

Reading Aloud in the EFL University Classroom: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Introduction: This article reviews research related to Reading Aloud (RA) in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university classroom in the quest to justify its use with particular interest in the benefits it may have on improving students' EFL proficiency, especially with regards to pronunciation. Answers were sought to two research questions: 1) Is time spent on RA in the university EFL classroom justified? and 2) Is RA in the university EFL classroom effective for pronunciation improvement purposes? **Method:** Papers were obtained from electronic journals and databases using the major search terms: reading aloud, pronunciation, benefits, drawbacks, EFL, and university classroom, from 2000 to 2024. Criteria for reviewing the papers were research which mentioned the effects of RA on university students in classrooms and was pronunciation related. **Results:** Findings indicate that RA is relevant to enhancing EFL skills in the university setting, however, student confidence when RA can be both gained and lost depending on the environment. Teachers' attitudes and classroom environments contributed both negatively or positively to the learning outcomes of RA for pronunciation purposes. Practice is probably a contributing factor for RA to produce positive effects, and RA resembles a stepping stone to reach improved proficiency comprehensively across the four skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking), from any age or level. This led the author to conclude that careful implementation of RA with sensitive classroom interactions is vital for its success in general EFL learning and for improving pronunciation.

Keywords: reading aloud, pronunciation, university, EFL, classroom

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Background

Is RA in the EFL university classroom justified? RA seems not to have been

recommended in general English language teaching (ELT) methodology literature since the late 1970s, due to a reaction against perceived traditional teaching methods. Unprepared reading around the class was 'commonly perceived as an unimaginative and easy time filler for the teacher,' RA was considered 'dull and boring, anxiety-provoking, and not much benefit for listeners' (Gibson 2008, p. 29). It was thought that slightly unnatural texts that are often used for RA did not necessarily help pronunciation in spontaneous speech because these texts usually have the redundancy, fragmentation, and incompleteness which feature in everyday speech edited. However, some specialist area authors have found that RA, when used sensitively and with clear aims, can be a useful learning tool for purposes such as 'aiding to reinforce graphemic-phonemic correspondences, helping the acquisition of prosodic¹ features of English, and developing writing skills by using it as oral proofreading' (Gibson 2008, p. 29). Reasons for and against bringing RA to the classroom have been presented. It was suggested that the benefits of RA could outweigh the drawbacks, and that any disadvantages could be reduced through appropriate implementation of RA. Gibson's small-scale study of teachers and learners of English suggested that RA in language learning should be reevaluated (Gibson, 2008).

History of RA

Historically, RA has been important particularly in the association between print and performance, and in the communication of the words orally. As early as 1300 BC, written words were recited orally (Fischer, 2003). A thorough introduction to the importance of RA in history is given by Brewster (2020), stating that elocution manuals give material form to the intersections between literacy and orality, and offer alternative ways of thinking about the relationships between print and performance, with elocution books in particular functioning as sites of aurality (a combination of the written and the oral) by fostering practices of RA where the reader uses their voice to produce a version of the text from print.

A Spatiotemporal Map of RA

In terms of the physiological effects of RA, research has shown that first language RA

¹ Prosodic means relating to the rhythm and intonation (the way a speaker's voice rises and falls) of language (Cambridge Online Dictionary, 2024).

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relies on 'multiple complex cerebral computations: mapping from a written letter string on a page to a sequence of spoken sound representations' (Woolnough et al., 2022, p. 5438). The study utilised direct intracranial recordings in a fairly large cohort of 46 participants, while they read aloud known and novel words, to track, across space and time, the progression of neural representations of behaviorally relevant factors that govern reading speed. It was found that, '...concordant with cognitive models of reading, that known and novel words are differentially processed through a lexical route, sensitive to frequency of occurrence of known words in natural language, and a sublexical route, performing letter-by-letter construction of novel words' (Woolnough et al., 2022, p. 5438). The study's results concluded that, '... two routes were activated, once a known word is detected, at a latency which depends on frequency, the sublexical route appears to be interrupted, and the word is named through the lexical route. However, if the word is novel, the lexical route continues to attempt to identify the pseudoword while the sublexical route, involving the inferior parietal sulcus (IPS), constructs the phonology of these words, with activity driven by pseudoword orthographic complexity. Last, the early, lexically sensitive activation of ventral premotor cortex (pCS) implies a role in early grapheme-to-phoneme conversion, as part of the sublexical route, distinct from the IPS' (Woolnough et al., 2022, p. 5448). When it comes to second language (L2) RA, the process of transferring from written words to oral presentation is likely to be similar. This finding suggests that the larger a student's vocabulary and the more familiarity they have with the phonemics of visualized words the faster their reading speed will be. RA may not improve fluency or the production of correct pronunciation but, the larger the vocabulary and familiarity with the correct grapheme-to-phoneme conversion resulted in improved reading speed. This may be similar for L2. Therefore, exposure to RA with effective teaching of correct pronunciation, knowledge of irregular spelling, and practice of the words, may produce quicker individual word recognition.

