

Reading Fluency Development in a Speed Reading Course for EFL Learners

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Abstract: Several studies have shown the positive effects of a speed reading course on students' speed improvement, yet they were carried out within a small scope. This study set out to confirm the existence of speed improvement in a speed reading course for EFL learners. The research also aimed to see how speed reading courses should be scheduled to achieve optimal results. It was found that reading speed could be increased by at least 38 words per minute, and that having three or four sessions of speed reading per week for five or four weeks would be the best choice and having two sessions per week for 10 weeks would be the least favourable one.

Keywords: Reading fluency, reading speed, speed reading courses, reading comprehension, scheduling a speed reading course.

1. Literature review

1.1. Reading fluency and reading speed

Most definitions of reading fluency were proposed in research on reading in the first language (L1). Studies in reading in a second language (L2) or a foreign language (FL) commonly took the theories of L1 reading fluency as the underpinning. In L1 silent reading, fluency is commonly understood as the ability to read and to comprehend accurately at the same time [1; 2]. A fluent reader is a person who has “*freedom from word*

identification problems that might hinder comprehension” [3].

In L2/FL reading, fluency has received relatively scant attention. However, a few researchers have consistently regarded foreign reading fluency as the ability to read and comprehend a text in the foreign language at an adequate speed and two observable signals of this aspect are speed and accuracy in comprehension [4; 5].

Silent reading speed, or silent reading rate is popularly accepted as one of the indicators of silent reading fluency. It is generally understood as the rate of word recognition, which is the total number of words per minute (wpm) a person can recognize. Researchers have pointed out that a normal skilled L1 reader

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reads at around 250-300 wpm and makes approximately 90 fixations per 100 words [6; 7]. Research on reading speed in L2/FL silent reading is a relatively new area. Researchers have suggested that a reasonable goal for second language learners who are reading materials with no new words should be around 250 wpm [5] but that reading speed in L2/FL is slower than in L1 [8]. Although recently L2/FL researchers and educators are focusing on methods to increase L2 and FL reading rate [9], the area of reading speed in L2/FL is still in its infancy.

Researchers have attempted to formulate methods to measure reading rate and comprehension L2/FL silent reading [10-12, 4]. Regarding reading speed, which is conventionally measured by the words per minute (wpm) calculation, the one-minute reading probe, the three-minute probe, the ten-second interval method, and the entire text method have been used [13- 15]. With respect to comprehension assessment, the most popular methods to measure comprehension are true-false questions, multiple choice questions, short answer questions, recall tests and participant self-reports [16; 4]. Typically, in a speed reading course, the learners are asked to keep a graph of their speed in words read per minute and a graph of their comprehension score on the accompanying questions. In this way, the teacher can see students' progress in reading speed and at the same time be informed about their comprehension level [14, 15, 11].

1.2. Speed reading courses

Speed reading courses can be traced from the late 1950s when a teacher named Evelyn Wood invented a method called the *Wood Method* and renamed it as *Reading Dynamics*

in 1958. Soon after that her method, which was also called speed reading, gained popularity in the United States and other English speaking countries. Since then speed reading courses have been regarded as one of the most effective ways to help increase students' L1 reading rate. These courses have also been used in a number of institutions to help students learning English as a foreign or second language increase their reading speed. They vary in terms of scheduling. Millett et al. [15] suggested that during a speed reading course, at least three passages should be read every week. However, they provided no evidence for this choice being better than other choices. While undertaking their study to investigate the effect of speed reading courses, Chung and Nation [12] asked the participants to read twenty-three texts in a total of nine weeks: two texts per week in the first five weeks, three texts per week in the next three weeks, and four texts in the last week. Yet they did not mention the rationale for this scheduling method and no attempts were made to see if this schedule is more effective than other methods. Similarly, Cramer [17] had his participants read eight practice texts over four weeks. However, the researcher did not investigate how this way of scheduling the speed reading course affected the participants' reading rate gains.

