

# Reading Aloud in Britain Today: an overview and implications

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## Introduction

*Do you ever read out loud?*

*When, where, with whom and why?*

*Do you ever listen to others reading aloud?*

Though I have asked this question now a great many times, I am never bored by the answers I get. I am in the second year of a two-year Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project recording and analysing contemporary adult reading aloud practices. I have been trying to ask as many adults across Scotland, Wales and England the questions in italics above. Why have I been doing this? There are many ways to answer this. One answer is simply that very little is known, or written down, about this. If scholars from 2500 were to try to find out what adult reading was like in 2018, they would find all sorts of records of the types of texts created, sold, borrowed from libraries or downloaded onto devices. They might also find bestseller lists, book reviews and reading curricular. They would find quite a lot, in other words, about the texts that were read and about ideas to do with the teaching of reading. They would find few clues, though, about how texts were read, and in particular about what was read in silence and what aloud, using the voice and ear. Similarly, if you were to do an internet search under 'reading aloud' right now, you would probably find material about the use of reading aloud as a teaching tool to teach literacy or language, and you would almost certainly find material about the importance of parents reading to their children. You would find it much harder to find anything about the reading aloud practices that we as adults may do regularly across the different domains of our lives (Duncan, 2015, 2018).

But why does this matter? I think it matters because we talk about teaching or developing 'reading' as if we all share an understanding of what reading means, but do we? What exactly do we mean by 'reading'? 'Reading,' particularly in teaching or research contexts, is usually taken to mean an individual, silent process of looking at some marks on a page and deciphering a meaning. Reading certainly is this, but isn't it also so much more?

## The research project

Reading Aloud in Britain Today is a multi-method research project, using three different forms of data collection to gather information about contemporary reading aloud practices. It started in the summer of 2017 with a Mass Observation Project directive sent around ‘correspondents’, asking questions about reading aloud and their lives (see Directive 109, Summer 2017 under <http://www.massobs.org.uk/mass-observation-project-directives>). The summer of 2017 also saw the completion of a 29-item questionnaire that was distributed, mainly electronically, through project partners and community organisations (see pdf on the project website: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/research/projects/reading-aloud-britain-today>) (with the option of a hard-copy by post). By the beginning of 2018, 160 Mass Observation correspondents had sent in written responses to the ‘Reading Aloud’ directive, in hard copy and by email, and 529 people had completed the questionnaire. Finally, between October 2017 and July 2018, I travelled around Scotland, Wales and England interviewing adults and, where possible, making audio-recordings of both these interviews and of adults undertaking different forms of reading aloud.

The decision to use these three methods of data collection was, on one level, simply about trying to find multiple ways to gain the participation of a range of people across Britain, each offering different ways for experiences to be fed into the project. More than this, though, these forms of data collection all allow for the gathering of data in keeping with the work of New Literacy Studies, or the ethnography of literacy more broadly, championed by the work of Brice-Heath (1983, 2012), Street (1984), Barton & Hamilton (1998) and Gregory and Williams (2002). In this view, literacy is recognised as a socially-situated, varied, ideological and ever-evolving social practice. Within this perspective, what ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ mean is not self-evident but rather we need continual examinations of the real-life usage of different communities to inform our understandings. As Mace (1998) and Baynham (2000) have stressed, if we remember that literacy practices involve personal and social meanings within or beneath the observable literacy events, we cannot hope to research literacy practice without finding ways to gather individual, first-person accounts to access these meanings or values. The thinking behind both the original (1937-1950s) and revived (1981-) Mass Observation Project are remarkably in keeping with this view and can be understood in terms of multiple layers of duality, being both collaborative writing and data collection, both an art and a social science, and involving correspondents writing both as autobiographers, telling the stories of their own lives, and sociologists observing others (see Kramer, 2014) for an analysis on this ‘dual vision’ (Duncan, 2018). The desire to gather both participants’ observations of practices and their personal accounts of their own experiences of reading aloud is the ‘Mass Observation ethos’ underpinning the Reading Aloud in Britain Today research design.

## **An overview of findings**

I will report back briefly now on what each of these forms of data collection tell us about adult reading aloud today.

### **The questionnaire**

The first thing that the questionnaire says, at least about its participants, is that reading aloud is widespread. Around 90% report reading something aloud either daily, weekly or monthly, and less than 3% never read anything aloud. This provides an answer of sorts to the question – do adults read aloud today? These ones, at least, certainly do. But more than this, it also says that the reading aloud that they do is diverse. Social media posts, newspapers, signs and posters, children's books, recipes and instructions, poetry and religious texts are some of the texts more often read aloud, with graffiti on toilet doors and placards at museums read aloud less often and by fewer people. The reasons for reading aloud are equally diverse, with reading aloud to share a text being the common reason indicated, with to memorize, to learn, to help others, to worship, to write and to enjoy as also commonly given reasons. Many also noted the range of purpose at play 'to fix instructions in my head or for comprehension of tricky language or for something unbelievable in the news', 'for the impact e.g. sibilance in a poem. To help with understanding wording. For problem solving.' 'To communicate information to someone else so they can comment on it straightaway. To instruct someone while working together (e.g. reading a recipe while cooking). To share the load of reading (e.g. a long Bible passage), hear different voices for variety and hear it come to life, to help parents/grandparents - if they are not wearing reading glasses.'

