

## Investigation of PoodLL ReadAloud in Moodle to reduce the foreign language learning anxiety in English and Japanese language classes

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How to cite: Ho, M. T. (2023). Investigation of PoodLL ReadAloud in Moodle to reduce the foreign language learning anxiety in English and Japanese language classes. In *CALL for all Languages - EUROCALL 2023 Short Papers*. 15-18 August 2023, University of Iceland, Reykjavik. <https://doi.org/10.4995/EuroCALL2023.2023.16956>

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### **Abstract**

*The advantages of learning a foreign language are widely acknowledged, and it is commonly understood that practice is essential for acquiring proficiency. However, learning another language has various obstacles, such as language learning anxiety which hinders students' learning capabilities. There are many studies to attempt to identify the anxiety provoking factors (Cheng et al., 1999; Khattak et al., 2011; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2000; Sellers, 2000; Zheng, 2008). Recent technological advancement offers many potential methods to empower student learning without anxiety. This study aimed to investigate one such tool, PoodLL ReadAloud activity in Moodle to enhance speaking practice. This study compared the anxiety levels experienced while speaking in foreign language classrooms with those experienced when using PoodLL on a computer, employing questionnaires (Short Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale and PoodLL Anxiety Scale). The anxiety level associated with using PoodLL was lower in first-year and second-year university classrooms, but not among graduate students. Additionally, feedback from the students using PoodLL revealed a positive practice experience, technical difficulties, and scepticism of AI grading. In conclusion, PoodLL shows promise as a tool for practicing speaking skills, however, further research is needed to assess its impact on skill improvement.*

**Keywords:** PoodLL, Moodle, speaking task, foreign language learning anxiety.

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## 1. Introduction

Speaking a foreign language offers numerous advantages, but individuals often encounter difficulties when they embark on learning another language. For example, the fear of making errors and feeling embarrassed, especially in speaking, can impede concentration and hinder optimal performance. Researchers have identified this anxiety as a common occurrence in foreign language classrooms and have conducted numerous studies to explore the contributing factors (Cheng et al., 1999; Khattak et al., 2011; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2000; Sellers, 2000; Zheng, 2008). Despite various studies, there is a scarcity of research focusing on types of less anxiety-provoking speaking practices to enable learners to reach their full potential. The technological advancements, including Artificial Intelligence (AI), offer significant potential for enhancing speaking practice. This study aimed to assess whether using PoodLL ReadAloud activities in speaking practice would be less anxiety-provoking than in regular classrooms, and gather students' feedback on their experience with PoodLL.

There are several studies to investigate and indicate the anxiety factors in foreign language classrooms (Ohata, 2005, Khattak et al., 2011, Effiong, 2015). Students reported that they constantly felt they were evaluated by teachers and peers, sometimes even by themselves (Ohata, 2005), and the fear of making mistakes in class could raise their anxiety level (Khattak et al., 2011). Even the teachers' dress code, their age, tone of voice and gender would provoke anxiety in the classroom (Effiong, 2015). Anything perceived as unfriendliness or strictness by the students could raise their anxiety level, and the students experienced stress, anxiety or nervousness during the foreign language class.

A key factor to influence the anxiety level in the language classroom is the students' level of confidence. Cheng et al. (1999) claimed the learners' confidence was a good predictor of their anxiety level. If the learners are confident in their speaking and writing abilities in the target language, they score lower in Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). MacIntyre et al. (1997) found that low-confidence learners tend to have negative expectations of language learning itself (MacIntyre et al., 1997). Increased anxiety among learners negatively impacts their willingness to engage in classroom communication, consequently impeding their learning opportunities (Cheng et al., 1999). Therefore, the students who are confident in the target language are less anxious and more likely to participate in classroom activities.

