

Giving Effective Instructions: Using Think Aloud

Hyunsun Chung and Woomee L. Kim
George Mason University
Fairfax, Virginia, U.S.A.

Think Alouds can be used by EFL teachers to model classroom language and critical thinking skills.

English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers can model the target language for their students to facilitate a communicative language learning process. Students can observe their EFL teachers and learn from how they think, speak, and read in English. A Think Aloud is most commonly used as a reading comprehension strategy. In a Think Aloud, teachers talk aloud about what they are thinking about, as they are reading a text. "Their verbalizations include describing things they're doing as they read to monitor their comprehension. The purpose of the think-aloud strategy is to model for students how skilled readers construct meaning from a text." (Farr & Connor, 2004). Think Alouds give students time and space to think about what they are reading. Students also can use their prior knowledge when participating in a Think Aloud. Therefore, the teacher should carefully plan and select the various Think Aloud strategies.

Different Think Aloud strategies and expressions can promote higher order of thinking and facilitate active target language use in EFL classrooms.

EFL teachers can use the following Think Aloud strategies to create a communicative learning environment. Various teacher

expressions during Think Alouds can support learners' language development and critical thinking. As teachers model, students can also be given opportunities to think and speak using these strategies and expressions. Figure 1 below lists some Think Aloud strategies and sample expressions that teachers can use with their students.

Figure 1. Think Aloud strategies and sample expressions.

Think Aloud Strategies	Sample Expressions
1. Prediction	"I predict..." "In the next part, I think..."
2. Questioning	"Why did...?" "What did...?"
3. Visualizing	"I see..." "I picture..." <i>Personal Responses</i> "I feel..." "My favorite part is..." "I liked/disliked..."
4. Clarifying	"I got confused when..." "I'm not sure of..." "I didn't expect..."

5. Summarizing	"I think this is mainly about..." "The most important idea is..."
6. Reflecting	"I think I'll...next time." "Maybe I'll need to...next time." "I realized that..." "I wonder if..."
7. Making Connections	"This is like..." "This reminds me of..." "This is similar to..." "If it were me..."

Best practices for using Think Aloud.

The following are some best practices when using Think Aloud:

- Choose a reading text, then pre-read and decide which Think Aloud strategy(s) best fit the text.
- Then, use sticky notes to mark the parts in the text where you expect your students to experience some reading challenges due to unfamiliar vocabulary, pictures, and/or difficult sentences. By using sticky notes, you can easily find these parts during a lesson and verbalize your thinking out loud.
- Do not choose too many strategies for one text because too much input can confuse the students.

In an actual Think Aloud with students, teachers model the potential student thought processes and questions that may take place when students are reading. That

leads to coaching how to make connections, ask the right questions, and predict what will happen next. Also, students learn to recognize their background knowledge for the text, where they are confused, how to find clues, and eventually which strategies they can use according to the purpose for reading the text (Farr & Conner, 2004).

When giving classroom instructions, remember to "Just do it" and that "Less is more."

It may be quite obvious to teachers that their learners need to know what they are supposed to do for a given activity. Giving clear directions is a basic input strategy but it is not always easy to perform. Parrish (2004) recommends teachers two use mottos. They are "Just do it" and "Less is more." As you can already imagine, "Just do it" means that teachers need to actively demonstrate the tasks for their students, instead of just explaining verbally the entire task directions. Once the teacher demonstrates with a student, two other students can repeat the questions to the whole class for clarification. The next motto, "Less is more", means that lengthy explanations should be divided into multi-steps, in order to facilitate students' meaningful understanding. Teachers need to remember to identify and demonstrate each step, one at a time.

Figure 2 below shows a sample activity handout that guides students to talk about their interests and hobbies.

Figure 2. A sample activity handout.

How do you like to spend time on weekends?

From the list of activities below:

- Circle three things you like to do.
- Cross out three things that you never do.
- Write three other things you like to do in your free time.

Activities

watch movies
chat with friends
work out
read
listen to music
cook
garden
swim
go to the library
visit family
take care of younger siblings
ride a bike
go hiking
play basketball

Example B

T: Dildora, what do you like to do on the weekend?

D: I like to read.

T: So do I. (T places sample handout on overhead and circles 'read'.) Do you ever garden?

D: No.

T: Neither do I. (T crosses off 'garden'. T distributes handout to class.) Akbar, what do you do on the weekend?

A: Play football. (T uses a questioning look.) Do you see football on the list? (T points to overhead.)

Class: No. (T asks Akbar to write it on the blank. T and Class now read instructions together.)

T: What do you circle?

C: Things we do on the weekend.

T: What do you cross out?

C: Things we don't do on the weekend.

Class completes part 1 of the handout individually and then T gives instructions for part 2 through a similar demonstration.

Next, two different teacher talks are presented in the examples that give task instructions to students. As you read these examples, consider which version of the directions you use more often.

Figure 3. Teacher talk examples.

Example A

Teacher distributes the handouts listing the hobbies and activity direction to class.

T: "Now you are going to talk about things you like to do when you have some free time during the weekend. I want you to circle three things you like to do, cross out three you don't like to do, and add three more things you like to do. After you finish, talk to people in class and find the person who has the most in common with you. Ask them the questions at the bottom of your handout."

Which version of giving directions do you use more often? Can you explain the main differences between the two examples? In Example A, the teacher gives a lengthy explanation of the activity, but does not demonstrate what the students will do. The teacher cannot tell the students' comprehension of her instructions because she does not interact with them. In Example B, the teacher spends time walking through the activity with the students, modeling the process, and asking questions to guide meaningful conversation. She is using the "Less is more" motto to give clear instructions.



References

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Parrish, B. (2004). *Teaching adult ESL: A practical introduction*. McGraw-Hill.