

Dynamics of Reading Aloud in First (L1) and Second Languages (L2): A Comparative Analysis of Neurocognitive, Affective, and Production Effects¹

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Abstract

Reading aloud can be understood as a dialogic and multimodal practice that engages phonological, prosodic, and auditory-feedback systems. Neuroimaging studies suggest activation of a predominantly left-hemisphere reading network, with additional executive-control demands often observed in second language (L2) contexts. In first language (L1) settings, read-aloud practices have been associated with vocabulary development, prosodic sensitivity, and socio-emotional engagement; in L2 settings, their effects appear to depend more strongly on learner profiles, task design, and instructional scaffolding. The production effect may support recall in L1 and, when embedded in repeated and meaning-oriented practice, may also contribute to fluency and comprehension in L2. This article offers a narrative review of the literature on reading aloud in L1 and L2 contexts, integrating neurocognitive, affective, and mnemonic dimensions to outline pedagogical implications for inclusive language education.

Keywords: reading aloud, first language (L1), second language (L2), neurocognition, lifelong learning.

¹ *Methodological Note: this article is conceived as a narrative review of interdisciplinary literature on reading aloud in L1 and L2 contexts. It does not report original empirical data; rather, it comparatively discusses selected contributions from neuroscience, language education, and inclusive pedagogy to identify convergences, divergences, and pedagogical implications, Authors' Note. In addition, hereafter, unless otherwise indicated, all footnotes are by the Authors, Editor's Note.*

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Abstract

La lettura ad alta voce può essere intesa come una pratica dialogica e multimodale che coinvolge sistemi fonologici, prosodici e di *feedback* uditivo. Gli studi di *neuroimaging* suggeriscono l'attivazione di una rete di lettura prevalentemente lateralizzata nell'emisfero sinistro, con ulteriori richieste di controllo esecutivo osservate soprattutto nei contesti di lingua seconda (L2). In quelli di lingua prima (L1), le pratiche di lettura ad alta voce sono state associate allo sviluppo del vocabolario, della sensibilità prosodica e del coinvolgimento socio-emotivo; nei contesti di L2, i loro effetti sembrano dipendere maggiormente dai profili degli apprendenti, dalla progettazione del compito e dalle strategie di *scaffolding* didattico. Il *production effect* può sostenere i processi di memorizzazione in L1 e, quando inserito in pratiche ripetute e orientate alla costruzione di significato, può contribuire anche alla fluidità e alla comprensione in L2. Il presente articolo propone una revisione narrativa della letteratura sulla lettura ad alta voce nei contesti L1 e L2, integrando dimensioni *neurocognitive*, affettive e mnestiche, al fine di delinearne le implicazioni pedagogiche per un'educazione linguistica inclusiva.

Parole chiave: lettura ad alta voce, lingua prima (L1), lingua seconda (L2), neurocognizione, apprendimento permanente.

1. *The multimodal and dialogic nature of reading aloud*

Reading is among the most complex and multidimensional processes in language development, encompassing not only the recognition and decoding of written symbols but also the seamless integration of linguistic, cognitive, and cultural knowledge systems. Reading, whether enacted within formal educational settings or beyond, in a circle with a printed book or by tapping “play” on a tablet, shapes how we perceive a language’s subtleties and hone our communicative skills (Dunst, Simkus, Hamby, 2012). In particular, shared reading practices further strengthen language acquisition and foster comprehensive literacy development (Farrant, Zubrick, 2013). In both first language (L1) and second language (L2) contexts, reading transcends a silent engagement with the text to become a dialogic encounter shaped by phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic factors (Perfetti, Stafura, 2014). This integrative challenge is especially pronounced in L2 reading, where additional layers of linguistic unfamiliarity and cognitive load can undermine both efficiency and depth of comprehension.

This article offers a narrative, conceptual review of the literature on reading aloud in L1 and L2 contexts. Rather than conducting a systematic meta-analysis, we synthesize findings from neurocognitive, affective, and educational research to identify converging themes, highlight gaps, and propose directions for future investigation and classroom practice. Our approach is integrative and interdisciplinary, drawing on neuroim-

aging studies, educational interventions, and theoretical frameworks to build a holistic understanding of reading aloud across the lifespan.