Little research was carried out to explore the effect of speed reading courses on L2/FL learners. Just a few studies have addressed this issue but within a small scope [12, 17, 18, 14]. Chung and Nation [12] did a study of reading speed among 49 university students in Korea and found that a speed reading course was helpful for learners in improving their reading rate. Along similar lines, Macalister [14] confirmed that there were reading speed gains

during a speed reading course for EFL learners. However, with small sample sizes, caution must be applied when interpreting the results of their studies as the findings may not be repeated with a larger sample size.

In conclusion, there is evidence that speed reading courses are effective for L2/FL readers, but there is no research on how speed reading course should be scheduled to achieve optimal results. This study examines speed improvement during the course and aimed to find out how many sessions per week would be the optimal choice of scheduling a speed reading course.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research questions

This study was designed to measure the effects of speed reading courses on reading rate improvement and determine the progress pattern of speed improvement. It was carried out with a larger sample size to seek the answers to the following questions:

1. Will EFL learners' reading speed improve during a speed reading course?
2. How should a speed reading course be scheduled to achieve optimal results?

2.2. Materials

The texts in the speed reading course were taken from *Asian and Pacific Speed Readings for ESL Learners* by Millett et al. [15]. They were twenty passages written at the 1000 word level. Each of the passages was 550 words long and was accompanied by ten comprehension questions. The book provides a progress chart in which participants keep records of their reading speed and comprehension scores, and an answer key.

The vocabulary test was taken from Schmitt, Schmitt and Clapham [19]. The test was changed into a bilingual test and then modified after pilot testing. This test was used to make sure the participants had reached the desired vocabulary level for the speed reading course.

2.3. Participants

The participants in the study were first year English majored students at universities in Vietnam. They were randomly divided into four groups. The first group (hereafter named group 1) had one session of speed reading a week, and thus read only sixteen texts as the semester lasted for only sixteen weeks. The second group (hereafter named group 2) had ten weeks with two sessions a week. The third group (hereafter named group 3) and had three sessions a week and thus finished the course in seven weeks. The last group (hereafter named group 4) finished the course in five weeks with four sessions every week.

Initially group 1, group 2, group 3 and group 4 had respectively 23, 23, 24 and 21 participants. However, during the treatment, five students from group 1, four students from group 2, six students from group 3 and three students from group 4 skipped more than three reading sessions. Thus, these students' results were omitted from the analysis.

2.4. Procedure

The four groups followed the speed reading course run by the researcher. Initially, the vocabulary test was given to the four groups to make sure that they had reached the 1000 word level. During the treatment, in each of the sessions, the researcher asked the participants to read one passage in the text book, record their

time, answer the comprehension questions, mark their comprehension score and mark their speed score in the progress chart. The teacher was pointing at the time written on the board, which was in five second intervals.

The twenty texts in the course were distributed among the participants in the way that in every session, as few students as possible were reading the same passage. This was to control for the possibility of different difficulty levels between the passages. As the time periods that the groups went through were different, the groups began the speed reading course at different points of time in such a way that they finished the course at the same time.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

3.1.1. Speed increases in the course

Four scoring methods were used to explore the participants' reading speed improvement: the 20th minus 1st scoring method, the extreme scoring method, the three extremes scoring method and the average scoring method. The 20th minus 1st scoring method takes the score on the 20th text minus the score on the 1st text. The

extreme scoring method takes the highest score minus the lowest score. The three extremes scoring method takes the average score on the best three texts minus the average score on the worst three texts. The average scoring method takes the average score on the first three texts minus the average score on the last three texts, thus increase the chances of being reliable. This method is the most conservative of all four methods and was used as the main method to measure the participants' reading speed increases.

