



# Strategically Building Reading Fluency: Three Strands of New Listening- Reading Research

ANNA HUSSON ISOZAKI

Juntendo University

Especially with alphabetical writing systems, fluent reading in the typical brain is built on connections to our auditory systems and whether real or imagined, we experience a sense of hearing the print we see. Recent worldwide reading research shows learners need increased aural input to develop from halting reading toward reading fluency. Empirical research in listening and reading, in particular, shows bimodal provision of stories is beneficial for building EFL reading comprehension and related skills, including grammar. These results are now supported further by cognitive studies, pointing to strong and lasting benefits from aural activation and bimodal input. Calling into play these interweaving strands of research, adapting input integration to fit learners' needs, and tapping the intrinsic power of social support found in humans telling each other stories may provide powerful routes forward toward more empowered foreign language reading.

“We were never born to read,” as the neuroscience of literacy scholar Maryanne Wolf (2008, p. 3) famously explained, even though for fluent readers it feels like breathing. The concept of reading fluency itself is still a subject of debate and competing definitions. Regarding second language reading fluency, Chang and Millett discussed “reading rate (speed) and comprehension,” (2017, p. 2) noting that there are many processes which we must learn to do together, quickly and automatically, to make reading flow smoothly. Chang and Millett also drew a distinction between the reading rates expected in first language reading and the much lower speeds, though naturally varying by task, at which most second language learners

read (pp. 1–2). The crucial role of bimodal experience to build more effective fluency in reading has been clarified empirically, however, thanks to strong advances in cognitive and reading research (Alexander & Nygaard, 2008; Calvert, Campbell, & Brammer, 2000; Chang & Millett, 2015; Field, 2008; Koda, 2005; Koda & Zehler, 2008; Shankweiler et al., 2008; Walter, 2008; Wolf, 2008).

In short, we humans have hacked our brains to read, but to do it well we need enough bimodal (e.g., reading-listening) input to build up the necessary mental connections for automatic processing and reading fluency in each language we learn. Still, however, only a handful of researchers have been actively exploring the implications for second language reading fluency (Chang, 2011; Chang & Millett, 2015, 2017; Cheetham, 2005, 2017; Isozaki, 2014; Koda & Zehler, 2008; Masuhara, 2007; McNabb,

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2013; Stephens, 2017a, 2017b; Walter, 2008; Woodall, 2010).

Despite strong results and implications for teaching from these studies, disconnects between research and practice seem to remain. Some researchers have noticed a reluctance to explore multimodal input or to incorporate the research findings into pedagogy (Cheetham, 2005, 2017; Danon, 2004). One hesitation may simply be a desire to stay with tradition in teaching methods, as noted with chagrin by Amer (1997). Even earlier, Dhaif (1990) pinpointed the under-questioned assumption that “reading is normally a solitary activity” (p. 457) in foreign language learning. Subsequently, sociocultural and foreign language learning research began to contribute insights on second and foreign language reading, including findings suggesting a powerful role for socially-activated deepening of language learning with the addition of a voice, even when learners simply read aloud to themselves (Swain & Deters, 2007; Takeuchi, 2003).

The questions of effective teaching for reading become more urgent as the distance between the first and second languages increases. Koda and Zehler (2008) and their contributors, reporting on reading studies worldwide, demonstrated in *Learning to Read Across Languages* that as distance is added, the challenges in learning to read become more complex and persistent in the second language literacy-building process. While meta-analyses have found extensive reading to be beneficial (Nakanishi, 2015), comparative studies have found that adding audio support for second language reading can improve reading comprehension and fluency more than reading alone (Chang & Millett, 2015; Woodall, 2010). Phonology, as Walter (2008) concluded, is more than “an

optional extra” for L2 reading development (p. 455).

## **Background issues and relevant research**

### *Choosing levels of challenge for second and foreign language reading*

Appropriate levels of difficulty for learners’ practice to build fluency in L2 reading are, as with the input issues introduced above, still a subject of debate, with the research not always reaching the classroom. Second language reading specialist Amos Paran noted in a recent interview:

I think we very often give our learners things to read that are too difficult in terms of progressing reading, sight vocabulary, and fluency. You need to read something that is below the level you’re at... Otherwise you stop. If you’re trying to enjoy a book, if you’ve got more than two or three unknown words per page, you’re not going to enjoy it, and if these words are crucial, then you won’t understand it. If you’re reading for pleasure you’re going to put it aside. When you’re doing extensive reading, I’m a real believer in ‘read easy and read a lot.’ (Bibby & Isozaki, 2017, p. 18)

However, even with graded reading materials at low enough levels to fit these sensible observations and guidelines, the broader skill-building effects of extensive reading, including oral communication gains (Krashen, 2012) which teachers might be anticipating, still might not develop easily in EFL contexts, if at all (Tomlinson, 2000). Milton, Wade and Hopkins wrote that there may be less overlap between skills than we might hope:

For practical purposes, phonological and orthographic vocabulary knowledge appear to be different, to interact only loosely with each other and to interact differently with performance. The fact that a word is recognized in its written form, for example, does not mean it will also be recognized when heard. (2010, p. 97)

Woodall (2010), in the straightforward observation of a veteran teacher, also pointed out this phenomenon: “learners at this stage [in university, learning English as a second language] even stumble with many known words, and this stumbling with known words is what defines much of the experience of beginning L2 readers” (p. 199).

