

## The effects of teacher's reading aloud versus students' silent reading on surface and deep level comprehension: A quasi-experimental study from a tertiary context

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### Abstract

The research on the effects of teacher's reading aloud versus students' silent reading on reading comprehension in EFL contexts is limited. This study is significant as it is the first of its kind investigating the effects of teacher's reading aloud versus students' silent reading of an informational text on the surface and deep level reading comprehension of tertiary EFL students. 60 pre-intermediate students of English participated in the study. The research was designed as a quasi-experimental study with an experimental and a control group. The experimental group had an informational text read aloud to them by the teacher while the control group read the same text silently. Two measures were used to test the effects of treatments on reading comprehension: a multiple choice text for surface level comprehension and a phrase cloze text for in-depth comprehension. The findings showed that there was no significant difference between teacher's reading aloud and students' silent reading conditions in surface level comprehension, yet students' silent reading was found to be significantly more effective than teacher's reading aloud in deep level comprehension. The study implies that students' silent reading can be preferred over teacher's reading aloud in EFL classes when reading informational texts. Another implication signals the possibility of eclectic in-class reading practices compromising two strategies in accordance with their functions. According to this paradigm, teacher's reading aloud can be used as a bridge in comprehending the text at the surface level, which could then be followed by students' silent reading for in-depth comprehension.

**Keywords:** EFL reading, teacher's reading aloud, students' silent reading, surface level reading comprehension, deep level reading comprehension.

## Öğretmenin sesli okuması ve öğrencilerin sessiz okumasının yüzeysel ve derin düzey anlama üzerindeki etkileri: Yükseköğretim bağlamından yarı deneysel bir çalışma

### Öz

Yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğretilen bağlamlarda öğretmenin sesli okumasına karşılık öğrencilerin sessiz okumasının okumayı anlama üzerindeki etkileriyle ilgili sınırlı sayıda araştırma vardır. Bu araştırma bir bilgi metninin öğretmen tarafından sesli okunmasına karşılık öğrenciler tarafından sessiz okunmasının üniversitede yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğrenen öğrencilerin yüzeysel ve derin düzeydeki okuma-anlamasına olan etkilerinin incelendiği, türünün ilk örneği bir çalışma olması nedeniyle önemlidir. Çalışmaya İngilizce düzeyleri ön-orta olan 60 öğrenci katılmıştır. Araştırma

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deneySEL grup ve kontrol grubuyla yrtlen yarı-deneySEL bir alıřma olarak dzenlenmiřtir. DeneySEL gruba ğretmen tarafından bir bilgi metni okunmuř, kontrol grubu ise aynı metni sessiz okumuřtur. Uygulamaların okuma-anlamadaki etkilerini lmek iin iki lt kullanılmıřtır. Kullanılan ltler yzeySEL dzey anlamayı len oktan semeli test ve derinlemesine anlamayı len szck gruplarıyla bořluk doldurma testidir. Sonular ğretmenin sesli okuması ve ğrencilerin sessiz okuma kořulları arasında yzeySEL dzey anlama aısından anlamlı bir fark olmadıėını gstermiřtir. Ancak derin dzey anlamada, ğrencilerin sessiz okumasının ğretmenin sesli okumasına gre anlamlı olarak daha etkili olduėu bulunmuřtur. alıřma İngilizcenin yabancı dil olarak ğrenildiėi sınıflarda bilgi metinleri okurken ğrencilerin sessiz okumasının ğretmenin sesli okumasına tercih edilebileceėini dolaylı olarak ortaya koymaktadır. Arařtırma, iki stratejiyi iřlevlerine gre uzlařtıran eklektik sınıf ii okuma uygulamalarının mmkn olabileceėine de iřaret etmektedir. Bu paradigmaya gre ğretmenin sesli okuması metni yzeySEL olarak kavramada bir kpr olarak kullanılabilir ve bu durumu, derin dzey anlamaya ynelik olarak ğrencilerin sessiz okuması takip edebilir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Yabancı dil olarak İngilizce ğreniminde okuma, ğretmenin sesli okuması, ğrencilerin sessiz okuması, yzeySEL dzey okuma-anlama, derin dzey okuma-anlama.

