

Pronunciation Activities in Extensive Reading Classes

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Extensive Reading can be used as input for classes that focus on language production. This approach has achieved some degree of success at the presenter's institution. On the premise that phonemic awareness (the "voice" of a text) is an important part of the reading experience, this paper looks at introducing structured pronunciation activities into Extensive Reading activities. In general, the activities use a graded reader as a basis for pronunciation practice. In this way, reading activities can be used to highlight language use for other areas of the students' English development, and to help students find authors' voices and their own.

According to Gilbert, pronunciation as a skill may be under-represented in the EFL classroom (2010). This has direct consequences on reading skills because words are, first and foremost, sounds. The sound of words—even when reading—is important. The National Reading Panel recommended phonics, phonemic awareness, and read-aloud activities as key features of first-language reading instruction in the US (National Reading Panel, 2000). In his discussion of reading pedagogy in L2, Nation (2009) reflects similar approaches, and Koda (2005) notes the importance of "converting visual input into its phonological form" (p. 33) as a strategy for dealing with vocabulary. This paper reports on some activities developed towards marrying phonological skills to Extensive Reading activities.

Within the context where these activities were developed, Graded Readers are a part of "output" classes, focusing on fluency in speaking and writing. Following Nation's four-strand approach to instruction (Nation, 2009), we have used graded readers as meaning focused input that can be used with a degree of autonomy by the students. Meaning focused output has been achieved by having students report on what they have read. Fluency development takes place by establishing word goal targets for reading, and having students discuss what they have read, either in written or spoken formats.

Pronunciation activities would come under the heading of language-focused learning in Nation's approach. To create this language focus, I have been selecting a text of appropriate level for the class, and using a page or so to look at features of pronunciation in read aloud activities. In a typical activity, the pronunciation point will be modeled for the class, and

an alternative text provided for students to try in pairs or small groups. Following this, students engage in read-aloud activities from their own books.

Finally, I have generally avoided individual sounds in the teaching of pronunciation, preferring to coach at this level of detail when it arises naturally. Most students are aware of difficulty with sounds, but the general consensus in pedagogy is that, although easier to teach than suprasegmental features (i.e. those features above the phoneme level), errors in individual sounds have a lower impact on communication success or failure (see, for example, Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin, 2010). Indeed, the discourse visible throughout a reading passage provides meaningful practice of suprasegmental targets for students.

Word-level activities

As with other first language groups, Japanese learners have a tendency to insert extra syllables into words (a form of epenthesis) and to misplace word stress. Starting at the word level gives students the easiest access to the concept of syllables.

Taking a sample page from a reader, students can separate the words on the page into one, two, or three syllable groups using a table. Once the number of syllables in a group of words is recognized, they can be separated according to primary, secondary, and tertiary stress. This can be done with any level of student, and an example for a low level class of false beginners is given in Appendix 1.

Connected speech

When words join to make an utterance, they change each other. Rules for linking, blending and reduction

can be quite difficult if taught explicitly, but focusing on smaller targets can make for dramatic reading. For example, reduction of modal verbs would make a suitable target ("Who would" becoming "Who'd", "what will" to "what'll"), and can be easily implemented on a sample page.

Another key concept at the sentence level is the difference between "function" words and "content" words. In the sentence "Do you like pizza?", "Do you" would be function words (carrying tense and so on) and unstressed, while the content words "like pizza" (the communicative content) receive the stress. Usually, "pizza" would be the most important word, and thus receive the primary stress, while "like" would receive less stress. This can be confusing for students, as they spend a lot of time focusing on the function words in class, and the "Do" would be highlighted in a grammar text. Modeling the difference between content and function words, and then asking students to work together to distinguish the two is a useful awareness activity and appears to lead to improved reading and comprehension.

Finally, asking students to break up sentences into understandable pieces, much as one might break up a telephone number, can be a useful exercise.

The delivery of thought groups can lead to work on intonation, function, and deeper meaning within a text.

Read-aloud activities

Many pronunciation texts have various level checks based on reading a passage. These are useful, and may form part of assessment, but are undoubtedly teacher-centered. Their communicative value may also be limited because teachers choose the texts, and students may simply try to score points.

A conversation circle in which students read a passage of their book to each other may help in book selection. Multiple passes give students the chance to experiment with pronunciation and reading techniques. Literature circles (see, for example, Furr, n.d.) have the role of "Passage Person" available, and this has been one of the easier roles for students to understand. Both of these activities avoid the main problem with read-aloud activities by having students read to each other rather than to the teacher. The output is also meaningful as students are trying to "sell" the excitement of their books.

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Figure 1. Voiceshadow (above left) and Voiceboard (above right), with the peer assessment page

Students can record while simultaneously listening to a model (shadowing) or simply record a passage. Students can rate each other on a set of scales (below, centre), or the teacher can assign a global score (below, right).

Electronic read-aloud techniques have the advantage of being semi-permanent and are easier for both student and teacher comments. To this end, the Moodle modules Voiceboard and Voiceshadow have been useful. Both are freely available and built with peer assessment in mind (although teachers can assign grades too). Recordings of short passages (30-60 seconds) were useful follow-up from thought-group activities. Voiceboard activities allow students to read a common passage and listen to each other's rendition of it. In particular, these records can be used for longer-term assessment of progress, in that early recordings can be compared with later recordings for specific features. Screenshots are given in Figure 1.

Conclusion

Pronunciation does not seem to receive a lot of focus in reading literature, despite the deep link between phonology and orthography. Strengthening this link in the classroom may therefore have long-term benefits for students in terms of acquiring reading skills and in terms of acquiring other aspects of a second language. Above all, however, it my sincere hope that a focus on pronunciation work also enhances the simple enjoyment of the "voice" of a text. If pronunciation activities and Extensive Reading are done together, students stand to gain academically as their language skills increase, and personally as the language they are exposed to starts to have a more profound impact upon them.

References

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Appendix 1. Example worksheet for syllable and word stress activity, using *Trouble at the zoo* from the Cengage Foundations Library.

Part 1

Look at the passage below. Underline the words with 2 syllables. Include names of people ("Jenkins").

Mr. Jenkins goes away. Mike goes over the fence. He picks up the baby kangaroo.

"Jenny, do you want a picture with Joey?" asks Mike.

"Stop, Mike, put him down. He doesn't like it," says Jenny.

Jenny goes over the fence to Mike and says,

"Stop it!"



Which word has 3 syllables? _____

Part 2

Put the words into the box below according to their word stress.

1. Mr.
2. Jenkins
3. **away**
4. over
5. **ba**by
6. Jenny
7. picture
8. Joey
9. doesn't

Oo	oO
baby	away