The questionnaire data also suggests something interesting about multilingualism. About half of those who filled out the survey indicated that they at least sometimes read aloud in more than one language. Some of these seemed more 'traditional' forms of multilingualism, reading aloud in the two or more languages they use to communicate in most days: 'I am bilingual – Polish and English- and occasionally read aloud in both languages' or 'I read aloud in English in class.' 'Also, love reading aloud in French as I am a French speaker.' Some are reading for religious purposes, where that language is used almost exclusively for that religious purpose 'Religious reasons – Arabic' or 'In Hebrew at the synagogue.' A great many are for language learning purposes: 'I'm learning Danish and it help me,' 'When I was learning German in the 80s it was really useful to get my tongue around the demanding consonant clusters.' Some are people who seem to value the sounds, rhythms and texts of a language (Old Norse for example) that they do not use to communicate with others. Rather, their engagement with this language takes the form of reading and reading aloud: 'I read good poetry aloud in English, Persian and Azeri Turkish' or 'I also read Latin and Ancient Greek aloud, slowly and repeatedly, in order to wrestle the meaning from the texts.' This may be well a useful reminder that our engagement with other languages, our voicing of other languages even, is not necessarily mainly or always about person-to-person communication.

We do, though, need to consider who the survey participants are. These 529 adults are not a mini-version of the current population of Britain. They are a fair representation geographically, and over-represent linguistic and ethnic/cultural diversity, but are 75% female and 75% university educated. Men and those without a university education are therefore significantly under-represented. It is also clear that those who filled in the survey were predisposed to talking or thinking about reading (choosing to fill in a survey called 'everyday reading'), and most were confident doing surveys online. We need to remember, therefore, that the sample are not necessarily speaking for 'most people' in Britain. However, it is equally important to note that these are not reading aloud fanatics. Nearly everyone noted that they prefer reading silently to reading aloud, do more reading silently and find reading silently easier. These 529 adults may well be (overall) a university-educated group particularly keen on reading, and particularly confident doing online surveys, but they do not seem to be particularly preoccupied with reading aloud specifically (a number noted that they had not thought much about reading aloud before doing the survey), and this makes their responses of great interest.

### Mass Observation

The 160 Mass Observation responses range from less than half a page to over eight pages, 96 by email and the remainder posted. These can all be read, along with other Mass Observation responses, at the Mass Observation Archive at the Keep in Sussex. The overwhelming message is one of *surprise* at the topic ('adults and reading aloud don't go together') and *realisation* that they read aloud more than they had realised (with the word *realise* or *realised* appearing frequently). This cannot be overemphasised, so strongly does it feature:

'my first reaction – I don't do it. But the more I thought about it, the more I realised I do actually read out loud, more than I thought I did'

'I suddenly realise that I am saying these words aloud as I tap them out on the word processor. Something I must be doing continuously without realising it.'

'I imagine like other people I had thought little about reading aloud [...] It was something I immediately associated with childhood. However, the more I've thought about it, I've realised that I read aloud or am read aloud to in a variety of ways.'

Participants also wrote about a great many different reading aloud practices and sixty-six kept a reading aloud diary detailing these. I grouped the practices into 20 categories: memorises from childhood and youth; generic work practices; specific work activities; study purposes; individual and group writing processes; sharing correspondence; following instructions, recipes or reading ingredients; preparing and giving speeches; board games, quizzes, crosswords and quizzes; play-reading, drama and amateur dramatics; engagement with poetry; religious worship; to help others; reading books or stories to other adults; listening to audiobooks; engagement with social

media and the news, and miscellaneous solitary practices (including throat exercises). Six headline points may be a better way in to all this:

1	More people reported reading aloud social media posts and newspapers than reading to children (despite reading aloud with children being such a visible, talked about practice).
2	Not all reading of books and stories is to children, a large amount is to other adults.
3	Not all reading aloud is to others at all, a lot done completely alone and to pets.
4	A great deal of reading aloud at happens in the workplace, both more specialist (e.g. scripts used for forms of therapy or reading aloud to perform wedding ceremonies as a registrar) and generic (such as the reading of minutes at meetings or the reading aloud of health and safety regulations).
5	Many different forms of reading aloud happen as part of individual and group religious worship, including reading aloud and listening, one person reading aloud to many listeners, many people reading aloud or reciting together in unison and solitary reading aloud.
6	Finally, it is notable just how much poetry, drama and literary reading activity goes on among this group, across a range of ages and educational backgrounds. This says as much, or more, about the often hidden natures of these more 'artistic' aspects of adult life as it does about reading aloud itself.