Overall, the data indicated that all four groups made speed increases of at least 38 wpm (see Table 1). The data on initial and final speeds also showed that the average scores on the first text of all groups were similar with group 4 slightly lower than the others (see Table 2). The average scores on the first three texts of all groups were also similar but with group 3 slightly higher than the others. Group difference was only 13 wpm. This result suggests that the study was not affected by unusually high or low scores on the initial texts. Note that the average first three text scores were higher than the 1st text score, showing that the improvement in speed was occurring with texts two and three.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of speed increases for the groups

	Group 2	Group 1	Group 4	Group 3
<i>n</i>	19	18	18	18
Mean	37.94	42.94	53.05	58.27
SD	33.10	31.27	45.90	47.69

Table 2. Means and standard deviations of initial speeds for all groups

		Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
Speed on the 1 st text	Mean	141.16	136.78	139.61	126.66
	SD	38.06	23.59	30.53	38.11
Average speed on the first three texts	Mean	151.22	148.82	162.09	148.81
	SD	31.45	23.99	33.35	25.94

The results from the 20th minus 1st method, extreme method and three extremes method showed the same ranking among the four groups, with group 3 making the most gain, group 4 the second, and group 1 and group 2 the least. This both enhances the validity of the results from all four groups and makes it evident that on average the participants consistently made progress during the speed reading course.

It was found from the preliminary analysis of the participants' progress charts that 73% of the participants made the gradual increase pattern (see Table 3). Only 13% had the erratic or plateau increase pattern. It can therefore be assumed that the speed improvement that the participants made was meaningful and not caused by some erratic or dishonest behaviour.

Table 3. Numbers of participants for different change patterns

Group	No improvement	Erratic change	Plateau change	Gradual change	Mixed change
Group 1	2	3	0	13	0
Group 2	2	2	2	13	0
Group 3	1	3	1	13	0
Group 4	2	2	0	14	0
	7 (9%)	10 (14%)	3 (4%)	53 (73%)	0 (0%)

In the present study, comprehension accuracy was measured by counting the number of correct answers out of the 10 multiple choice comprehension questions for each text. A preliminary analysis of the data (see Table 4) indicated that all groups made an average score of at least seven out of 10 on initial texts, final texts, the first half and the second half of the course. The standard deviation was quite small. This demonstrates that they were increasing speed while still comprehending most of the text. In addition, the data also show that for all groups except group 2, their average scores on the last three texts were slightly higher than their average scores on the first three texts, and their average scores in the second half were slightly higher than their average score on the first half. Although the results show that the participants' improvement in comprehension

was minimal, it could still be assumed that the speed changes they made were real progress and that in speed reading courses, readers increase their speed without comprehension suffering.

The data showed that in their three best sessions, all groups were reading and comprehending with more than 70% accuracy and that only 9 out of 73 participants comprehended with less than 70% accuracy in their best sessions. These results demonstrate that even when the participants read at their best speeds, most of them could still keep their comprehension level at at least 70% accuracy, thus their speed increases were meaningful and this enhances the idea that speed reading courses are meaningfully beneficial to EFL learners.

Table 4. Average comprehension scores on the first three texts and the last three texts, and in the three highest speed sessions, in the first half and the second half of the course for all groups

		Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
First three texts	Mean	7.28	7.25	7.26	7.63
	SD	0.69	0.80	1.36	0.84
Last three texts	Mean	7.59	7.18	7.53	7.75
	SD	0.88	0.98	0.78	0.78
First half	Mean	7.85	7.54	7.70	8.01
	SD	0.61	0.57	0.91	0.58
Second half	Mean	7.91	7.48	7.82	8.05
	SD	0.80	0.92	0.38	0.72
Three highest speed sessions	Mean	7.40	7.70	7.70	7.90
	SD	1.10	1.10	0.76	0.83

3.1.2. Scheduling a speed reading course

The four groups of participants were scheduled in different ways for the speed reading course. Group 1 had only one session a week; group 2 had two sessions; group 3 had three sessions and group 4 had four sessions. To see which way of scheduling the speed reading course would help to achieve an optimal effect, we compared the rate changes made by each

group in the course. All four methods of calculating speed change were examined. As Table 5 shows, all four scoring methods resulted in the same ranking of the groups from lowest to highest, group 2, group 1, group 4, and group 3. The four methods also produced a similar ranking of each treatment, from lowest to highest average, last minus first, three extremes, and extreme.

