

Reading Miscues and Comprehension*

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Introduction

Among the four skills of English learning, reading and listening are said to be passive or receptive, while speaking and writing are active or productive (Widdowson, 1978). The combination of reading and speaking in terms of oral reading could be a more active way of acquiring a reading skill. Although Japanese high school and college students have been taught this skill in the process of learning new words and sentences by first seeing them printed and then repeating after the tape or the teacher, they hardly go beyond simply producing the sounds. They can read, but their ability to comprehend what is written is much less than their ability to pronounce what is written. Why does this happen?

The students are concentrating so hard on correct pronunciation that they cease to see or lose the relationship of the words and sentences with each other. Frank Smith points out the lack of relevant knowledge and reluctance to use nonvisual information as two causes of "tunnel vision" (Smith, 1978). By changing the focus of the students' concentration, we should be able to remove the causes of the tunnel vision as proposed by Smith. By so doing, the students' reading comprehension would then increase.

However, for Japanese college students there seems to be more causes of tunnel vision than Smith proposed. Also there are some

unique patterns of oral reading which prevent good comprehension.

A research was conducted in the hope of finding how much the students could understand after the first oral reading, the causes of unsatisfactory reading, if there were any, and the ways to delete or overcome those causes.

Procedures

One hundred and eighty-eight freshman and sophomore English majors at Hokusei Gakuen College

- 1) were given reading material entitled "The Terrible Tornado" (see Appendix).
- 2) were requested to read the story aloud once, while their reading was recorded on cassette tapes in the language lab. The students were free to correct their mistakes but were not supposed to re-read before recording or re-record after finishing the first recording.
- 3) were given a true-false quiz of 15 statements about the content after the reading material was collected.
- 4) were requested to write down as much as they could recall.
- 5) were asked to draw a picture of a tornado.

The students' recordings were collected and their reading miscues were copied on the worksheets according to the marking system from the *Reading Miscue Inventory (RMI) Manual*. Then their miscues were carefully examined. All the answers of the true-false quiz were made by the students with the LL response analyzer. Recalled information, written either in English or Japanese, were evaluated to see how much correct information they received from the material. Finally, the pictures they drew were examined to find if they really know what a tornado looked like.

Results

The following results were found after the research. First, the reading miscues frequently found among the informants were shown in Table 1. All the miscues corrected by the informants during their reading were excluded from the present discussion. High frequency of the miscues was seen among such words as *buses*, *cars*, *cone*, *dark*, *roaring* and *vacuum* (Column 1). Then the miscues were grouped into phonetic, accentual and graphic groups according to their causes. The phonetic miscues occupy the highest proportion of the miscues, which indicates the informants' inability in English pronunciation (Column 2). Some of those miscues could change the meaning not only of the words but of the sentence context to which they belonged (Column 3).

The miscue of the word *tornado* which appeared five times throughout the text and which was deeply connected with comprehending the story was isolated and examined.

- a. The word *tornado* was pronounced correctly by 18 informants (9.6%).
- b. The five *tornado*'s were pronounced incorrectly but consistently by 70 informants (37.2%).
- c. The five *tornado*'s were pronounced inconsistently by 100 informants (53.2%).
- d. No informant left the word unpronounced.

The average points the informants obtained from the true-false quiz were 10.1 out of 15 (67.3%). The average information recall was 5.2 out of 19 (27.4%), which is a comparatively low percentage. This is because, besides misunderstanding the content, the informants had difficulty in retaining the content. However, 135 informants (71.

