



Bridging Traditional Practices and Modern Tools: Technology-Supported Reading Aloud for North Korean Refugee Students

Mun Woo Lee (Yonsei University)



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Lee, Mun Woo
Associate Professor, Department
of English Language and
Literature
Yonsei University
50 Yonsei-ro, Seodaemun-gu,
Seoul 03722, Republic of Korea
Tel: 02-2123-2325
Email: munwoo@yonsei.ac.kr

ABSTRACT

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This study explores the implementation of a mobile phone-assisted reading aloud method in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom for North Korean refugee students with limited English proficiency. Conducted over one year, the study involved eight students participating in a cultural exchange program with native English speakers. Using a practical action research framework, the researcher integrated mobile phone voice-recording technology into reading aloud activities to assess its impact on students' language development. The findings indicate significant improvements in reading fluency, oral proficiency, vocabulary acquisition, grammar, and pronunciation. Additionally, students reported increased confidence in speaking English and a greater willingness to engage in conversations. The study highlights the pedagogical potential of combining traditional reading aloud practices with digital tools to enhance language learning, particularly for marginalized learners with limited access to conventional English education. These insights offer practical guidance for EFL educators seeking innovative approaches to support students struggling with English proficiency.

KEYWORDS

mobile phone-assisted reading aloud, low-proficient EFL learners, North Korean refugee students, participatory action research

1. Introduction

North Korean refugees are no longer difficult to find in South Korean society today. By the end of December 2024, a total of 34,314 North Korean refugees had entered South Korea. The number increased significantly until 2011 but has declined since 2012, with a sharp drop after 2020 due to COVID-19 border controls. While arrivals remained low in recent years, 236 refugees entered South Korea in 2024, marking a slight increase from previous years (Ministry of Unification, 2024). Regarding education, reports from April 2023 indicate that 1,769 North Korean refugee students were enrolled in various educational institutions across South Korea. While this number had been growing until 2017, it has since been on a declining trend. Among them, 38.7% were in high school, 29.0% in middle school, 23.8% in elementary school, and 8.5% in other educational programs (Ministry of Unification, 2024).

Studies on North Korean refugees have consistently highlighted the challenges these students face in adjusting to the South Korean school system, with English being the most commonly reported subject of difficulty (Kim and Ahn 2017a, 2017b, Lee 2018). Since many of these students have either never learned English or have only been exposed to it through reading, it is unsurprising that they experience frustration when required to develop English proficiency across all four language skills in South Korean schools. According to Lee (2018), North Korean refugee students enrolled in South Korean schools expressed a desire to learn English in more practical and culturally relevant ways, as English plays a crucial role in contemporary Korean society. Consequently, a lack of English proficiency is often associated with marginalization. Furthermore, teachers who participated in Lee's study emphasized the urgent need for a customized curriculum tailored to this population, highlighting the significant proficiency gap between North Korean refugee students and their South Korean peers, primarily due to their limited exposure to English learning.

The need for a customized curriculum for this population has been a central topic in studies on North Korean refugee students. However, most of these studies have focused on college-level students (Cho 2019, Choi 2022). Research on North Korean refugee students at the secondary level remains scarce, and existing studies are not only limited in number but also in scope. They fail to fully explore how "customization" can be implemented from teachers' perspectives and how effective it can be in enhancing English learning from students' perspectives (Kim & Ahn, 2017a, 2017b, Lee, 2018). This study examines how the traditional teaching method of reading aloud can be adapted to better support North Korean refugees with low English proficiency, specifically through the use of mobile phones. Drawing on the fact that previous studies have not focused on speaking classes and that mobile phones are the most widely used electronic devices among North Korean refugee students, this study explores how everyday technology can be integrated with existing teaching methods to help improve students' English proficiency over time. The research questions addressed in this study are as follows: (1) How can mobile phones be used to support reading aloud in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speaking classroom, particularly for learners with limited English proficiency? (2) What are the impacts of incorporating mobile phones into reading-aloud activities in an EFL speaking classroom, particularly for learners with limited English proficiency?

