

# Improving Reading Speed

Activities for the Classroom

BY NEIL J. ANDERSON

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o many second language readers, reading is a suffocatingly slow process; yet developing rapid reading, an essential skill for all students, is often neglected in the classroom. Data from Segalowitz, Poulsen, and Komoda (1991:15) indicate that the second language (L2) reading rates of highly bilingual readers are “30% or more slower than L1 reading rates.” These data are also supported by Weber (1991), who points out that highly skilled bilinguals typically have a slower reading rate in a second language. Perkins and Pharis (1980) state that average ESL readers are well below average native English speakers in reading ability. Jensen (1986:106) indicates that “at the end of a reading course, even advanced ESL students may read only 100 words per minute or less.”

The purpose of this article is to discuss classroom activities that increase reading speed. These activities are designed to increase L2 learners’ reading rates to a satisfactory level, so that students are successful in academic reading tasks.

## Research findings on the value of rapid reading

The earliest studies conducted with native English speakers indicated that rapid reading was only a skimming strategy used to cover the reading material (Brown, Inouye, Barrus, and Hansen 1981). Yet, later studies show that readers achieved not only rapid-reading skills but also better comprehension when specifically taught rapid-reading techniques (Cranney, Brown, Hansen, and Inouye 1982).

Very little has been reported on the effects of rapid-reading instruction for second language learners (Anderson 1983; Coady and Anderson 1993; Cushing Weigle and Jensen 1996; Mahon 1986). Many texts acknowledge the importance of this reading skill but only give instructions such as “read the following passage as quickly as possible.” Research by Coady and Anderson (1993) emphasized the importance of including a rapid-reading component in reading programs and concluded that it is possible to increase reading rate in an L2 without a concomitant decrease in comprehension.

Nuttall (1996:127) describes the frustration resulting from slower reading in her description of the “vicious cycle of the weak reader.” Readers who do not understand often slow down their reading rates and then do not enjoy reading because it takes so much time. As a result, they do not read much, and so continues the vicious cycle. Nuttall suggests that by increasing reading rates, the reader can get into the “virtuous cycle of the good reader.” By reading faster the reader is encouraged to read more, and with more reading, comprehension improves.

Nuttall’s concept is supported by Stanovich (1986), who points to a phenomenon identified by Merton (1968) as the “Matthew effect.” This suggests that the more students read, the more they increase their reading abilities. Stanovich (1986) claims that readers who are reading well and who have good vocabularies will read more, learn more meanings, and hence read better. Readers with inadequate vocabularies who read slowly and without enjoyment, read less. As a result, they have slower development of vocabulary knowledge, which in turn inhibits

further growth in reading ability. Thus, the more exposure a student has to language through reading, the greater the possibilities that overall language proficiency will increase. By increasing reading rates, second language readers are exposed to much more language than if they read at a slower, more laborious rate.

### Optimal reading rate

Conflicting data exist regarding the optimal or sufficient reading rate. Some authorities suggest that 180 words per minute “may be a threshold between immature and mature reading and that a speed below this is too slow for efficient comprehension or for the enjoyment of text” (Higgins and Wallace 1989: 392). Dubin and Bycina (1991:198) state that “a rate of 200 words per minute would appear to be the absolute minimum in order to read with full comprehension.” Jensen (1986:106) recommends that second language readers seek to “approximate native speaker reading rates and comprehension levels in order to keep up with classmates” and suggests that 300 words per minute is the optimal rate. This rate is supported by Nuttall (1996:56), who states that “for an L1 speaker of English of about average education and intelligence... the reading rate is about 300 words per minute.”

### Current pedagogical applications

The following four reading-rate activities can be used in the second language reading class to increase student reading rates. These activities are based on reading-rate development theories and practice in first and second language reading (Anderson 1983; Fry 1975; Harris 1966; Samuels 1979; Spargo and Williston 1980). The activities do not require specially developed texts or equipment and therefore can be implemented by classroom teachers using class texts or materials. Furthermore, the activities are short and can fill small units of time.