Table 1 Reading Miscues

Words	Readings**	① Frequency	② Miscues			③ Comprehension Loss
			Phonetic	Accentual	Graphic	
1 begins	[bi:ɪŋz]	4			○	○
	[bɪgɪn]	4	○		○	
	others	2				
2 buses	[bæ:sɪz]	7	○			○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
	[bʝʊ:sɪz]	5	○			
	[bʊzɪz]	4	○			
	[bʌs]	4	○		○	
	[bʊsɪz]	3	○			
	[bʊsɪz]	3	○			
	[bʊzɪz]	3	○			
	others	9				
3 cars	[kɑ:rz]	44	○			
	[kæ:rz]	10	○			
	others	1				
4 cleaner	[kliənər]	7	○		○	○ ○
	[kliər]	3	○		○	
	others	4				
5 cone	[kɔ:n]	38	○			○
	others	6				
6 dark	[dɑ:rk]	31	○			
	[dæ:rk]	4	○			
7 destroy	[déstɔɪ]	11		○		
	[déstɪ]	3	○	○		
8 destructive	[dɪstrɪktɪv]	4	○			
	[dɪstɹáktɪv]	4	○			
	[déstɹəktɪv]	3		○		
	[dɛstréktɪv]	3	○			
	others	8				
9 fast	[fá:rst]	15	○			○
10 favorite	[fá:vraɪt]	6	○			
	[féivəreit]	6	○			

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Table 1-2 Reading Miscues

Words	Readings**	① Frequency	② Miscues			③ Comprehension Loss
			Phonetic	Accental	Graphic	
	[féivərait]	4	○			
	others	3				
11 ground	[gláund]	14	○			
	[grænd]	9	○			○
	[græund]	4	○			
12 hundred	[hændrid]	13	○			
	others	1				
13 it is	[its]	11	○		○	
14 May	[méni]	14			○	○
	others	2				
15 member	[námber]	12			○	○
16 month	[mænth]	13	○			
	[máuth]	8			○	○
	others	1				
17 nightmare	[náitmar:]	6	○			
	[náitmaíər]	4	○			
	[náitmar:]	3	○			
	others	7				
18 noise	[nóuz]	12	○		○	○
	[nóiziz]	4	○		○	
	others	2				
19 railroad	[léil-lòud]	15	○			
	[riəl-ròud]	3	○			○
	others	1				
20 roaring	[róuriŋ]	34	○			
	[róuliŋ]	20	○			○
	[róuiŋ]	7	○			○
	others	14				
21 sweeps	[swi:p]	9	○		○	
	[sí:ps]	5	○		○	○

Table 1-3 Reading Miscues

Words	Readings**	① Frequency	② Miscues			③ Comprehension Loss
			Phonetic	Accental	Graphic	
	[wɪps]	3	○		○	○
	[slɪps]	3	○		○	○
	others	3				
22 target	[tɔ:rgɪt]	21	○			
	others	2				
23 things	[θɪŋ]	10	○		○	
24 through	[ðəʊ]	21			○	○
	{θrú}	6	○			○
	others	3				
25 tops	[tɔp]	10	○		○	
26 touches	[tʌtʃ]	10	○		○	
	[tʃ:tʃɪz]	3	○			
	others	9				
27 travel	{trábl}	9	○		○	○
	others	1				
28 unbelievable	[ʌnbɪlɪ:əbl]	13	○			
	[ʌnbɪlɪáɪəbl]	3	○			
	[ʌnbɪlɪbl]	3	○			
	others	12				
29 vacuum	[vækjʊ:m]	61		○		
	[vʌkəm]	4	○			
	[vɛikəm]	3	○			
	[vɛikʊ:m]	3	○			
	others	2				
30 winds	[wɪnd]	13	○		○	
	[wáɪd]	6			○	○
	[wáɪndz]	4	○		○	○
	others	5				

8%) accurately drew pictures of a tornado, which indicates those informants eventually comprehended the content of the text.

Discussion

From the miscues the informants made while reading, some characteristic features were found. Many of the miscues shown on pp. 216~218 as examples of high frequency were of pronunciation. Other miscues such as omission, insertion or reversal were corrected by the readers themselves. It is evident from this that although the informants were trying hard with tunnel vision to be as accurate as possible, they were unable to pronounce many words correctly.

The informants had trouble with some vowels such as {a:r} in *cars*, *dark*, or *target* and {ou} in *cone* and {ɔ:r} in *roaring*. The very common word *buses* became difficult for the informants to pronounce correctly because of its plurality. From a different point of view, however, a reading of [bjú:siz] seems to be rather in the norm of the phonetic rule. This kind of miscue can happen when the reader does not associate the meaning with the printed word. Likewise, such miscues as [méni] for *May* and [námber] for *member* are graphic and could be gotten rid of, if the readers kept the meaning of the sentences in mind. In other words, graphic miscues also show that tunnel vision keeps the readers from understanding the meaning of the text.

