



Technology-Integrated Approach for Growing Read-Aloud Skills

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Abstract

Effective communication relies on understanding and being understood, a challenge faced by newly enrolled high school students learning English. These students must develop basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) for everyday interactions and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) for academic success. While BICS can take up to three years to develop, CALP may require four to ten years. The integration of technology, such as the Reading Coach feature in Flip.com, offers personalized feedback and supports various proficiency levels, thus enhancing pronunciation practice and boosting confidence in speaking. This innovative tool helps students improve their read-aloud skills, contributing to overall language proficiency and public speaking capabilities. Knowing another language is a great skill to have. For some, it offers a way to comfortably explore the world and expand their appreciation of diverse cultures. For others, it is a critical necessity for survival, belonging, and self-esteem. Therefore, the efficiency of the language acquisition process is crucial for these individuals. Just as with any new skill, practice is essential for language learning. So, what technology-integrated approach can we use to maximize our efforts and effectively learn a new language?

Keywords: *read-aloud, technology, differentiation, language development*

BICS and CALP

To understand and to be understood are the reasons we communicate with each other. One of the first questions my newly enrolled high school students strive to master is asking for permission to go to the bathroom. Words are not necessary to understand what they are asking for, but expecting the students to voice the question creates the need to practice speaking in the new language. I see them turn to their more fluent peers for support, they practice a few times and then come up to me. For the next week or so the process will be repeated until they finally feel that task is mastered. That is not an easy vocabulary for a beginner learner. The loud and quiet sounds of <th> letter combination are the usual source of pronunciation challenges for multilingual students. More often it would sound like <Can I go to de bathroom?>. Modeling and repetition help master these essential linguistic skills needed in everyday, social face-to-face interactions, also known as basic interpersonal cognitive skills (BICS). Some sources indicate that it might take between six months to two years to develop BICS [1], or two to three years.[2]

However, the expectations of the newly enrolled high school students are not limited to BICS. Simultaneously with learning BICS, they must find a way to perform in all their academic classes where a different kind of vocabulary and skills are needed for success. Research suggests that four to ten years might be necessary to develop cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP), which is an enormous task.[2] In the book *Teaching Vocabulary to English Language Learners* Graves presents the data on vocabulary size and its effect on comprehension. He states that on average a high school student learns about 3,000 words a year. By the end of the 12th grade, an average graduate develops a vocabulary of more than 40,000 words. Additionally, to comprehend the general academic text and be able to draw an understanding of unknown words from the context clues, we need to know about 80% of high-frequency words, which are estimated to be around 5,000 words.[3]

Speaking Skills

Language could be divided into <receptive functions> through listening and reading, and <productive functions> through speaking and writing. Research suggests young learners come to school with stronger receptive listening and productive speaking skills; while adult language learners might come in with stronger receptive reading and productive writing skills.[3] All my students are part of the ESL (English as a Second Language) program, with varying language proficiency levels (entering,



emerging, developing, expanding, bridging, and reaching) according to the annual ACCESS test results, which assess listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Some students have been in U.S. schools since kindergarten, others joined in middle school, and some recently entered high school from countries where English is not spoken (newcomers).

The comparative data was collected for the last several ACCESS test results in our school. Low results in the speaking domain, regardless of performance in other areas, were consistently observed. Students were interviewed to uncover the reasons behind these low scores. Aside from being new to the country and not yet speaking the language, several common explanations emerged: some students lacked the motivation to speak; others struggled to provide detailed answers; some felt uncomfortable speaking to a computer; a few believed their pronunciation was inadequate for the test; and others felt uneasy speaking with other test takers (typically up to four in the testing room) present.

Reading Coach

Helping every student practice pronunciation in a class of 20-30 without waiting for his/her turn, minimizing embarrassment, and receiving immediate feedback is a challenge. In spring 2023, I found a satisfying solution while exploring the features of an application I had been using since the pandemic. The Reading Coach feature within the Immersive Reader on Flip.com addresses these needs by allowing students to practice pronunciation independently, receive immediate feedback, and improve their skills efficiently and effectively. The built-in features also support requirements for differentiation within a group of learners with varying levels of English language proficiency. The platform is easily accessible for vocabulary and texts in various subjects, ensuring alignment with all five English Language Development Standards established by the World-class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) organization: Social and Instructional Language, Language of Social Studies, Language of English Language Arts, Language of Mathematics, and Language of Science.

