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Fran Watkins

Teacher trainer, teacher, exam and materials writer

Reading aloud: a useful or a useless activity?

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March

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Reading aloud: a useful or useless ELT activity for learners?

We will explore:

- how, when and why to use reading aloud with learners
- which learners may benefit most
- practical, effective approaches and techniques
- which genres suit reading aloud

30th March • 2pm UK time

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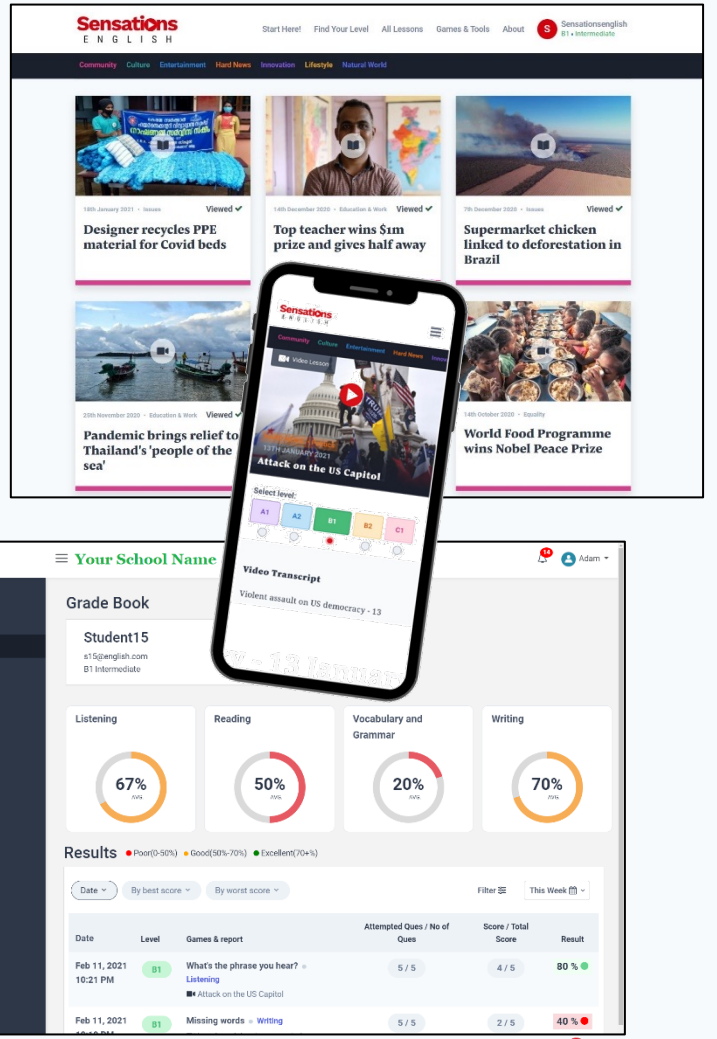

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Reading aloud: a useful or a useless activity?

Overview

This session aims to:

- Examine the benefits and the limitations of reading aloud
- Look at the placement and timing of it
- Identify the genres that may be suited to it
- Clarify the difficulties learners are likely to face when processing
- Give practical suggestions of how to exploit RA in class

What does reading aloud (RA) refer to?

Reading aloud, for the purposes of this session, refers to when the **learners** read aloud in class (not the teacher).

Typically it is a dialogue or reading text, such as an article, of variable length. It could also refer to when ss read aloud a **literary** text – a poem, play, story or novel.

The session is NOT referring to functional/grammatical or lexical drills which are written, then spoken. Nor does it refer to when learners RA rubrics in class.

The background: a little about reading aloud (RA)

A historic technique in language learning

- Long before the communicative approach, when people used to learn through **grammar translation**, for example, RA was a common ingredient

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The Grammar-Translation Method:
a modern-day example of this method in action

- As we enter the classroom, the class is reading a passage in their textbook. The passage is an excerpt… from Mark Twain's "Life on the Mississippii".
- Each student is called on to read a few lines from the passage. After he has finished reading, he's asked to translate into Spanish the few lines he has just read. The teacher helps with new vocabulary items…
- The teacher asks them to write the answers to the comprehension questions which appear at the end.

TASK

What kind of things do your learners sometimes RA in your classes? WRITE IN THE CHAT

Larsen-Freeman 1986

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The Audiolingual method

- According to Carrell (1998),

"The strong influence of the audiolingual method dictated the primacy of listening over reading and of speaking over writing…….

Decoding sound-symbol relationships and mastering oral dialogues were considered to be the primary steps in the development of reading proficiency."

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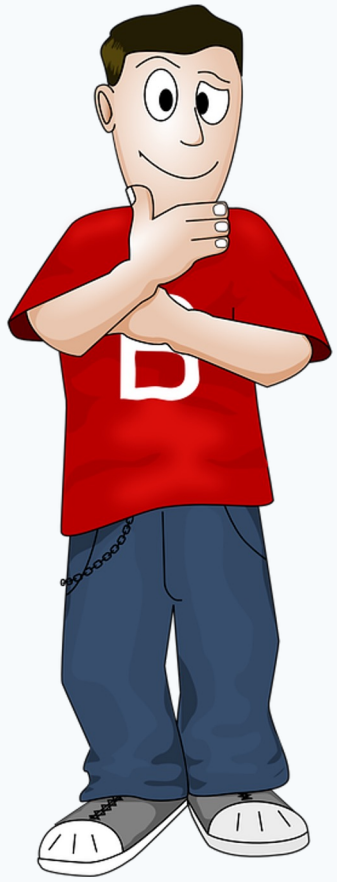
Reading Aloud and the CEF

Interestingly, the CEF refers in passing to RA.

It says “activities” like RA “are currently out of favour in communication-oriented language teaching owing to their artificiality and …undesirable backwash effects. A case can be made for them as **testing** devices.”