From the sound the informants made for *tornado*, it is understandable that the word *tornado* was not familiar to the informants. Only 18 informants pronounced the word correctly. The rest of them tried to sound out the word according to their own sound system. If the sound was consistent, it shows that "the readers are making sophisticated use of available cuing system" (*RMI Manual*, p.

101).

So, in the sense of comprehension this kind of miscue (phonetic) is preferable to completely omitting the unknown word or to using a graphic miscue. The replacement of words with synonyms, however, is acceptable because it happens when the reader puts some meaning into the printed word. A few noteworthy miscues like *typhoon* for *tornado* or *as fast as* for *as soon as* were found in this research.

The relation between the difficult readings of the word *tornado* as well as other results is shown below.

Table 2 Reproduction of *tornado* and Other Results

Pronunciation of <i>tornado</i>	picture	T/F	Information Recall
Correct 18	17	12.4	7.0
Incorrect but Consistent 70	53	11.1	5.5
Inconsistent 100	65	10.4	4.7
Total 188	135		

Ninety-four percent of the informants who could pronounce the word *tornado* drew the picture correctly and had the highest points in the true-false quiz (12.4) and the recalled information section (7.0). By contrast, 65% of the informants whose reading of *tornado* was inconsistent could draw the picture correctly, but their points both in the true-false quiz and the recall section were the lowest (10.4 and 4.7) among the three groups shown in Table 2 above. From this, it can be concluded that reading and comprehension are deeply related. More precisely, if one could read well, he could have a better understanding of the text.

Conclusion

Though only 18 informants (9.6%) could read the word *tornado*

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which covers the main idea of the story, more informants eventually learned what a tornado looked like. The comprehension of the story was higher for those who could correctly or consistently pronounce the word *tornado*. This could be expanded to the degree that if one can pronounce well, he can understand the content well, too.

As far as the present research is concerned, the informants paid too much attention to the pronunciation of words instead of to phrases or sentences, so that they failed to comprehend the meaning of the material they were reading. To read without mistakes or with perfect correction does not always mean that the readers have good comprehension in reading unless they associate the meaning with its printed form. If readers are too careful about correcting their miscues, they will at the same time be reluctant to use non-visual information because of the tunnel vision they have. In order to overcome the causes of tunnel vision, the readers need to stop the eye-mouth reading habit. They need, instead, to shift the focus of their concentration from mere pronunciation in oral readings to actual meaning for comprehension of the printed material.

Notes

- * This paper is a revised version of the research orally presented at the 24th Annual Convention of the Language Laboratory Association (LLA) held at Tohoku Gakuin University in Sendai, Japan, on July 26 and 27, 1984.
- ** The sounds the informants made were reproduced here in an effort to be as close to the original sound as possible. These 30 words are those which were pronounced incorrectly by more than ten informants.

Bibliography

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APPENDIX

The Terrible Tornado

Although a tornado is the smallest member of the storm family, it is the most destructive. It is often less than a thousand feet wide; it travels only about thirteen miles. For the people and things in its way, however, it is a nightmare.

A tornado looks like a dark cloud that is hanging from the sky. If you look at *the picture of a tornado, you'll find that** it looks like an ice cream cone. The winds in this storm can travel as fast as five hundred miles per hour. If it stays above the ground, it doesn't destroy many things. On the other hand, if it touches the ground, trouble begins.

It acts like a vacuum cleaner: it picks up anything and everything in its way. For example, it takes railroad cars and buses off the ground; it pulls the tops off houses and trees out of the ground; it sweeps people high into the air.

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This “unwelcome guest” hits most often in spring or early summer in the United States. More take place in May than in any other month. Although it hits every state, Kansas is its favorite target. Not many people have seen the inside, or the “eye” of a tornado, and then have lived to tell about it, but those who have lived through it say that the noise is unbelievable. One man said it was like the noise of ten thousand trains roaring at the same time. It is an experience one never forgets.

—*The New Intensive Course in English, Work Book, Intermediate Part-2*, p. 56.

- * The italicized part was changed for the benefit of the present research. The original line is *this picture of a tornado*.,