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Teaching Reading Comprehension in Large Classes

Pimpan Srivardhana

Chulalongkorn University Language Institute

The teaching of reading in EFL has grown enormously in the last 30 years. We have learned that a skilled reader must be able to make use of sensory, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic information to accomplish his/her task. These various sources of information appear to interact in many complex ways during the process of reading. Thus, increasingly, reading has been viewed as a phenomenon involving both process (comprehending) and product (comprehension).

A Process Approach to Reading Comprehension

The 1970s and 1980s saw the emergence of explicit models of the reading process models that describe the entire process from the time the eye meets the page until the reader experiences comprehension. Jeremy Harmer (1983, p.151) sets out guidelines for this in the form of five-stage model:

1. The teacher introduces the topic and tests the students' previous background knowledge about the topic.
2. The teacher sets a task that the students will have to perform as a pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading activity.
3. The students read silently and perform the task, e.g., answer the questions set beforehand.
4. The teacher gives feedback on the student's performance.
5. The teacher gives follow-up tasks.

It is worth pointing out here that the teacher should choose tasks for the students in accordance with the type of text, its organisation, content, language and most importantly the reading style that is appropriate for the comprehending.

There are some guidelines to enable us to plan reading activities that will give the learners training in the reading and comprehending process. Before we go into details on practical classroom procedure, I would like to address some of the problems that lie in teaching reading in large classes.

Student Participation

The first problem that often comes across when teaching large classes is the participation of all students in the activity. What normally happens, when the answers to comprehension tasks are given orally, is that a small group of the best students will dominate the class. This results in frustration by weaker students and eventually causes them to opt out of more and more reading activities.

Accuracy and Fluency

The second pedagogical problem that may arise is that the teachers tend to focus on the correctness of oral work rather than the reading process itself. The idea is that many teachers try to insist on both the content of the students' answers and the linguistic correctness. This eventually results in weaker students being reluctant to give oral answers to reading comprehension

tasks, even if they have got the right answers.

To solve this problem, the teacher should remember that their objective is to develop the skills involved in text comprehension and that his/her evaluation of the students should focus only on the content.

These problems underlie the classroom procedures that I will now set out.

Classroom Procedures for Reading in Large Classes

1. Introduce the topic of the text and ask some questions to activate the students' knowledge of the topic. The idea behind this is to prepare the students for what they are going to read, create expectations and stimulate their interest in the topic.
2. Introduce some key vocabulary or expressions from the text. Choose only the key words that are essential for understanding the text. Often enough, we see that most teachers tend to devote their time to excessive pre-teaching of new words which prevents students from developing the important skills of guessing meaning from context or ignoring unknown words.
3. Give the students one or two focus questions as a pre-reading activity. It is believed that this will give them a purpose in their reading of the text. It also enables them to practice their predicting skills. As they read, they will think about the text and see whether it contradicts or reinforces the ideas, opinions or expectations that they have in mind. At this stage, you can also practice skimming or scanning strategies. As for skimming, the focus of the question should be 'what is this text about?' and you should set a time limit for finding the answers. For scanning, the focus of the questions requires specific detailed information, and again there should be a time limit.
4. Have the students read the text by themselves and write down their answers to the comprehension questions. Silent reading is the normal way most adults read in real life. It is advisable not to let the students listen to a reading aloud whether by teachers or other students since in real life we don't normally hear the text before reading it. Having students write their answers rather than answer them orally enables the teacher to go around and monitor their work, and to get an idea of how many of them are able to answer the questions correctly.
5. Ask some students to read their answers aloud. The teacher has to be careful not to say 'good' or 'that's right' but merely 'thank you' as it will discourage other students from giving alternative answers. Also at this stage, the attention should be focused on the meaning of the text rather than on how students express their answers.
6. Have one or two students write their answers on the board. The purpose of this is for the students to see some alternative answers and for them to point out some mistakes or suggest some improvements. It is at this stage that attention is paid to the correctness of the language as well as the content of the answers. By pointing out and correcting their peers' mistakes, students get practice in monitoring written answers which can also benefit their writing skills.

7. Check the students' results individually. This is a very important stage as it gives the teacher useful information about the students' performance and it gives the students feedback.