## Introduction

Learning English as a second or foreign language has become a *sine qua non* of the globalized world. Reading in English is one of the significant skills playing an increasingly important role in daily, academic and professional lives. Reading as an in-class practice has its own modes, two of which are teacher's reading aloud and students' reading silently. The modes are important in terms of the variety they bring to the classroom as alternative forms of exposure to the target language. Either of them has its own advantages and challenges.

Teacher's reading aloud in its typical form is often referred to as 'listening while reading' because students are expected to follow along silently in their own books or materials as they listen to the teacher read the text (Dowhower, 1987). In addition to this mode, teachers may also conduct the read-aloud strategy interactively, engaging students by asking questions and making explanations during reading (Terblanche, 2002). Teacher's reading aloud in the EFL contexts, where the readers have limited chances of being exposed to English outside the class, is described as a useful tool to make meaningful interpretation of the text (Amer, 1997; Dhaif, 1990; Swaffer, Arnes & Byrnes, 1991). According to Amer (1997) and Dhaif (1990), teacher's reading aloud is very important for EFL readers especially at the early stages of language learning since these learners tend to read the text word by word during silent reading and try to understand each word. This anxiety to understand each word leads them to break the utterances into unrelated, meaningless chunks. As a result of this process, intersentential integrity is deteriorated and the text loses its meaning. Supporting this view, Swaffer et al. (1991) refer to the negative psychological effects of word-by-word reading process of the students. They indicate that this habit prevents the learners from getting pleasure from reading as well as discourages self-reliance in making use of foreign language texts. It can thus be alleged that learners learn the language and language skills through modelling, patterning and repetition and in teacher's reading aloud, the teacher can serve as a model for the mechanical processes of word and pronunciation recognition. Thus, teacher's reading aloud can be used as a means for students to identify words correctly and to say sentences adequately. Amer (1997) adds teacher's reading aloud with the proper production of punctuation signals, stress, and

intonation may help readers gradually realize that they can accomplish a higher level of comprehension by reading larger meaningful units of texts rather than paying attention to individual units.

Teacher's reading aloud is also claimed to particularly affect learners' ability to interrelate, interpret, and draw conclusions from the content (Santos, 1987) and help to increase vocabulary and expand general world knowledge (Elley, 1989; Greene Brabham & Lynch-Brown, 2002; Swanson, Vaughn, Wanzek, Petscher, Heckert, Cavanaugh, Kraft, & Tackett, 2011; Varon, Acuna & Munoz, 2012; Trelease, 2001). It might also build an interest in reading (Pegg & Bartelheim, 2011) and lead students to share the excitement, the suspense, the emotion, and the sheer fun of reading (Thiele, 2014). According to Jacobs and Hannah (2004) teacher's reading aloud builds a mutual communication channel between the reader and the listeners and sets the grounds for meaningful and purposeful teacher-student interactions.

On the other hand, Dwyer (1983), Gardner (1986), and Greenall (1981) consider any form of reading aloud to be of little or no value compared to students' silent reading as reading aloud has the potential to distract attention and lead the reader to focus on pronunciation, intonation and vocalization rather than meaning. Smith (2007) describes teacher's reading aloud as disengaging and superficial since in this process, students just look at the printed page to obtain information rather than construct meaning by interacting with the text with their own backgrounds. According to Hale, Skinner, Williams, Hawkins, Neddenriep, & Dizer (2007), teacher's reading aloud is a restrictive practice because the reader's overall comprehension may be reduced as the limited cognitive resources of the learner may not be effective while dealing with structural and mechanical factors other than meaning. According to the researchers, it is silent reading which enables the readers to understand a text quickly and directly. Hopkins (1997) maintains silent reading makes it possible for the readers to read a text at their own speed. Silent reading also allows for concentration on content words for reading comprehension rather than almost every word as in reading aloud practices (Gabrielatos, 2002). Moreover, silent reading has the benefit of increasing learners' confidence in their ability to work on and understand a text autonomously. With such features, silent reading can be said to be a mode that prepares learners for life-long reading. Also silent reading communicates the message to the reader that to become a skilled reader, one must spend significant amount of time with eyes on print, practicing reading and accumulating and processing conceptual knowledge (Mol & Bus, 2011). In silent reading, students can be more active and learn to deal with semantic, orthographic, and syntactic patterns according to Adams (2009). On the other hand, in teacher's reading aloud, students are passive and if students passively depend on the teacher to process the text, they might develop a sense of learned helplessness, which may pave the way for low expectations for their reading abilities and the situation of not knowing what to do against reading difficulties as suggested by Butkowsky & Willows (1980). According to Meyer, Wardrop, Linn and Hastings (1993), language learners reading the text silently can develop a sense of control and ownership over it by using their reading skills and background knowledge developed in their first language.