RA doesn't fit neatly with either reading or speaking, or pronunciation alone or spelling. RA **straddles multiple skills**.

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Reading aloud in our first language

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RA in our L1

Stories - a genre sometimes read aloud in our first language - have a strong impact on us emotionally.

RA is a way of **sharing** written stories. It's a very natural human activity.

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In our L1(s), what kind of texts/genres do we sometimes RA?

IN REAL LIFE ... we might RA:

- A story/fairy story e.g. parent to child
- An article from the news

TASK **Can you think of any more text types that we typically RA in our L1?**
Write in the CHAT.

AUTHENTICITY is often a driving force behind CLT, but of course there is also the authenticity of the language classroom itself, e.g. dialogues (*WRITTEN* language intended to be spoken)

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When reading in our L1 …

Outside the classroom, when we read aloud a text, e.g. a story or article to someone, generally we:

a) Either already **know or can predict the content.** We may have read it before or be already immersed in it/the topic/the author. We may be the actual writer.

b) Or are **generally fluent readers,** so not over-relying on bottom-up decoding skills.

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Let's put ourselves in our learners' shoes

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News mag – page entitled "People"

The Week 4 March'23

TASK Read this dense, high level text. One of you is going to read it aloud. Ready? *I0 secs preparation!*

Like the battle to win women the vote a century ago, the struggle to make a hip-hop musical about some of the suffragette movement's heroines has been long and hard, says John Bungey in the Times. When 'Sylvia' was first staged at the Old Vic in 2018, it was described as work in progress and – afflicted by last-minute cast changes – it was poorly reviewed.

TASK

What would you be concentrating on, if I asked you to RA that text to the webinar group, here and now?

How would you be feeling?

Write in the CHAT.

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So what are some of the possible drawbacks of RA?

- Many students do not enjoy being 'put on the spot' before their teachers and peers. For some, it's stressful.

- In a class of 20-30, it can be extremely time-consuming, taking time away from useful tasks.

- Other learners 'switch off' as don't understand, aren't interested, or simply cannot hear.

- Learners often don't fully understand what they're reading, so they read aloud imperfectly - for listeners this is at best a **barrier to enjoyment**, at worst a **barrier to comprehension**

It seems that many of us don't fully understand how to use RA. We don't appreciate the challenges involved ….

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Reading: a complex interplay of skills and processes

involves extracting and constructing meaning

interactive

involves decoding (lower) + higher processes

The reader = “an active information processor”

comprehension ***emerges*** from the component skill processes

And yet “reading is something many of us take for granted.” Grabe (2008)

What the learners say from one key study ...

In one study, brain-imaging was used to see how the students' brains lit up when RA in L1 and L2

1 I could read aloud the easy English passage very smoothly. I read it aloud in the same way I did the Japanese ones. .. But reading the difficult English passage aloud was difficult. I was only able to catch the key words, and I think my attention was rather put on vocalization of the words. [*Participant LJ*]

2 It was very difficult to read the (difficult English) passage aloud. I tried to get its meanings but I couldn't, because I was reading aloud and paying more attention to pronouncing each word properly. [*Participant IL*]

3 I didn't understand the meanings of the (difficult English) passage very well. ...I gave up, because the length of each word was getting longer and I had to concentrate just on vocalization of the passage[*Participant LT*]

Takeuchi, Ikeda and Mizumuto 2012

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Cognitive Load Theory

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Cognitive Load Theory: some quotes

Cognitive load = the load that performing a particular task imposes on the learner's cognitive system *Paas et al.2003*

First, **avoid split-attention**, which occurs when **multiple sources of information must be mentally integrated**. *Sweller 2017*

As flexible and resilient as it is, the human brain can only cope with so much newness at any given point. *Bauducco 2021*

In any learning situation, the learner's attention funnels info to their short-term, working memory. Our hope is that much of this info will then be stored in the learner's long-term memory. **The bottle-neck in this process is the processing capacity** of working memory.... It is very **easy to overload the learner's working memory**...

Ragsdale 2019

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The benefits of RA

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Is RA worthwhile?

Gabrielatos claims RA, as typically used, can actually be 'detrimental' to the development of reading skills'. Also questions if it benefits speaking, as written language is different from spoken. However, he claims it is useful for phonology. (2002)

Gibson states that the disadvantages could be 'mitigated by careful and appropriate use'....'the role of RA in language learning should now be reappraised. (2008).

There are good reasons for doing RA, providing the timing and approach is right in the lesson...

More generally, what are some of the possible advantages?

If used appropriately ...

- It can provide a change of focus in the classroom, adding to **variety**, particularly in a 'reading lesson'
- Hearing oneself speak aloud in a foreign language, can be **motivating**.
- It encourages deeper **processing**. Cognitively, activating reading **in combination with** oral and phonological awareness and recognition could be beneficial.
- This may in turn aid **memory**
- **Auditory learners,** or those who rate pronunciation highly, often respond well to this activity