Some researchers use audio or video recording to alleviate speaking anxiety. Young & West (2018) analyzed the studies using Asynchronous Multimedia-based Oral Communication (AMOC), such as video conferences, vlogs, YouTube videos, turn-based video conversation, and computer-mediated communication. Compared to the synchronous communication activities, AMOC showed promise in helping fluency, accuracy, and pronunciation.

This study investigates speaking practice using PoodLL ReadAloud activity among university students. There are 3 questions to be considered in this study.

1. Do the students have lower anxiety levels using PoodLL than in the classroom?
2. How many assignments did they complete, and what is the reason for the completion/incompletion?
3. What was the overall impression of PoodLL? Are there any difficulties?

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. PoodLL ReadAloud**

PoodLL, a Moodle plugin, enriches the platform with audio and video recording tools and activities to enhance reading and pronunciation skills. In this study, students used the 'ReadAloud' activity to practice speaking. Each week they could choose to shadow read with headsets (simultaneous listening and speaking) or read aloud. They also had the option to listen to a model speech before recording.

### **2.2. Participants and context**

This study included 8 non-Japanese graduate students in Beginning Japanese, 19 graduate students (including 3 non-Japanese students) in English for Science, 26 second-year students in English III, and 26 first-year students in English I. Japanese class participants received Japanese assignments, while those in English classes received English assignments. They completed 10 assignments before responding to the questionnaire.

The passages, selected based on class relevance and language proficiency, ranged from 150 to 300 words. Students had 1 minute 30 seconds to 3 minutes for reading. AI grading assessed their reading speed and pronunciation accuracy, providing instant feedback after recording.

### **2.3. Questionnaires (Short Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale and Poodle Anxiety Scale)**

I opted for questionnaires as the data collection method due to their minimal impact on students' schedule and their efficiency in gathering responses from many participants. The first questionnaire took place seven to eight weeks after the term started to prevent confusion with the beginning of the academic year or college life for first-year students. The second questionnaire followed ten weeks of ReadAloud assignments. Students were informed

of the study's purpose and their option to abstain without academic penalty. Those who agreed to these conditions voluntarily joined the study.

First, participants completed the Short Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (SFLCAS) by Botes et al. (2021) with its Japanese version (Yashima et al., 2009). To reduce respondent stress and align with the study's focus on comparing anxiety related to the PoodLL and classroom settings, the SFLCAS with its concise eight questions was used instead of the lengthier FLCAS (Horwitz et al., 1986), which comprises 33 questions. SFLCAS was adapted by modifying 'classroom' to 'ReadAloud' to create the Poodle Anxiety Scale (PAS). Responses were rated on a 1-5 Likert scale (higher scores indicating higher anxiety). Additionally, PAS included three open-ended questions to probe assignment completion reasons, evaluate the PoodLL ReadAloud activity, and gather unanticipated insights regarding PoodLL. These questions were added to uncover any positive or negative reactions to the PoodLL activity, rather than solely focusing on anxiety-related psychological impacts.

### 3. Results

The study compared the means of SFLCAS and PAS for each classroom, as detailed in Table 1. Notably, the means of PAS were consistently lower than those of SFLCAS. However, the means among graduate students did not exhibit statistical significance. Additionally, due to an insufficiently small sample size, responses from the Japanese language class were excluded from statistical analysis.

**Table 1.** The comparison of the means of SFLCA and PAS.

Student Groups	SFLCAS	PAS	p-value
1st year (N=26)	28.43 (SD=5.91)	25.03 (SD=6.40)	P=0.048
2nd year (N=26)	29.23 (SD=5.29)	23.65 (SD=7.48)	P=0.005
Graduate (N=19)	28.00 (SD=7.26)	27.42 (SD=8.08)	P=0.817

On average, the students completed 8.44 out of 10 assignments. Regarding the reason for their completion/incompletion of the assignment, the individuals who did only a few or none of the assignments commented that they simply forgot to do it. No students mentioned having a negative reaction to the activity. Among those who completed the most assignments, approximately half commented that they felt they were obligated to do so because it was an assignment. However, the rest of the students responded as they thought it would improve their speaking skills and viewed them as valuable opportunities for practice. A few students found the activities enjoyable, either due to their interest in the material or by likening the assignment to a game.

