



# The Power of Live Delivery: Reading Empowered by Orature or Audio?

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Sixty-four students silently read along while listening to live reading of texts in class, and read while listening to audiobooks for homework, every week over a semester. The teachers conducting the live readings to their respective classes were an American and an Australian. At the end of the semester, students were asked whether they preferred reading along while listening to the live readings or reading-while-listening with audiobooks. Most students preferred the live reading and provided reasons for this, such as the interactive nature of silently reading along while listening to a live reading and the effectiveness of embodied communication. Despite the availability of audio recordings, there are clear advantages to a live reading due to the multi-modal nature of embodied communication. This is manifested through facial expressions and mouth movements, elusive qualities such as warmth and reassurance, and the interaction between the reader and the audience.

Reading may be undertaken in the mono-modal channel of silent reading, the bi-modal channel of reading-while-listening, or the multi-modal channel of silently reading along to a live reading. Cheetham (2017) recommended that multi-modal input rather than mono-modal input be practised as the norm in foreign or second language teaching. The bimodal practice of reading-while-listening in ELT has received support from experimental studies: Isozaki's (2018) students identified improvements in their vocabulary, attitudes to reading, and listening. Woodall (2010) found that reading-while-listening benefited reading comprehension. Chang

(2011) explained how reading-while-listening facilitated the speed and accuracy of listening. Chang & Millet (2015) demonstrated how reading-while-listening lead to an improved rate of reading and reading comprehension. Taguchi et al. (2016) revealed the importance of prosody in reading comprehension, and Walter (2008) highlighted the role of phonological processing for reading comprehension. A further modality may be introduced in the embodied interaction which occurs during a live reading. This study is a comparison of student preferences for silently reading along during a live reading versus reading along while listening to audiobooks ('reading-while-listening'). A preliminary study by Stephens (2017) of 21 students demonstrated an overwhelming preference for silently reading along to a live reading. Stephens' research concerned readings by a single teacher, whereas the current

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study concerns live readings conducted separately by two teachers to a total of 64 students.

Group dynamics are important in foreign language classrooms because they include features such as physical proximity, interaction, co-operation, a sense of achievement when a group task is completed, and joint hardship leading to group achievement (Dornyei & Marderecz, 1999, p. 160). These features are present in a live listening task, but absent from individual listening to an audio recording. As Dewaele explained, "The progress of the learner is linked to the chemistry that develops between the learner, the other members of the group, and the teacher" (2014, p. 2). Investigation is needed to ascertain the extent to which these characteristics of group learning confer advantages on listening to a live reading.

On the other hand, a strong case was made for solitary learning by Cain (2012), who claimed "excessive stimulation seems to impede learning" (p. 85). Cain identified the benefits of solitude, when necessary, for creativity, although her discussion did not address listening comprehension by English learners. Nonetheless she provided a strong case for introverts to be granted the opportunity to work alone when they need to, and arguably, some of our English learners may benefit from this, too.

### **Why Reading-While-Listening is Important**

Before discussing the modes of delivering reading-while-listening, it is important to establish why reading-while-listening is necessary, and why it should be preferred to silent reading. Lefevre (1964) explained that writing is a mnemonic device which helps

the reader recall sounds and intonation: "even the most fleeting visual skimming probably carries vestigial traces of inner speech" (p. 5). Drawing an analogy with reading a musical score, Lefevre referred to writing as the "linguistic melodies of the printed page" (p. 73-74). Learners of English may benefit from the prompt to developing inner speech in English that reading-while-listening provides. Moreover, Chang and Millett (2015) explained how reading-while-listening pulls low level readers along at a faster speed, prevents them from getting distracted, provides stimulating sound effects, and enhances concentration (pp. 99-100).

Some learners of English may not yet have the access to the phonological representation of the words, and the printed word therefore cannot yet act as a mnemonic as Lefevre (1964) described. In the absence of an English phonological representation, the students may generate an approximate pronunciation of English which conforms to Japanese syllables, as is sometimes suggested by texts which provide katakana syllabary renditions of English vocabulary. Phonetic differences between English and Japanese may render spoken English difficult for Japanese learners to comprehend. Siok et al. (2003, cited in Birch, 2007) explained how syllabic and phonemic processing differ in terms of neural activation. Birch (2007) speculated, "an L1 reader of Japanese, which relies heavily on the syllable for processing, would need reprogramming to read English, which relies on phonemic processing and onset/rime patterns" (p. 38). Given these processing differences, it would be advantageous to have students read while listening, in order to familiarize them with the onset and rime pattern characteristic of English.

