

IMPACT ANALYSIS OF TIMED READING INTERVENTION ON STUDENTS' READING FLUENCY AND COMPREHENSION

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ABSTRACT

Reading is widely known as a difficult aspect for both English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers and learners correspondingly in their teaching and learning process. Therefore, the question of how to increase the reading speed while maintaining the reading comprehension remains a troublesome issue. An experimental research project was carried out on the first year students at Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration (TUEBA). Fifty students who joined in this study were divided into 3 groups basing on their reading speed at the pretest: fast, medium and slow readers. The reading activity included two stages, correspondingly, the former covering conventional reading activity while the latter dealing with timed reading intervention. In this study, a pretest, posttest and a reading rate chart were utilized to measure the students' reading rate and comprehension. As the results shown, both students' reading speed and comprehension remarkably increased after having timed reading intervention. The fast reader had their highest reading rate and comprehension score among the three groups.

Key words: Reading comprehension; reading speed; reading activity; timed reading intervention;

INTRODUCTION

In Vietnam and many other countries, second language (L2) learners read much more slowly than in their native language called L1 because they read word by word and often check unfamiliar words as they encounter them. Moreover, the fact that they are likely to use method of translating into their native language for their comprehension affects their speed and accuracy in reading which accordingly gradually forms a slow reading speed and lead to their poor reading comprehension. Slow reading is seen to significantly limit students' exposure, make comprehension become poor and reading for pleasure nearly unthinkable. This problem sets a challenging task for teachers of English; that is, to design courses including activities which can help learners improve their reading speed while maintaining their reading comprehension. This requires a lot of changes in teaching and learning activities of reading. The same situation has been found among the majority of students at TUEBA where the authors are employed. Here, before graduating, students are required to get 500 scores for TOEIC test (Test of English for International Communication) which measures their competence in communication in the workplace in their future jobs. However, with their average of reading speed, a large number of those students are unable to pass the exam and graduate. One of the reasons to this problem is that students lack time to finish their reading comprehension because of their low speed in reading. A combination of those mentioned reasons has urged the authors to conduct this study to show a picture of students and teachers' opinions concerning the effectiveness of classroom reading activities that focus on how to improve students' reading speed and comprehension.

By doing this research in certain situation with the certain targets, the researcher can find out exactly how students get improvements in their reading competence with the intervention of timed reading into their usual course of English. The study also emphasizes the importance of improvements in a process of learning but not in a certain period of time or a short period time with the support of timed reading. To the extent of the overall aims, this research is expected to help to find out whether this intervention of timed reading can help TUEBA students increase their reading speed while maintaining their comprehension with the purpose of achieving the highest scores in TOEIC.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Reading is generally defined as the fastest way to bring information into our body. According to David (2002), reading is the process of acquiring information from a written or printed text. Therefore, reading is not converting written language to spoken language. That is reading aloud, which is always speaking, but not always true reading because sometimes the person reading aloud (even in the case of native speakers reading aloud in their own language) is so concerned with pronouncing the words correctly or reading with expression, that she or he does not pay attention to the meaning of the text and therefore, does not truly read.

Smith (1994, pp. 171-182) defined reading as an interaction between readers, writers and the texts. Reading is thinking and can never be separated from the purpose, prior knowledge, and feelings of the person engaged in the activity or from the nature of the text being read. The conversations of texts permit the expectations of readers and the intentions of writers to meet.

According to Kelly (2007), reading is an active process in which readers interact with text or reconstruct the message of the author. Printed symbols are signs which lead an active mind to reflect on alternatives during the process of constructing knowledge.

Gerald (1987) divides reading strategies into two kinds for good readers. The first kind is *activated before reading* actually begins. That is, the reader must have a plan for making those predictions, and these plans must be adapted to each situation since the topic, text structure, and purposes change from text to text. Other strategies, called *repair strategies* (Johnston, 1983), are activated during reading whenever meaning is blocked by unknown words, by predictions that turn out to be incorrect, or by a disruption in the reader's train of thought.

According to Wallace (2001), successful readers reported that they used various strategies such as reading in *broad phrases, skipping inessential words, guessing from context, and continuing to read* the text even when they encountered a term that they did not know. Training in strategic use is what timed reading promotes and reflects what Devine (1993) means by, "...training enhances the metacognitive knowledge base of readers and results in improved reading performance." (p.71)

Another strategy mentioned by Wallace is the ability to *make informed predictions* as the student progresses through the text (Goodman 1967, Smith 1971, Wallace 2001). Through making predictions, students take an interactive role in the reading process, which Blanton (1994, p.68) stated is "...at the heart of literacy, formal learning, and academic success". This interaction is stimulated by the reader's background knowledge that acts as a catalyst for text comprehension.