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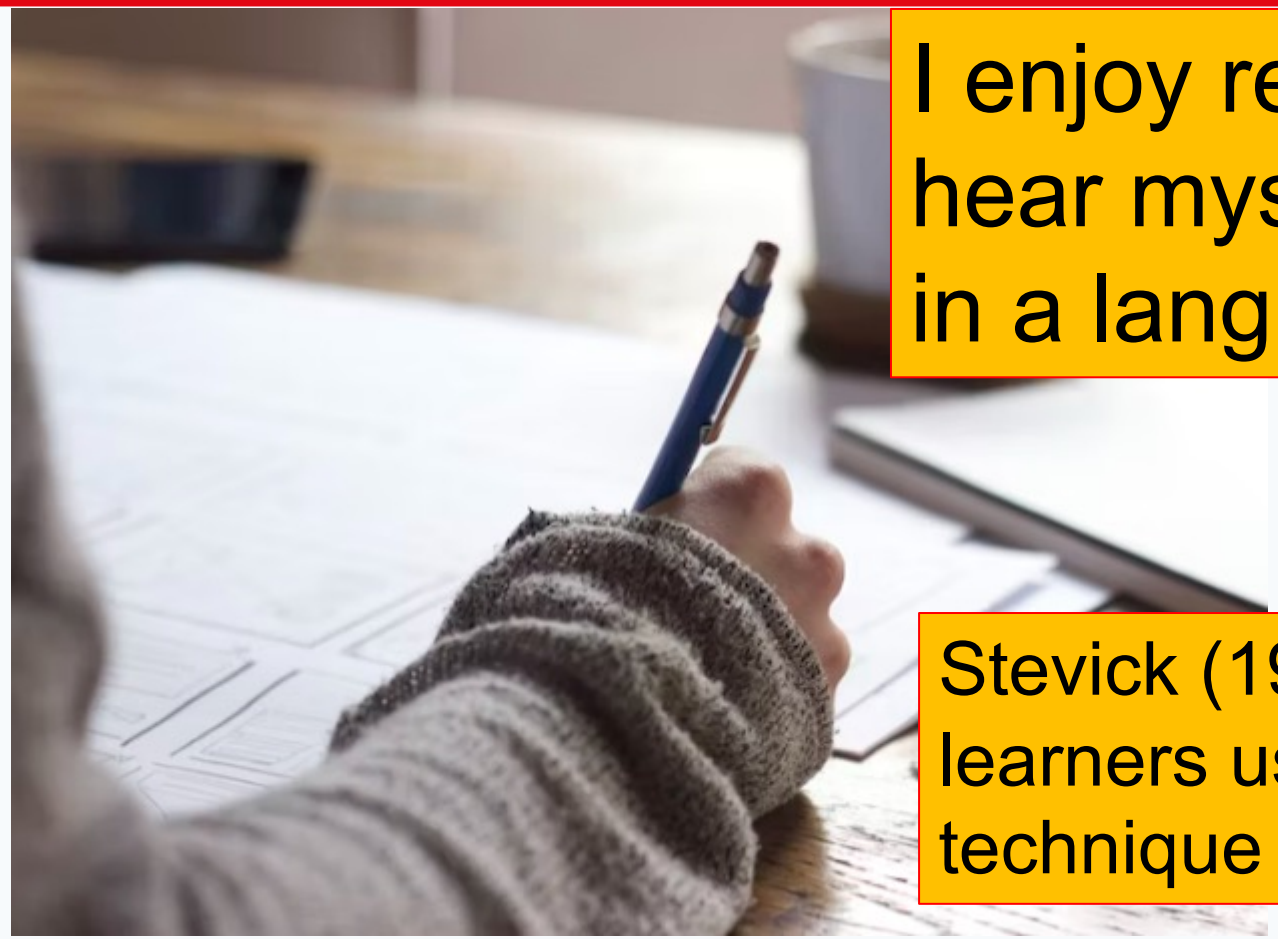
And, as a language learner…



I enjoy reading aloud, to hear myself speaking in a language I'm learning.

Stevick (1987) found many good language learners used RA too as a learning technique outside the classroom

And some learners explicitly need/want to RA

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Certain learners want/need to focus on RA

Some of my recent learners …

A Czech doctor obliged to do countless presentations on neuroscience, to an international organisation

A Brazilian primary teacher in London who often has to read stories aloud to her children.

A Hungarian politician who had to give an important political speech in English

An Italian secondary school teacher/translator who just wanted to improve her reading aloud skills as she felt it would improve her pronunciation

A German man (fluent in 4 languages) and interested in English literature, e.g. Shakespeare and Keats

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Level of these learners?

- All, except the politician, were **C1 or C2** level. And the politician was extremely familiar with the content of his speech.

To note:

- *Even my **C2** learners find it challenging to read aloud AND digest the content on first reading. The **cognitive load** is simply too high.*

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And for teachers?

If used appropriately, in a principled way ...

- It can actually be a useful **indicator of genuine reading ability** and of the learner's **level of comprehension** of a text - not just pronunciation and decoding at word level, but also at phrase, clause level and beyond (tonic placement + tone units).

Kuhn and Stahl on L1 (2003) and Gibson on L2 (2008) found that clear expression, using prosody, displays understanding and efficient reading skills.

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So what's the general procedure with RA?

What are we saying about the *placement* of RA in a class?

Leading up to RA in class ...

... learners need to understand what they are reading about, to reduce the CL.

... they also may need emotional, linguistic and phonological support before they RA, given the barriers discussed