### ***The Essential Role of Phonological Decoding for Reading***

Koda (1995) contrasted how the alphabet and Japanese kanji are represented to their respective readers by distinguishing between the orthographic systems of morphography and phonography. Morphographic writing systems, such as kanji, are organized according to morphemes, whereas phonographic systems, such as an alphabet, are organized according to phonemes. Phonological decoding aids retention of what has been read in short term memory (Koda, 1995; Hamada and Koda, 2010). Readers of phonological scripts, such as the alphabet, always interpret the text phonologically, whereas Japanese readers of L2 English can interpret the text without necessarily decoding every word phonologically (Koda, 1995). These findings provide justification to the practice of reading-while-listening for learners of English whose L1 is morphographic. Early EFL readers from morphographic traditions can be guided past attempting to remember new words by a visual strategy alone. Given that reading-while-listening is not yet a widespread practice in EFL classrooms in Japan, and that L2 learners of English commonly undertake silent reading, the opportunities to practice phonological decoding are unnecessarily limited. The importance of phonology for retaining what has been read, identified by Koda (1995) and Hamada and Koda (2010), does not appear to have filtered down into classroom practice.

### ***The Phonological Loop in Developing a Working Memory for English***

Rather than having students read and translate an English text into Japanese, students should be encouraged to develop a working memory for English. Students need to develop a phonetic representation of what

they have read, and hold this in working memory while they assimilate the meaning, in order to attain comprehension and, eventually, automaticity. Baddeley et al. (1998) and Gathercole & Badderley (1993) presented a component of working memory for storing and rehearsing phonological information, known as the phonological loop. This loop explains the commonly observed phenomenon of people being able to repeat what they have just heard. Baddeley et al. proposed a purpose of this skill: "We suggest that the function of the phonological loop is not to remember familiar words but to help learn new words" (p.158). Furthermore, Baddeley et al. suggested that the phonological loop may help children learn syntax in their L1: "the phonological loop may play a crucial role in syntactic learning and in the acquisition of the phonological form of lexical items" (p. 167). Walter (2008) extended the role of the phonological loop to second language reading. She explained the importance of second language readers being capable of phonological storage and comprehension of what they have just read in order to make it meaningful to them; they "need to be better at mentally representing spoken language" (p. 470), in order to improve their reading skills. In countries where there are few opportunities to access spoken English, Walter recommended teachers have students read while listening to an audio-recording, watch television or listen to the radio in English (p. 470).

Studies of variable reading proficiency by L1 English-speaking children confirmed the relationship between the grapheme-phoneme correspondence and reading skills. Barron (1981) investigated the reading skills of children in Canada between ages 10 and 12, and suggested that rapidly activating the phonological code, which he describes as a "phonographic strategy" is connected with reading comprehension.

This is because the phonographic strategy may facilitate storage of the text in working memory (p. 322). As for L2 learners, Ellis and Beaton (1993) specified the conditions under which the phonological loop is invoked to learn new vocabulary:

*The phonological loop is used in FL [foreign language] vocabulary acquisition when the material to be learned is phonologically unfamiliar and when semantic associations via native language cognates are not spontaneously created; it can be circumvented if the material readily allows semantic association. (p. 552)*

They explained the connection between repetition and the phonological loop, and how this aids retention of vocabulary in long term memory (p. 553); not only do learners require extensive exposure, they also require repeated practice for the development of a new motor skill involved in the pronunciation of an unfamiliar word. According to this reasoning, reading-while-listening may provide only the first component of developing a working memory for L2 English; it does not in itself provide the opportunity for output.

### **Student Preferences for Listening to Live Readings**

Although the importance of phonological encoding for the facilitation of working memory for reading comprehension has been established, the question remains as to the ideal kind of auditory input to be provided to the learners. One of the cohorts in Stephens' (2017) study consisted of 21 students who had undertaken reading-while-listening as homework, and who had also listened to the teacher read stories (in the form of news items) to them in class over the semester. Results of a questionnaire conducted at the end of the semester

revealed that most students preferred the live reading to listening to audiobooks. The current study seeks to confirm this with a larger group and an additional teacher, and to elicit reasons for the students' preferences.