Follow-up to Reading

These are some optional classroom activities which could prove fruitful to students:

- ❖ Guessing meaning from context
- ❖ Personal questions relating the text to the students' own feelings, lives or experiences

- ❖ Group discussion on the topic of the text
- ❖ Reading aloud as a practice for pronunciation

Conclusion

I have used this approach with intermediate-level university students, but I believe that it can be applied to students at any level of instruction. Although the procedure is time consuming, it has the huge advantage of involving most of the students in developing the skills they need to become a good reader.

The Author

Pimpan Srivardhana is an English instructor at Chulalongkorn University Language Institute. She obtained a Bachelor Degree in English from the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University. She has two master degrees, one in English Language Studies and Methods and the other in British Cultural Studies from University of Warwick, England.

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Pronunciation Clinic

Tanyaporn Arya

Chulalongkorn University Language Institute

In today's world, it is essential to be able to communicate effectively with people from different cultures and language backgrounds. Since English is an international language, it is important for one not simply to be able to speak the language, but to do so effectively. For a non-native speaker of English, one part of communicating effectively is being able to produce the sounds of the English language properly, and with clarity. Doing so increases confidence in using the language.

Although the importance of pronunciation in the classroom has not been overlooked, pronunciation practice in classrooms may not be sufficient for EFL students. In much the same way, special training in pronunciation in informal classrooms has not been a common practice. Where pronunciation practice is an exercise that is most effective when given feedback, it is almost always left to the students to practice on their own.

It may be worthwhile to establish a center where students can focus solely on practicing their pronunciation and, at the same time, build confidence in using the language orally. In such a center, an instructor would be available to provide students with tips on how to produce the sounds properly and ready to give students immediate feedback and encouragement.

What is Pronunciation Clinic?

The Pronunciation Clinic is one of the many activities organized by the Extra Curricular Activities Unit, Chulalongkorn

University Language Institute (CULI). It is a place where students can practice and improve their pronunciation out of class and receive immediate feedback from instructors who are available to give advice and guidance on how to pronounce English sounds with clarity.

The objective, however, is not for students to attain a native speaker accent, rather to correct common problematic utterances in English, including word stress, vowel and consonant sounds, and intonation that may hinder understanding. At the same time, students would have the chance to review grammar points encountered in the contexts provided and learn new vocabulary, idioms, slang, and cultural aspects that are unfamiliar to them.

The CULI Pronunciation Clinic is targeted at Chulalongkorn University students of any major and year who have problems producing certain sounds in English and who want to improve their pronunciation. The Pronunciation Clinic accommodates 8-12 students per session to ensure as much individual attention as possible. There are altogether 12 sessions, lasting one and a half hours per session. The sessions are usually held after class once a week in the first semester of every academic year.

Why bother?

On the students' part:

From observations made in my own classrooms, students often show self-consciousness when they speak or read aloud in English. When asking for volunteers to

read aloud, almost always, no one volunteers. Many avoid eye contact and look down at their desks. This may be due to various reasons, ranging from cultural influence, laziness, stress, nervousness, shyness, peer pressure, to simply not being in the mood for reading aloud. Perhaps another reason may be the lack of confidence in their pronunciation, fear of not pronouncing correctly, or fear of making mistakes. Even when an average student is specifically called on to read aloud, more often than not, he/she will read with a really soft voice, may avoid eye-contact, and show a lack of confidence and certainty in what he/she is reading. Wouldn't being able to pronounce clearly and correctly in English boost students' confidence?

At the same time, students have shown real interest when pronunciation particulars are brought up in class. An increased alertness is seen from their body language. Many sit up straight, look up from their books, make eye-contact, try to mimic the correct way of pronunciation voluntarily, even enthusiastically. Moreover, pronunciation activities seem to be more enjoyable because such activities relieve them from the more complex aspects of language learning, such as grammar, reading, or writing that they are in the middle of. When, for instance, the focus of the class is turned to a certain aspect of pronunciation, almost immediately students show enthusiasm and interest. It gives them time out - a break - from the heavy content that they have been concentrating on, and at the same time they are still learning an important aspect of the language.

On the teachers' part:

From pronunciation texts, like "The Pronunciation Book" by Tim Bowen and Jonathan Marks, it has been mentioned that

many teachers regard teaching pronunciation difficult and end up not teaching it in their classes.

