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ARTICLES

BUILDING STUDENTS' READING FLUENCY THROUGH TIMED READING

Mansoor Al-Surmi, Qatar University, Doha, Qatar

Reading fluency is one of the major goals of many reading classes, especially with intermediate or high-intermediate learners of language. As beginners, foreign language learners tend to read word by word, and they may continue to use this strategy as they progress in their learning, which is not helpful when they reach higher levels in their language programs. Therefore, it is very important to introduce fluency-based activities as early as possible.

To promote reading fluency, many reading fluency-building activities, such as read aloud, extensive reading, paced-reading, and timed-reading, can be used in the classrooms (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). Using such exercises in classroom settings raises many issues related to the actual implementation. In this short article, the focus is on using timed reading to improve reading fluency. Drawing on information from the literature and reflecting on my personal experience, I present suggested steps for implementing timed reading and discuss issues related to such implementation.

What Is Timed Reading?

Timed reading is a "rate-development activity during which students time their reading (in words per minute) and calculate comprehension scores. The goal is to improve reading rate and comprehension over time" (Grabe & Stoller, 2011, p. 295). In timed reading, the students are in charge themselves in terms of time, unlike paced reading where time is set by the teacher and students are expected to finish within the time allowed (de Lopez, 1993). The advantage of timed reading over paced reading is that the former is more accommodating to individual differences when it comes to reading speed. We all know, as language teachers, that we rarely get a homogenous group of learners in one classroom. Therefore, in a typical reading class, it might be counterproductive to hold all students to the same standards if you are utilizing paced reading for the whole class. Moreover, it would be very challenging for the teacher to implement paced reading for students individually. I personally found timed reading more practical and more effective with my students.

The goal with timed reading is not only more speed, but also improved comprehension. The essence of timed reading is reading with time in mind. This time pressure pushes learners to go beyond their regular reading speed and makes them read at a higher rate. It also helps them process texts faster, which could help improve their comprehension. Walczyk, Kelly, Meche, and Braud (1999) showed that students reading under mild time pressure achieved the best reading comprehension compared to those who read under no time pressure or under severe time pressure. In fact, several studies have showed that timed reading led to increased reading speed (e.g., Chung & Nation, 2006) as well as comprehension (e.g., Chang, 2010).

Implementing Timed Reading

Traditionally, in timed reading, the teacher gives the students a reading text. Students mark the beginning of time, start reading, mark the finish time, answer comprehension questions, and record their time and correct answers. The next time, they read a text (of similar length) and try to read it within a shorter period of time than they did for the previous text. While these key steps are essential, other aspects, such as previewing, are as important to have more effective results, at least in my personal experience. Here, I present a traditional model I have used to implement timed reading and discuss practical issues related to each step. The model I have used is based on Spargo (1989):

1. Previewing
2. Reading
 - a. Recording time
3. Answering comprehension questions
 - a. Recording correct answers
4. Filling progress chart

Previewing

When thinking about this step, many questions come to mind, such as should we include previewing itself? In general, previewing is a comprehension strategy that involves activating prior knowledge, predicting, and setting a purpose for reading. It is an effective prereading activity for faster reading (McLaughlin & Allen, 2002), and, therefore, we need to include it. Do not start the reading without a prereading activity, and be consistent.

Previewing, in this case, is basically skimming, which has typical strategies such as (a) reading the title; (b) looking at key elements, such as graphs, pictures, numbers, or terms; and (c) reading the opening and closing paragraphs, or first sentence of each paragraph, or the first and last sentence of each paragraph. Students need to practice these strategies if they are not familiar with them.

Other questions that might come to mind is whether to time or pace previewing. If we time previewing (i.e., have student record their start and end time individually), students might spend more time than necessary, and they might be tempted to read more details than needed. Pacing previewing (i.e., setting a specific time by the teacher and reducing it over time) might be more fruitful. Students are forced to skim rather than scan and this will also help in building speed.

Reading

After previewing, the reading phase starts. Typically, students mark the start time, read, mark the end time. Simple! However, we might wonder what type of passages could be used. Are these passages those a teacher could choose from newspapers or magazines, for example? Or are they in textbooks? Of course, there are many ready-made timed reading textbooks, such as the Timed Reading and Timed Reading Plus series or the Reading Power series, which include a section about timed reading. If you choose to create or select the reading passages yourself, you need to consider (a) the text type/genre (e.g., science, history), (b) the readability level, (c) the content (i.e., relevant or irrelevant), and (d) length. However, choosing a ready-made series would save you time and would most likely control for the many aforementioned variables. The key here is to choose a series of controlled passages and use them for a certain period of time. I used a ready-made textbook series, and I included timed reading as a regular activity in my reading classes, about twice a week for a whole semester.

Answering Comprehension Questions

Considerations in this step include whether to time answering questions and whether students are allowed to go back to the text. Here, you have two choices: (a) Set a time for answering questions and allow students to go back to the text, or (b) don't provide a specific time and don't allow looking back at the text (i.e., answering questions from memory). The choice is yours, but be consistent.

For my classes, I chose the first option. I believe that keeping the mild time pressure in all the stages is more fruitful. I used a timed reading text with 10 multiple-choice questions. I gave my students 4 minutes to answer the questions and allowed them to refer to the text. The rationale, for me, is that in real target language use situations, students are allowed and encouraged to go back to the text when answering reading questions. Moreover, relying completely on memory might be challenging and discouraging for some students. Again, the choice is yours, but be consistent.

Filling the Progress Chart(s)

The last step is documentation. When students finish, they record their time on a chart that marks the time they spend, approximate words per minute, and the number of correct answers. A sample chart is presented in Appendix A. If you are using ready-made timed reading textbooks, then this chart or a variant of it will be provided.

What might not be provided is how to piece together reading time and comprehension scores to understand whether students are making progress. The available charts often provide you with separate info about reading time and comprehension scores and leave it to you to interpret such data. Millett (2005), for example, suggested encouraging students who score 8, 9, or 10 (on a 10-multiple-choice question set) to read faster the next time, while being concerned about those who score 6 or below. To her, the goal is to read faster with about 70% accuracy in answering questions. This is one approach. However, to measure whether students are making progress in both timed reading and comprehension (getting faster with high accuracy rate), I used the following formula to get a quantitative number to track their progress (on a 10-multiple-choice question set):

$$\# \text{ of correct answers} \times 10 \div \text{time in seconds} \times 100 = \text{progress score}$$

time in seconds

For example, if a student finished in 2 minutes and got 7 correct answers out of 10, his or her progress score would be 58.33.

$$7 \times 10 \div 2 \times 100 = 58.33$$

$$2 \times 60$$

The progress score of each text can then be logged in a progress chart (see Appendix B for a sample). This way,

Appendix B: Progress Chart

Progress																				
100																				
95																				
90																				
85																				
80																				
75																				
70																				
65																				
60																				
55																				
50																				
45																				
40																				
35																				
30																				
25																				
20																				
15																				
10																				
5																				
Text	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#
Score																				

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Mansoor Al-Surmi has taught English in the USA and Middle East for many years. He is a published author in TESOL Quarterly and System. He is currently an English lecturer and a program coordinator at Qatar University.