Table 5. Means and standard deviations of speed increases in all the four scoring methods

Measure		Group 2	Group 1	Group 4	Group 3
Average method	Mean	37.94	42.94	53.05	58.27
	SD	33.10	31.27	45.90	47.69
Last minus first method	Mean	59.57	60.38	78.38	83.55
	SD	44.16	32.85	52.62	51.64
Three extremes method	Mean	73.36	75.11	91.50	101.72
	SD	22.68	26.79	34.70	52.70
Extreme method	Mean	90.26	95.22	119.55	142.22
	SD	31.57	31.84	40.60	82.15

Using one-way ANOVA, we tested the null hypothesis that all the mean increases of the four groups were equal. We found that the groups' mean scores were not significantly different for the average scoring method, $F(3, 69) = 0.98$, $p = 0.406$, for the last minus first scoring method, $F(3, 69) = 1.27$, $p = 0.277$, and

for the three extremes method, $F(3, 69) = 2.61$, $p = 0.058$. However, for the extreme method, there was a significant difference, $F(3, 69) = 4.07$, $p = 0.010$. Post hoc comparisons using Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean scores for group 1 ($M = 95.22$, $SD = 31.84$) and group 2 ($M = 90.26$, $SD = 31.57$) were significantly

lower than the mean score for group 3 ($M = 142.22$, $SD = 82.15$). The mean score for group 4 ($M = 119.55$, $SD = 40.60$) was not significantly higher than the mean scores for group 1 and group 2.

Because group 1 only had one session a week and the semester only lasted for 16 weeks, we had to compare the average score on the

three initial texts and the average score on the 14th, 15th and 16th texts. This was done to make sure that the comparison was an equal one between group 1 and the other three groups. The results presented in Table 6 indicate that group 2 ranked the last in all four scoring methods.

Table 6. Means and standard deviations of in-course speed increases for all treatment groups when using calculations involving 16 texts

Measure		Group 2	Group 1	Group 4	Group 3
Average method	Mean	28.37	42.76	49.05	40.98
	SD	33.10	31.27	45.90	47.69
Last minus first method	Mean	43.23	60.10	76.65	59.78
	SD	45.22	32.85	50.07	49.23
Three extremes method	Mean	60.83	74.91	83.23	88.87
	SD	21.89	26.79	28.49	50.37
Extremes method	Mean	82.86	95.04	112.98	115.06
	SD	25.52	31.84	42.37	54.60

Taken as a whole, the results suggest the two sessions per week scheduling produces the least favourable results.

3.2. Discussion

3.2.1. Speed increases in the course

The study set out to determine the effects of a speed reading course on reading speed improvement. The findings emerging from this study enhanced our understanding of the benefits of speed reading courses.

In the first place, the results showed that Vietnamese EFL learners gained reading rate increases in the speed reading course. This collaborates with the findings by Chung and Nation [12] and Macalister [14]. Reading speed improvement was measured using the average method. The 20th minus 1st method, the extreme method and the three extremes method were also used and it was found that the four scoring

methods agreed with each other on the ranking of the group averages. The consistency in the ranking of the four groups for the four methods suggests that they all are feasible scoring methods. The agreement between the four scoring methods in ranking the groups is a partial validation of each of the methods.

The study has confirmed that the participants' speed increases were real progress and that speed reading courses are useful for EFL learners. All findings related to the participants' speed improvement agreed with each other. First, all four scoring methods validate each other in terms of producing the same ranking of the groups. Second, all the four groups had similar average initial speeds. Third, the groups' comprehension scores were kept at the appropriate level of over 70% accuracy, showing that they reading rate improvement was meaningful.