It has also been observed that instructors in general would rather focus on skills that they believe would be more useful to students, like reading and writing skills or grammar. It is very often the case where teachers do not have the privilege to focus much on pronunciation since there is so much material to cover within a semester that teachers would prefer not to spend too much time on it. After all, priority should be given to accomplishing all the tasks set in the course syllabus within the time frame, which is already very narrow. Pronunciation is ultimately regarded as having less significance than other aspects of the language such as grammar, reading or writing skills.

So, if students do enjoy learning pronunciation and if teachers cannot supply students with sufficient pronunciation practice in their classes due to various factors, setting up a Pronunciation Clinic is an alternative answer. A Pronunciation Clinic is where pronunciation can become the focus and the beginning of a new passage that allows students to learn other aspects of the English language, be it grammar, idiomatic expressions, slang, or culture. By putting pronunciation first, students would be more motivated to learn, develop a more positive attitude toward learning the language, and increase their confidence in using it.

Procedures

The CULI Pronunciation Clinic is not for every student. It is available only to students who have pronunciation difficulties. To check, we start off with giving the student a diagnostic test. Then, together with other students, he/she participates in the sessions

with the aim to improve his/her pronunciation. The steps are as follows:

1. *Diagnostic test:* Students tape-record themselves reading the diagnostic test - any piece of writing that may contain English utterances commonly mispronounced by Thais. Cassette tapes are kept for later comparison. The instructor makes note of each student's pronunciation problem.
2. *Lessons:* First, the instructor focuses on how to distinguish problematic sounds (both vowel sounds and consonant sounds) and how to produce such sounds and their counterparts. Compact mirrors, scratch paper, or other material that would help in producing such sounds properly would play a role in this phase of the session.

Then the instructor concentrates on producing correct word stress and intonation in the sentence level. At this point, practice activities are given and students are provided with individual feedback. Practice activities vary. They include jazz chanting, reading aloud poems, tongue twisters, and lyrics; even singing; and playing games. From the given handouts, grammar points, idiomatic expressions and slang, as well as some cultural aspects can be brought up during this part of the session.

The session ends with a wrap-up activity where students are encouraged to read aloud the practiced piece to their peers. Students are also encouraged to keep a cassette tape and record themselves for self-practice and self-monitoring on their own time.

3. *Post-test or Final self-test:* Students tape-record themselves reading the same diagnostic test as they read in the beginning. This time, another cassette is

used, so they can easily compare how they have improved since the first recording. Students listen to both cassette tapes and note their improvement. They are prompted to practice further on their own and to carefully self-monitor the way they pronounce.

Ideas on How to Set up a Pronunciation Clinic

Preparation stage

The program coordinator and/or instructor does the following:

- Identify common problematic pronunciation areas of students.
- Create a diagnostic read-aloud test using the common problematic sounds found.
- Search for methods to eradicate such problems through a variety of materials and techniques.
- Search for a variety of activities that can be applied to students with the aim to improve their pronunciation.
- Create an application form for students to fill in their personal information. This is to be kept as a record.
- Create a questionnaire for students to evaluate the sessions. This is to be used as feedback for the program.
- Allocate time, space, and manpower for conducting the program.
- Advertise! Make it known that a Pronunciation Clinic is available for students.

At the Start

- Students fill in an application form.
- Students take the diagnostic test. The coordinator and/or instructor checks whether or not applicants need to enter the program and keeps record of each

individual's problematic area of pronunciation.

Activities (to pick and choose according to students' needs)

- The instructor provides oral warm-up exercises.
- The instructor introduces pronunciation pairs.
- The instructor conducts sound discrimination exercises.
- Students practice producing individual sounds.
- Students practice producing the sounds in situational contexts.
- Students learn other aspects of the language: new vocabulary, slang, idioms, grammar, culture, etc.
- Students are given self-practice exercises for further practice.

After completing 10-12 sessions

- Students take post test or final self-test. Students listen to their recorded pre-test and post-test and note how their pronunciation has improved.
- Students fill out evaluation form. The coordinator and/or instructor gathers students' feedback for further improvement of the program.

Materials and Sample Activities Used in the Pronunciation Clinic

Since the Pronunciation Clinic at the Language Institute is an extra curricular activity, it is not conducted during regular teaching hours, but after school hours. It is a special program organized in addition to the normal workload. Instructors already have their hands full. Therefore, materials and methods used for the pronunciation practice sessions are not all tailor made, but borrowed from resource books in order to use the least

time preparing for the sessions and also in order to make the most of what is available. There are many resource books on pronunciation that supply pronunciation teaching methods, games, and fun ideas that can be adapted to suit any pronunciation class. A list of practical books is provided at the end of this article.