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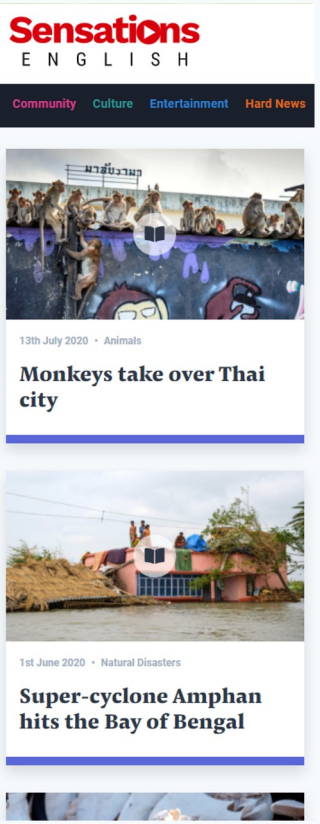
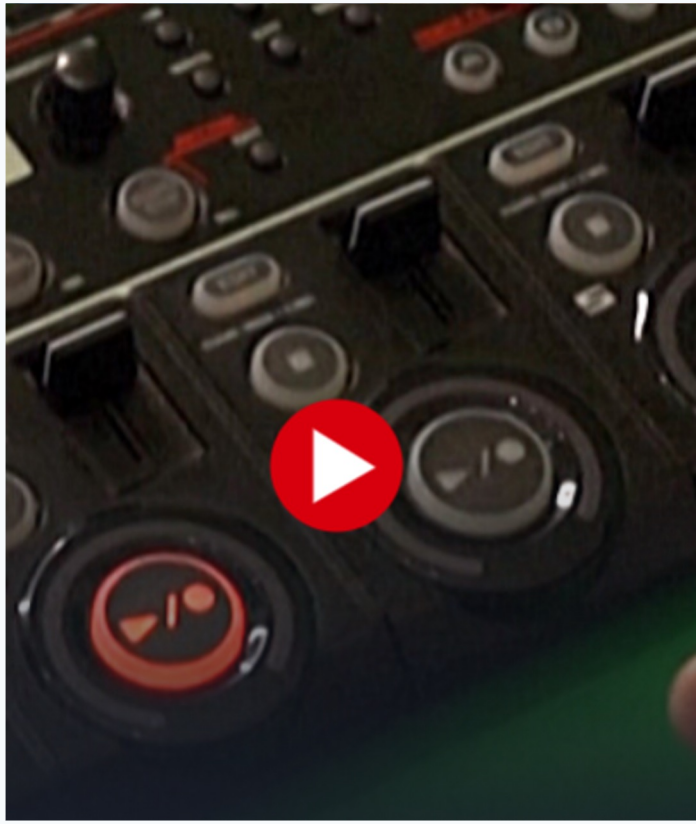


How does RA work in the actual classroom ?

Some practical suggestions



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First remove the comprehension block

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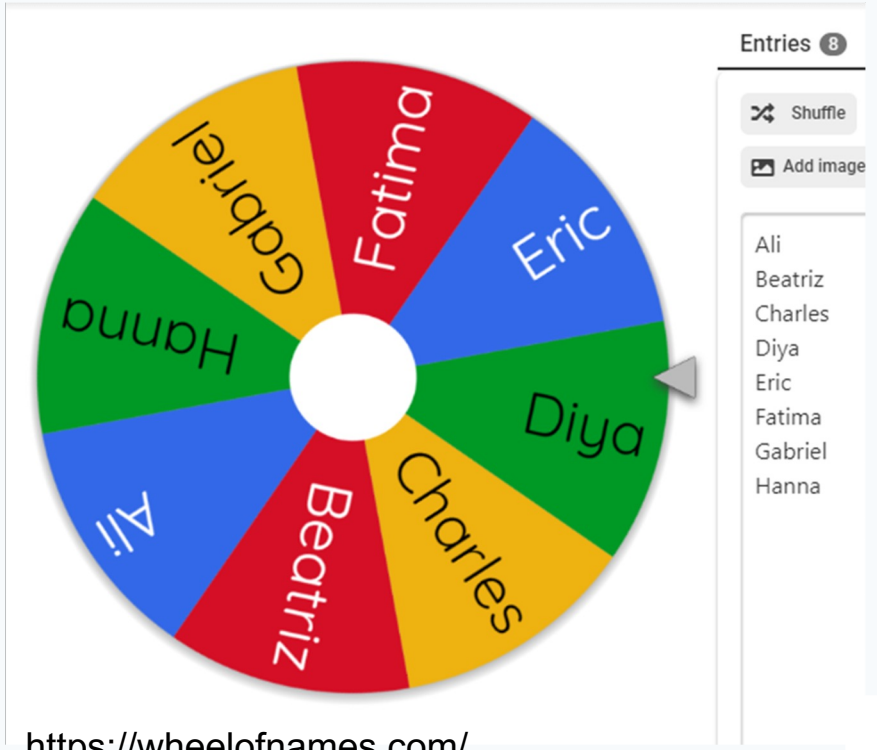
ONE: Use random nominating, where apt



https://wheelofnames.com/

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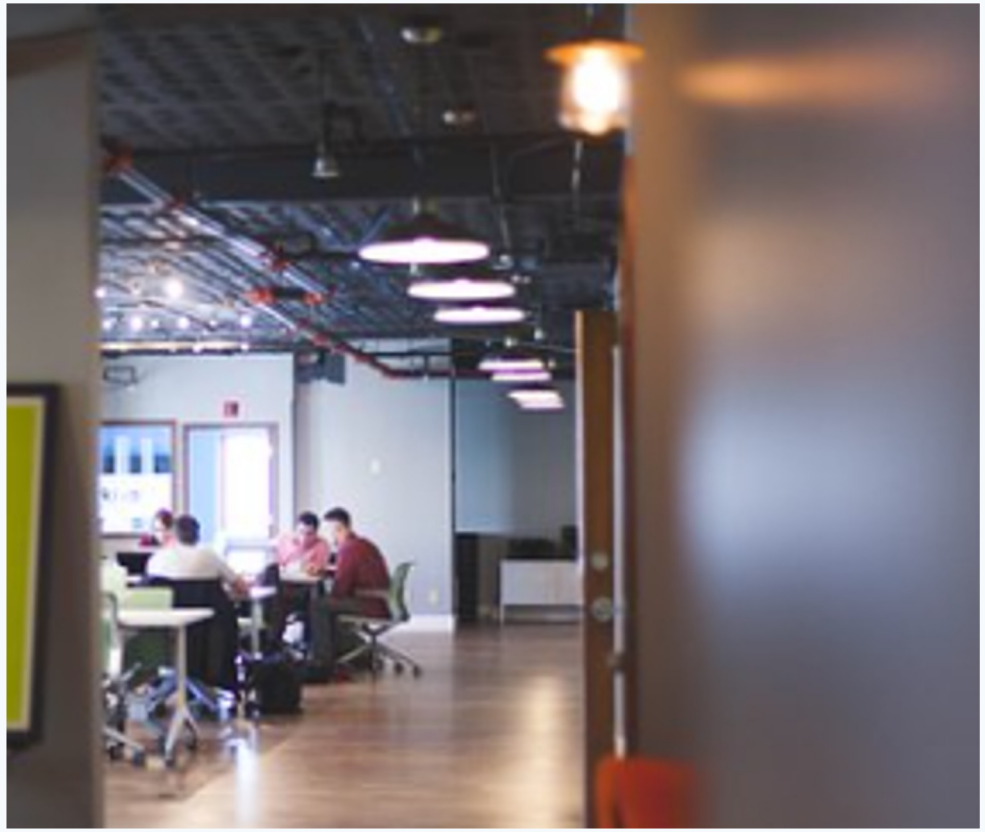
TWO: Sometimes do RA in pairs or small groups, not in front of the whole class