Against this backdrop, the practice of reading aloud, frequently sidelined in favor of silent reading within educational and research settings, warrants renewed scholarly attention. Reading aloud involves the intentional oral rendering of written text, during which the reader decodes graphemes, reconstructs phonological forms, and articulates them for an external audience. By transforming reading from an introspective, silent process into an open, shared dialogue, this practice engages phonological, prosodic, and auditoryfeedback systems, thereby reinforcing orthography-phonology mappings and potentially supporting overall comprehension (Rasinski, 2012; Wolf, 2018).

From a lifelong learning standpoint, reading should be fostered, practiced, and promoted from the earliest years of life, maturing into a healthy habit that accompanies the individual throughout their entire educational journey. The linguistic dimension of reading is paramount: it not only facilitates the acquisition of language skills and the comprehension of texts (Korat, Shamir, Heibal, 2013; Waugh, 2018) but may also contribute to emotional awareness by enhancing one's ability to perceive both personal and others' emotions (Batini, Bartolucci, 2016). Equally significant is the creativity that reading can ignite, guiding the reader to encounter new worlds and ideas and thereby nourishing the imagination (Hutton, *et al.*, 2015). Having highlighted the dialogic and developmental significance of reading aloud, we now explore its neural pathways, from the swift visual parsing of graphemes through to their phonological conversion and lexical integration.

2. Neurofunctional circuits underpinning reading aloud

Reading entails a cascade of processes ranging from the recognition of individual graphemes to their integration into words, phrases, and extended discourse. A growing body of neuroimaging research has illuminated a specialized cortical region, the Visual Word Form Area (VWFA), located in the left occipitotemporal cortex, which is dedicated to the rapid extraction and holistic analysis of letter strings (Mancinelli, 2018). Written text is initially processed visually, primarily via the fovea, a retinal locus that affords high-resolution discrimination of fine graphic detail; this stage of processing unfolds within approximately 150 milliseconds, after which visual information is transmitted to higher-order

areas (Tarkiainen, Cornelissen, Salmelin, 2002). It is at this juncture that the VWFA intervenes, recognizing letter combinations as coherent units while parsing their constituent elements. Given that reading necessitates interplay between visual and linguistic networks, the signal subsequently proceeds to the *planum temporale*, which decodes the association between grapheme and phoneme. Within this framework, two principal neural pathways are delineated: the phonological route, responsible for converting graphemes into language sounds (phonemes), and the lexical route, which maps those phonological representations onto stored semantic knowledge (Coltheart, *et al.*, 2001).

Contemporary neuroimaging meta-analyses have shown that, within L1 contexts, reading aloud is associated with activation across a largely left-hemisphere network, encompassing the inferior frontal gyrus, dorsal temporo-parietal cortex, and the VWFA, while also recruiting cerebellar and frontoparietal control circuits involved in error monitoring and attentional regulation (Türker, Fumagalli, Hartwigsen, 2025). Vocalization also appears to increase activity in primary motor regions and superior temporal auditory-feedback sites, underscoring the self-monitoring component intrinsic to speech production. When extended to L2 reading aloud, these neural demands may become more pronounced: learners must negotiate less familiar grapheme-phoneme mappings and manage the concurrent activation of L1 and L2 phonological systems, thereby placing additional demands on executive-control mechanisms. Event-related potential studies indicate that bilingual readers can generate phonological responses to L2 words within 80-160 ms, before full lexical access, suggesting rapid engagement of phonological processing (Timmer, Schiller, 2014).

A complementary functional near-infrared spectroscopy (fNIRS) investigation with advanced Japanese-English bilinguals reported greater oxyhemoglobin concentration changes in bilateral dorsolateral prefrontal and inferior frontal regions during L2 reading aloud than during L1 reading, regardless of text difficulty. The same study also suggested a possible “sweet spot” for cognitive load: moderately challenging passages elicited peak prefrontal recruitment, whereas overly difficult texts led to a plateau or decline in activation, pointing to an optimal range for engaging articulatory-rehearsal and monitoring mechanisms (Takeuchi, Ikeda, Mizumoto, 2012). These findings suggest that L2 contexts require culturally sensitive scaffolding and identity-affirming practices to lower the affective filter and sustain engagement. Extending beyond acute effects, Takeuchi *et al.* (2021) ex-

amined longitudinal changes following a four-week adaptive training protocol comparing shadowing and reading-aloud (RA) tasks. Using voxel-based morphometry, they documented significant gray-matter volume reductions in the right anterior insula (and in the superior temporal gyrus in the RA group only). The Authors interpreted these volumetric reductions as potentially consistent with increased neural efficiency, associated with faster reaction times on working-memory tasks, suggesting an interaction between phonological processing and memory performance under the specific training conditions examined. Functional MRI during a working-memory task provided convergent evidence: after training, the RA group exhibited attenuated Blood Oxygenation Level Dependent (BOLD) responses in the same insular and temporal loci, indicating reduced metabolic demand for comparable cognitive loads.