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Benefits of Reading Aloud

Reading aloud involves students utilizing their visual, auditory, and cognitive faculties to read a narrative, hear

it through a narrator's voice, and comprehend its meaning (Gurdon, 2019). It has long been used as classroom activity and can be either teacher-directed or learner-led (Kim 2018). It is usually adopted among young learners for L1 learning (Gabrielatos 2002), although it can be used among learners from a wider age group for L2 learning (Cho & Seo 2001; Kim 2018). Regardless of the diverse categories of learners that may adopt it, it is widely known to be effective in improving various aspects of language proficiency. For instance, reading aloud helps learners acquire vocabulary and group words into meaningful chunks, both of which improve overall reading comprehension (Yu 2015). In addition, according to Huang (2010), when reading aloud is integrated into writing in a manner such that learners read aloud what they have written, they are able to mentally prepare the structure and content of their own writing.

Reading aloud also helps learners psychologically by increasing confidence and decreasing communication anxiety (Kim 2018), while enhancing their willingness to practise English (Chong 2022). Senawati et al. (2021) found that the benefits of reading aloud extended even to learning motivation and critical thinking skills. Among the many merits of reading aloud, however, the one most foregrounded has been its contribution to speaking. Although some scholars have criticised reading aloud mainly because of the substantial discrepancy between its artificial tone and that of spontaneous speech (Bygate 1987), as Gibson (2008) stressed, reading aloud has been proven to be effective in pronunciation practice. Because reading aloud involves automatic phonological coding and subsequent production skills, it prompts learners to become more aware of and pay attention to their own pronunciation. In addition, it enabled learners to work on suprasegmental features such as intonation and stress along with targeted speech patterns in the rehearsed speaking activities presented by Chun (2002).

Reading aloud can be particularly beneficial for low-proficient English learners, such as North Korean refugee students, who have had limited opportunities to practice phonological coding in English and apply it to vocabulary, sentence structures, and conversations. Despite its advantages, however, reading aloud is often perceived as an outdated method and is therefore not actively implemented in Korean EFL classrooms, not only for North Korean refugee students but also for other low-proficient Korean EFL learners. Thus, this study explores the potential of revitalizing the reading aloud method by applying it to North Korean refugee students with low English proficiency, particularly by integrating it with mobile phone voice-recording technology for enhanced learning outcomes.

2.2 Self Voice-Recording Activity with a Mobile Phone

Researchers examining how reading aloud improves students' speaking ability have usually depended upon pre- and post-tests or self-report. These methods quantitatively show whether reading aloud enhances speaking ability. However, they are not sufficient to demonstrate how students develop their speaking ability through the reading aloud process or capture the types of feedback available to them. Researchers have attempted to incorporate voice recording using mobile phones in reading aloud to overcome the above methodological shortcomings and show that the method is effective not only in improving various aspects of students' speaking ability, including pronunciation, intonation, and stress, but also in helping them observe their own performance and facilitating self-directed learning (Chong 2021, Kim 2018, Kim and Chang 2010).

However, despite the advantages of the method, there is a paucity of studies regarding using mobile phones for voice recording in reading aloud. Those that have implemented this method have focused on college students whose level of English proficiency is at least intermediate (Chong 2021, Kim and Chang 2010). Furthermore, these studies have not examined how students' speaking ability could be improved in authentic communication situations such as interactions with native English speakers. It is generally assumed that students with very low English proficiency are unable to participate in conversation classes with native speakers. However, if these students are

continuously excluded from such classes due to their low proficiency, they will remain stuck in a vicious cycle—unable to engage in conversation because of their lack of skills and unable to develop those skills because they have never had the opportunity to participate in conversation classes. Therefore, exploring whether this method is feasible for students with extremely low English proficiency is not only relevant to North Korean refugee students but also holds significant implications for learners from various backgrounds who struggle with English proficiency.