- Learners practise in groups
- T monitors, assists, responds.
- Then possibly select **one GROUP** to read aloud to the class, from time to time - a group effort.

TASK What difference might this make? Write in the chat.

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THREE: At least sometimes, allow for rehearsal time, with assistance

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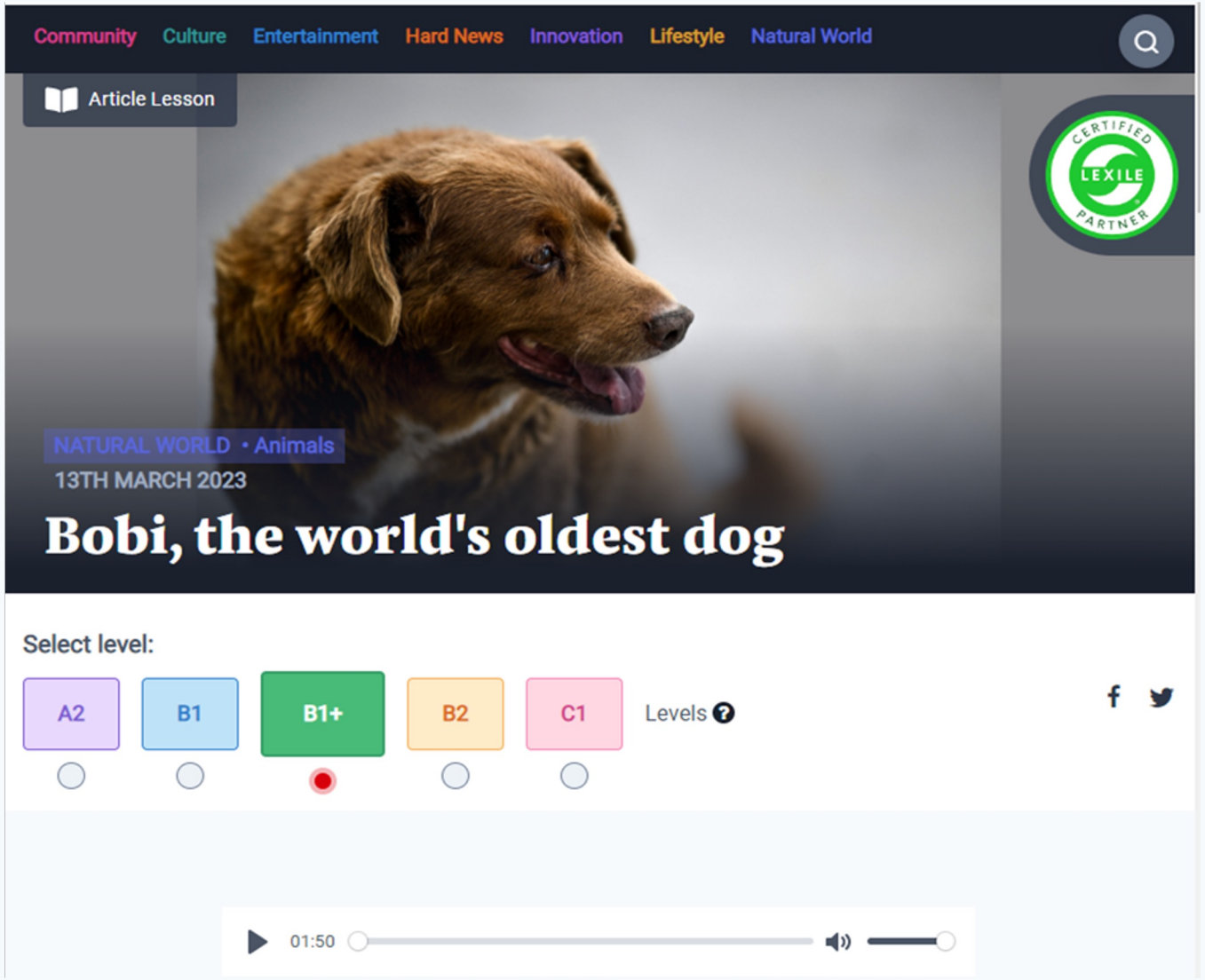
FOUR: Let learners hear you/the recording first, unless the text is very easy for them



Some sites, such as *Sensations*, allow you to hear the audio too, as well as providing the transcript.