Taken together, these studies help distinguish an initial phase of heightened engagement, marked by stronger demands on Broca's area and dorsolateral prefrontal regions for grapheme-phoneme conversion and self-monitoring (Takeuchi, Ikeda, Mizumoto, 2012), from a later phase in which repeated practice may be associated with functional and structural reorganization (Takeuchi, *et al.*, 2021). Rather than demonstrating a universal effect of reading aloud, these findings suggest that, under specific training conditions, oral reading may contribute to pronunciation practice, fluency development, and selected aspects of working-memory performance in both L1 and L2 learning.

While these findings concern neural correlates measured under controlled laboratory conditions, they suggest that the cognitive demands of oral reading are real and variable, and that instructional design may influence how efficiently those demands are managed over time.

3. Reading aloud as an inclusive scaffold for dyslexic learners

Children who exhibit dyslexia-related traits often struggle not only with slow, halting decoding but also with reduced fluency and phonological analysis, frequently confusing visually similar graphemes (e.g., “b” vs. “p”, or “d” vs. “b”) even in the earliest stages of literacy, independent of a formal diagnosis (Chiarenza, Casarotto, 2004). Rather than stemming solely from a specific learning disorder, these comprehension difficulties have been linked to broader deficits in the cognitive processing of written language (Bishop, Snowling, 2004).

In this context, reading aloud may be considered a potentially effective and inclusive instructional strategy. By coupling spoken production with visual decoding, it can support phonological and sublexical mappings, expand opportunities for vocabulary exposure, and facilitate text-level comprehension (Batini, Ed., 2022). When structured regularly and adaptively, read-aloud practice may offer benefits for a wide range of learners, including weaker readers, thereby supporting more equitable learning opportunities (Dicataldo, Rowe, Roch, 2022).

Empirical evidence underscores its relevant potency for lexical development. For instance, systematic aloud-reading cohorts have been shown to foster not only larger vocabularies but also more complex expressive language (Deckner, Adamson, Bakeman 2006; Duursma, Augustyn, Zuckerman, 2008). Nagy (1997) further demonstrated that, during the first two years of schooling in one's mother tongue, children's receptive vocabularies typically expand by over a thousand words per year, a trajectory that often decelerates when grappling with L2 due to orthographic and phonological incongruities.

Commissaire and Demont (2022) directly examined these cross-linguistic challenges in French secondary-school adolescents with dyslexia. Comparing aloud versus silent reading, lexical decision, and L2→L1 translation tasks, they observed that dyslexic readers not only faltered on pseudowords and irregular spellings but also formed weaker orthographic representations when faced with conflicting French-English grapheme-phoneme correspondences. Their findings highlight the necessity of calibrating sublexical variables, such as orthographic markedness and cross-linguistic consistency, to mitigate cognitive load in L2 read-aloud interventions.

Additional support comes from Santulli *et al.*'s evaluation (2018) of the *SuperReading* program, which involved structured aloud reading and decoding drills for adolescents and adults with specific learning disorders. Compared to a non-intervention control group, participants achieved significant, lasting gains in both reading speed and comprehension, reflected in large effect sizes on standardized assessment. These outcomes attest to the program's capacity to foster enduring phonological, lexical, and metacognitive enhancements, even in mature learners with entrenched reading difficulties.

Taken together, these findings suggest that reading aloud can represent meaningful instructional support for dyslexic learners. In particular, it may reinforce phonological processing, facilitate vocabulary access, and offer a structured scaffold that can be adapted to both L1 and L2 learning contexts.

4. *Reading aloud as linguistic and emotional growth*

Engaging children in read-aloud activities from the earliest years may help lay the foundation for native-language development by broadening vocabulary and supporting increasingly articulate communication (Omar, Saufi, 2015; American Academy of Pediatrics, 2017). It may also encourage a sustained interest in books, enlarging children's symbolic repertoires from their first encounters with text (Sidoti, Di Fede, 2023).