Materials

Diagnostic test

The diagnostic test is served as the pre-test and the post-test. It can be any piece of writing that contains sounds or words that are often mispronounced by students.

Tape recorder

The tape recorder is used to record the students when reading the diagnostic test and to play songs and jazz chants during the sessions.

Blank tape cassettes

Students should bring 2 blank tape cassettes with them. They will be used in recording students' voices reading the diagnostic test before and after they attend the sessions. To help economize, students can use one blank tape cassette.

Tape cassettes of Jazz Chants and songs

Instructors will have to provide these for students.

Compact mirrors

Compact mirrors are used especially to help students see how their mouths move when they produce a certain sound of English. Seeing and feeling the movements of the mouth will help them get used to producing the sound the way it is supposed to be produced. Students may bring their own

compact mirrors or the instructor may provide some.

Scratch paper

Scratch paper (A4 size) is used for differentiating between the fricatives /s/ and /ʃ/ and the affricate /tʃ/. Place the scratch paper half an inch always from your mouth. When the fricatives /s/ and /ʃ/ are produced, the slip of paper should not move, but when the affricate /tʃ/ is produced, the force of air should cause the piece of paper to flap forward.

Handouts

The instructor will provide handouts on Jazz Chants, tongue twisters, poems, songs, and games but students can also contribute by sharing lyrics of their favorite songs or poems to their peers.

Sample Activities Used in the Pronunciation Clinic

The following are some activities used in the Pronunciation Clinic at CULI. They include sound discrimination exercises, games, tongue twisters, and sentence writing. The activities focus on the common problem areas of Thai speakers of English, such as clusters, the /r/ and /l/, the /th/ sounds, and the /sh/ and /ch/.

Articulation Exercises

Taken from John Archibald (1992) in "Teaching American English Pronunciation" by Peter Avery and Susan Ehrlich (1992) Oxford University Press.

Students do warm up exercises to loosen up different parts of the oral cavity by producing the following sounds:

The Lips (20)

iy uw iy uw iy uw iy uw etc.

Lips and Jaw (20)

iy a uw iy a uw iy a uw iy a uw etc.

Tongue, Lips, and Jaw (5)

a ey iy ey a a ow uw ow a
a ey iy ey a a ow uw ow a

The Jaw and Middle of Tongue

[ya] Moving jaw, not tongue

[ya] Moving tongue, not jaw (rest chin on hand)

Back of the tongue (Tongue touches velum)

a g a g a g a g etc.

Consonants

pi	pi	pi	pi	pa
ti	ti	ti	ti	ta
ki	ki	ki	ki	ka
bi	bi	bi	bi	ba
di	di	di	di	da
gi	gi	gi	gi	ga
mi	mi	mi	mi	ma
ni	ni	ni	ni	na

Keep consonant sounds fully voiced

VVVIMMM

VVVINNN

VVVIηηη

ðððIMMM

ðððINNN

ðððIηηη

Bingo

Adapted from Mark Hancock's Pronunciation Games
Cambridge University Press (1995)

Focus: Sound discrimination

Type of Game: A listen and search game

Approximate time: 20 minutes

Preparation: Copy and cut sheet of cards so that there is one card for each student.

Conducting the game:

1. Give out the prepared cards.
2. Read out each of the words from one of the cards in random order. Tick off the words as you read them to avoid reading them twice. Ask students to cross out the words on their card as they hear them.
3. When a player completes a horizontal or vertical line on the card, he/she shouts out *Bingo!* Ask this player to read back the words to check that they were the exact words read out by you.
4. When one player has won, you can ask the remaining students to continue playing so they have the chance to reach the second and third winning positions. You may even have the winner in the first round be the one to read out the words instead of you.