The Benefits

The program helps to avoid stigmatizing poor readers, as the level of embarrassment they feel in front of the computer is significantly lower than in front of other students. The application does not sabotage fluency or pronunciation as there is no need to listen to struggling readers who demonstrate poor fluency skills and pronunciation. It strengthens comprehension, as everyone is exposed to the correct pronunciation at their pace and amount without having to listen to a peer who orally reads too slowly, too fast, or is interrupted by taking turns. The built-in language supports, such as word-by-word translation to nearly 120+ languages and frequently available visual representations, help with comprehension and feeling of inclusion. Moreover, the parts of speech indicators offer opportunities to deepen understanding of grammatical structures within the language. After each read-aloud session, Reading Coach provides instant personalized feedback on students' fluency, gauging both the speed and accuracy of their reading. Additionally, it offers personalized assistance by breaking down practice into manageable segments, each time focusing only on five words selected from a list of identified challenging vocabulary.

Procedures

Flip.com is a free application from Microsoft, and its original intention was to support educators' efforts to create safe groups, where students engage in curriculum discussions by creating, responding, and sharing their audio or video posts. However, for read-aloud purposes, I create a topic, and in the topic description area I post the content that I need my students to practice reading. It can be any readable content: starting from the alphabet letters to numerals, mathematical equations, a list of words, or a coherent text. The only limitation is the 2500-word count. As students open the topic link, they proceed to the Immersive Reader feature, where they can listen to the text they will read aloud later. They can adjust settings for voice (speed and gender), text (font size and background colors), grammar options, and translations for individual words. When ready to practice, students select the Reading Coach under Reading Preferences, click the microphone, and read the text on the screen. After the session, they receive a fluency report detailing the reading time, correct words per minute, accuracy rate, and five suggested words to practice. The learners need to take a screenshot of the report and submit it on Canvas, the learning management system, for a daily activity grade. There are



no limitations on the number of times the students can practice the assignments before submission. I also support resubmissions if a student desires to demonstrate the growth of the skills.

Results

By participating in two Reading Coach sessions weekly, students have become more comfortable speaking to the computer, even in the presence of their peers. This practice has led to notable improvements in pronunciation and read-aloud skills, resulting in increased confidence during class presentations and verbal participation. The program has also received positive feedback from its users. According to a survey of 82 current Reading Coach users, approximately 84% reported improved read-aloud and pronunciation skills. Additionally, a small group noted enhancements in reading speed, and some students mentioned that the practice helped them become more sociable, as it encouraged them to seek assistance from peers and offer support to others.

Furthermore, I observed increased confidence and satisfaction as students saw their scores improve. The instant feedback, noticeable progress, and manageable practice sessions motivated students to persist, supporting my efforts to instill a growth mindset—emphasizing that practice leads to progress. As students achieved positive results, they began sharing their successes with peers, sometimes sparking healthy competition over who could achieve better scores for speed and accuracy. This friendly rivalry made the practice of reading aloud enjoyable and engaging. Consequently, students encountered new vocabulary more frequently, aligning with the teacher's goal of vocabulary expansion. Finally, these assignments also placed students in control of their grades, as they received the grade for the results they chose to submit, reflecting their level of proficiency and effort.

Conclusion

Reading aloud is vital for a range of purposes, such as public speaking, storytelling, and language acquisition. It addresses numerous objectives crucial for language learning: refining pronunciation, strengthening listening abilities, expanding vocabulary, fostering fluency, deepening comprehension, promoting cultural insight, and instilling confidence. By utilizing the potential of the Reading Coach technology, educators can optimize learning outcomes, create meaningful educational experiences for every student, regardless of class size or individual proficiency levels, and even streamline the teaching process for educators.

REFERENCES

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