Additional feedback regarding the ReadAloud activity included both positive remarks and technical problems, as well as apprehensions regarding AI grading. Many students, including non-Japanese, found the speaking practice with PoodLL was highly beneficial for their language study. They noted improvements in vocabulary, intonation, and sentence structure, ultimately enhancing their speaking confidence. They regarded it as a valuable opportunity for practicing spoken language skills. For example, one second-year student commented "I can practice speaking English by it [PoodLL]. It is a good opportunity to speak English for me." However, some students encountered technical difficulties. They reported inadequate time to complete reading the assigned passages. Other students faced issues with their microphones, preventing them from recording their speech and thus, impeding their assignment completion. Furthermore, some students expressed their concern about the AI grading system. They believed that they consistently received low grades, regardless of their efforts, leading to uncertainty about the accuracy of AI grading abilities.

## 4. Discussion

In this study, the implementation of PoodLL ReadAloud activity presented some advantages for both educators and students. The teacher found it straightforward to assign appropriate tasks and grade automatically. Additionally, students benefit from a user-friendly platform that facilitates speaking practice and provides prompt feedback. The ease of use not only saved educators valuable time but also empowered students to engage in language learning, resulting in positive feedback for gaining confidence through practice.

The use of PoodLL reduced anxiety levels in undergraduate classrooms compared to traditional speaking tasks. Some students tend to disengage from anxiety-inducing tasks, leading to limited practice opportunities that can hinder their learning (Cheng et al., 1999). PoodLL provides a low-anxiety environment for speaking practice, making it more appealing to students. Nevertheless, it's important to note the absence of a significant difference in graduate student anxiety levels. Further investigation and analysis are needed to better comprehend anxiety reduction dynamics across various educational contexts.

While the AI grading system in PoodLL offers convenience for instructors dealing with a large number of students, it warrants refinement. Notably, beginner to intermediate students often received excessively low scores for pronunciation accuracy, suggesting that word recognition may be overly sensitive. Such low scores could potentially discourage students from engaging in conversations with others (Zheng, 2008). To address this, manual score adjustments were made throughout the term, with explanations to students about potential inaccuracies in machine grading. Nonetheless, the provision of instant feedback remained a valuable motivational tool for learners (Swanson & Schlig, 2010). Therefore, system improvement could benefit from the addition of a feature allowing for the adjustment of grading sensitivity.

Consideration of technology accessibility is vital in class design (Young & West, 2018). PoodLL, a paid Moodle plugin, may not be accessible to all institutions. However, for students, usability is relatively simple, requiring only internet access and a microphone, as long as the institution can offer the module. Therefore, it is worth considering its incorporation into Moodle if it is accessible.

## 5. Conclusions

This study investigated the effectiveness of PoodLL ReadAloud activity in Moodle for reducing anxiety during speaking activities. While technical challenges and concerns about AI grading were noted, the results of the questionnaires demonstrated a reduction in anxiety levels. However, the study did not measure the enhancement of their confidence levels or assess the actual impact on students' speaking skills. A related study by Sun (2012) examined speaking practices using voice blogs but found no significant improvements in pronunciation, language complexity, fluency, or accuracy. Therefore, future research should incorporate an investigation of confidence levels and assessments of speaking skills. Furthermore, the absence of significant differences in anxiety levels among graduate students requires further investigation, indicating the complexity of anxiety in language learning. Moreover, a larger sample size is required for conducting a more comprehensive investigation among Japanese language learners. Consequently, the PoodLL holds promise for facilitating speaking practice in foreign language classrooms, but a more comprehensive examination of its impact on speaking fluency, pronunciation, accuracy, and language complexity is needed in future studies.

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