

## Using Punctuation to Develop Prosodic Awareness: An EFL Example

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### Abstract

A class of five adult Japanese L1 speakers taking a weekly English class engaged in a two-part investigation of punctuation and prosody. This was done in a FonF (Focus on Form) style with the study being conducted using our in-class read-aloud novel. Firstly, students and teacher engaged in a classroom discussion of cross-linguistic differences in punctuation. Secondly, students were given a special homework assignment that involved listening, a follow-along task, and finally reading alone, there were follow-up questions. All activities were designed to focus students' attention on punctuation and secondly any prosodic elements they might become more aware of through their focus on punctuation marks in the text. Qualitative data was collected throughout. Although students expressed some difficulty with understanding (hearing and using) prosody there were some good examples of increasing student awareness in prosodic elements.

My class consists of five adult Japanese L1 speakers with various levels of English proficiency but centered around an intermediate level. It is evident that prosodic elements are missing while my students read aloud in English. Some of the class's difficulties include reading too fast (ignoring punctuation), pausing or reading in a monotone voice, and not emphasizing the correct word stress. "Punctuation is connected to prosody in English and one of its main functions is to guide the reader to read with the appropriate expression (stress, intonation, pause, rhythm)," (Clifton, 1993, Cohen et. al, 2001, Steinhauer, 2003, Steinhauer and Friedericic, 2001 as cited in Heggie and Wade-Woolley, 2009, p. 205). Additionally, my students have told me that they do not think about punctuation very much because there is already so much to think about in reading (vocabulary, meaning, and pronunciation). My research question then is: Can increasing my student's awareness of punctuation markings increase their prosodic awareness? My approach for examining this question is through an in-class discussion and through one "Focused task, (i.e., those where a given linguistic feature is given prominence, but which also emphasize meaning) (McLaughlin, 1987, as cited by Brinton M. D., Celce-Murcia M., Goodwin M. J., 2010, p. 47).

## Literature Review

Let me start by emphasizing three relevant points. One, punctuation is connected to prosody in English and one of its main functions is to guide the reader to read with the appropriate expression (stress, intonation, pause, rhythm for example) (Clifton, 1993, Cohen et al., 2001, Steinhauer, 2003, Steinhour and Friedericic, 2001 as cited in Heggie and Wade-Woolley, 2009, p. 205). Two, in an EFL context it is beneficial to discuss cross-linguistic differences regarding prosody (Saito, Saito, 2016), and three, studies show that it is beneficial to use reading aloud in the English L2 classroom (Gibson, 2008 as cited by Takeuchi et al., 2012). The following is a review of these three relevant points and should further demonstrate why (1) focusing on punctuation awareness to develop prosodic awareness, (2) explicitly discussing relevant cross-linguistic differences, and (3) reading aloud (RA) are beneficial in my (and maybe your?) EFL context.

First, a little about punctuation in general. There exist two ways, historically, that punctuation has been used in written English (Chafe, 1987). In “Punctuation and Prosody in the Written language” Wallace Chafe (1987) states that throughout much of English language history, punctuation has been used as a visual marker of prosody (derived from spoken language and reflected similarly in written text). However, punctuation in more recent times has been seen more as a grammatical tool to be taught in a grammatical fashion (Chafe, 1987). Through analysis Chafe concludes that the main function of punctuation is to “tell us something about the writer’s intentions with regard to the prosody of that inner voice” (Chafe, 1987, p. 6). Another related study describes prosodic elements relating to punctuation (Miller and Schwanenflugel, 2006 as cited in L. Heggie and L. Wade-Woolley 2009) state: “Basic declarative, declarative

quotatives, complex adjective phrase commas, and phrase-final commas trigger expressive reading in oral language in the following ways: basic declaratives may elicit pitch declines at the end of the sentence, while declarative quotatives, complex adjective phrase commas, and phrase-final commas may elicit a pause following the quote or phrases” ( p. 194). However, EFL students, at least mine, struggle with the punctuation to prosody connection while reading, perhaps because of a lack of awareness of English punctuation conventions. In fact, in *Prosodic Awareness and Punctuation Ability in Adult Readers* (Heggie, Wade-Woolley, 2018), it was found that there is a correlation between punctuation ability and prosodic awareness. “Prosodic awareness emerged as a robust predictor of punctuation knowledge, as the relationship survived the contributions of three important control measures: punctuation knowledge, reading comprehension, and working memory” (p. 205).