### ***Does the Embodied Presence of the Teacher Facilitate Listening Comprehension?***

Emotions are an integral part of learning (Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2010), and the emotional context of learning present in the interpersonal relationship facilitates the development of language proficiency (Harris, Berko Gleason & Ayceci, 2006). According to Thornbury (2013), language learning is situated in social practice rather than simply being a cognitive activity, and is therefore both embodied and embedded, both external and internal. In the classroom it is not only the language that is important but the interaction between those in the classroom, manifested both linguistically and paralinguistically (p. 73). Lakoff (2008) explained the matching of face and body muscles with emotions, and how mirror neuron circuitry leads interlocutors to sense both the musculature and the corresponding emotions (p. 101). Damasio (1994) pointed out that the interaction of both mind and body with the environment are often overlooked: "when we see, or hear, or touch or taste or smell, body proper and brain participate in the interaction with the environment" (p. 224), and "The near inevitability of body processing, regardless of what it is that we are doing or thinking, should be apparent. Mind is probably not conceivable without some sort of embodiment" (p. 234). Shotter (2008) explained in fine detail the synchrony of the body with utterances:

*As I speak, you can see my body moving in synchrony with my voicing of my utterances, my hands in synchrony with my*

*intoning of my words, my eye movements with my pauses, and my facial expressions with certain of my linguistic emphases- I shall use the word 'orchestration' to denote the unfolding structuring of these intricately timed, creative intertwining and inweavings of the many inter-related participant parts or 'bodily strands' of our responsive-expressions (p. 79).*

Wajnryb (2001) elaborated on how an embodied presence contributes to the delivery of a text. She drew attention to "the active collusion and complicity of the interlocutor whose involvement actually, if invisibly, shapes the unfolding nature of the text" (p. 176). It is not only the text that contains meaning, but also the interpretation provided by the audience. She described this as a "polyphonic perspective" (p. 176), because the spoken text is co-constructed by the listener.

The traditional practice of storytelling fosters the development of "imagination, attention span, empathy and insight into the minds of others" (Greenfield, 2014, p. 254). Regarding listening to stories in a second language, Jacobs (2016) outlined a myriad of benefits obtained by students, including the bond that develops between the readers and listeners, and having the reader model the joy of reading (p. 10). Thus the relationship between the reader and the listeners is an integral factor of storytelling. Underhill (1999) highlighted how the teacher-student relationship facilitates learning. He identified qualities which distinguish good teachers, and yet which are hard to quantify: "patience, relationship, spontaneity, empathy, respect and so forth, are qualities that are of the utmost importance, yet cannot be put in place by more methodology or a different course book" (p. 129), and added the following qualities:

"feelings, attitudes, thoughts, physical presence, movements, quality of attention, degree of openness" (p. 132). Underhill also distinguished the notion of relationship from that of topic and method: "a major variable in successful learning lies in a zone beyond both the topic being learned and the teaching method employed" (2013, p. 205). The present study investigates to what extent the embodied presence of the teacher reading aloud in the classroom contributes something over and above the audio recording.

## **Method**

### *Rationale*

This study is based on the speculation that interpersonal relationships influence listening comprehension. Teachers can deliver many qualities which are absent from an audiobook. The question we pose is to what extent these features create conditions for learning to read and listen to spoken English which differ from reading-while-listening to audio recordings.

### *Participants*

The participants consisted of a total of 64 second year non-English majors enrolled in required English classes at a regional national university. The cohorts consisted of three second-year classes.

### *Procedure*

The teachers, one of whom was American and the other Australian, delivered weekly live readings to their respective classes, and the students' weekly homework was to simultaneously listen to and read an online audiobook. At the end of the semester they were asked to reflect on these modes of delivery and indicate their preferences.

The students were asked two yes/no questions. The first question was pedagogical, asking them to specify which mode was easier to understand. The second was motivational, asking them to specify which mode they preferred. Next they were asked to provide the reasons for their answers. The questions were in Japanese and the students responded in Japanese. They were translated into English by one of the native English speaking authors, and these translations were checked by the native Japanese speaking author. Their responses were grouped according to themes, and the frequency of responses conforming to each theme were recorded. Responses which provided no new information, such as ‘it was easy to understand’, were not included. Two students provided two reasons for their responses, and these were categorized separately.

## Results

### *Ease of Understanding and Preferences*

All 64 students responded to the questions. The results of the yes/no questions reveal a difference in the ratio between the relative ease of understanding, and the preference for each mode of delivery (See Table 1). The respondents’ preference for the teacher’s delivery was not solely because of the ease of understanding of this mode. Although 81% (52 out of 64) of them preferred the teacher’s delivery, a smaller majority, 58% (37 out of 64), indicated that this mode was easier to understand. Therefore there are factors other than ease of understanding which explain the preference for a live delivery.