Remembering, though, that the Mass Observation correspondents are writing as autobiographers as well as sociologists, here are two examples of the many, many stories told:

'My dying friend, bed-ridden and no longer able to go outside, particularly enjoyed listening to poems about nature and the seaside. It made her feel nostalgic and she imagined herself walking along a beach with sand between her toes.'

'I chanced one evening to accidentally receive Radio Cairo which was broadcasting, in Arabic I suppose, an extremely long reading [...] by a man whose voice and style were so intense and passionate, that I was mesmerized by it all, and was compelled to listen. I didn't understand any of it, but recognised that some sentences were from time to time repeated as in an heroic poem. The passion and intensity of the reading increased to an extreme degree as the reading continued until, abruptly it ended- very precipitately as if the reader had been shot dead. I sat stunned: its emotional effect was enormous although I

understood not a word. I remember it even now, more than half a century later, and can still hear that reader's passionate voice – it still has an effect upon me.'

I would invite any readers to think about what these two stories are telling us about reading aloud, and also, why, when asked about their literacy practices, correspondents respond with stories like these (see Duncan, 2018 for a longer analysis of the Mass Observation data)

### **The recordings: interviews and practices**

Between October 2017 and July 2018, I travelled around, interviewing and making recordings of people reading aloud in Rotherham, Hull, Frome, Glasgow, Shetland, Skye, Pontypool, Huddersfield, Nottingham, Gloucestershire, Leicester, Sunderland and all over Greater London. 91 audio-recordings are now in the British Library Sound Archive available to listen to in the reading rooms ([British Library Sound & Moving Image Catalogue shelf mark C1765](#)). The range of practices and purposes are broadly similar to those noted in the questionnaire and Mass Observation responses, but the nature of these in-depth interviews and audio-recordings allowed the capture of more detailed explorations, explanations and conversations. In the presentation I gave at the conference, instead of presenting an analysis, I played a 5-minute edit of some of the interviews. The extracts that these were taken from are available to listen to [here on the project website](#), and all of these interviews are available to listen to in full at the British Library. However, I would like to try to capture something of this approach here with this edited transcript of these seven voices, arranged here into three themes, each of which highlights the profound in the 'everyday'.

#### *1) 'Everyday stuff': 'reinforcing' the 'right things'*

Voice 1: I got married quite late [...] I do a lot of shopping, so shopping involves her reading me lists and me talking about them, so negotiating shopping, everyday stuff. We talk a lot and we listen to the radio, you know online stuff that we share, newspaper items we get, you know [...] we'll read and talk about bits that interest us [...] just everyday stuff. [...] we arrange a lot of meetings, so we read from emails, talk about, you know 'can you do Wednesday week? 'No, my sister's coming.' 'Oh blast, blah blah blah' and we'll look at something else and then we'll read again so, everyday stuff is one thing.

Voice 3: If my partner's driving and he has messages, I'll read them back to him [...], I'll get them mixed up, mind [...] in supermarkets I tend to read aloud [...] reading ingredients and stuff- [...] cause I've gone gluten free and I just pick something up and read – I probably look like a crazy person standing there reading to myself, but you see a lot of people doing it [...]

Voice 4: You do see people in the supermarket doing it a lot [...] I do it for clarification that there's no wheat in it, it sounds silly, but in my head it makes sense and if I read it aloud, and I've read every word, and I've spoke every word, then it means that's not in it, if I haven't seen wheat in it or gluten then that's not in it.

Voice 3: I think it's back to, same as revision, reading aloud enforces it for me –

Voice 4: Enforces that thing. And recipes - I find if I do a recipe on my phone or on my tablet, I find myself talking to the tablet, relaying the information, right, now I'll do that now, I'll do that now – and I'm relaying the information as a reinforcement that I'm doing it right, and putting the right things in the right time and the right amount.

## *2) 'Expressing life': the 'mysterious' 'resonance' of the 'wider ownership' of words read aloud*

Voice 2: In the last couple of years, in Addis Ababa there have been poetry, developing poetry programmes and many youngsters are writing poetry to express themselves so I listen a lot through [...] social media, so it's interesting, they read out loud because there are lots of emotions in it, it's mainly political, social, a reflection of their life [...] The beauty of the language, but also the message [...] I mean you listen to politicians and it's dry, poetry is much more complex and it has beauty. It expresses life in a very amazing way, in a way that I like to listen because I can relate to that.