As a teacher-researcher working with low-proficiency English learners from a North Korean refugee background, I have consistently sought effective methods to improve these students' English-speaking abilities. During this process, I discovered that all of these students owned mobile phones and actively used them in various ways for both learning and daily life. In particular, I observed that mobile phones were frequently utilized in class for looking up English words, listening to their pronunciations, and searching for information online. Recognizing this, I considered it beneficial to explore ways to integrate mobile phones more practically into their lessons to enhance their learning experience. Through my observations, I found that the mobile phone-assisted reading aloud method is a viable approach to helping students improve their English-speaking skills and, ultimately, become autonomous learners. In this study, I share my experience of implementing reading aloud with the integration of voice recording using mobile phones for students with highly limited English proficiency. More specifically, this study examines how mobile phones can be utilized to support reading aloud in an English as a foreign language (EFL) speaking classroom, particularly for learners with limited English proficiency. Additionally, it explores the impacts of incorporating mobile phones into reading aloud activities in an EFL speaking classroom, with a focus on their effects on learners with low English proficiency.

3. The Study

3.1 Participants

The study involved eight students (three male and five female) with limited English proficiency. The students had all come from North Korea within a couple of years of the commencement of the study and had either never studied English or encountered a very basic level of English back in North Korea. When the study was conducted, they had studied English at school, but their English proficiency was at best between levels 3 (extremely limited user) and 4 (limited user) based on the International English Language Testing System criteria. The school's English curriculum mainly focused on reading, and to familiarize the students with English reading, the teachers made them memorize a large amount of vocabulary and grammar rules every week. Before the study was conducted, I had an opportunity to informally interview the students. All of them wanted to communicate in English, but because of their limited English proficiency, none of them “had dreamed of” (as expressed by some of the students) having a conversation with a foreigner or even speaking a sentence in English.

They found the English speaking class, which was conducted by native English speaking teachers, to be highly challenging. The school was able to arrange this class thanks to volunteer teachers who were serving the US armed forces in Korea. Fourteen teachers participated in the class over one year, but most of them came to the class just once, the exception being Brian,¹ who interacted with the students once a week throughout the year. The students

¹ All names mentioned in the paper are pseudonyms.

were excited to see foreign nationals in their class and were eager to speak to them in English. However, the first two classes, in which a popular English conversation textbook was used, were a failure, and I was busy translating between the teachers and the students. I noticed that the speaking class with this particular group of teachers and students needed to be different, and that the most important factor needed to enable this class to work was helping the students practice English speaking even when they were not in class. This caused me, as a key participant in the study, to focus on the reading aloud method, especially with the use of mobile phones.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

This study was based on the practical action research framework (Creswell 2005, p. 552), which focuses on teacher development and student learning by implementing a plan of action. As a teacher–researcher with extensive teaching experience at both the secondary and tertiary levels, I intended to improve a particular classroom situation by conducting a small-scale research project (Lee 2018). I designed the speaking class as a “cultural exchange” class to enable the teachers from the US and students from North Korea to talk not only about their own cultures but also South Korean and Chinese culture because many of the students had lived in China after they defected from North Korea. We covered 12 themes during two consecutive semesters. The themes were as follows: (1) delicious food, (2) interesting movies, (3) songs that represent my culture, (4) traditional fairy tales, (5) favourite celebrities, (6) meaningful holidays, (7) my hometown, (8) famous places, (9) children’s games, (10) weddings and funerals, (11) a memorable school life, and (12) interesting sports. The topics were directly related to the participants’ lives, and they engaged in the speaking activities as a single group comprising the whole class, in small groups, or one-on-one depending on the number of teachers available and the themes of the week.

Each class lasted 90 minutes, and each theme was covered over two weeks. For each theme, I adapted a short reading passage from the textbook or the internet or wrote one myself. I asked the students to read the passage aloud at home and record it using their mobile phones. In the classroom, the students followed a similar routine for each theme, which consisted of four stages: (1) discussing the reading material, (2) checking the recorded speech, (3) working with the native English speaking teachers, and (4) performing activities together. In addition to collecting the students’ recordings, I recorded all of the classroom discourse with the permission of the teachers and the students. I also wrote reflective notes immediately after each class to keep track of what could have been done more effectively during the class and apply them in the following sessions. In addition, I conducted an oral interview with Brian and the students respectively, asking them about how they perceived the cultural exchange class in general and the mobile phone-assisted reading aloud activities. The interview data was recorded and transcribed alongside the other collected data and was then coded based on two predetermined themes: the implementation of the reading aloud method and its effects. I subsequently reviewed the remarks in my reflective notes and incorporated them into the coded data, leading to the emergence of three themes: the four stages of implementing the reading aloud method, fluency-related effects, and accuracy-related effects.

