Reading Speed and Learner Autonomy

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This paper describes the significant role that reading speed has in reading fluency and development of learner autonomy, argues for the necessity of conscious training and monitoring of reading speed growth both in class and outside class, and shows the change of students' understanding of the value of reading speed after completing an Extensive Reading (ER) course. The data was collected during five consecutive years with classes of 15 to 22 students, using questionnaires, interviews, group discussions and teacher observation.

At our junior college, instead of having an ER program as part of the foundation for the entire English curriculum, we have a one-semester, one-credit elective course for second-year students. In general, students in our English Communication Department do not read much even in their L1. In class, students read painfully slowly, decoding word by word. Most of my students do not enjoy what they do, i.e. intensive reading, and they know nothing about extensive reading. Because they do not understand easily and because they read so slowly, they do not like reading; because they do not like reading they are not willing to read on their own. Thus, the vicious circle of a weak reader is created (Nuttal, 1996). Because students have done only intensive reading, when they enter Easy Reading class for the first time, they do not consider speed to be an important factor, thinking that aiming for speed will sacrifice comprehension. My belief is that you need a certain speed to get a real understanding of a text, and as a foreign language learner you need to work on gaining this speed through reading extensively on your own and through class activities to become fluent in a language. I also believe that there is a strong relationship between reading skills, including speed, and autonomous learning. Researchers emphasize the learner-friendly nature of an ER approach (Richards, Platt, & Platt 1992), and its role in the development of reading speed and fluency (Grabe, 1991). However, for students with lower proficiency levels to achieve a reasonable speed, they need to develop a daily reading habit.

What is the "Certain Speed"?

By the "certain speed" I mean the pace that allows students to read for meaning without the need to speed up excessively, but still fast enough to be able to connect all parts of the text, understand the general ideas, enjoy the story, and generally use the language rather than study about the language. Waring (2009) points out the difference between these two kinds of learning.

The main reason for promoting ER as an indispensable part of an EFL program lies in its role in building fluency and automaticity, which in turn depends heavily on "certain speed". Fluent readers read fast with a high percentage of comprehension. Strong readers read on average about 300 wpm with complete comprehension (Anderson, 1999; Carver, 1990). However, Anderson (2006) proposes 200 wpm with 75 percent comprehension for EFL learners as a satisfactory rate. I believe that to actually get to this speed and comprehension, one must choose materials which are a little below one's reading ability, at least during the first phase when the reading habit is not yet established.

Why do Students Need a "Certain Speed"?

For Cognitive Purposes

Students who read slowly are unable to understand longer, complicated stories, or stories with many characters. What they need is a certain speed to connect the information gathered early in reading to the information provided during the ongoing reading process to make sense of the story. Students find it extremely difficult because they are accustomed to intensive reading of short passages with a dictionary. They never read at length.

For Pleasure

Some students in my class read so slowly that it hardly makes reading enjoyable. There is often a fast flow to dialogs and narratives which asks for faster reading.

Students who read with a rate slower than 100 wpm said they didn't enjoy their stories, and students who read close to 200 wpm rate said they did. In other cases, depending on the contents, the same students who read very slowly showed improvement in their reading rate simply because they liked the story better or could use more background knowledge when the subject had a connection to their own experiences.

For Time Control and Strategies

Students who read faster were able to decide early in reading a text if they wanted to continue reading. They rarely complained about not being able to find a book to their liking, unlike students who read slowly. Students who read faster were more confident about reading a story in their spare time, and they borrowed more books from the library in one sweep than the slow readers. Also, while reading for information or scanning and skimming a text in class, the faster students got more information in the time given than slower students, and they seemed to use more strategies, like scanning the text before reading, or getting information from photos, pictures and headlines.

For Fluency Building

Fluency requires speed. The faster and more automatically the students understand and use foreign words without translating them to and from their L1, the more fluent they become in their L2.

Autonomy

If autonomy in reading means being able to read at length without a dictionary or other outside help, being able to choose one's reading materials, and generally being self-sufficient, then we better get our students used to being on their own. The argument goes: we are alone when we travel through the pages of a book, even when physically being in a crowd. Students need to experience this feeling to really appreciate the quality of time spent with a book. When you read fast enough, you can read a lot of material in a short time, so you can read more. You just need to find a place to immerse yourself in a book. When students realize that it is wonderful to experience many lives through books, they will be "hooked on reading" enough to become autonomous EFL learners through extensive reading. For that purpose, at least 30 minutes in class and more than half of all lessons were spent in the library on silent reading. Students were free to choose their own reading materials

from the library and the teacher's collection after an orientation where they learned how to match the level of graded readers to their English proficiency level.

The Current Situation in ER Class

Students are not used to reading easy material. They are used to reading texts which do not match their ability for output, and they do not know much about easy texts or the beneficial effect they have on learning a foreign language. So students are skeptical at first when they come to Easy Reading class, and they don't read many graded readers during the first few weeks. However, reluctantly, students set a personal goal of a higher reading rate in the 15 weeks of the course.

Reading Materials

All educators who introduce ER know that an abundance of easy reading materials with a variety of subjects and no gaps between levels is a must for a successful program. In our library we have more than 2,000 graded readers, but we still do not have enough titles at the 200~300 headword level. They are the most valuable to us because the EFL proficiency level of our students is very low. We do not discriminate between publishers or genre. The only determining factor is readability. However, many graded reader series do not fill the gaps between levels, so students cannot find readers suitable for a smooth transfer to higher levels. There is often a gap between 300 and 600 headword level graded readers. Students feel intimidated from going to a higher level due to this gap. The majority stay at the same low level for the whole course.