As opposed to the above-mentioned views displaying teacher's reading aloud and students' silent reading as two clashing paradigms, supporting the superiority of one over the other, the third view is underlain by an eclectic tenet that both students' silent reading and teacher's reading aloud have a place in the language class since they are mutually dependent in terms of functions (Kailani, 1998). As Kailani (1998) states, on one hand, teacher's reading aloud in general deals mainly with the surface structures, thus it focuses more on the forms of the language (e.g. vocabulary, sentence structure and pronunciation) and mechanics of reading. With these form-focused components, the reader can grasp the superficial meaning of the piece of discourse. On the other hand, students' silent reading is mainly

concerned with getting the meanings and the messages the writer has expressed. It deals with deeply-built structures and meanings not directly available from surface forms. Thus, in order to develop an in-depth understanding of the text, silent reading is necessary. According to Kailani (1998), for a holistic comprehension, the modes should complement each other in a reading class. That is, a student should first recognise the visual configuration of words and perceive the whole unity of sentences through teacher's reading aloud. Then for in-depth comprehension, students' silent reading would be necessary.

There is limited research on the effects of teacher's reading aloud versus silent reading on the reading comprehension of ESL / EFL students. The studies compared teacher's reading aloud and students' silent reading with experimental and control group designs. In most of these studies, teacher's reading aloud was found to have a significant positive effect on reading comprehension (Al-Mansour & Al-Shorman, 2011; Amer, 1997; Dhaif, 1990; Kowsary, 2013; Kowsary & Rouhani, 2013; Santos, 1987; Zolfagharkhani & Kowsary, 2013) while Güler (2013) May (1986) and Reed, Swanson, Petscher, and Vaughn (2014) displayed no significant differences between the effects of teacher's reading aloud and students' silent reading on reading comprehension.

Almost all of these studies have been conducted with young learners and adolescents (Al-Mansour & Al-Shorman, 2011; Amer, 1997; Güler, 2013; May, 1986; Reed et. al., 2014; Santos, 1987; Kowsary, 2013; Kowsary & Rouhani, 2013; Zolfagharkhani & Kowsary, 2013) and it was the narrative extensively used as the text type (Al-Mansour & Al-Shorman, 2011; Amer, 1997; Dhaif, 1990; Güler, 2013; Kowsary, 2013; Kowsary & Rouhani, 2013; May, 1986; Santos, 1987; Zolfagharkhani & Kowsary, 2013). Moreover, there is little research testing the effects of teacher's reading aloud versus students' silent reading on the surface and deep level reading comprehension (Amer, 1997).

Thus there is a need for studies on the effects of teacher's reading aloud versus students' silent reading on reading comprehension

- conducted with adult learners in EFL contexts at tertiary level,
- focusing on text types specific to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) settings, and
- testing both surface level and deep level comprehension.

The present study takes a significant step to fill in this tripartite gap in EFL reading literature.

## Method

This quasi-experimental study with the experimental and control group design aims to investigate the effects of teacher's reading aloud versus students' silent reading on the surface level and deep level reading comprehension of young adult tertiary students. 60 students learning English in the preparatory English classes of a school of foreign languages at a state university in Istanbul participated in the study. The participants were students in two different pre-intermediate level classes in the educational setting. Both the experimental group and the control group had the same number of students, which was 30. Their level of English was found to be pre-intermediate as a result of the proficiency test applied as a part of the study. The whole group of participants consisted of both male and female students who were between 18 and 22 years old. The text type used in the study was an informational text. It was the reading passage planned to be covered in the pertinent weekly syllabus of the EAP reading course. The text was about the moon.

## Procedure

The treatment was given to both classes in the conventional format of teacher's reading aloud, that is, the students followed the text silently in their own books as they listened to the teacher read it. The teacher was trained about how to read aloud the given text so that it could be conveyed in a lively manner with varying patterns of prosody in a sound balance, aiming to attract attention. The teacher followed a neither slow nor fast route and read the text highlighting chunks of information by pausing, stress and intonation. Thus in the reading aloud practice, the teacher tried to read the text as meaningfully as possible while the students were following her. Before the reading began, as a pre-reading activity, schemata activating questions were asked and key vocabulary in the text was discussed and explained. Next, the teacher read the text aloud. The same procedure was followed with the control group except for the fact that the students read the text silently without any oral reading provided. In both of the groups, after the reading process was over, the multiple choice test aiming to test surface level comprehension and the phrase cloze test aiming to test deep level comprehension were given to the students successively. The length of time to be given for each test was piloted and it was set as 10 minutes for the multiple choice test and 20 minutes for the phrase cloze test. Both treatments were observed by the researcher.