In L1 settings, shared read-aloud experiences have been associated with greater perspective-taking, richer social labeling, and, in some studies, reduced prejudice (Vezzali, *et al.*, 2015), while also supporting caregiver-child bonding and partially mitigating vocabulary gaps among children with fewer family reading opportunities (Farrant, Zubrick, 2013).

The deliberate selection of stories that resonate with children's lived experiences, narratives of play, friendship, and acceptance, can create conditions conducive to socio-emotional development (Batini, 2011). Moreover, prosody, through rhythmic and intonational modulation, may support emotional engagement and memorization through the activation of memory- and emotion-related neural circuits (Schirmer, Kotz, 2006). Large-scale initiatives such as "L'ABC delle emozioni" (The ABC of Emotions) project (Buccolo, 2017) and Giunti Scuola's "Leggimi ancora" (Read Me Again) program (Batini, 2022; Batini, in Batini, Marchetta, eds., 2023) suggest that regular read-aloud practice can support attention, memory, and comprehension, while also helping to bridge socio-cultural divides, particularly for migrant or linguistically disadvantaged students.

When read-aloud practice is extended to L2 learners, affective dynamics may shift: students can experience heightened anxiety before gradually gaining confidence through appropriately scaffolded instruction. In Chinese EFL undergraduates, instructor-centered read aloud instructional strategies reduced anxiety and were associated with larger confidence gains than student-centered formats, with anxiety declines correlating strongly with fluency and confidence improvements (Wei, 2023). Conversely, a case study of an 11-year-old Haitian migrant in Chile showed that uniform choral reading routines may provoke embarrassment and withdrawal, leading the child to whisper in his home language and limiting possible fluency benefits (González Contreras, 2025).

These findings suggest that L2 contexts require culturally sensitive scaffolding and identity-affirming practices to lower the affective filter and sustain engagement.

5. *The production effect of reading aloud*

Reading aloud confers a well-documented mnemonic advantage known as the “production effect”, yet its manifestations appear to differ between L1 and L2 contexts. In native speakers, even a single session of vocalized reading may improve verbatim recall and recognition of surface details, as shown in controlled experiments (Roberts, *et al.*, 2024) and broader syntheses of the literature, but such benefits do not necessarily extend to deeper inferential or conceptual comprehension. By contrast, in second-language learners, repeated read-aloud practice has been associated not only with gains in surface memory but also, under specific instructional conditions, with improvements in fluency and understanding. Through dual-encoding mechanisms that couple articulatory motor planning with auditory self-monitoring (Hedgcock, Ferris, 2018), tasks such as translation read aloud – where L2 words are vocalized alongside their L1 equivalents – may support phonological recall and form-meaning mapping (Cai, Zhang, Wang, 2024). In addition, an eight-week repeated-reading regimen with Iranian EFL undergraduates produced increases in words per minute by the fifth iteration and comprehension gains that were higher for bilingual than monolingual participants (67.4% vs. 55.3%; Yeganeh, 2013).

These findings suggest that while brief vocalization may be sufficient to enhance lexical encoding in L1, L2 learners may benefit more from iterative practice that aligns articulatory enactment with semantic processing, especially when prior bilingual resources can be mobilized to support both automaticity and deeper integration. These observations are consistent with neural evidence from Takeuchi *et al.* (2021), which indicates that sustained training may first heighten frontal activation and then be associated with functional reorganization, though generalizability requires cautious interpretation.

6. *Cross-linguistic comparison*

Cross-linguistic comparison of reading-aloud dynamics reveals both shared neurocognitive foundations and language-specific differences in affective and mnemonic outcomes. Neuroimaging evidence indicates that both L1 and L2 oral reading engage a core left-hemisphere network, including inferior frontal, temporo-parietal, and visual word-form areas, as well as frontoparietal and cerebellar control circuits involved in

error monitoring and attentional regulation. However, L2 reading aloud appears to impose an additional executive-control burden, reflected in stronger dorsolateral prefrontal and anterior insular activation during early practice phases, which may lessen following sustained training (Takeuchi, Ikeda, Mizumoto, 2012; Takeuchi, *et al.*, 2021).