First Steps toward a Reading Habit

On a chart, I note the progress students make: one segment is colored for each graded reader that a student reads. Students can see this chart any time. They find it stimulating because they enjoy a bit of competition, but not too much. The purpose is each student's individual progress, so I don't exaggerate the importance of competition.

The biggest problem is that we have just 15 lessons for introducing ER to our students. For introductory purposes that is fine. The students get the general idea of what ER is about, and there is a significant increase in their reading speed by the end of the course. But it is surely not enough to install a reading habit, and not enough to measure exactly to what extent our students improve their English skills. About 70% of the ER course time is allocated to silent

reading in the library with the purpose of creating a reading habit. However, students are also supposed to read extensively at home. They start to do so with reluctance, but by the end, over 70% of the students surpass their quota, which is set low, only 20 graded readers per term, as a minimum for getting credit with the lowest grade. However, this year, those who exceeded the quota, read on average 30.7 graded readers during the course. Accordingly, next year I'm going to set this number as the new quota and see what happens. I think that setting conditions is important because students feel more confident when they have a concrete goal. The advice, "Read as much as you can" does not work well for students who do not know what the "much" means.

Problems and Gains in the ER Course from the Students' View

Students' experience of the course can be seen from the following survey responses.

📖 When I read faster I don't understand what I'm reading. When I read for meaning I become very slow.

📖 I still can't understand many words, so I'm unable to read on a higher level.

📖 I didn't read much so I can't see much of a progress.

📖 It's difficult to create a habit. When I stop I can't go back to reading.

📖 I like reading more than before. I read faster now.

📖 I discovered how great it feels to read without a dictionary. My motivation to read increased.

📖 While reading I'm able to visualize characters and happenings better.

📖 My vocabulary increased.

Change in Student Beliefs

After completing the course students were asked to answer a questionnaire. The results show a change in their beliefs about the importance of reading speed and their own improvement in this area. The results of this questionnaire are almost identical for each year. As Figure 1 shows, the majority of students become confident that speed is essential to fluent reading. The few students who were not sure were the ones who did not read many graded readers and did not reach the quota. Figure 2 shows that most students actually succeeded in reading faster after taking this course.
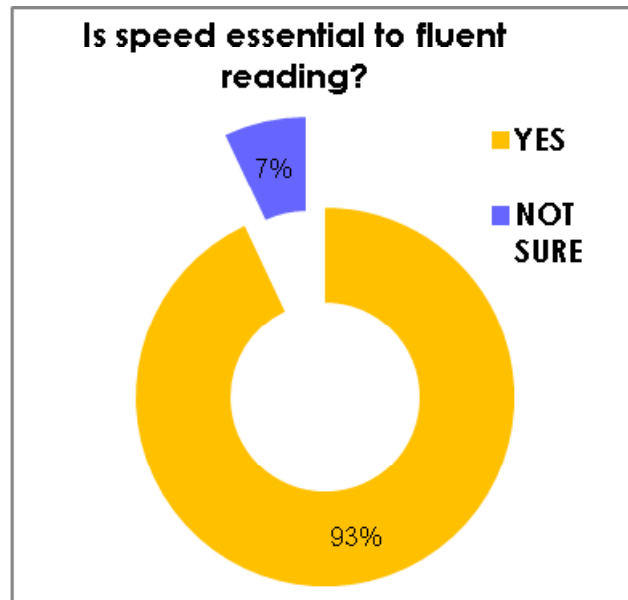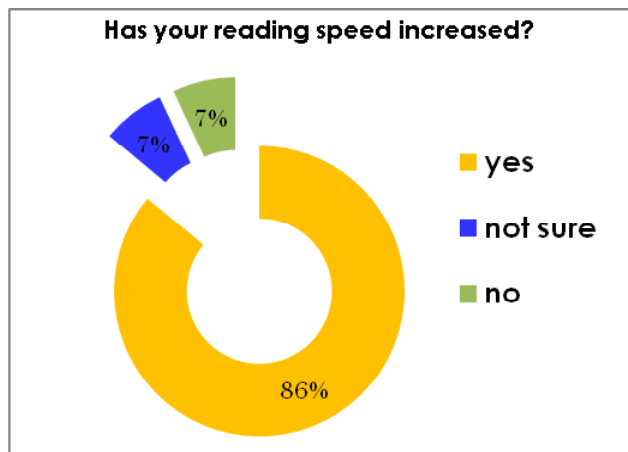

Figure 1

Figure 2

Conclusion

I am convinced that students need to read a lot, possibly several low-level graded readers and at least one higher-level graded reader a day. It seems obvious to educators that students with lesser aptitude need to work harder, but this is not necessarily obvious to our students, so these students need more of the teacher's attention than the able ones. At the end of the course, students started to believe that considerable speed is indispensable for achievement of satisfactory reading and enjoyment. In our class we were not able to reach the goal of 200 wpm with at least 75% comprehension, but all students improved in comparison to their initial speed records. Also, during the repeated reading activities in class, students became aware of gaining speed as their eyes slid effortlessly over words and phrases which had become familiar to them.

Teachers are responsible for making the ER approach understandable to students, helping them to choose proper reading materials, and conducting learning activities in class. But besides that, the teacher should make himself/herself scarce in an ER class. I believe that students need to be left alone with books for longer periods of time and that teacher supervision should be very discreet. If a teacher talks too much or orchestrates each movement in class, students are not likely to have time for reading, and that is mostly what should be done in reading class. Even when striving for student autonomy, teachers are still needed in ER class. The next question is, "How could I make myself useful?"

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