When reading faster, readers can be able to gain a lot of benefits. Klaeser (1977) mentioned in his study some advantages of increasing reading speed. In the first place, increase the reading rate helps readers to save much more time in order to focus on reading comprehension. With an increase in speed, the student will be able to cover more materials than at a slower speed. Therefore, it leads to the likelihood of having more correct answers in reading comprehension. The second benefit is that the more concentration readers have on doing reading comprehension, the more they understand the complete thought of the written work. Successful readers reported that they used various strategies such as *reading in broad phrases, skipping inessential words, guessing from context, and continuing to read* the text even when they encountered a term that they did not know (Wallace, 2001). Training in strategic use is what timed reading promotes and reflects what Devine (1993, p.105) means by, "...training enhances the metacognitive knowledge base of readers and results in improved reading performance."

METHODOLOGY

With the aim of assessing the effect of timed reading intervention on the students' reading speed and comprehension, this study is conducted to seek answers to the following questions:

1. How much is students' reading speed improved with timed reading intervention?
2. How does timed reading intervention promote students' reading comprehension?

The participants in this study were 50 first-year students from Economics Department at TUEBA, most of whom are English non-majors and have their English at elementary level. These students were randomly chosen to take a pretest, based on which they were divided into 3 groups corresponding to their reading speed.

In order to record the students' reading speed and comprehension, the reading rate chart was utilized in this study. During the investigated period, after each lesson with timed reading intervention, the authors used the results to record the students' reading time, their reading rate and their scores.

In addition, students were asked to write regular reports (identifying the problems they encountered in the process of experiment as well as their attitudes towards timed reading intervention in their reading lessons) at the end of every three weeks in the stage having timed reading intervention.

Procedures of the experimental research: The class experimented in this study having 36 sessions in 12 weeks, except the first week for pretest and the last week for posttest. The authors delivered the reading pretest for students to do at the first week of the course. All the data gained from the pretest were collected and analyzed so as to compare with the result of the posttest. At the end of the course, week 14, the students took posttest to assess their improvements in both reading speed and comprehension.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Basing on the pretest result, the percentage of fast, medium and slow readers upon their reading rate was illustrated:

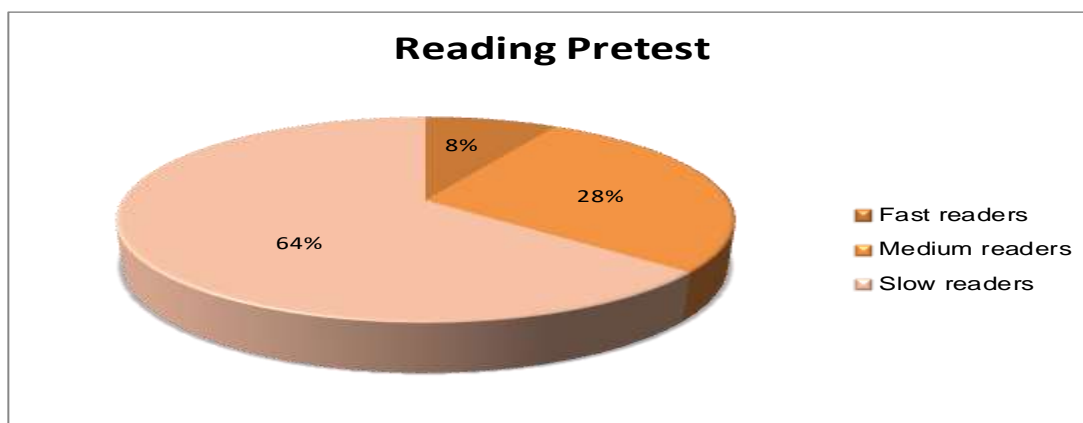


Figure1: The demonstration of fast, medium and slow readers at pretest

(Source: Pretest result)

Thanks to timed reading intervention, a number of readers made an improvement in their reading speed as shown in posttest result below.

Table 1: Students' reading speed

Groups	Pretest (words/minute)	Posttest (words/minute)	Gain
Fast readers	113	157	44 (39%)
Medium readers	83	96	11 (16%)
Slow readers	59	67	8 (14%)

(Source: Posttest result)

As shown in Table 1, their average reading rate of fast readers increases 44 words per minute (39%), while that of medium readers grows 11 words per minute (16%) and the last increases 8 words per minute (14%) from the beginning to the end of the course. Somehow the result did not go up to the authors' expectation as only the fast reader makes the most significant growth. In general, all three groups' reading comprehension levels off (at around 3, 4.3 and 6 for slow-medium and fast readers, respectively) from the second week to fifth week with conventional reading activities. Sometimes, there was an increase in their score but it was not so remarkable as the improvement in the second stage.

The changes in students' reading comprehension throughout the course of fast readers, medium readers and slow readers are shown transparently in the chart below.