### ***Bimodal approaches to support L2 reading***

Woodall (2010) suggested another way forward: “Simultaneous reading of and listening to texts can push these students along” (p. 199). Paran, further, discussed cognitive reasons for teaching with aural support for reading automaticity and comprehension-building:

Listening to literature read aloud is important in developing the connections between the phonological representation and the visual form of the word ... and the meaning. In fact, you can't read a word without the phonological representation being activated. So reading aloud [by the teacher] serves to strengthen that link between the phonological representation and the visual, orthographic representation, and that's important. If a work is slightly above the level of the student, if the teacher reads it aloud, that's parsing it for the students, breaking it into chunks, using intonation – thereby helping them create a vision of what it's

about. ... If you are not sure of reading aloud, there are audiobooks. (Bibby & Isozaki, 2017, p. 18)

Through presenting literature aloud or by audiobook together with reading, teachers can help learners develop a number of essential literacy-related skills that may be just out of learners' reach, and other research has supplied evidence for teacher or audio-voiced reading benefitting second language literacy-building (Amer, 1990; Chang & Millett, 2015; Dhaif, 1997; Nakashima, Stephens, & Kamata, 2018; Stephens, 2017a; Stephens, 2017b; Woodall, 2010).

### ***Classroom research and cognitive investigations***

Dhaif (1990) wrote, “For several decades now we have been told by those concerned with psycholinguistics, foreign language pedagogy and teacher training that the best and most legitimate approach to teaching reading for comprehension is through engaging the learner in silent reading” (p. 457), but his study found stronger improvements in students' EFL reading comprehension when target passages were read aloud for the students by their teacher. Seven years later the same observation was made by Amer (1997): “Although reading aloud receives considerable emphasis in English as a first language, it is traditionally discouraged by EFL teachers” (p. 43). Amer also found stronger comprehension for EFL students with reading aloud by the teacher as compared to silent reading practice. Tomlinson (2000) noted the “inner voice” and the internal discussion which readers hold while reading, and suggested putting off silent reading in favor of reading aloud to L2 students or supplying audiobooks until students reached an appropriate level. Analyzing the then still-invisible processes of reading, Tomlinson (2000) also noted connections which could

be made across fields from the early 1970s; particularly that neuroscience and psycholinguistics were indicating that printed text comprehension, however silent to outside observers, occurred by auditory activity in the reader's mind. New methods in cognitive and neurological research soon showed evidence of the accuracy of those observations, appearing in Alexander and Nygaard (2008), Shankweiler et al. (2008), Calvert, Campbell, and Brammer (2000), and in book-length form in *Proust and the Squid* (Wolf, 2008). Foreign language reading researchers currently exploring the implications of these now-visible auditory foundations of reading are, like Tomlinson, recommending bimodal approaches for developing L2 reading more effectively by methods such as simultaneous listening and reading, and reading aloud (Cheetham, 2017; Stephens, 2017a, 2017b; Walter, 2008).

In a comparative study of high school EFL readers over 26 weeks, Chang and Millett (2015) found listening to audiobooks simultaneously with reading by slow readers (averaging 102 words per minute) significantly and sustainably improved the students' independent reading speeds to an average of 149 words per minute, and in tandem, reading comprehension significantly improved as well:

The present audio-assisted reading approach has also demonstrated a stronger effect on enhancing reading comprehension than timed reading or repeated reading while the silent reading approach, as in all other ER studies, has shown only moderate effect on comprehension improvement... If audio-assisted reading can help L2 learners comprehend better, then it is more likely that they will continue to read and enjoy reading.... (Chang & Millett, 2015, pp. 100–101)

### *Engagement, autonomy, and skill gains*

These benefits, however, can only be found when students are actually using the reading and audiobook materials. Learner investment may be an issue to address proactively (Fonseca-Mora & Machancoses, 2016; Stephens, 2017b; Van Amelsvoort, 2016). There are also persuasive arguments in research on language learning for self-regulated activity, particularly for listening to a foreign language (Murray, 2011; Vandergrift, 2007; Reinders & Cho, 2010) or listening and reading (McNabb, 2013; Prowse, 2002). Stress and overload when listening can have measurably detrimental effects on comprehension and learning a language (Elkhafafi, 2005). This does not necessarily mean slowing down, but rather possibly speeding up, or even, for example, separating sessions for listening and for reading, depending on the listening material and the individual student. Some teachers ruefully recall being ordered to read along with unnatural and overly-slow recordings in childhood, despite already being able to read much faster (L. Schowalter, personal communication, May 26, 2017). Researchers Chang and Millett (2015) warned:

Teachers should also be cautious when adopting audio-assisted reading. As students' reading rates increase, the speech rate of the audio recording should also be increased otherwise students may feel bored and will not benefit from it.... The...speech rate should be faster than the learners' reading rate. (p. 101)

Further related to listening and autonomy, Cho and Reinders (2013) conducted an EFL study exploring audiobook listening in three conditions: at a slowed speed, at the original speed but with pauses inserted, and at the original speed without modifications. They found all three learner groups

improved significantly between pre- and post-tests in target grammar, without significant differences between groups, from listening to one ninety-minute book outside class in the locations and conditions of their choice. That the improvements students showed were apparently without connection to the audio modifications by the researchers but, rather, thanks to the independent learning activity being carried out when and where the students chose suggests that there are potential benefits to be found in considering learner autonomy and may merit exploring with listening and reading in future research.

In adapting for natural variations in learners and their changing skill levels, scaffolding and learner-sensitive adjustments in class (Chang & Millett, 2015, p. 95), autonomy with pacing, or separating the listening and reading (Prowse, 2002; Reinders & Cho, 2010) could all be important. Equally important is a caveat—autonomy's benefits can be undercut or rendered nil if students use it to avoid engaging entirely, as discussed by Van Amelsvoort (2016) regarding the design of a completely autonomous extensive reading program which was then underutilized by students and showed few positive effects in their reading. Learning lab extensive reading and listening with the teacher present and assisting (Woodall, 2010), or classroom extensive reading and listening with the teacher incorporating time for explanations and discussions when needed (Chang & Millett, 2015, 2017) have, however, shown strong empirical gains from pairing audio listening with reading in EFL learning.

### *Socially activated learning and deepening literacy*

Sociocultural studies and literature in language learning research have also informed pedagogical interventions

building more empowered reading through provision of a human voice to a story, whether the teacher's, an audiobook actor's, or the learner's own (McNabb, 2013; Bibby & Isozaki, 2017; Swain & Deters, 2007; Stephens, 2015, 2017a; Woodall, 2010). Woodall (2010), in a reading project with university students studying English in Puerto Rico, provided access to an audiobook of Charlotte's Web read by the author, E. B. White. Participants listened in the university's language lab while reading, and strongly outscored a control group who only read the book rather than listening-and-reading, in the weekly comprehension quizzes. One reason for the difference posited by Woodall was that the voice, supporting the learners' reading practice, brought the learners into their Zone of Proximal Development, helping them reach levels of skill higher than before (pp. 197–198).

Other social approaches toward deepening reading engagement and empowerment are literature circles, reading circles or book clubs. These have been the subject of increasing research worldwide: as of autumn 2017, typing in these keywords brings up 168,000 hits through Google Scholar. Studies showing increases in learner investment in reading thanks to shared reading and discussion in person or online are appearing internationally, and regarding second language readers as well (Daniels, 2006; den Toonder, Visser, & van Voorst, 2017; Duncan, 2009; Isozaki, 2014; LeBlanc, 2015; Nishino, 2007; Shelton-Strong, 2012). Examples of learners helping each other deepen their reading experience by bringing relevant information and experiences into their discussions, and of positive peer pressure helping all members of a group complete their reading projects, are persuasively and sometimes movingly documented, as in online book group

research by Bowers-Campbell (2011) and Klages, Pate, and Conforti (2007).

## Conclusion

This piece is intended to draw together research which may have been overlooked or unavailable, depending on a teacher's setting, and to advocate making use of findings which might be applicable in each teacher's own judgment. Thanks to recent work by worldwide researchers, it seems clear that strands of cognitive, classroom, and sociocultural research are coming together. These converge toward what may, after all, be the most natural strategy for building L2 reading: reading stories aloud and sharing thoughts about them. Children around the world ask for stories aloud, why not second language learners? Calling on these findings and activating social aspects of learning in various ways—teacher's voice, own voice, recorded voice, and peers communicating with each other—has growing empirical evidence showing sustainable reading growth for learners. This shared space of enjoyed story—heard, read, and discussed—one could suggest calling a voice-activated reading area, or a “zone” for “proximal literacy development” (Isozaki, 2017). While this author has context-specific applications of these ideas, this paper intentionally refrains from prescriptive conclusions in respect for the tremendous diversity of teachers and teaching contexts among those participating at the conference and reading these proceedings.

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