Some studies report that sustained L2 read-aloud practice is associated with gains in working memory performance and reading fluency under specific training conditions, though effect sizes, durability, and generalizability across learner populations and instructional contexts vary and warrant further investigation (Takeuchi, *et al.*, 2021). Affective responses also differ: whereas L1 readers often approach aloud reading with limited anxiety and may derive perspective-taking and motivational benefits from shared text engagement, L2 learners can experience a continuum from anxiety to growing confidence.

Classroom-based evidence suggests that scaffolded instructor modeling and culturally responsive participation formats, such as choral reading, have been associated with reduced affective barriers and stronger engagement in L2 settings (Wei, 2023; González Contreras, 2025).

At the mnemonic level, the production effect also appears to vary: Roberts *et al.* (2024) report that brief L1 read-aloud tasks reliably improve verbatim recall but not inferential comprehension, whereas Yeganeh (2013) found that an eight-week repeated oral-reading regimen in L2 contexts was associated with increased reading rate and higher comprehension gains for bilingual than monolingual learners, suggesting that sustained vocalization in a foreign language may more effectively support the alignment of articulatory rehearsal with semantic processing. This contrast between brief L1 production tasks and extended L2 oral-reading protocols underscores a pattern consistent with the broader argument developed in this review: the benefits of reading aloud are not uniform, but depend on the duration and structure of practice, the linguistic demands of the context, and the degree to which articulation is coupled with meaning-oriented engagement.

Conclusions and pedagogical implications

In an age in which digital interfaces and algorithms increasingly fragment attention, reading aloud remains a distinct multisensory and embodied practice, coordinating vision, motor planning, auditory feedback, and executive control. This narrative review has highlighted that oral reading

involves a constellation of neurocognitive, affective, and mnemonic processes that extend beyond silent decoding alone. The literature reviewed points to a shared left-hemisphere circuit for oral reading, while also suggesting that L2 contexts often entail greater executive-control demands, which may decrease with sustained and well-structured practice.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings support the design of read-aloud experiences that deliberately interweave L1 and L2 modalities. In practice, this may involve initial teacher modeling in L1 to establish prosodic fluency and motivational scaffolding, followed by the gradual introduction of carefully selected L2 passages aligned with learners' linguistic repertoires. Repeated reading and explicit moments of semantic reflection (before, during, and after oral performance) may further consolidate both form and meaning. Text complexity should be calibrated to maintain adequate challenge without inducing cognitive overload. In L2 settings in particular, pre-teaching key lexical items before reading begins reduces mid-task processing demands and allows learners to direct attention toward the prosodic and phonological dimensions of the text, a reminder that the quality of instructional mediation around read-aloud, rather than the act of reading alone, is what substantially shapes outcomes.

Affective evidence points to the importance of culturally responsive design: anxiety around oral performance can undermine the benefits of read-aloud in L2 contexts, making the following practices essential: validating home languages, avoiding exposure routines that risk embarrassment, and adopting low-stakes participation structures such as choral reading, paired reading, or small-group practice. These formats reduce performance pressure while simultaneously creating opportunities for peer modeling and collaborative attention to text features. The design of production tasks should be differentiated according to learners' profiles and instructional goals. In L1 contexts, brief and focused oral activities may support surface-form memory and prosodic awareness. In L2 contexts, by contrast, literature suggests greater benefits from iterative and meaning-oriented read-aloud routines that connect articulation, listening, and comprehension over time. For learners with reading difficulties, including those with dyslexic profiles, such practices may be further strengthened through explicit phonological support, controlled text selection, and paced feedback.

As a narrative, conceptual review, this synthesis does not employ systematic search protocols or meta-analytic techniques. The studies discussed vary widely in design, population, language pairs, and outcome measures, limiting direct comparability. Neuroimaging findings identify

neural correlates of reading aloud but do not directly predict learning outcomes or classroom performance; the relationship between brain activation patterns and educational gains requires further investigation through combined neurocognitive and pedagogical research.

The present review aims to contribute to an empirically informed pedagogy of language education in which read-aloud practices in L1 and L2 are used not as universally effective techniques, but as context-sensitive resources whose value depends on learner characteristics, text design, and instructional mediation. Under these conditions, reading aloud may serve as a relevant tool for inclusion, cross-linguistic exchange, and lifelong learning.

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