4. Findings

4.1 Implementation of the Reading Aloud Method

The mobile phone-assisted reading aloud method largely consisted of two broad components: a home activity and classroom activities. The home activity consisted of an individual task in which each participant read aloud

two paragraphs (approximately 350–400 words) while recording their speech using their mobile phones. Before performing the recording, they were required to check unfamiliar words and phrases in the dictionary to comprehend the passage. They were required to submit their recordings to me before the class and also bring it to the class for the classroom activities. For each theme, the classroom activities consisted of four stages: 1) discussing the reading material, (2) checking the recorded speech, (3) working with native the English speaking teachers, and (4) performing activities together.

In the first stage, I began the class by discussing the contents of and vocabulary used in the reading passage. In the second stage, the students worked in pairs to listen to each other's recorded speech and obtained feedback from their peers as well as the native English speaking teachers. After spending 45 minutes on these two stages, the native English speaking teachers spent another 45 minutes discussing the theme and facilitating classroom interactions. The final stage, which lasted 90 minutes, was based on the activities that I designed in accordance with each week's theme. For instance, the teachers and the students played Korean children's games together (theme 9), role-played as celebrities (the teachers) and interviewers (the students) (theme 5), composed an imaginative wedding invitation (theme 10), and translated the lyrics of a famous K-pop song into English (theme 3). Table 1 provides a summary of the two components of the reading aloud method.

Table 1. Components and Stages of the Mobile Phone-Assisted Reading Aloud Method

Component/Stage	Time (min)	What the students did	What the teachers did
(At home) Mobile phone-assisted reading aloud	30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Read the assigned passage * Found the meaning of unfamiliar words using a dictionary on the internet * Listened to the pronunciation of the words provided by the online dictionary * If unfamiliar phrases or grammatical structures were encountered, sent a text message to the teacher * After fully understanding the passage, read it aloud while recording it using a mobile phone * Submitted the recorded voice file to the teacher before the class 	<Korean Teacher> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Answered the students' questions via mobile phone at the earliest possible * Ensured all students submit the recorded voice file on time
(In class) (1) Discussing the reading material	15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Answered the teacher's questions * Shared their feelings and opinions about the reading passage * Answering in Korean was allowed 	<Korean Teacher> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Asked a few comprehension questions regarding the reading passage * Pointed out key vocabulary, idioms, and sentence patterns * Used both Korean and English, but attempted to increase the proportion of English used over time
(2) Checking the recorded speech	30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Listened to the recorded speech of another student and exchanged feedback * Could share reflections about their own reading 	<Korean Teacher> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Divided the class into pairs or two groups * Asked the students to exchange their mobile phones and check each

		* Korean was allowed when giving feedback, but spoke only in English with the American teacher	other's recorded speech * Helped them exchange feedback <American Teacher> * Moved around the classroom and listened to the students' recorded speech with them * Helped the students give feedback to each other and also gave feedback to the students
(3) Working with native English speaking teachers	45	* Participated in the classroom interactions as actively as possible * Spoke only in English	<Korean Teacher> * Intervened when translation was necessary <American Teacher> * Prepared materials related to the theme of the week * Led the class by encouraging all students to participate
(4) Performing activities together	90	* Participated in the classroom interactions as actively as possible * Completed the given task during the class time * Spoke only in English	<Korean Teacher> * Introduced the task related to the theme of the week * Intervened when translation was necessary <American Teacher> * Participated in the task together with the students * Moved around the classroom and helped the students * Led the class in sharing the finished task together

4.2 Effects of the Mobile Phone-Assisted Reading Aloud Method

The effects of the mobile phone-assisted reading aloud method could be categorised into two types: fluency-related effects and accuracy-related effects.