## Tests

In order to measure the effects of teacher's reading aloud and students' silent reading on the reading comprehension of the participants, two tests were used to separately measure surface and deep level comprehension. For the former, a multiple-choice test was applied. It consisted of 10 questions. All the questions required lower level processing, that is, they mainly focused on the specific information explicitly given in the text. The second test aimed to test deep level comprehension. It was a phrase cloze test in terms of format (Sadeghi, 2014). In this test, specific sets of information in the form of phrases were left out of the text. Also, as in the study of Amer (1998), the blanks were accompanied with question words like 'What?', 'How?' 'Why?' in parantheses to guide the items that would fit in ten blanks. The phrase cloze test required higher level processing and in-depth analysis of the text requiring relatively detailed pieces of information and inferential replies like the reasons for events and the main idea. Students were asked to answer the questions in a meaningful way in the phrase cloze test (i.e., not necessarily with the exact words and phrases in the text).

## Scoring

In the multiple choice test, one mark was given for each correct answer. In the phrase cloze test, the original phrases in the text were taken as basis in correcting the students' answers. Each appropriate item again received one point and the test was marked by two raters, the teacher who instructed the reading to both groups and an experienced colleague of hers from the same context who was knowledgeable about the study and observed the treatments with the researcher. This second rater was appointed to ensure interrater reliability and maintain objectivity. The appropriacy of the answers was negotiated by the raters and the process was observed by the researcher without intervention.

## Data analysis

The data was first analyzed using simple descriptive statistics. Means and standard deviations were computed for comprehension scores by test and group types. Independent samples t-test was conducted

to find whether there were significant differences between the comprehension scores of the experimental and the control group for either test.

## Results

The analysis of the study was conducted using the SPSS Version 16. The descriptive statistics were calculated and the independent samples t-test was conducted in order to compare the means of the reading tests, namely the multiple choice test and the phrase cloze test. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of two tests given to the students after the treatments. As shown by the table, on both tests, the control group, who read the text silently, had higher means compared to those of the experimental group, who was exposed to the teacher's reading aloud.

**Table 1:** Descriptive Statistics of Reading Tests

TESTS	Experimental (n=30)		Control (n=30)	
	M	SD	M	SD
Multiple Choice Test	6,89	2,07	7,84	1,30
Phrase Cloze Test	5,36	2,19	7,52	1,71

A comparison of the means on the multiple choice test showed that there was no significant difference between the reading comprehension scores of the experimental and the control group ( $t(36)=1,68$ ;  $p<0.05$ ) as demonstrated in Table 2.

**Table 2:** T-test results of the multiple choice test

GROUPS	N	Mean	St. Dev.	St. Error Mean	Independent Samples t test		
					t	df	p
Experimental	30	6,89	2,07	0,47	1,68	36	0,1
Control	30	7,84	1,30	0,29			

However, the t-test analysis of the means on phrase cloze test yielded a different result. According to the findings, there was a significant difference between the teacher's reading aloud and students' silent reading conditions ( $t(36)=3,38$ ;  $p<0.05$ ) and the control group, who read the text silently, outperformed the experimental group, who was read a text aloud by the teacher. Table 3 displays the findings of the independent samples t-test run for the reading comprehension scores of two groups on the phrase cloze test.

**Table 3:** T-test results of the phrase cloze test

GROUPS	N	Mean	St. Dev.	St. Error Mean	Independent Samples t test		
					t	df	p
Experimental	30	5,36	2,19	0,50	3,38	36	0,02
Control	30	7,52	1,71	0,39			

## Conclusion

As a result of the findings of this study, there was no significant difference between teacher's reading aloud and students' silent reading conditions in surface level comprehension, which requires lower order processing. On the other hand, students' silent reading was found to be significantly more effective than teacher's reading aloud in the in-depth comprehension of the text, which requires higher order processing. It is therefore possible to maintain that when the aim is testing the surface level comprehension of reading, either of the conditions may be applied since there is no superiority of one over the other according to the study. On the other hand, when the aim is testing the in-depth understanding of the text, students' silent reading could yield better comprehension.