In the present study, the comparison between the participants' initial speeds and their final speeds showed that not only the participants with slow initial speeds but also the participants with the fastest initial speeds benefited from the speed reading course. It was also shown that none of the participants was near the ceiling level of around 300 wpm in normal reading. The comparison between the participants' initial speeds and their speed increases showed that initial speeds do not determine the amount of speed improvement. Both the participants with lower initial speeds and the participants with higher initial speeds made substantial increases.

3.2.2. Scheduling a speed reading course

As mentioned earlier, one of the main purposes of the study was to determine what is the best way to schedule a speed reading course in order to achieve the optimal effect. The results showed that groups 1, 3, and 4 outperformed group 2 in all scoring methods. This finding suggests that teachers should not use just two sessions a week in their scheduling option list. However, although it was possible to conclude that two sessions a week was a less effective choice, the lack of significant difference ($p > .05$ in most cases) among the other groups' results has made it hard to decide which way of scheduling would be the best to achieve optimal effect. The difference between the results from groups 1, 3 and 4 is neither statistically nor pedagogically meaningful. Only 8 wpm (between group 3 and group 4 when comparing sixteen texts), 6 wpm (between group 1 and group 4 when comparing sixteen texts) or 5 wpm (between group 3 and group 4 when comparing twenty texts) would not be worth changing the whole course schedule from

having one session a week to three or four sessions a week. A teacher may choose either of these ways as long as it fits their program and timetable.

4. Conclusion

The study confirmed the effect of speed reading courses on reading speed improvement. The main findings suggest that a speed reading course is beneficial for EFL learners. The findings highlighted the benefits of speed reading courses in L2/FL in several ways. In the first place, the substantial increases that the groups made reinforce the idea that a speed reading course in L2/FL can help learners to improve their reading speeds. The findings that most of the participants made gradual increases, even within the first three texts and the last three texts and that the four scoring methods agreed with each other increased the reliability of the results. Secondly, the evidence that not only the participants with higher initial speeds but also the participants with lower initial speeds could reach very high speeds at the end of the course demonstrates that a speed reading course can be beneficial for learners at different levels of reading ability. In addition, the research supports the idea that a speed reading course produces meaningful results because while increasing their speeds, the participants could maintain their comprehension at around 70% accuracy. Although further research is warranted to confirm the relationship between reading speed and reading comprehension, the findings of the study do expand previous research and have noteworthy implications for language teachers and language learners, especially those who are concerned with the reading skill and speed reading courses.

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Phát triển sự đọc hiểu trôi chảy của người học tiếng Anh như ngoại ngữ trong các khóa học tăng tốc độ đọc

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Tóm tắt: Một số nghiên cứu trước đây đã cho thấy hiệu quả của khóa học tăng tốc độ đọc cho người học ngoại ngữ. Tuy nhiên, những nghiên cứu này được thực hiện với quy mô nhỏ, số lượng người tham gia rất ít. Nghiên cứu này nhằm chứng minh và xác nhận hiệu quả của khóa học này đối với việc phát triển tốc độ đọc của người học tiếng Anh như là một ngoại ngữ, đồng thời xem xét việc thiết kế khóa học này ảnh hưởng như thế nào đến kết quả của người học. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy người học tăng tốc độ đọc ít nhất là 38 từ/phút, và thiết kế khóa học với 3 hoặc 4 lần rèn luyện đọc tốc độ mỗi tuần trong vòng 4-5 tuần là hợp lý nhất, trong khi khóa học hai lần mỗi tuần trong vòng 10 tuần là sự lựa chọn ít hiệu quả nhất.

Từ khóa: Độ đọc trôi chảy, tốc độ đọc hiểu, khóa học tăng tốc độ đọc, đọc hiểu, thiết kế các khóa học tăng tốc độ đọc.