Discussing differences in Japanese and English prosody and punctuation is important. It is acknowledged there are differences in how the two languages are expressed prosodically: “English is a stress-timed language while Japanese is mora-timed” (Noguchi, 2014, p. 294). Brian G. Rubrecht at Meiji University writes: students “end up only inferring rather than actually understanding English punctuation use” (p. 5), he goes on to say: “...students, therefore, rely upon the punctuation rules found in their L1 when they are at a loss as to how to punctuate a sentence” (p. 6). However, there is some methodology that helps to eliminate cross-linguistic interference. In a study by Yukie Saito and Kazuya Saito (2017) titled “Differential effects of instruction on the development of second language comprehensibility, word stress, rhythm, and Intonation: The case of inexperienced Japanese EFL learners” they found that: “In particular, the instruction which explicitly addressed cross-linguistic differences, helped learners mark stressed

syllables with longer and clearer vowels, reduce vowels in unstressed syllables, and use appropriate intonation patterns for yes/no and wh-questions” (p. 604).

Finally, reading aloud, (part of the methodology for this action research) in the English L2 classroom is recognized as a beneficial activity for developing students’ proficiency (Miyako 2006, Suzuki 1998 as cited by Takeuchi et al., 2012). “Some empirical studies have found that RA is effective even in the development of EFL proficiency,” (Takeuchi et al., 2012, p. 152) and that: “RA ability and English proficiency show moderate to strong correlations (Takeuchi et al., 2012, p. 152). Relating directly to this current inquiry (developing prosodic awareness through punctuation awareness): “In bilingual teaching, RA has also been found to increase language awareness and learner motivation” (Lyster et al, 2009 as cited in Takeuchi et al., 2012, p. 152). One challenge for my students, and EFL students reading aloud, in general, is the amount of effort it takes. According to (Takeuchi et al., 2012): “Reading aloud in L2 results in a higher degree of cerebral activation than reading aloud in L1” (p. 152). In fact, my students commented that they do not think about punctuation because the tasks of word recognition and constructing meaning are so central in their minds. Since it is difficult to focus on prosody because of the significant amount of information already being processed (Takeuchi et al., 2012), prosodic awareness should be developed in the easiest way possible. I believe punctuation can be an explicit and helpful tool in this goal.

## Methods

Can increasing my students' awareness of punctuation markings (using our in-class novel) increase their prosodic awareness? Currently, my students have various difficulties when reading aloud: reading too fast and ignoring punctuation, incorrect intonation, or incorrect word and sentence stress for example. One issue, in particular, influenced my methodology. (Takeuchi et al., 2012) found that cognitive demand is higher while reading aloud in an L2. My methodology goal was to not overburden my students with a confusing or heavy amount of new material to study. Please see Appendix A for the homework assignment used to gather student responses.

### Secondary Questions:

- I. Which elements of prosody do my students become more aware of through the activities in this research?
- II. Can discussing cross-linguistic differences in punctuation help bring awareness to English punctuation?
- III. Was it difficult to do the homework assignment (follow- along with the text and only pay attention to punctuation)?

### Setting

A class of five Japanese L1 speakers taking a weekly English class for personal enjoyment. The class meets once a week for 90 minutes, four times a month. This group began reading books in-class (reading aloud) last year. The students have been together for three years,

and I have been their teacher for one year. The students chose the current book and the level (a graded reader, level 2-Intermediate level). The book's title is: "The Little Prince" by Antoine de Saint-Exupery.

## Participants

Each of the five students is over 60 years of age, retired, and taking this English class for personal enjoyment and to enrich their life. All students could be described as intermediate level in all four skills. All students exhibit difficulty with prosody while reading aloud and so this difficulty has been the prompt for this action research

## Data Collection

Since this is a small class and I want to show what students are thinking I felt collecting notes from our discussion in-class and using student responses in the form of quotations would be best. Data has been collected through teacher note-taking in-class and through emailed question responses (homework answers) from students.