4.2.1 Fluency-related effects

The most conspicuous effect of the mobile phone-assisted reading aloud class was the students' improved reading fluency. At the beginning of the course, the students read the given passage at a speed of 57 words per minute on average. Their reading fluency improved dramatically by the end of the second semester, as evidenced by the increase in their reading speed to 168 words per minute on average. Although this was still below the average speed of fluent readers of 200 words per minute, the rate of improvement was so remarkable that both the teachers and students mentioned it as the biggest change effected by the method.

I guess the biggest difference that the students showed was the speed when they read aloud. When I first listened to their recordings, a lot of them took more than...I don't know may be...10 to 15 minutes? But now, it goes like

this quick [snapping their fingers], within 5 minutes.

(Teacher, Interview)

I became a fast reader thanks to the mobile phone-assisted reading aloud practice. Now, I apply this method when I read other English texts such as [a] textbook, and I can read it way faster than before.

(Participant 1, Interview)

In addition, their improvement in reading fluency was linked to improvements in their oral fluency. In the recorded classroom discourse, the proportion of teacher talk in the first three classes was about 82% on average, and the students were unable to express themselves in complete sentences (Researcher, Reflective Note). However, the classroom discourse from the last three classes showed that the proportion of student talk had increased to 43%, and many of their utterances were in complete sentences although most of them were short (Researcher, Reflective Note). The participants themselves were also aware of their increased oral fluency and mentioned it as an advantage of the mobile phone-assisted reading aloud method.

At first, I thought it was bothersome to record what I read, but then I noticed that I could utilise some of the vocabulary and idiomatic expressions that I practised in the recording in communicating with Brian. It was fascinating to see Brian understood what I said, so I think this method really works.

(Participant 5, Interview)

I didn't really like to listen to my recorded voice, but I noticed that this method could actually help me say something in English. In the past, I didn't even try to open my mouth at all to say something [in] English, so if a foreigner asks me a direction, I would run away. But nowadays, I try to say things in English both in and out of the classroom because I remember what I have read in the recordings.

(Participant 7, Interview)

Both Participants 5 and 7 were initially not fond of the unfamiliar reading-aloud activity. However, their attitude gradually shifted to a more positive one as they recognized its benefits, particularly in enhancing their ability to communicate in English with an American teacher and other foreigners. Interestingly, both participants highlighted that their improvement in English conversation stemmed from their ability to utilize the vocabulary and expressions they had practiced through the self-voice-recording activity. This finding suggests that reading aloud, combined with self-voice recording using a mobile phone, can help students expand their vocabulary and expressions by reinforcing retention and facilitating retrieval in meaningful conversational contexts. Additionally, the participants reported increased confidence in speaking English as a result of engaging in the self-voice-recording activity and the connected speaking class. Although the psychological impact of this practice could not be quantified numerically, it was a noticeable change that both participants and teachers commonly acknowledged.

4.2.2 Accuracy-related effects

The improvement in the students' oral fluency was also closely interrelated with their enhanced competence in vocabulary and grammar. All of the students mentioned that they benefited from the mobile phone-assisted reading aloud method in terms of learning vocabulary. Four of them also said that they became more aware of sentence

structures and formulaic expressions. These improvements were particularly noticeable in their recorded speech. In the early recordings, there were random pauses in their speech, which made them sound even less proficient in English than they might have possibly been. However, with time, they were able to parse or divide sentences into meaningful units, evidencing that they became more aware of English vocabulary and grammar. Furthermore, the participants also incorporated their acquired knowledge into authentic communication situations with the native English speaking teachers.

Food...also.....play...s a sig...sig...nificant...role in.....health..health.... and well...-be...ing, inf...lu...encing our...physic...cal and.....mental sta...ate...s.

(Participant 2, Theme 1 Speech Recording)

Sports offer...a fascinating a...rray of activities...that cap...tivate and...engage people across the globe....., each...with its unique set of skills, strate...gies, and cultural significance.