The study also has significant implications about the effects of the text type on the reading conditions tested in this study, which are teacher's reading aloud and students' silent reading. Although previous research on teacher's reading aloud narrative texts concluded the significant positive effects of this process on both surface and deep level comprehension (Amer, 1997), the case has not been the same in comprehending informational texts. In this study, there was no significant difference between teacher's reading aloud and students' silent reading in surface level comprehension of an informational text, but in deep level comprehension, students' silent reading has been shown to be significantly more effective than teacher's reading aloud. This derives us to the implication that students can develop a surface understanding of an informational type of text as well when the teacher reads the text aloud to them as when they read it silently. However, when in-depth comprehension is targeted, even if the teacher reads the informational text by paying utmost attention to prosodic features (e.g. rhythm, intonation and pause) as is the case in this study, students' silent reading may still be more effective. One must also note that there is the natural limitation of the informational text type which focuses on facts, not emotions and dialogues as in narrative text type. Due to such a limitation, reading an informational text aloud would be limited in terms of prosodic features. Thus in narratives, teacher's reading aloud can well be a facilitating factor in the in-depth comprehension of the text as they include conversations and descriptions intertwined with emotions that can be enlivened with prosody, helping the listener to get the deeper meanings of the text. Yet, teacher's reading aloud may not be as effective in the in-depth comprehension of informational texts as shown by this study. This brings us to another conclusion that effectiveness of in-class reading techniques (which are teacher's reading aloud and students' silent reading in our case) may well depend on the text type.

This study has also brought about sound definitions about the effectiveness of the reading techniques tested. In this study the silent reading group has higher means in both the surface level and deep level reading comprehension tests whereas the experimental (teacher's reading aloud) group answered at least fifty percent of the questions in either test type correctly. Also students' silent reading has proved to be more effective than teacher's reading aloud in only the in-depth comprehension in this research. Therefore it would be unreasonable to define teacher's reading aloud as an "ineffective" technique according to the findings of this study. More precisely, this research has demonstrated that teacher's reading aloud can be as effective as students' silent reading in surface level comprehension and a significantly less effective tool than students' silent reading in in-depth understanding of the text.

With all these findings, the study implies that the English language class in reading an informational text may choose to practise

- students' silent reading only (since it wasn't found to be ineffective in surface level comprehension and it had a significant impact on deep level comprehension) or
- both teacher's reading aloud and students' silent reading (since teacher's reading aloud was not found to be less effective than students' silent reading in surface level comprehension and students' silent reading had significant positive effects on deep level comprehension).

Kailani (1998) supports the latter view and claims teacher's reading aloud and students' silent reading are two aspects of the reading skill which are mutually dependent with regard to their functions regarding surface and deep level comprehension so they should be used together in the English classroom. In the same vein, this study signals the possibility of an eclectic perspective in reading classes, according to which two reading modes tested in this study can be used meaningfully and purposefully according to the comprehension purposes. That is, teacher's reading aloud can be used as a bridge, as the first step in comprehending an informational text at the surface level. By teacher's reading aloud, students can get an overall meaning of the text and recognize the structures and vocabulary. This extensively form-focused practice could then be followed by students' silent reading for in-depth comprehension of the text focusing primarily on meaning rather than form.

The study is similar to some studies in literature as it has shown no significant differences between teacher's reading aloud and students' silent reading (Güler, 2013; May, 1986; Reed et. al., 2014). However, different from the previous research, the study has demonstrated that there are no significant differences between these two reading modes in surface level reading comprehension. For in-depth reading comprehension, the study has revealed another unique finding that students' silent reading is significantly more effective than teacher's reading aloud.

Finally, the study has presented important findings and implications clarifying the functions of teacher's reading aloud and students' silent reading in EFL reading classes. However, it is hard to make generalizations out of one study. It is necessary that further research comparing teacher's reading aloud and students' silent reading be conducted with larger groups and with different text and test types as well as different styles of teacher's reading aloud (e.g. interactive forms) in different contexts. Only with collaborative efforts of researchers and practitioners can we effectively integrate teacher's reading aloud and students' silent reading into EFL /ESL reading classes.

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