Action Research Schedule		
Week 1	Week 2	Week 3 Data Collection/Analysis
<p>*Discuss cross - linguistic differences in punctuation between Japanese and English. *Read aloud our weekly chapter.  <u>*Special Homework Assignment given.</u></p>	<p>* Discuss cross-linguistic differences in punctuation. Read aloud and take notice of punctuation markings.  <u>Take class notes.</u></p>	<p>*Collect student homework via email. Collate with class notes and observations.  <u>*Qualitative Data Analysis:</u> Collect relevant class notes, including student comments about punctuation. Group student answers from homework assignment together under respective questions to see the range of responses.</p>

## **Data Analysis**

A qualitative data analysis approach was used (see above, week 3). Any comments from students in our classroom discussion of cross-linguistic punctuation issues were written down verbatim. The homework responses were grouped together under the respective questions so that I could see the range of responses

## **Findings**

My main question: Can increasing my students' awareness of punctuation markings increase their prosodic awareness? Was only partially answered. It was found that my students did not have a problem understanding English punctuation usage and there was no cross-linguistic confusion when it came to understanding punctuation either. However, it was admitted by some students that they paid little to no attention to punctuation while reading (before this investigation). After the homework assignment, there was some positive comments about utilizing punctuation in reading, for example one student remarked: "It's a good guide for my reading!" In terms of prosody, through the homework assignment students' responses were similar in sharing that the (1) homework task was simple but that hearing and utilizing prosody such as intonation and rhythm was and is difficult. It seems there is some awareness of prosodic elements near punctuation markings in the text however and some student comments reveal awareness of pausing and intonation around punctuation marks.

## Cross-Linguistic Issues and Classroom Discussion

A short in-class discussion about Japanese and English punctuation markings showed that at least the two markings most often seen in our in-class text (period and comma) are very similar to the Japanese kuten and toten, respectively. The following example is from an online blog: (<https://www.fluentu.com/blog/japanese/japanese-punctuation/>).

“The full stop or 句点 (くてん) — kuten is the Japanese period. It marks the end of a sentence.”

“The comma, 読点 (とくてん) — toten, is used to divide sentences into segments, separate items in a list and to deliver asides.”

I asked my students to teach me a little about Japanese punctuation. Is there anything equivalent to the English period or comma? (Our in-class reading contains periods, commas, question marks, and colons). I wanted to limit our discussion to periods and commas because from observation these are the two markings that seem to go unnoticed in our reading aloud.

My students' responses included the following:

“In Japanese, it's called Kuten.” (English period equivalent)

“It's the same!”

“The comma is called toten.”

At this point, I realized that the function of the English period and comma was understood by my class. The real difficulty lay in the practice of utilizing them in reading aloud (as prosody markings).

Homework Assignment: Developing English punctuation and related prosodic Awareness.

### Step 1

This homework assignment was based on the challenge I feel my students have in including prosody in their reading activities (reading in English is already a challenging task): “I think about the words and what it means,” one of my students said in a class referring to reading in English. I did not want to cause an increase in cognitive workload since “Reading aloud in L2 results in a higher degree of cerebral activation than reading aloud in L1,” (Takeuchi et al., 2012, p.152). My first goal was to have students pay attention exclusively to the punctuation markings in our current in-class novel. My students were assigned homework that included listening to a recording of the week’s chapter and following along with a finger in the text, noticing punctuation exclusively, and finally, answering questions.

Below is “**Step 1**” of 4 steps in the special homework assignment, and the accompanying question and responses I received.

#### STEP 1

Listen to chapter 25 (my recording) and follow the text with your finger (moving from word to word). Don't worry about reading, just follow the words and pay attention to any punctuation marks that you see.

(.) (,) (:) (!) (?) etc...

Q: Was it difficult or easy to follow along with your finger while listening to the recording?

Class	Accompanying Question Responses:
<b>Student A</b>	“It was easy”
<b>Student B</b>	“Following along with my finger was difficult for me. Sometimes, my finger went slower and sometimes went faster than Ben’s reading.”
<b>Student C</b>	“My answer is easy.”
<b>Student D</b>	“It’s not difficult.”
<b>Student E</b>	“It was easy.”

Four out of five students said that listening to the chapter recording and following along in the text with a finger was easy. Only one student in the class disagreed and said the task was difficult. It could be that this student is more aware of prosodic elements and therefore is paying attention to prosody, as well as vocabulary, pronunciation, and text meaning (even though the instructions said to just pay attention to punctuation). In other words, it may be harder to pay attention to only punctuation if you have a higher overall proficiency and understand more of the meaning and hear more prosody.

## Step 2

The second homework task was for tapping into my students’ prosodic awareness by having them listen again to the recording, follow along with the text and listen for any prosody they hear that is happening near punctuation marks.