(Participant 2, Theme 12 Speech Recording)

I think they actually picked up some useful vocabulary and some idioms while they were reading things aloud. So for example, I was very surprised when Eunji said “take a look at this” to me last week. She would have said just “look” or did not say anything if she had not practiced things through the assignment. Oh, I also remember Hansung also said his mother was able to escape from North Korea because of her strong will or something like that. I don’t remember the sentence exactly, but he used some difficult expressions such as “was able to” or “will”.

(Teacher, Interview)

In his first speech recording, Participant 2 was unable to parse words into meaningful grammatical units and struggled to pronounce even a single word at a time, especially when encountering longer words (e.g., significant, influencing). In contrast, by his 12th speech recording, Participant 2 demonstrated significantly improved proficiency in reading. He no longer had to pause between every word; instead, he was able to group words into meaningful units such as “sports offer,” “a fascinating array of activities,” “that captivate and engage people across the globe,” and “each with its unique set of skills, strategies, and cultural significance.” This progress appeared to be a result not only of his improved vocabulary skills but also of his enhanced grammatical awareness in English. Brian also highlighted the students’ improved understanding of grammar by providing a specific example of Hansung’s mention of a substitute expression for the modal verb “can,” particularly in its past tense form (“was able to”) and the modal verb “will,” which is used to form the future tense.

Along with their enhanced competence in vocabulary and grammar, their pronunciation became more precise and comprehensible. As indicated in the quote above from an early recording from Participant 2, the participants had difficulty pronouncing English words, especially when they were long and difficult. There were cases in which their mispronunciations resulted in miscommunications with the native English speaking teachers. For instance, when Participant 4 pronounced the word “gigantic” as [gigantik] instead of [dʒar'gæn.tɪk], there was a breakdown in the conversation (Researcher, Reflective Note). Nevertheless, although the participants mispronounced certain words when practicing reading aloud, they had an opportunity to correct their mispronunciations in the classroom because they brought the recordings to the class for feedback. Thus, the use of mobile phones in this activity was key to enabling the widening and deepening of their vocabulary.

I really liked to use my cell phone in English learning. I actually didn't know that I could use a cell phone for this purpose because I usually watch YouTube or text with my friends via Kakao Talk.....I especially like the fact that I can learn how to pronounce some difficult words. When I study English vocabulary, I just memorize the spelling and its Korean meaning, so I often don't know how to pronounce it. Now, I pay more attention to how to pronounce the words, too, and this makes me feel that I know the words more completely.

(Participant 4, Interview)

As Participant 4 mentioned, in the typical Korean EFL context, the method of memorizing English vocabulary is heavily focused on learning the Korean meaning of English words in a one-to-one correspondence. As a result, learners often concentrate solely on the meaning of words without understanding how they are actually used in real-life contexts. Due to this study method, some learners, like the North Korean refugee students in this study, may not even know how to pronounce the English words they have memorized. This indicates that students are learning English vocabulary in an incomplete manner. However, through the self-voice-recording activity using a mobile phone, students were able to practice using a wider range of words within actual sentences and conversational contexts. More importantly, by pronouncing the words themselves, they could directly experience the potential for effective communication through accurate pronunciation. This was one of the most significant benefits of this activity.

5. Discussions and Conclusion

The findings of the study showed that reading aloud, which is often regarded as a somewhat old-fashioned language learning method, has the potential to improve the English speaking ability of learners with limited English proficiency, especially when combined with an easily accessible technology. The use of mobile phones in reading aloud enabled the participants of the study to link their individual endeavours in the form of completing their home assignments to authentic speaking activities in the classroom (Chong 2021, Kim 2018, Kim & Chang 2010). Unlike previous studies that have simply measured students' improvement in English proficiency using self-reported questionnaires or tests, the present study engaged the students in actual communication with native English speaking teachers. In addition, reading aloud with the use of mobile phones helped them to observe themselves objectively when speaking in English and pay attention to other students' performance because the recordings allowed them to give and receive feedback on various aspects of their speech and the text such as speed, pronunciation, and parsing. In short, the incorporation of mobile phones for recording in reading aloud renewed the language learning method.