Method

Papers were obtained from a university online library collection search discovery service made up of various information resources such as electronic journals and databases including EBSCOhost, Gale Academic OneFile (AONE), and JSTOR (Journal Storage), using the search terms of reading aloud, pronunciation, benefits, drawbacks, history, EFL,

university, and classroom from the period 2000 to 2024. The criteria for reviewing the papers were research which mentioned RA with regards to its effects on university students in classroom settings, and was pronunciation related. Twenty journal articles fitted the criteria and were subsequently analysed for their type of study, quantitative or qualitative, research problem, research questions, data collection procedure, findings, strengths, and weaknesses.

RA or Silent Reading

How does RA compare to reading silently (RS)? In order to investigate the production effect which proposes that RA leads to better memory than does reading silently, Roberts, Hu, Curtis et al. (2024) hypothesized that the benefit of production may extend beyond memory and beyond individual words. In a series of four experiments, passages from reading comprehension tests served as the study material. Participants read some passages aloud and others silently. By separating the multiple-choice questions into memory-focused versus comprehension-focused questions, a consistent production benefit only for the memory-focused questions for RA was observed. It was found that information read aloud was better remembered at study and at test than information read silently. However, it was found that the production (RA condition) only improved accuracy for memory questions and not for comprehension questions.

In support of RA rather than RS, Syafitri, Budiarti, and Derin (2019) reviewed the work of Ninsuwan (2015) which confirmed that even primary English level students gained a better understanding of what they read if they read it aloud compared to reading it silently. Syafitri proposed numerous benefits of RA, not limited to decreasing students' intimidation on difficult and unfamiliar words, but also provoking them to understand and analyse what they read, and training not just their reading skill but also their listening and speaking skills. Although problems are noted with the written structure of the article and perspective taken of RA in it, Ninsuwan's work is given glowing praise from Syafitri et al. (2019). The study emphasizes points made by Ninsuwan, saying RA is a simple method but strengthens the cause for realizing that vocalizing the text may help EFL learners experience the feelings, mood, and emotions of the characters in it, thus facilitating their overall comprehension of the text, and enhance their appreciation of narratives, Syafitri (2019). This seems to be a valid point which argues against the commonly held belief that

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RA does not positively impact comprehension. Syafitri also stresses the importance of the role of the teacher in the process of producing favourable outcomes. 'Overall, Ninsuwan's article has done an excellent job proving that RA increases not just students' reading skill, but also listening and speaking in an engaging way,' Syafitri (2019, p. 41). Although it is not mentioned here, physically producing the words orally may also have benefits in preparing for L2 communication.