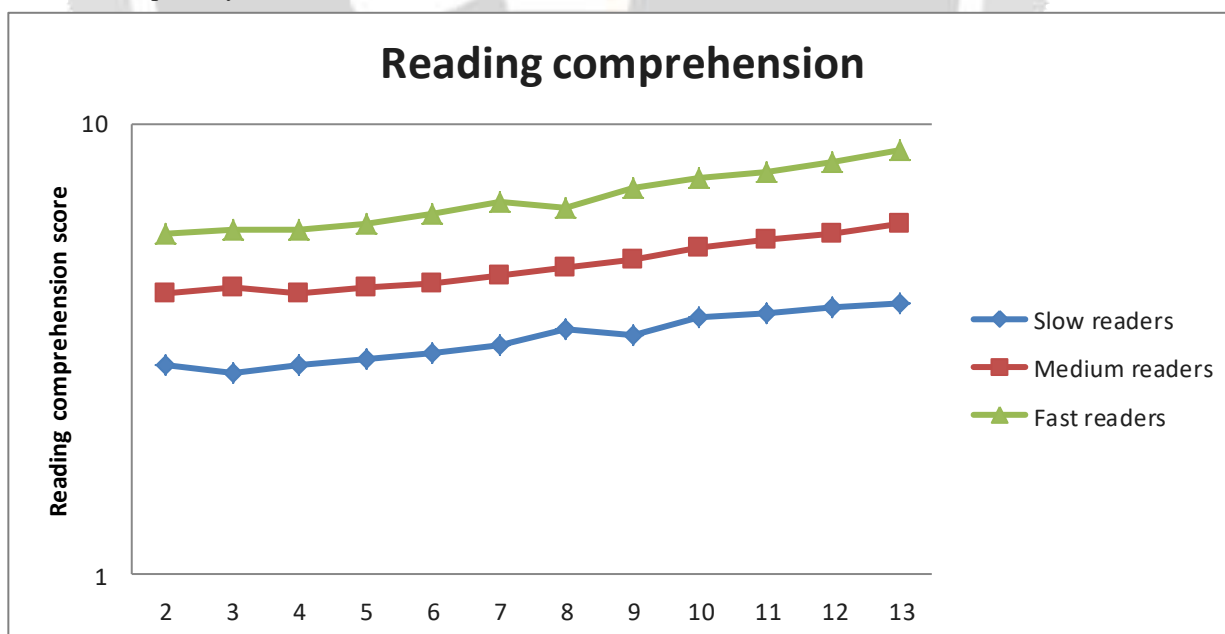


Figure 2: Changes in reading comprehension of fast, medium and slow readers

(Source: Synthesized from pretest and posttest results)

As shown in Figure 2, the change of the lines can be seen from week 5 till the end of the course. Usually, the students' reading comprehension improved parallel to their reading speed. By week 12, all three groups of readers witnessed an enhancement in their reading comprehension, specifically, to approximately 9 (for fast readers), around 7.8 (for medium group) and over 6 (for slow group).

To sum up, students' reading comprehension increase gradually from the pretest to posttest. Like reading speed, in the first stage, reading comprehension doesn't make a considerable change till the second stage. It is interesting to note

that fast readers reach higher scores than medium readers and medium readers gain higher scores than slow readers. It means that the more words per minute they can read, the more reading score they may gain.

CONCLUSION:

Improving students' reading speed and comprehension or reading fluency is very important and necessary for EFL learners in general and for the students in Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration in particular. The study examined the correlation between the students' reading speed and comprehension through applying a timed reading activity in the reading course. After 14 weeks implemented the experiment, the researcher gained a lot of results that are very useful for teaching reading in particular and for teaching English in general. The result indicates timed reading is not effective for developing the reading rates but also for reading comprehension of the students in this study.

The first finding is that all three groups remarkably improved both their reading speed and comprehension after having the intervention of timed reading activities. The second finding is that the fast readers had more considerable growth in both reading speed and reading comprehension than any other readers in the study. The reading comprehension of the fast readers is much more than that of slow readers. The third finding is that gains in the students' reading speed and comprehension were not immediate, but it is the result of a process and can be best shown at the end of the course. Although reading comprehension in the current study improved only marginally, the results of the current study in fact support the theory of automatic information processing because these students increased their reading rates, but their comprehension did not decrease. An explanation of the limited comprehension improvement is that the students' current reading rate had not reached the optimal level to improve comprehension.

Like any reading program, increasing reading rate is more than just opening a book and jumping into the text. Timed reading involves the use of various strategies in conjunction with in-class exercises and extensive timed reading. Timed reading is not reading as-fast-as-you-can over a passage and simply marking the gradual improvement (if there are any). It involves reading strategies via the teacher's instruction.

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