Table 1. Comparison of preferences vs. ease of understanding percentages

	<i>Live readings</i>	<i>Audio recordings</i>
Easier to understand	57.81%	42.19%
Preferred	81.25%	18.75%

### **Reasons**

The responses regarding reasons for their preferences for each mode, grouped into themes, appear below, with the number in parentheses representing the number of students providing the reason.

#### **Reasons provided by those who indicated that the teacher was easier to understand**

The teacher adjusts the way she reads it to facilitate our understanding. (11)

I feel compelled to listen to if it is a real person. (2)

I am familiar with the teacher’s voice. (1)

The teacher makes eye contact. (1)

The teacher's placement of stress facilitates our understanding. (1)

The audio is of poor quality. (1)

The audio is too fast. (1)

I can judge from her mouth movements. (1)

#### **Reasons provided by those who indicated that the audio was easier to understand**

The audio provides a professional delivery. (8)

I can adjust the volume. (2)

I can adjust the speed. (2)

I have been familiar with listening to the audio since high school. (1)

### **Reasons for preferences for silent reading along to a live reading**

The teacher's presence is more natural or authentic. (9)

I have improved concentration with a human presence. (6)

There is human warmth. / I like interpersonal interaction. (6)

I can see the teacher's expressions. (5)

A live delivery is interactive. (2)

The teacher attends to the details. (2)

I am familiar with her voice. (1)

The teacher makes eye contact (1)

It will be useful. (1)

In a live reading the important points were easy to understand. (1)

The sound sometimes breaks up on the audio (1)

It's hard to listen to a recorded voice. (1)

### **Reasons for preferences for the audio-book**

I can replay the audio. (2)

It suits my level. (1)

The delivery of the audio is more professional. (1)

The delivery of the audio is faster. (1)

## **Discussion**

### *Embodied Communication*

Damasio (1994), Thornbury, (2013), and Shotter (2008) explained the importance of embodied communication, and this study supports the advantages of an embodied delivery, such as the facilitative effect of gestures, observing facial expressions, naturalness, reassurance, and even warmth. Cheetham (2017) highlighted the need for L2 learners to observe the integration of sound and lip movement, and the importance of observing lip movement was mentioned in our study too. Other mentions of embodied communication include modulation of the voice, and the teacher speaking in front of the student's eyes, providing support for Van Wassenhove's (2013) explanation of how watching a speaker's face can reinforce comprehension: "the kinematics of the face articulating speech can robustly influence the processing and comprehension of auditory speech" (p. 1). A further advantage identified by respondents to arise out of embodied communication is the possibility of concentrating more deeply. Without being prompted, the students were intuitively aware of the contribution of embodiment to comprehension.

### *The Interpersonal Relationship between Teacher and Class*

Tokuhama-Espinosa (2010) revealed the importance of emotions in learning, and Dewaele (2014) highlighted the importance of the chemistry between the teacher, learner and group. The importance of this chemistry is evident in the students' comments in this study. The expression

*yukkuri hanashite kureru* ([she] 'speaks slowly for us') concerns the interpersonal relationship between the teacher and the students; this is indicated by the choice of the verb *kureru* ('to give to me/us'), which implies a relationship between the interlocutors. The student-teacher relationship is also implied in comments such as 'I am used to her voice', 'She adjusts the speed according to the need', and 'She was kind'.

### **Preference for the Audiobooks**

As Cain (2012) argued, some learners prefer to work alone. Some respondents provided reasons for their preference for listening to an audio recording, suggesting that this mode of delivery also has merits. The reasons specified by the respondents for the ease of listening to a recording include clarity, the absence of a regional accent, consistency of delivery, and being able to listen to the audio at their convenience.

### **Conclusions**

Most students in this study preferred to silently read along to a live reading of a story to reading-while-listening with an audiobook. Despite the convenience of audiobooks, we argue that the traditional practice of a giving a live storytelling continues to be important. The students provided a myriad of reasons why they preferred the live reading, such as mouth movements, facial expressions, warmth, kindness, and improved concentration. On the other hand, the practice of listening to a recording also has advantages, such as clarity, ease of listening, consistent pace of delivery, and lack of a regional accent. Hence the modes of listening to live readings and reading-while-listening with audiobooks can be considered to be complementary. Van Manen (2015) explained, "In our increasingly technologically mediated worlds, the personal and relational dimensions of

teaching-learning, and interacting are at risk" (p. 12). As reading-while-listening with audiobooks continues to grow in popularity, we recommend that the embodied practice of live storytelling not be neglected.

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