RA Questioned

By questionnaire, Huang (2010) found that a third of students thought that teachers and students RA was worthy, but most students had a negative attitude to RA in class. Students easily became embarrassed, would read worse when being corrected by the teacher, thought RA was aimless as they each had a copy of the original material, and found reading unprepared literature too difficult. Research questions regarding the necessity and function of RA, and what needs to be paid attention to when RA are answered. The study concludes that students should be able to understand the reading material and that 'reading aloud is the primary pivot connecting reading and oral English training. Reading aloud fluently not only helps to foster reading ability and basic skill, but helps to improve oral expression,' (p.150). Practicing RA can improve the students' integrated EFL ability (Huang, 2010). This sounds quite simple, and how to read aloud 'fluently' is not easy, but the basic principle maybe true. Huang (2010) recognizes that there is a positive answer to most, if not all, of the negative issues raised about RA, and that at the core, lengthy practice and hard work should pay off. Huang (2010) echoes the drawbacks associated with reading aloud stated in Gibson (2008). In the quest to answer doubts surrounding RA Huang (2010) justifies the practice as being a comprehensive foreign language teaching (FLT) method, and once again has similarities with Gibson (2008). For example, students and teachers in England from different countries were using RA in various ways (Gibson, 2008). In Huang's case, regarding RA, it is believed to be necessary based on principles of language education around the world, many of them dating back as early as the 19th century (Guofang, 2000). It is proposed that RA has five functions in FLT: to practice pronunciation, improve oral English, get deeper understanding, strengthen knowledge, and improve the classroom atmosphere (Huang, 2010). Drawing from experience, Huang (2010) emphasises the importance of using authentic and carefully

selected reading materials, providing guidance to students, and being well-prepared. The need for students to have courage to experiment with their RA further stresses the importance of a comfortable classroom environment.

Suitability of RA for University Students

Regarding age appropriateness, Novianti and Abdurahman (2019) addressed the problem of whether empirical evidence shows that RA could be an effective strategy for EFL students' reading comprehension, however, its practice in EFL literature classrooms has received scarce attention. They adopted Read aloud 2.0² in a tertiary EFL literature classroom in order to help students make meaning of the literary texts. Data was collected through blended³ discussion carried out through 'Edmodo'⁴ as a learning platform for virtual engagement between teacher and students and between students and their peers. The implication of this practice is that both teachers and students maximize their engagement with literary texts both face-to-face and virtually. It was concluded from their study that Read aloud 2.0 could help students better understand the literary text. 'The read aloud sessions were designed to spark learners' joy of reading and promote students' comprehension of the text,' (Novianti & Abdurahman, 2019, p. 708). The results suggest that read alouds can be practiced in an EFL undergraduate classroom and are not limited to children and younger learners. The practice showed that read alouds could be integrated with Web 2.0 to better engage technologically-savvy students' interaction with texts (Novianti & Abdurahman, 2019).

Hasegawa (2016) was also interested in the appropriateness of RA in the university classroom. He was interested in the relationship between higher/lower levels of phonological awareness and reading speed. His research questions asked about the difference of speed between higher and lower silent reading, the difference of speed between higher and lower oral reading, and speed changes of both phonological awareness groups. A phonemic discrimination task was administered to divide 34 Japanese

² Read aloud 2.0 is software that reads aloud text from Web Pages or any text you input. The current version is Read aloud 3.0 (Software.informer, 2024).

³ Blended learning is an instructional approach that combines traditional face-to-face learning and online learning (Shang, 2021).

⁴ Edmodo first launched in 2008 as one of the early teacher-led viral adoption products. It permanently shut down in September, 2022 (Ng, 2022).

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undergraduates into higher and lower phonological awareness groups. Over five successive weeks students practiced reading English texts aloud for approximately 30 minutes of each 90-minute lesson. Silent and oral reading speeds were recorded in each lesson. The results of the study showed the higher group to be faster on the first day but the gap reduced after five weeks. The reading rate of both conditions increased in both silent and oral conditions. Most importantly, Hasegawa concluded that RA is effective at the university level of education.

RA Effective for Pronunciation

Abimanto (2020), carried out quasi-experimental research to clarify whether or not RA had a positive effect on pronunciation. The treatment was administered ten times and was so called RA periodically. Abimanto tested 30 non-English major participants and concluded that the periodically administrated RA treatment was effective.

Nurani and Rosyada (2015), conducted research using short texts for RA to assess the improvement of adult English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, specifically 20 information technology (IT) engineers. The results showed an improvement in mean scores on the second cycle of tests, and this was registered as good. The focus of the research was on the improvement of pronunciation skills through RA assessments.

The question of whether implementation of RA develops students' speaking skill was proposed by Supraba, Wahyono, and Sy (2020). From a population of 77 students from two first semester classes of the English Language Education Study Program, at the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Cokroaminoto Palopo University, Indonesia, ten students were selected as the sample for this research through the purposive sampling⁵ technique. Results of the study boasted a significant relationship between the implementation of RA and the development of students' speaking skills. Supraba et al. (2020) concluded that RA can be an effective way in teaching oral language since there was a significant improvement in the students' speaking skill correlating with the implementation of RA as a teaching method in class.