Voice 5: I would read out loud in our chapel because we have our own worship so there will be readings out loud in chapel [...] so out loud is quite an important thing for the rest of the community and the public to hear. [...] In my own prayer life too, I will frequently read aloud, poetry for example, because I like to hear the resonance of sound, and expression and it becomes much more alive for me.

Voice 6: The fact that the words on the page are being verbalised it gives them a different, a different resonance, it gives them a different meaning [...] you know when I'm in class and I'm reading the, you know, the phrase that I really wanted to, it's like 'oh yeah ok I really understand that differently now' [...] there's a different resonance, there's a different feeling to it, there's a different, it's almost like a play, like, it's like 'ok I can accent this word I this way,' or I can put this emotion on this word, or I can feel text in a different way [...]

Voice 5: There's a double dimension, isn't there? I would agree with you what you are saying. It's something to do with your body, something to do with your voice, the

ownership of the word widens completely and I think there's something quite mysterious actually.

### 3) 'Emotional' 'engagement': 'a time to be together'

Voice 7: I had a recent experience where my partner was not well and it sort of, it ended up being, not quite for medicinal purposes, but 'lie down and I'll read you a story' and it brought back, not quite memories [...] I was reading a novel, so, but that quiet, calm, someone not well, it was soothing, it was lovely, it was just a time to be together [...] it was quite a bit emotional moment actually where the engagement of one reader and one listener was – a dead interesting thing.

Here we see reading aloud fusing the ordinary and the extraordinary, or as a portal between the mundane and the metaphysical.

### **Conclusion 1: What does this tell us about adult reading aloud today?**

Looking across these three data sources, we can say that reading aloud *is* a ubiquitous part of adult life. It may not be talked about a great deal, but it is done, and it is done in lots of different ways, in different places and for different purposes. Reading aloud (like reading itself) is not one activity, one process, but many. Some of the reading aloud practices examined seem to be forms of service to others, whether to entertain, help, teach or facilitate worship. Other forms of reading aloud are employed to serve particular cognitive or creative purposes: for example, to memorize or learn something or to compose or refine text, alone or with others. Still other forms seem to be ends (or beginnings) in themselves, where the saying or hearing the words has particular importance, conjuring or proclaiming truths or enjoying sounds.

The project findings also encourage us to reassess the ways we can understand boundaries or divisions between literacy and oracy. We could consider, for example, whether a memorized and recited text that has never had a written form could be seen as a form of reading aloud. We could also think about how often we may do 'something' that is a mixture of reading aloud and improvised oral language, when doing a presentation from PowerPoint perhaps, ordering from a menu with friends, or discussing the opening times of a shop, standing outside staring at the sign in the pouring rain.

The data also suggest something about how we understand a literacy practice to be common or 'everyday'. Is a practice common when a person, or a certain number of people, do it frequently? (Every week? Every day?) Or is a practice common when it happens regularly across a society, a sort of prevalence, for example readings at weddings or funerals? These happen often but not within any one individual life. Or is it more about the cultural visibility of a practice? We hear a lot about reading to children but much less about the reading that adults may do to each other or that we may do completely alone to write emails. Are differences in visibility to do with context,

forms of power, or something else? What does this mean for whether these practices are included when we think about reading in educational contexts?

## **Conclusion 2: What does this mean for us as adult literacy teachers?**

The aim of the Reading Aloud in Britain Today project is to find out what people do and why. It is a 'finding out' exercise. It is not about advocating any particular uses of reading aloud or arguing that reading aloud should be used as a teaching tool. We can, though, think through potential implications as adult literacy teachers. Perhaps the most important, and simplest, implication is the importance of interrogating our definitions or conceptualisations of reading that underpin our teaching. When we teach reading, what are we teaching? The old Adult Literacy Core Curriculum and the Functional Skills English subject content documents do a decent job of breaking reading down into component skills, but this seems to have been done assuming that reading is always and only a silent process. There are no mentions of uses of the voice and ear or of reading to communicate something to someone else.

If we take seriously the reminders from Street (1984), Brice-Heath (1983) and others that our teaching needs to be based on careful examinations of what learners do and want to do, and that we must challenge dominant assumptions of what literacy is or means, then this should include remembering that reading is not one, single, uniform process, just repeated in different locations. Rather, 'reading' is an umbrella term for a hugely diverse range of practices and processes. This certainly does not mean that we all need to start doing lots of reading aloud in our classes, but I think it does mean that we need to be a bit more open in our explorations of the forms of reading engaged in by our learners and think a bit more carefully about how best to support our learners in developing the reading and writing skills that matter the most to them. This project has taught me that we cannot guess at the practices that mean the most in each other's lives (or assume they are like our own); we need to ask and keep asking.

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