BINGO 1

Whale	Vine	Fend	Wary
Life	Vocal	Vary	Final
Vest	Vinyl	Fine	Veil
Live	Saver	Vend	Safer

BINGO 2

Live	Vest	Life	Whale
Saver	Vinyl	Vocal	Vine
Veil	Fine	Vary	Vine
Vend	Final	Safer	Wary

BINGO 3

Wary	Final	Fend	Vine
Vocal	Safer	Life	Vinyl
Fine	Veil	Whale	Vary
Live	Vend	Vest	Saver

BINGO 4

Fend	Wary	Vine	Life
Final	Fine	Vary	Whale
Safer	Vocal	Vinyl	Live
Veil	Saver	Vend	Vest

BINGO 5

Life	Whale	Live	Vest
Fend	Vary	Saver	Vinyl
Vine	Fine	Vocal	Veil
Wary	Final	Safer	Vend

BINGO 6

Vary	Final	Wary	Fend
Vine	Safer	Whale	Vocal
Vest	Veil	Life	Vend
Vinyl	Saver	Live	Fine

Correct Me, Please!

Tanyaporn Arya

Focus: Sound discrimination and correct pronunciation

Directions: Read aloud the words from each group, pronouncing one word incorrectly. Have the students correct you once they've heard the mispronounced word.

Initial clusters with /l/ and /r/:

- | | | | |
|-----------|-------|--------|-------|
| 1. Play | Braid | Pray | Blade |
| 2. Clash | Craw | Crash | Claw |
| 3. Fright | Flee | Flight | Free |
| 4. Grew | Brink | Glue | Blink |

Initial clusters beginning with /s/:

- | | | | |
|----------|-------|---------|--------|
| 1. Steak | Sty | Snicker | Small |
| 2. Slip | Sway | Spot | Stroke |
| 3. Slum | Space | Sprint | Sky |
| 4. Sneer | Swat | Speak | Squat |

Mixed Initial and Final clusters:

- | | | | |
|---------|-------|--------|--------|
| Camp | Meant | Stump | Ant |
| Hitched | Beast | Locked | Risks |
| Figs | Buns | Health | Bugged |

Sample Exercises to Practice /r/ and /l/

Taken from Nilsen and Nilsen's Pronunciation Contrasts in English
Prentice Hall Regents (1973)

Focus: Sound Recognition

Materials: Blank piece of paper

Recognition I

Instructions: Number your paper from 1-5. I'm going to say groups of 3 words. Two of the words will be the same. Write down the number of the word which is different. For example, if I say quill queer quill, you should write down 2.

- | | |
|-------------------------|-------------------|
| 1. lash lash rash | 4. clue clue crew |
| 2. locker rocker locker | 5. sear seal seal |
| 3. wrist list list | |

Recognition II

Instructions: Number your paper from 1-8. Listen to the following words. When a word ends with /l/, write l. When it ends with /r/, write r.

- | | |
|---------|---------|
| 1. toll | 5. tile |
| 2. tore | 6. tile |
| 3. toll | 7. tire |
| 4. toll | 8. tire |

Recognition III

Instructions: Number your paper from 1-6. I'll say groups of three words. Listen carefully for the word which begins with a consonant cluster containing /l/. If it's the first word in the group, write the number 1. If it's the second word in the group, write number 2. And if it's the third, write number 3.

- | | |
|------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. prod pod plod | 4. fame flame frame |
| 2. go glow grow | 5. pray play pay |
| 3. flight fright fight | 6. blight bit bright |

Production Exercise I

Instructions: Listen carefully and then repeat the following contrasts with /l/ and /r/ in initial position. The /l/ words come first.

- | | |
|-----------|-----------|
| Lace race | Law raw |
| Lag rag | Leap reap |
| Lane rain | Lamp ramp |

Production Exercise II

Repeat the following contrasting words which have /l/ and /r/ in the medial position:

- | | |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| Glean green | Elect erect |
| Filing firing | Collect correct |
| Belated berated | |

Production Exercise III

Repeat the following contrasting words which have /l/ and /r/ in final position

Mole more

Pole pore

Feel fear

Peal peer

File fire

Toll tore

Production Exercise IV

Listen carefully to these sentences which contain contrasts. Repeat after me.

There is a light on the right.

Are they free to flee?

The leaf is on the reef.

The file was on fire.

He doesn't feel any fear.

Production Exercise V

Number your paper from 1-8. Repeat the following sentences after me. If the last word begins with /l/ make a check on your paper.

1. This isn't a good lime.

5. It is a high load.

2. This isn't a good rhyme.

6. It is a high road.

3. This isn't a good rhyme.

7. It is a high load.

4. This isn't a good lime.

8. It is a high load.

Now it's your turn!

Create a recognition and a production exercise of your own using the same patterns.

Test them on your partner.