⁵ Purposive sampling is a technique used in qualitative research to select a specific group of individuals or units for analysis. Participants are chosen "on purpose," not randomly. It is also known as judgmental sampling or selective sampling (Dovetail Editorial Team, 2023).

Effects of RA with a Partner or in a Small Group

Tost (2013), investigated the feasibility and impact of partners reading out loud to each other to improve English pronunciation with a focus on fluency and expression. The participants were three adult students of level 1 of English in the Official School of Languages located in a town near Barcelona. Surprisingly, students gained an increased comprehension of the text, not not only improved fluency. The prework, group work, and mutual help contributed to improved RA performance. Speaking skills were thought to benefit from the task. It was thought that collaboration worked positively to achieve the desired effect. Tost (2013) suggests RA in groups for lower-level readers may improve pronunciation, speaking, and even comprehension as reported by the students in the study.

RA in the (CALL) Classroom

The proficiency of learning English by RA more actively by inclusion of a Computer Assisted Learning Lab (CALL) was assessed by Li (2020). It was found that being made aware of the error rate, and the phrases most frequently misread (as stored in the system memory) was effective for students. Supervision is also easy to tailor to individual needs. The experimental groups, who were asked to spend two hours a week in the language lab, had the Speech Recognition System (SRS) incorporated into their pronunciation course, and a trained teacher assisted with the process. Li (2020) calls for reflection on how much technology can be implemented to aid EFL learners after participants in the study praised the SRS system. The task consisted of engaging and actively reflecting on RA. The SRS improved reading aloud proficiency. The extra attention given to students' pronunciation in general could have been a contributing factor. The study shows that RA needs careful attention to be effective.

RA is Not Effective

Fabra (2022) reported that a RA condition did not fare as well as a delayed repetition condition. In the reading aloud task, the target words were presented as visual prompts in a carrier phrase. In the delayed repetition, words were presented aurally and participants repeated them after a two-second delay followed by an audio prompt. The words were

⁶ Phon is a software program that greatly facilitates a number of tasks related to the analysis of phonological data. Retrieved from https://www.phon.ca/phon-manual/getting_started.html

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phonemically transcribed using Phon⁶. This brings to light the fact that spelling of words and their visual recognition may hamper the pronunciation and consequently speed of RA. The RA condition had more mistakes namely mis pronunciations. This is an important link in highlighting that for only pronunciation RA can be seen as a hinderance when compared to aural cues and perhaps imitation, but for comprehensive learning and literature it is beneficial.

Furthermore, a 2018-study, consisting of nine participants chosen from a purposive sample of students which had previously taken pronunciation class in their first semester, found that diphthong⁷ sounds that were the focus of pronunciation practice during RA were not improved between the first and second testing conditions. The most striking finding revealed was that students were hesitant to the point of 'stammering' (Rasaki, Ikhsan & Pratiwi, 2018, p. 139).

The Importance of Perceiving

In tests designed for activities intended for the explicit teaching of pronunciation, Adrian (2014), tested the efficacy of RA. The tests had a 'noticing' and 'awareness' part, and a part to assess the learners' beliefs regarding the prescribed learning tool. The participants consisted of 20 first-year university students, majoring in English. Ten written texts were selected by the instructors in order to practice reading aloud for ten weeks. Students were also administered a questionnaire. The findings were positive regarding improved pronunciation. Also, it is worthy to note the attitudes of the participating students. They indicated that they thought RA was an effective, 'good', way to improve their pronunciation.