In these situations, learners become "newsreaders"

AUDIO LINK

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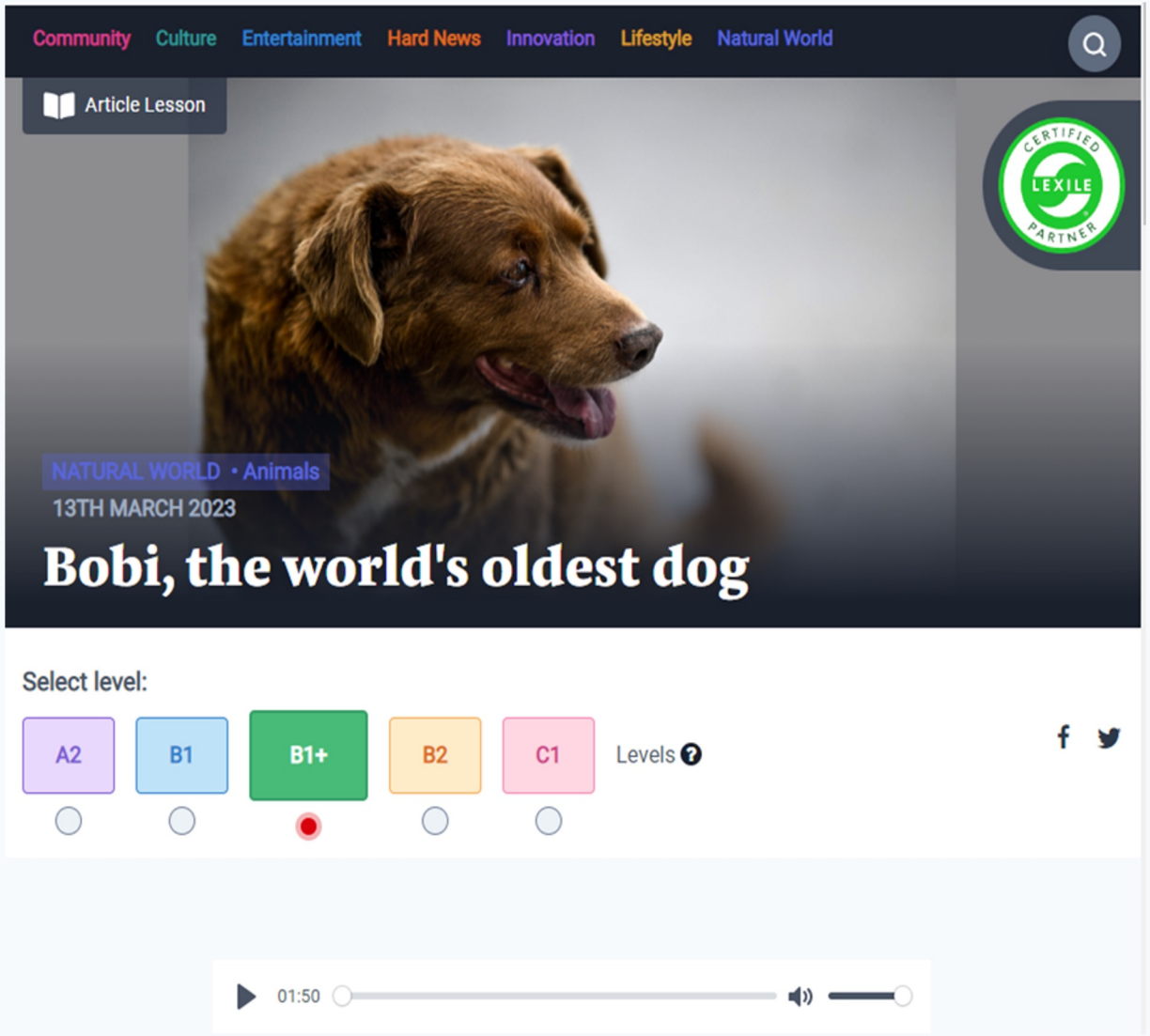
FIVE: Avoid asking learners to RA something which has a high cognitive load



Sensations English has different levels. One option is to ask learners to read aloud at a **lower** level than their receptive level.

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SIX: Discuss RA - give it substance

Treat it as a valued learning and teaching strategy, not simply part of an unquestioned classroom routine.

Discuss the reasons for doing it

Discuss progress in RA

Give praise, where appropriate to readers

Discuss the challenges, the fears, what makes it easier for them

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SEVEN: Give learners choices

How many sentences to read aloud - one, two or three?

Before reading aloud to the whole class, first practise with peers?

How much prep time? 1,2, or 3 mins?

Hear the teacher/audio say it (again) first?

RA individually (quietly in head), just to partner or whole class?

Help or no help from the teacher?

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EIGHT: Try shadow-reading ...

https://www.sensationsenglish.com/video/Nx9muF/3#

TASK ***You as learners.***

Think about ...

- **Why** do you think women are now able to work as mechanics?
- **How** do you think the women **feel** about it?
- **What** do you think some of the **difficulties** they might face?

