

### 3. Consolidation

Rapid reading makes it possible to understand the general meaning of a text, but sometimes there are phrases and sentences of which we can more fully appreciate the meaning and the sound only by reading them aloud so as to better reproduce the writer's ideas and feelings. Such wonderful treasures, especially in literature, are missed by rapid silent reading. There is of course reading for mere general information, but some texts need deep appreciation, so we have to differentiate them. Besides, by reading the latter aloud, we can savour them not only through our eyes but through the sound itself. When we read them dramatically, that is with feeling, they will be much more impressive. In this way, we can enjoy reading aloud and also express ourselves by sometimes reading to an audience. There is then understanding not through our native language, but directly in the original language, using all our senses.

Those language materials which are thus used through the spoken sounds and with our senses can be consolidated more easily. They will then be more readily transferred to the speaking and writing skills because the body itself retains them, just like music.

## D Special Activities in Oral Reading

### 1. Oral Interpretation

The purpose here is not simply to verbalize word symbols, but "to communicate the total experience embodied within the selection one has chosen to read" (Reid, 1965, p. 105). Omi similarly quotes a passage from Lee as follows:

Oral Interpretation is the art of communicating to an audience a work of literary art in its intellectual, emotional and aesthetic entirety.

(Lee, 1965, p. 3)

We have to interpret a given text and then express it as our own experience. Expressing entails some kind of creation: "It is both a personal and group experience through the work itself, and a substitute experience of life described in it, and sometimes a creative experience with the addition of one's own interpretation" (Omi, 1984, p. 42. Translated by Kubo).

Vocalizing by definition can not be merely an abstract and passive activity, but is the presenting of a passage as a narrative. It is extremely important to recognize all written works as a kind of narrative.

From this viewpoint, reading cannot be a passive and monotonous activity. Articulation, intonation, stress, speed and timing, projection and so on, all these are used to communicate something through the body and the heart. It needs some techniques, as Reid points out:

Effective interpretation requires understanding of the content and form of the material plus mastery of the techniques of communication, including the more complex arts of timing, heightening the effect, and establishing mood, as well as basic vocal and bodily skills.

(Reid, 1965, p. 105)

Sound is thus integrated with thought and emotion. Oral reading is not the mere vocalizing of symbols, but the presenting of living words. It is not mere knowledge, but direct appreciation of the text through the original language, and this is what is missed in translation.

Oral Interpretation can be done by a person or by a group. Accordingly, there is solo interpretation and group interpretation. Next we shall discuss choral reading as group interpretation.

## 2. Choral Reading

This does not mean reading which is usually done in unison in a classroom, but what is called "Choral Speaking", "Chamber Theatre" or "Readers Theatre". Reid explains choral reading as follows:

Choral reading is group interpretation of poetry or prose. It is not class recitation; it is not a class merely reading together. Instead, it is class interpreting together. The group takes words from the printed page and makes them come alive. Through imagination students understand and recreate the experience of the writer. As sensitive human beings they react to this experience emotionally and then express this reaction vocally. Thus, by means of the mind, emotions, voice and body, students re-create a vital experience from the printed word.

(Reid, 1965, p. 326)

Choral reading "has been used in religious worship or in other aspects of social and cultural life as a form of group expression" (Fessenden et al, 1968, p. 243), and came to be used in schoolrooms as an educational tool around 1900 (ibid). Owing to its effectiveness in education, "it is an excellent medium for stimulating interest in poetry, improving diction, drawing out the shy child, correcting faulty speech, and securing total group cooperation" (ibid, p. 243).

Done in chorus, choral reading demands unity within the group. According to Reid, there are unities of thought, articulation, inflection, pitch and feeling (Reid, 1965, p. 328-330). In order to attain

these unities, discussion is indispensable.

It is said that everybody can enjoy choral reading, whether they are children or adults, and it is suitable for both training and enjoyment. Choral reading is of various types, such as "reading in unison, the refrain chorus, antiphonal reading, the line-a-person assignment, the part-arrangement" (Fessenden et al, 1968, p. 243). We can combine these types and create many possibilities. The important task is to select good material which is suitable for the learners.

Choral reading is a kind of creation through cooperation among students, and is different from monotonous drill. It needs cooperation, creativity and the use of all our senses. Therefore when it is done well, it gives the performers great satisfaction and the audience thorough enjoyment.

## E Conclusion

Oral reading aims at correct articulation, especially within the flow of complete sentences. It also requires reading as we think of the content, which calls for appropriate interpretation of the text. According to the content, we can give the right value to our expression of the feelings involved. Our voice has various shades which colour our feelings. We would like to direct our students' interest and concern to this role the voice plays. Moreover, it is hoped they will develop sensitivity and appreciation of beauty using language not only as a means of getting information but also a means of cultivating sympathy as a human-being. By involving their thoughts, emotions and all their senses, visual and auditory, it will be easier to retain the English of the passage and apply it to speaking and writing as well as listening. Particularly in choral reading, enjoyment and satisfaction will be greater through cooperation with others, and through the realization of a wider variety of voice arrangements, and more dynamic presentations than an individual presentation allows for.

Reading, an act which seems to be rather passive, will then be changed into a more active function, and even into a kind of creativity. We can have students grow and profit from their involvement in such an active study of language.

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