In a study to find out if RA was beneficial for Korean college-level English learners, Yu (2015), asked three questions, the first one about vocabulary knowledge, grammar knowledge and reading comprehension, the second on whether the effect of student reading aloud practices on L2 language learning differ according to the students' reading performance levels, and most interestingly, a third one regarding how students perceive student reading aloud practices. The study was quite large, 91 college students participated in the study, and they were divided into two groups based on the reading

⁷ A diphthong is any complex vowel sound comprising a glide from one vowel sound to another within a single syllable, with movement of the tongue between the two sounds. (Oxford Reference).

comprehension test scores. Tests were taken in vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension during weeks one and 14 in order to identify any effect of reading aloud on L2 language learning. Students were also asked to complete questionnaires. Yu (2015) found that student RA was helpful for the students to enrich their vocabulary knowledge, improve pronunciation and word stress, and help with identifying sentence structures and understanding the texts. However, the statistical differences differed from the students' reading performance levels. Higher-level students had significantly improved in vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension, but for lower-level students, significant differences were only found in the area of vocabulary. Interestingly, students perceived that reading aloud practices were more advantageous in vocabulary learning and pronunciation than with grammar and reading comprehension. Yu (2015) summarizes that RA is an easy method that could be utilized by lower-level proficiency students to recognize words, pronounce them, and then feel a sense of achievement when they finish reading a short text aloud. Also, that RA should be considered a worthy activity that could trigger students' interests and build self-confidence in studying English. The point that RA activities have not been considered a major activity for adult students is made.

Integrating RA with other Skills

RA and Shadowing for Listening Skills

Combining shadowing⁸ with RA, Niimoto (2022) asked two questions: Will shadowing with reading-aloud training enhance Japanese university students' segmental⁹ aspects, suprasegmental¹⁰ aspects or overall comprehensibility? and Will shadowing with reading-aloud training enhance Japanese university students' bottom-up skills for listening? A total of 25 university students (17 males and eight females, aged 18-19), majoring in informatics, participated in the study. They took a required English class, which aimed to improve their Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) scores, once a week. Their

⁸ Shadowing involves repeating an audio as you are listening to it (Lewis, 2020).

⁹ In phonetics used to refer to individual units of speech, such as phonemes or phones (Cambridge Online Dictionary, 2024).

¹⁰ In phonetics relating to a speech feature, such as stress or pitch, that affects more than one speech sound: Suprasegmental features can be used to signal grammatical differences (Cambridge Online Dictionary, 2024).

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English proficiency-test scores ranged from 230 to 270 on the TOEIC test (beginner level). Participants were given 90 minutes of shadowing with RA training once a week for two and a half months (ten times in total). In addition to shadowing and RA training, texted-shadowing was introduced. In texted-shadowing, learners shadow incoming sound with a written script. As scripts are involved in this activity, the learners' attention resource was split between sound information, meanings and letters (Hamada, 2019, cited in Niimoto, 2022). The participants' training was focused on part three (conversations) in the TOEIC test. The study revealed that shadowing with read-aloud training improved participants' segmental, suprasegmental, and comprehensibility productions (t-values = -5.19, -3.81, & -2.80 respectively). Concerning segmental speech productions, it was assumed that RA training, an off-line task, could facilitate participants in developing their segmental productions. Shadowing with RA successfully exerted its effect on their listening skills. Niimoto (2022) states that it was difficult to clearly ascertain whether shadowing or RA training was attributable to improvement of the three production features, since the teaching techniques were combined together. The combined treatment produced measurable results that were deemed to be positive in effect.

Scaffolding with RA to Foster Active Participants

Bruner's Scaffolding¹¹ theory was introduced to education by the cognitive psychologist in the 1950s, the term is clearly explained by Vasquez (2024) in relation to English Language Learners (ELL), and is promoted by Chong (2022) following careful analysis of her insignificant RA research results. It was suggested that oral reading was supported and fostered by peer interactions. Chong especially found that willingness to practice English was a major, yet unsurprising, contributor to participants' success. Chong stressed that, 'The methodology can also be recommended for use in EFL classes to make students become active participants and be aware of their English competence,' after concluding the study (2022, p. 47).

¹¹ Scaffolding consists of helpful interactions between the teacher and the student that enable the student to do something beyond what he could do independently. It is a temporary framework that is put up for support and access to meaning and is taken away when the student feels successful, and is able to master tasks, concepts, and language acquisition (Vasquez, 2024).