A major benefit of these activities is that they make the reader aware of the importance of reading rates—not at the expense of reading comprehension but in conjunction with comprehension. Students find these activities worthwhile and see measurable progress in their reading rates as a result of these activities (Coady and Anderson 1993).

**Rate-buildup reading.** In this activity students have 60 seconds to read as much material as they can. They are then given an additional 60 seconds to read again from the beginning of the text. They must read more material during the second 60-second period than in the first. The drill is repeated a third and fourth time.

The purpose of this activity is to reread “old” material quickly, gliding into the “new.” As their eyes move quickly over the old material, students actually learn how to process the material more quickly. The exercise does not really emphasize moving the eyes quickly; instead, the material should be processed and comprehended more efficiently. As students participate in this rate building activity, they learn that indeed they can increase their reading rates.

**Repeated reading.** The repeated reading activity develops reading rates as students read a short passage over and over again until they achieve criterion levels of reading speed and comprehension. For example, students may try to read a 100-word paragraph four times in two minutes. The criterion levels may vary from class to class, but reasonable goals to work toward are criterion levels of 200 words per minute at 70 percent comprehension.

Results of a repeated reading study with native speakers of English indicated that as the student continued to use this technique, the initial speed of reading each new selection was faster than the initial speed on the previous selection. Also, the number of rereadings required to reach the criterion reading speed decreased as the student continued the technique (Samuels 1979:404).

As learners do repeated reading exercises, they come to realize how this activity can improve their reading comprehension. They understand more when reading something twice at a faster reading rate than when reading it slowly only one time. This activity helps empower second language readers and strengthens their metacognitive awareness of the merit of faster reading rates.

**Class-paced reading.** The class-paced reading activity allows the class to set a goal for a minimal reading rate. Involving the learners in determining this minimal reading rate goal incorporates principles of student-centered learning. Once the class establishes the goal, students calculate the average num-

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ber of words per page of the material being read and determine how many pages need to be read in one minute in order to achieve the class goal. For example, if the class goal is to read 200 words per minute (wpm) and the material being read has an average of 100 words per page, the class would be expected to read one page every 30 seconds. As each 30-second period elapses, the teacher tells the class to move to the next page. Students are encouraged to keep up with the established class goal. Of course, those who read faster than 200 wpm are not expected to slow down their reading rates. As long as they are ahead of the designated page, they continue reading. For those readers who are not able to keep up at the designated pace, continued reading-rate practice is recommended.

The teacher should carefully review a class-paced reading goal. If it is too high, adjustments may be necessary to allow students to meet the class-paced challenge. This reading activity encourages and supports learners as they work together at improving their reading rates.

**Self-paced reading.** Self-paced reading allows students to determine their own reading-rate goals and the amount of material they need to read in 60 seconds to meet their set reading rates. For example, if a student's objective rate is 180 words per minute and the material being read has an average number of 10 words per line, the student needs to read 18 lines of text in one minute to meet the goal. The activity proceeds nicely when each student marks off several chunks of lines and reads silently for five to seven minutes with the instructor calling out minute intervals. Students can then determine if they are keeping up with their individual reading-rate goals.

#### **Additional activities**

In addition to these four activities, students can do a variety of reading passages and multiple-choice comprehension questions like those found in rate-building texts (Fry 1975; Harris 1966; Spargo and Williston 1980). They can set individual goals for reading rates and reading comprehension. During these readings, students should be encouraged to work toward reading at least 200 words per minute with at least 70 percent comprehension.

#### **Conclusion**

Often, in efforts to assist students to increase their reading rates, teachers overemphasize accuracy. When this occurs, reading fluency is impeded. Hence, the teacher should work toward a balance in reading-rate improvement and reading comprehension. This balance may fluctuate depending on the topic of the reading passage, level of reading difficulty, and the purpose of the reading.

This article has suggested four classroom activities designed to help EFL learners become more rapid and fluent readers. These activities are not designed to teach students how to speed read but how to increase their reading rates above a minimal threshold necessary to move beyond reading at the word level and to gain greater fluency in reading. Building these activities into an existing reading class can increase the reading rates of our learners. This will allow readers to read more with greater understanding, thereby leading to increased language proficiency.

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