The authors of a study (Miller and Schwanenflugel, 2006 as cited in L. Heggie and L. Wade-Woolley 2009) describe prosodic elements relating to punctuation stating: “Basic declarative, declarative quotatives, complex adjective phrase commas, and phrase-final commas trigger expressive reading in oral language in the following ways: basic declaratives may elicit pitch declines at the end of the sentence, while declarative quotatives, complex adjective phrase commas, and phrase-final commas may elicit a pause following the quote or phrases” ( p. 194).

Below is “**Step 2**” of 4 steps in the homework assignment, and the accompanying questions.

**STEP 2:** Can you listen a second time and do the same as above (step 1), but this time pay attention to any sounds or pauses you hear next to punctuation marks. (Remember to use your finger to follow along with the text).

In this step, it is only important to pay attention to the recording, punctuation marks, and any sounds (word stress, intonation or pauses) you hear in the text. **Don't worry about the meaning of the words.**

Q: The second time you listened; did you notice anything new? Intonation ? (Rising or falling?)

Pausing? Rhythm? Word stress around the punctuation marks?

Class	Accompanying Question Responses			
<b>Student A</b>	“I listened to your recording for many times. Punctuation mark that I didn't pay attention before.”			
<b>Student B</b>	“I didn't pay attention to the punctuation marks so much before. I'm interested in them now. They're good guides for my reading!”	“-!- always falling, ? -almost always rising, sometimes falling. Every punctuation mark has pause. (short pause and long pause).”	“The words before (!) sometimes have stress.”	

<b>Student C</b>	“Punctuation (.): Stops everywhere as a break at the end of a sentence.”	“Punctuation (,): Almost no stop. Sometimes it stops.”	“Conversational sentence: I found that it was filled with emotions like the words of the speaker.”	“Intonation: I couldn't detect it because I didn't understand the story flow yet.”
<b>Student D</b>	“Voice inflection, rhythm and strength are difficult for me.”			
<b>Student E</b>	“(;) is explanation's meaning, isn't it? I'm not sure.”			

It's possible that all students were aware of prosody (even recognizing you have a deficiency in prosody is being aware of it in a sense). A, B, and C all reported being aware of prosody.

### Step 3

The third task was to have students engage in their regular reading habits and read the assigned chapter aloud one time. The goal was to see if any of the punctuation awareness practiced in tasks 1 and 2 stayed with the students and whether they felt more aware of prosody (either missing or increasing in their reading aloud).

“In bilingual teaching, RA has also been found to increase language awareness and learner motivation” (Lyster et al, 2009 as cited in Takeuchi et al., 2012, p. 152). All the students enjoy reading in this class and express that, although it is sometimes difficult, it is fun and we, as a class, agree reading aloud is a good way to improve our proficiency skills and I think a good way to focus attention on many linguistic aspects (such as prosody).

**STEP 3:** Lastly, can you read (as you usually do) chapter 25 by yourself (no recording)? What do you notice?

Q: What do you notice as you read chapter 25, and what do you think about as you read in general?

Class	Accompanying Question Responses			
<b>Student A</b>	“When I read by myself, I think about English rhythm the most. Also pronunciation, intonation and word stress are important.”	“I recorded own reading (chapter 25) I was disappointed to hear that. Because my reading was not rhythmical and not smooth besides I read in a monotone.”	“I need to make an effort to improve my reading.”	
<b>Student C</b>	“When reading by myself, I tried according to the reading of punctuation marks that I understood in Ans2. However, since this is the first sentence I read, I stumbled on a word and cannot read it smoothly. It will not be fluent unless you read the sentence several times.”	“Everyone can see multiple words at the same time at a glance, so you can see what comes first. Currently, when I read English, I can only see each word, so I am chasing the words.”	“Everyone has a sentence pattern in their head, and when a certain word appears, the sentence that comes after can be almost predicted.”	
<b>Student E</b>	“It was difficult to read it smoothly for me.”	“reading : is this explanation’s meaning, isn’t it? I’m not sure.”	“I’ll be careful about the phrase, rhythm, and strength. And read it	I’d like to improve more the reading”

