On the Use of Timed Reading in ESL/EFL Classes

by A. Ian Slater

Introduction

This paper is part of an occasional series in which the author briefly reviews and comments on recent research, scholarly articles, and/or publications which may be of interest to his colleagues in the English teaching profession both at Assumption University and beyond. In this instance, he reviews work on the use of timed readings in ESL/EFL classrooms which was first published in the Internet TESL Journal. (http://www.iiteslj.org/)

Timed Reading in L2 Teaching

"What we become depends on what we read after all the professors have finished with us. The greatest university of all is the collection of books"

The quote above is from the great English essayist Thomas Carlyle. I think most teachers, not only those in the business of teaching the language of English, would agree with its sentiments. However, there are many ways we, as English language teachers, can specifically help our students to profit from their reading experiences. One important way is to help them to read faster and it is this aspect of the complex process of learning how to read, and read effectively, in a second language that I would like to address in this short paper.

In his article, Why Teachers Should Use Timed Reading in ESL Classes, Jeremy Browning (2003) provides a useful summary of the rationale for the inclusion of timed reading activities in classrooms where English is being learned. His focus is on ESL classrooms, although his observations should be equally relevant to EFL contexts such as Thailand.

The goal of timed reading activities is to improve the reading speed of students. Browning mentions the benefits of faster reading for L2 readers and identifies a number of the strategies rapid readers use. The achievement of proficiency in these strategies becomes the goal of timed reading instruction in language classrooms. Browning does not, however, suggest explicit lesson plans or activities. He concentrates on why timed reading should be used rather than how it could be incorporated into an existing or new ESL/EFL syllabus. Teachers seeking guidelines on specific activities to use in order to build students' reading rates would be well advised to consult several of the works cited in this paper, in particular Anderson (1999a) which, as well as providing instruction on how to increase students'
reading speeds, also functions as an excellent overview of the issues involved in teaching second language reading in general.

Regarding the benefits of faster reading, Browning highlights four issues which have appeared in the research related to reading speed over the past 30 years or so. The first is the time saved by students when their reading speed increases. Faster readers are able to cover more material in a shorter time. The second is the greater comprehension that accrues to readers who are able to read faster. Slower readers spend more time and expend more cognitive effort processing text at a word-by-word or even syllable-by-syllable level. This leaves them less time and cognitive processing power to employ in understanding ‘global’ meaning in a text. Third, Browning suggests that faster readers achieve higher academic grades. He cites Klaeser (1977) for this, however I am not aware of any other research studies that have shown this result as a benefit of faster reading. Certainly, however, if such a relationship can be shown to be both extant and significant, then the implications of increasing the reading rate of Assumption University students, who must read a great deal in their “content” subjects, should be obvious. Fourth, Browning argues that faster readers will enjoy reading more. This is conceptually plausible, although again he fails to adequately reference the point. In fact, it would seem to me that Browning’s contention here provides a departure point for an action research project which could be pursued with relative ease here in the context of Assumption University. An interested teacher/researcher could seek to measure the individual reading speeds of a body of students and then follow this up with a survey to gauge (among other things) the level of enjoyment students obtain from reading. The issue then would be to establish the degree of correlation between the two factors.

In terms of strategies for reading faster, Browning highlights the usefulness of reading in broad phrases, skipping inessential words, guessing from context, and continuing to read even when readers encounter terms they don’t know. He also mentions the importance of encouraging students to make predictions as they read, and the importance of pre-reading activities to help students understand the gist of a passage. These are all important skills which should be taught in the classroom. Again however, how to help students develop these skills is not specifically addressed in the article.

Browning argues that two other important aspects of faster reading ought to be promoted in L2 reading classes. The first is phrase reading, whereby students learn to process textual information in ‘chunks’, rather than word by word. The second is automaticity, whereby students develop their vocabulary and basic grammatical competence so that large portions of text (both in terms of meaning and structure) can be processed rapidly without conscious cognitive effort. Again, these are very important skills that L2 readers need. However, again, Browning does not address how to improve these skills. Teachers looking for guidance in these areas would do well to look at Anderson (1999a), as already mentioned, as well as Mikulecky and Jeffries (1996), and Fry (2000).