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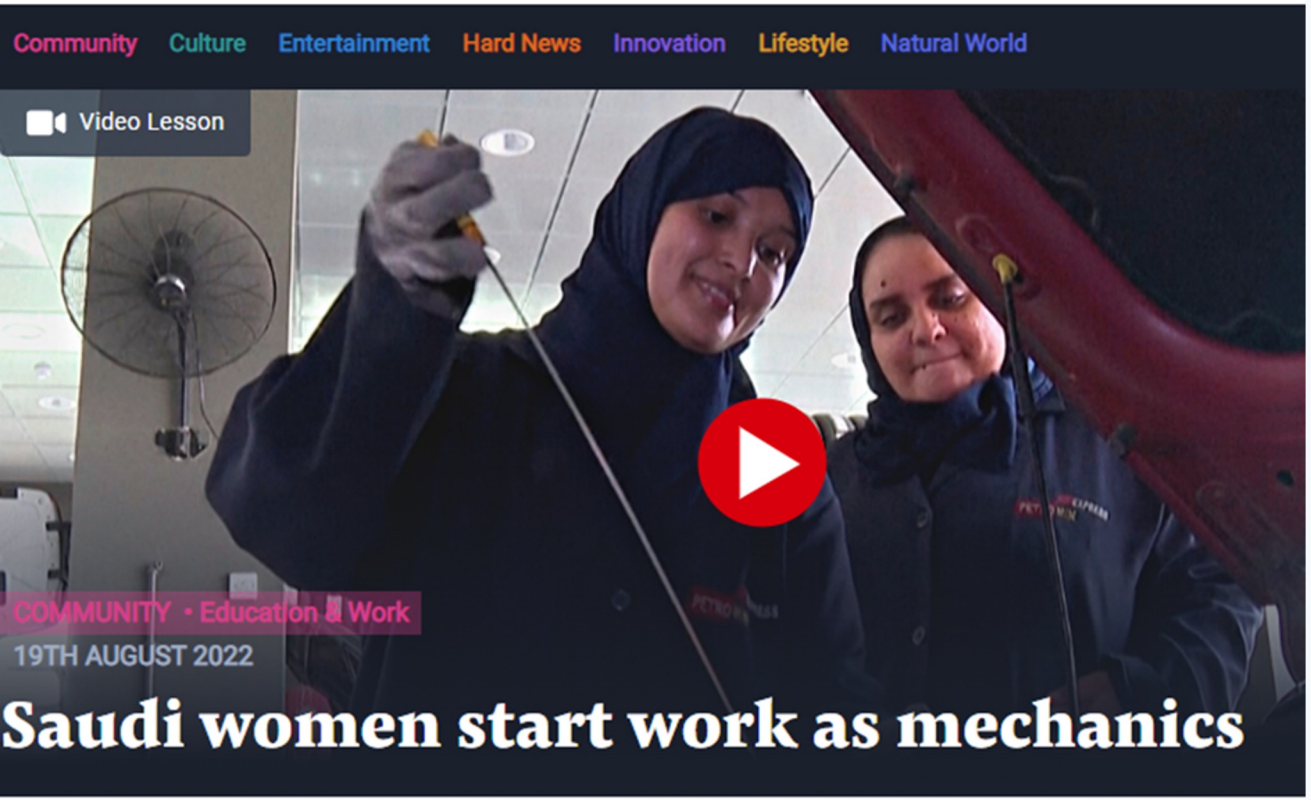
Shadow-reading - what is it?

https://www.sensationsenglish.com/video/Nx9muF/3#



Build up to shadow-reading a chunk/the whole text with the audio.

TASK Silently read the text (1st two parags only).

Then read them again WITH the audio, using the sub-titles.

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Transcript: Saudi women start work as mechanics

Women are starting to work on cars in garages across Saudi Arabia. The government's expanding women's rights to work as part of the country's economic plan. This moves towards Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's strategy to widen the nation's economy by 2030.

The first step, which happened in 2018, gave women the right to drive. Now, they're training as mechanics and working on those cars, just like their male colleagues.

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NINE: explicit pron work

At times, spend some time integrating explicit pron work.
You might do this prior to shadow-reading, for example.

https://www.sensationsenglish.com/video/Nx9muF/3#

You could choose to pick out:

Specific problem sounds for your learners

Problem syllables/word stress

Features of connected speech, e.g. the schwa or consonant-vowel linking

Tonic stress

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Explicit pron work: breaking it down

You could choose to:

a) Pick out **problem sounds**
b) Select **problem words** - syllables/consonant clusters

The first step, which happened in 2018, gave women the right to drive. Now, they're training as mechanics and working on those cars, just like their male colleagues.

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Explicit pron work: breaking it down

The first step,// which happened in 2018,// gave women // the right to drive.// Now, // they're training as mechanics // and working on those cars,// just like // their male colleagues.

You could choose to:

c) Pick out **tonic stress** in each // intonational phrase //

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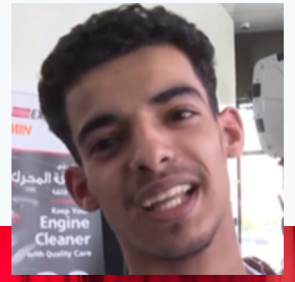
TEN: Try "gamifying" RA

Use **drama**, e.g. get learners to read aloud with pausing and emotions.

Sensations - some video pieces include different speakers too

NARRATOR
+



AND/OR
Read aloud with no hesitation or repetition! Pose this as a challenge to stronger readers.

ELEVEN: Favourite sentence

"It says here ....."

As in real-life, learners read, then choose the most interesting sentence, for them.

One by one, tell the class, "*It says here*", followed by the sentence, which they RA.

Harmer 2009

You could vary this: "*There's one line I found really interesting. Listen to this*," or " *I like this bit*", followed by the sentence.