### Discussion

The evidence I have collected reveals two important and useful points: (1) my students have not thought so much about English punctuation markings and related prosody while reading- aloud, but now, I feel they have a little more awareness of the connection between

punctuation and related prosody (especially at periods, and commas). (2) cross-linguistic issues regarding punctuation usage are non-existent for my students. Most importantly, through listening to one chapter via a teacher recording, following along with the text using a finger, and noticing the punctuation markings (while ignoring the meaning of the text for this exercise) I believe my students increased their awareness of (1) punctuation markings in the text, and (2) intonation and pausing around punctuation markings in the text. Student C, above, noticed pausing and took note of dialogue that was filled with the speaker's "emotion." Another student noted intonation rising and falling at exclamation marks and question marks (Student B above). Student B also remarked that punctuation marks are: "a good guide for my reading!" Simply by having my students complete a relatively easy listening and follow-along homework assignment they could increase their awareness of punctuation and prosody. Since some students expressed that in the past, they had not given attention to punctuation markings I think this FonF style of addressing prosody by developing awareness of in-text punctuation markings is an effective one. Another important realization is that automaticity is a factor in holding my students back from utilizing prosody more when reading -aloud because when reading word by word, for example, they may be unable to utilize the rhythm, intonation, or pausing within a sentence (for example this could happen if a reader is unprepared when reaching punctuation markings (some of my students give the majority of their attention to each word). As Student C said: "Currently, when I read English, I can only see each word, so I am chasing the words". This comment also points to the tremendous cognitive workload that is present when reading in an L2, (Takeuchi et al., 2012) Student B: "When I read by myself, I think about English rhythm the most. Also, pronunciation, intonation, and word stress are important." These comments show that students have a lot to think about as they read. I believe adding prosody to my students' reading should be done in a

way that does not overburden their cognitive workload. I believe in utilizing punctuation markings, something already visually present in the text, as a starting point for learning prosody. This visual nature of punctuation also gives prosody a visual entity to relate to.

### **Research Implications**

Our class is beginning to take careful observation of punctuation markings and related prosody when reading (for some students, it is a first) and they now have a visual and predictable starting point for understanding prosody in English. For my students and perhaps for many other EFL classrooms, punctuation markings should be brought to students' attention when reading in-class or while listening to a written text. One way to think of attaching punctuation to language lessons is through Focus on Form (FonF). FonF can be a way to focus on grammatical items within a language activity where the main goal is actually meaningful content. Punctuation can be included in the concept of FonF, it should be brought to students' attention, and it can be linked to a discussion of prosody. It is a visually tangible way to make English prosody slightly more predictable. Additionally, punctuation and related prosody could be taught in writing and reading simultaneously through activities like writing and then reading the written works in-class. This way, punctuation, and prosody could be closely linked in students' minds. Short dialogues, skits, role-plays require us to involve prosody actively in writing and in orally producing them, so we should encourage students to write out dialogues, skits, role-plays, or conversations and ask students to pay attention to the punctuation in both writing and reading. We can then easily slide over to discussing and practicing prosodic elements surrounding punctuation marks and hopefully move on from there to a wider discussion of prosody.

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## Appendix A

Hi class!

February 18, 2022

Good afternoon.

I hope you are well! I have a question. I am studying for my graduate degree (Master's degree) in Education. I have a small reading experiment (it involves reading in English and listening to our weekly recording). I want to ask you for help with this small experiment! ☺ Homework?!!! Sorry to ask! ...I am happy to bring back some sweets from Kansai in exchange!!! ***With this experiment, I want to use "The Little Prince" and chapter 25. This experiment includes listening to the recording and then reading by yourself. You can complete this experiment at different times during your week (you don't have to do it all at once).***

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### Little Prince Reading experiment:

#### STEP 1

Can you listen to chapter 25 (my recording) and **follow the text with your finger (moving from word to word)**. Don't worry about reading, just follow the words and pay attention to any punctuation marks that you see.

(.) (,) (:) (!) (?) etc...

## STEP 2

Can you listen a second time and do the same as above, **BUT pay attention to any sounds or pauses you hear next to punctuation marks.** (*Remember to use your finger to follow along with the text*).

\*For STEPS 1 and 2 it is only important to pay attention to the recording, punctuation marks, and sounds/pauses or word stress you hear. Don't worry about the meaning of the words in this experiment.

\* Lastly, can you read chapter 25 by yourself (as you usually do), without the recording?



Finally, can you send me a message (email or LINE) and answer these questions?

1. Was it difficult or easy to follow along with your finger while listening to the recording?
2. The first or second time you listened; did you notice anything new? For example, a *word or phrase sounds rising or falling? Pausing? Rhythm? Word stress around the punctuation marks?*
3. When you read (English) by yourself what do you think about the most?
4. Please tell me anything more about what is challenging when reading in English. Even a word or two is Ok!

Thank you so much!! Ben