As several participants mentioned, mobile phones have long become an essential part of daily life for many students, including North Korean refugee students. These devices are no longer just tools for occasional communication or entertainment; rather, they have become indispensable in modern education and personal development. However, despite their omnipresence, students primarily use their mobile phones for social networking services (SNS), watching YouTube videos, or looking up word meanings in a dictionary. Their potential as interactive learning tools, particularly for improving English proficiency, has remained largely untapped. This study highlights not only the rediscovery of such familiar technology but also the new pedagogical possibilities of integrating mobile phones with traditional language learning methods. Reading aloud, once a fundamental practice in language education, has gradually fallen out of favor in many classrooms due to its seemingly outdated nature. However, this research explores how a technology deeply embedded in students' daily

lives can be repurposed to revive and enhance the effectiveness of reading aloud.

By incorporating mobile-assisted self-voice recording into the reading-aloud process, students are encouraged to actively engage with spoken English, refine their pronunciation, and develop a greater awareness of how words are used in context. The combination of a long-standing yet underutilized language learning method with a ubiquitous, student-friendly technology makes this study particularly meaningful. It demonstrates how modern tools can bridge the gap between conventional and contemporary learning approaches, fostering a more engaging, accessible, and effective language-learning environment. Thus, this study holds special significance in that it does not merely reaffirm the role of technology in education but also reimagines how familiar digital tools can be utilized in innovative ways to enhance English language learning—specifically through reading aloud, a method that has often been overlooked in recent years.

The fact that the mobile phone-assisted reading aloud method was effective for the participants of this study implies more than simply the efficacy of the method. The overall English proficiency of all of the participants was very limited, and, as mentioned by some of them, they had not “dreamed” of speaking in English. Furthermore, they were from a highly marginalized section of South Korean society. Their parents could not afford the high tuition fees of private English institutes and some did not even have their parents with them (Lee, 2018). They did not know how to approach studying English speaking, and this caused them to feel frustrated even before they started. Thus, in addition to directly improving various aspects of their English speaking proficiency including reading and oral fluency, vocabulary and grammar, and pronunciation, the biggest change that this method elicited from this particular student sample was in their ability and confidence to study English on their own by offering them the practical guidance to do so, supporting them to become self-directed learners (Chong 2021, Senawati et al. 2021). This change also seemed to be related to the reduced communication anxiety of the students (Cho & Seo 2001) and their increased willingness to communicate in the classroom activities (Chong 2022), although the causes of these outcomes were not directly measured.

The adoption of the mobile phone-assisted reading aloud method can be easily facilitated through cultural exchange speaking classes, in which both students and teachers engage in genuine interactions. In this study, when working on various classroom activities, both the students and teachers were genuinely curious about each other’s cultures and asked many referential questions, which often led to lengthy conversations. Notably, despite their limited English speaking ability, the students were not afraid to make mistakes and exhibited an impressive improvement over time. This served as a strong counterevidence to the long-held beliefs that low-proficiency learners are not ready for English conversation classes or they should focus more on rote learning methods such as pronunciation exercises (Bygate 1987). English speaking cannot be developed by combining competence in various aspects of the language separately. Rather, it is developed in a holistic manner when opportunities for genuine interactions in English are provided. In this regard, the mobile phone-assisted reading aloud method presented in this study is a viable teaching method for English as a foreign or second language educators seeking solutions for teaching English speaking to learners with limited English proficiency.

This study could be conducted thanks to the presence of certain conditions. First, although the number of the students was small, all of them participated in the class consistently without dropping out. This enabled them to feel comfortable and experience a sense of community while working in the classroom. Second, the school curriculum was flexible in that I could design and implement the class based upon what I had learned from theory and practice. Most importantly, however, the class as a whole was possible thanks to the dedication of the native English speaking volunteer teachers, including Brian, who were willing to come to the class from a considerable distance. Whenever I asked them to prepare for a week’s theme, they always exceeded my expectations by bringing their photographs, snacks, and PowerPoint presentation materials. However, I humbly believe that change can be

achieved even without these privileged conditions. The most important point to remember as a teacher is to believe that English learners with very limited English proficiency can also succeed, and I hope this case study serves as a meaningful inspiration to teachers in other contexts as well.

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Examples in: English

Applicable Languages: English

Applicable Level: Secondary