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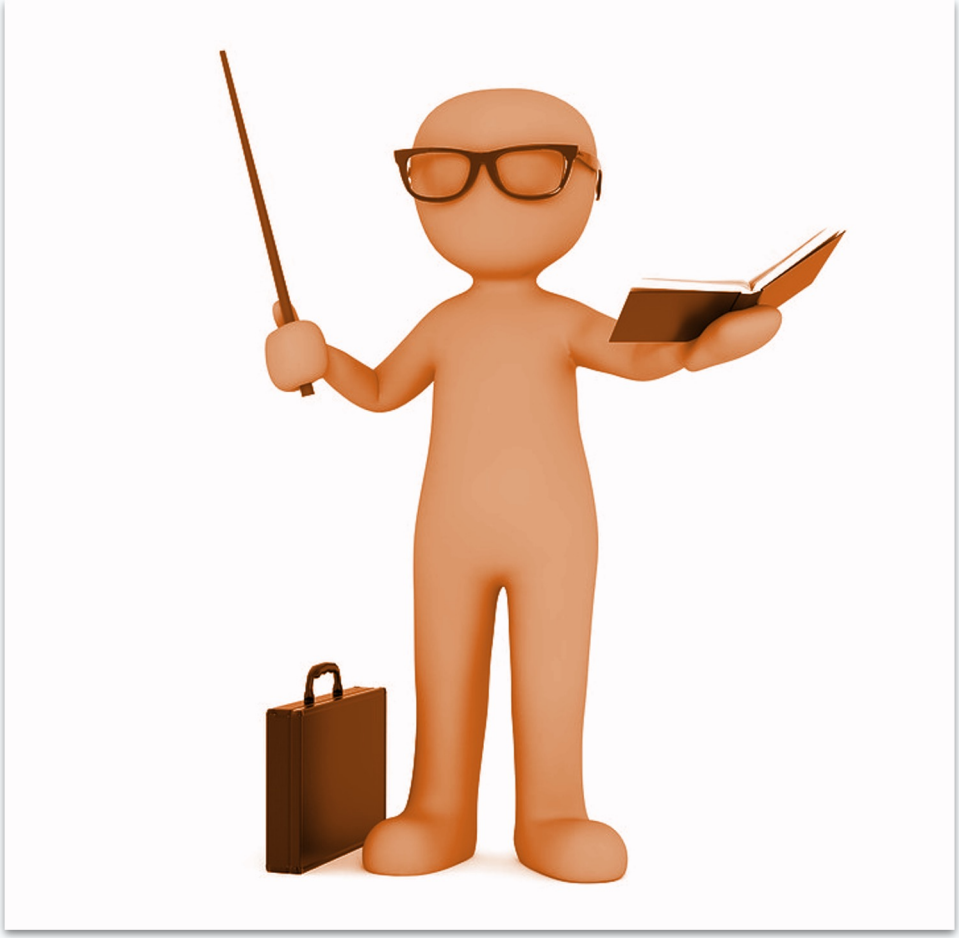
TWELVE: Memorization



Now and again, get each of your learners to memorize one (or poss) two sentences from a text. They have to then RA, with you orchestrating - challenging but fun!

TWELVE: Use it to round off, not begin a skills class

Why not get ss to sometimes read aloud a short passage as a **whole** class **together** too, with you? Boys, then girls? Half class, other half?

HINT: Use 3 claps at the end of each sentence, to stay in unison.

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And so .....

If reading aloud is used insensitively or inappropriately, the objections are still valid. However, given the approval of reading aloud by the researchers, it is not reading aloud in itself that is bad practice, but its misuse.

Gimson 2008

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To sum up …

- Reading aloud can be extremely worthwhile for both learners and teachers, not least for pronunciation and for indicating level of understanding.
- If handled properly and in a varied way, it can also be enjoyable too, giving light and shade to a lesson.
- It needs to be approached in the right way, not 'cold' i.e. first the content needs to be understood, to reduce the CL and allow learners to focus on how to vocalize the words.

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March

Fran Watkins
Teacher trainer, teacher, exam and materials writer

Reading aloud:
a useful or useless ELT activity for learners?

We will explore:

- how, when and why to use reading aloud with learners
- which learners may benefit most
- practical, effective approaches and techniques
- which genres suit reading aloud

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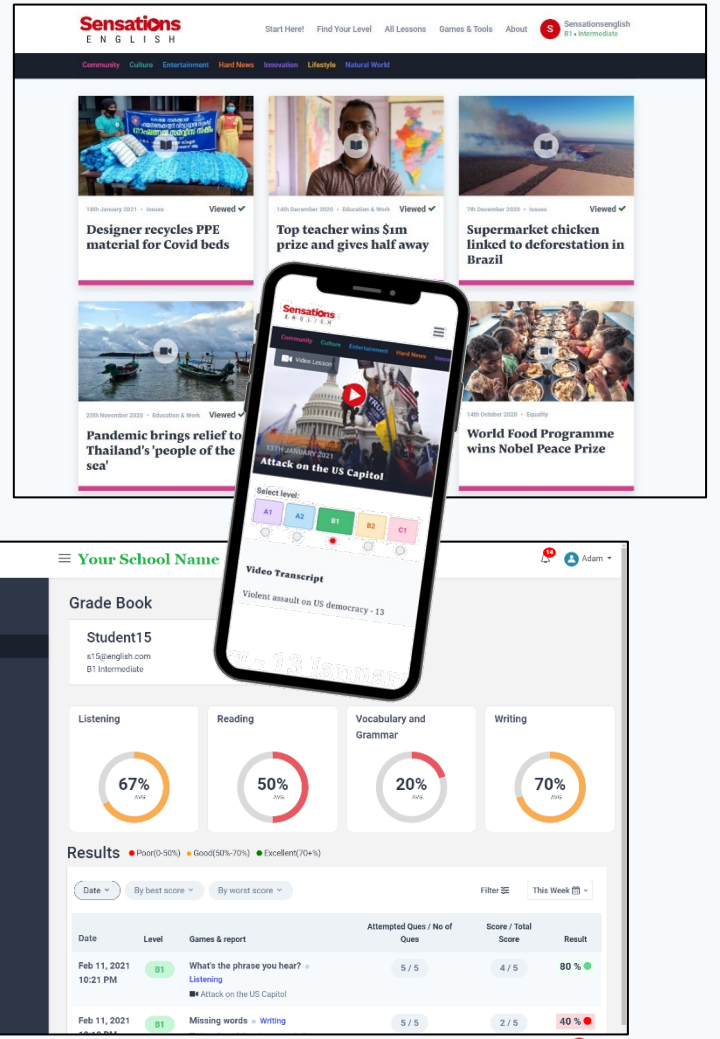

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