For my part, I see the explicit teaching of skills designed to increase reading speed, along with the use of timed readings in class, as worthwhile and productive activities which should provide students with recognizable, demonstrable, and measurable
improvements in a variety of macro and micro reading skills. In my case, a great majority of my teaching time at Assumption University has been spent teaching English IV (during
the day) to undergraduate students and English for Business Communication (during the
evening) to MBA students. Both cases may be viewed as instances of ESP (English for
Specific Purposes) or, to narrow the focus, as EAP (English for Academic Purposes).
Students are present in these classes (ostensibly) in order to acquire a raft of English
skills which will facilitate their academic success in taking a degree in an English-medium
university, and also in any future study in English. This academic success is critically
dependent on their being able to process a great deal of information contained in English
texts as fast as possible. One obvious way to improve their ability to survive and prosper
in an English language academic environment is to improve the rate at which they process
written information in English. Thus I concur with Browning's exhortations to explicitly
courage the development of faster reading among students. I try to incorporate timed
readings and explicit reading skill activities wherever possible in my own classes. By
explicit in this sense, I mean activities where students are told in advance that the purpose
of an activity is to improve a specific skill, be it reading speed, comprehension rate, or
whatever. I believe that students respond better when they can see a clear reason why
they are performing any activity. Thus it is useful for a teacher to explain in advance the
pedagogic and learning purposes that underlie any activity so as to increase the students'
awareness and sense of involvement. I think it is helpful in this instance to think in terms
of "process" rather than "product", i.e., students should be informed about what process
or skill we (the teachers and the students) are working on in a particular activity. Thus
the "product", i.e. what a text is about in the case of reading skill activities, is less
important than the "process", i.e. what reading skill is being improved. To exemplify, I
see it as more useful when, at the end of a class, a student says, "Today I learned how to
read for gist" rather than, "Today I read a passage about football gambling in Thailand",
or whatever the topic may be.

In terms of how to incorporate timed readings into an English language class, or
indeed how to plan and implement any other overtly skills-focused reading activity in
the classroom, I would encourage interested teachers to turn to several of the sources
mentioned in this paper. I particularly find Mikulecky (1990) and Mikulecky and Jeffries
(1996) useful, especially for my MBA students, and recommend both texts; although I
am certain that teachers will have their own materials to hand, or may easily find others
as a result of a library or Internet search.

A final point concerns what might be considered an "optimal" reading rate for
students reading in English as their second language. A number of researchers have
investigated second language reading speeds over the years and this has led to the
emergence of slightly different conclusions.

It has been suggested 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, as cited in
Anderson 1999b, p. 2). Jensen (1986) however, recommends that second language readers
seek to "approximate native speaker reading rates and comprehension levels in order to
keep up with classmates” (as cited in Anderson 1999b, p.2) and suggests that 300 words per minute is the optimal rate. This rate is also suggested by Nuttall (1996), who argues that “for an L1 speaker of English of about average education and intelligence... the reading rate is about 300 words per minute.” (as cited in Anderson 1999b, p.2)

In his article, Browning does not quote or stipulate an optimal rate, although he references Klaeser (1977) as equating 350 words per minute with “good readers”. I think this level may be somewhat ambitious in the Thai context, however. Tests conducted in my own classrooms here at Assumption University have indicated that, while students exhibit a range of reading speeds, most students (at both graduate and undergraduate levels) are reading at a rate of less than 200 words per minute. I tend to side with Anderson (1999a) when he argues that 200 words per minute is the cutoff point below which reading becomes a “suffocatingly slow process” (Anderson 1999b, p.2) and, therefore, I try to make reading at this speed the goal for my students. It is important to add a note of qualification here however, and point out that recent research has shown that reading rates, even among native speakers, vary according to the purpose for which a text is being read. Reading for detailed understanding, for example, is slower than reading for gist. (see Anderson 1999a) Nevertheless, I think teachers at Assumption University would do well to consider 200 words per minute as a reasonable benchmark for their students, with slightly higher or lower speeds being expected depending on the complexity of the text being read and the purpose of the reading.

My comments here concerning Browning’s article in particular and the subject of timed readings in general have been, necessarily, brief, but I hope I have been successful in directing attention to a topic which has been the subject of some attention in the wide and growing field of research and publication related to English Language Teaching. Browning’s article provides a neat summary of the main goals and benefits of timed reading, although as mentioned, advice on the incorporation of such activities into actual lessons must be sought elsewhere. If I have, in reviewing this material, brought some hitherto overlooked research to the attention of a busy colleague or stimulated some thoughts which may be useful in the ongoing process of learning and development which every thoughtful teacher is, or ought to be, engaged upon, then my intention will have in some small measure succeeded. I would welcome feedback and comment by email at islater@au.edu.

Works Cited


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