RA for Extensive Reading

Jacobs (2016) points out the benefits of dialogic RA to promote extensive reading. Dialogic reading is defined by Iturbe (2019), in her blog, as the student-centered process of having an interactive dialogue with students around the fiction or non-fiction text they are reading. This dialogue involves asking questions to help students of all ages and levels explore the text at a deeper level, including defining new words, analysing the components of a story and being able to talk about the text, and adds that it is not passive listening, teacher centered, or mechanical. Looking for solutions on how teachers can motivate students to read extensively in a second language, the question of why teachers might want to RA to their students is put forward by Jacobs, and some of the proposed benefits for teachers to RA to their students are discussed. A particularly interesting reason that was uncovered is because it 'encourages a love for reading silently and aloud' Jacobs (2016, p. 10). 'Perhaps the key goal of reading aloud lies in motivating students to read on their own, and most of that reading will be silent reading, although now and then students might read aloud. The more students read, the more they have to discuss with others' Jacobs (2016, p. 10). The benefits of being read to apply to all students, regardless of age and reading level. Therefore, all ages are included, and all cognitive levels. RA is a journey, not a race (Trelease, 2013, cited in Jacobs, 2016, p.11).

Findings

Findings indicate that: RA is relevant to enhancing EFL skills in the university setting, however, student confidence in the execution of the task can be both gained and lost depending on the environment. Practice is probably a mighty contributing factor for RA to produce positive effects, and RA is similar to a stepping stone to reach improved proficiency comprehensively in the four skills from any age or level. A general theme was noticed that the teacher's attitude and classroom environment contribute both negatively or positively to the learning outcomes of RA for pronunciation purposes. This led the author to conclude that as RA is an active skill, the way it is implemented and the subsequent RA classroom interaction is vital for its success in EFL learning.

Discussion

Reading aloud seems to have enough evidence to be justified as a practice which takes

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up classroom time in a university setting. From recent research articles on RA in the university EFL classroom it was found that RA is an activity that is shown to have stronger effects on memory and remembering words compared to RS, which seems to be better for comprehension and critical thinking (Roberts et al., 2024). It is supposed that RA can possibly help the reader to feel the emotions of the writing (Syafitri et al., 2019). RA to improve pronunciation seems to hang on many variables such as motivation and willingness of the student to be active. Length of practice, suitable materials, and constructive corrections are also factors to be accounted for.

RA is used as a tool for monitoring students' pronunciation proficiency in the classroom. Instructors can give feedback and constructive criticism. Lessons can be devised to address difficulties. It is a vehicle used to gauge and improve pronounced text. Perhaps peer pressure and the adrenaline of performing in front of the class can be effective when the RA task is at an appropriate level (Chong, 2022). Concentration and focus may prove effective. The role of the teacher and peers also seems to have a large effect. Instructors need to air caution in order not to embarrass or demotivate students (Rasaki, 2018). Students tended to think that RA was effective to improve pronunciation skills (Adrian, 2018) and could feel more confident when they perceived that RA had improved their pronunciation skills (Yu, 2015). RA can be effective in improving pronunciation proficiency (Tost, 2013). RA in the classroom to facilitate pronunciation proficiency is integrated with lessons, lectures, activities, vocabulary learning, and not a stand-alone activity (Jacobs, 2016).

However, only RA without a model or intervention could possibly mean repeated practice of mispronounced words (Fabra, 2022). Voice and jaw and tongue practice for speaking are to be gained. Listening to and looking at an instructor would be better, or listening to an audio book or being read to while following the text is another way to understand the pronunciation of the text. Shadowing (Niimoto, 2022) or imitating an audio with a transcript under an instructor's guidance for homework or utilising a CALL (Li, 2020) with headphones would probably also be more effective.

In general, there seems to be a beneficial learning outcome from participating in the practice of RA. Furthermore, a sensitive coach and a dedicated apprentice with unlimited potential will probably reap the best results. More studies of EFL students in the university classroom are called for to modernise this language teaching and learning

technique. As RA obviously has comprehensive benefits, making it relevant to today's classroom, and subsequently changing the way it is perceived seems necessary. In the future, it would be interesting to add a study to measure the effect of jaw and tongue movement on improved pronunciation after a period of RA.

Conclusion

RA in the EFL university classroom, regardless of proficiency, is effective in developing students' English language skills, including pronunciation, and perhaps this practice will open the door and lead the way to better communication exchanges.

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