

EFL ACADEMIC READING ISSUES: MANAGING READING RATE/SPEED FRUSTRATION AND COMPREHENDING TEXTS

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Abstract: An issue that until recently has been “irrelevant” for me personally and for many other English teachers, is the issue of reading rate/speed. I presumably believe that most teachers have never thought of this issue because of limited time for classroom instruction or simply because as teachers, the level of reading and preparation for classroom instruction is usually plenty. EFL academic reading however, involves reading different materials in different subjects and courses and being able to “interact” with them. The issue of interacting with books and texts depends a great deal on the level of comprehension. At university studies, students are overloaded with different materials and deadlines that are in fact frustrating. Students are obliged to read “thick books” in different academic subjects and courses and are over-flooded with known and unknown terminology, both scientific and professional in the specific field of study. They now must get the most out of books and must perfectly understand course books in order to pass exams and gain overall success. For such reasons, students either learn to read faster or don’t read at all. According to Anderson (1999) “knowing how to read more efficiently and adjusting reading speed to reading task are critical to this success. (1999:56). Therefore, “increasing students’ reading rates makes them able to devote greater cognitive capacity to comprehension skills” (1999:54). The study aims at testing students’ overall comprehension skills using timed-reading activities and questionnaires over a period of 4 weeks (12 instruction hours). It will be conducted with 3 and 4 year students of the English department during their English reading instruction classes. Other matters of study will be students’ anxiety, frustration, previous experience with reading, motivation etc.

Keywords: reading rate, frustration, cognitive capacity, comprehension etc.

An introduction to EFL academic reading

Reading as a general term refers to the process of “decoding words and their meaning on paper, in written text.” Moreover, it is the interaction of one’s eyes, brain and many other accompanying factors such as previous experience with texts, imagination, creativity, vocabulary etc. As Richardson, Morgan and Fleener (2006) put it: “the physical process of reading requires the eyes to move in a jerky pattern, over the page, stopping to let the brain take in information, and then moving again. These eye fixations constitute the physical process of reading.” (2006, p. 263) What is important is how readers manipulate the information taken in with a fixation, or “what goes on between the eye and the brain” rather than from the page to the eye.” (Smith, 1988) According to Ruddell (2005), “reading is the act of constructing meaning while transacting with text. Just as we use information stored in schemata to understand and interact with the world around us, so do we use this knowledge to make sense of print.” (2005, p. 30) Rosenblatt (1994) further states that “every reading is an event, or a transaction, involving a particular reader and a particular pattern of signs, a text and occurring at a particular time in a particular context. Instead of two fixed entities acting on one another, the reader and the text are two aspects of a total dynamic situation. The “meaning” does not reside ready-made “in” the text or “in” the reader, but happens or comes into being during the transaction between reader and text. (1994, p. 1063). The major difference between reading and academic reading may be explained accordingly to why one reads. Grellet (1981) defines two main reasons for reading: reading for pleasure and reading for information (in order to find out something or in order to do something with the information you get). (1981, p. 4) Pleasure reading, skimming through a newspaper, a comic strip etc. may be defined as “just reading” since the reader in this case is not asked to reproduce the information afterwards, whereas academic reading is usually reading done in academic subjects during studies, which requires retaining of information, comprehension etc. Academic reading requires a depth analysis of the written work i.e. full comprehension and is usually based upon certain deadlines, exam sessions etc. The extent of comprehension further “marks” students overall success in both oral and written exams. Therefore, practicing the skill of retrieving information, managing rate and speed and improving comprehension is the key to overall success in FL or L2 reading. However, as a separate skill that is usually practiced along with the other skills, reading is usually “neglected” by teachers. Grabe (2009, 2010) concludes that: “generally, in a second language (L2) or foreign language (FL) learning context, reading fluency has been ignored.” However, as Anderson (1999) states, “reading is one of the most important language skills for ensuring students’ success at all educational levels...” (1999, p.56), by which practicing reading in a foreign language is mandatory. Therefore, reading should be a skill taught and practiced throughout the whole learning process, and its’ implementation in language acquisition should be thought of as a primary source in effectively learning a foreign or second language.

Reading speed/rate

Apart from neglecting reading in general, most teachers forget to consider reading rate/speed which are tied to comprehension and overall frustration. Reading rate refers to how much one has actually read i.e. ones' experience with written texts, whereas reading speed refers to how fast one can skim, scan and retain information i.e. how many w.p.m. (words per minute), "knowing how to read more efficiently and adjusting reading speed to reading task are critical to this success (Anderson, 1999, p. 56). Therefore, "increasing students' reading rates makes them able to devote greater cognitive capacity to comprehension skills" (1999, p.54) and also "as reading teachers reflect upon the vital role of increasing students' reading rates, they will be in a better position to assist students improve their reading skills." (1999, p. 64) Failure in improving this issue results in students' failure to satisfy themselves and also in frustration when foreign students must succeed in academic subjects: "when they move into content area reading tasks , ESL/EFL students benefit from a fluent reading rate, because they will have increased reading demands"... and "increased reading fluency can also improve performance on standardized tests."(1999, p. 56). Nuttall (1996) describes frustration that may be part of slower reading in her description of the "vicious cycle of the weak reader" (1996, p.127) In such cases students lack of reading rate and comprehension skills make reading a very difficult task, due to which students' motivation lacks because: "to many second language readers, reading is a suffocating, slow, process." (Jensen, 1986) *The optimal reading rate*-the process of reading is different for every individual. According to my own personal philosophy and experience, I would divide students into 3 categories: those that enjoy reading, those that are neutral and those that dislike reading. For some (1st group), reading is an enjoyable daily activity, a preferable hobby that amuses them, neutral reading individuals (2nd group) are those which have nothing against reading , but which do not have a passion for reading either (this group of students when needed to complete a term paper will actually read the book), and in the last (3rd group) are those that simply dislike reading and might have never actually read a book (these students won't read even when assignments are due and usually fail the course) All these personal feelings are deeply related to the whole reading process because rather we like or dislike reading, every subject in schools and universities is "tied" to reading: there's no difference in between history and literature field of studies, since both have "readings". What differs here is the "reading burden." While those that read daily need less time to read through a page, those that never read need more time, and the reading goes slower: "readers who do not understand often slow down their reading rate and then do not enjoy reading because it takes so much time." (1999, p. 59). Dubin & Bycina (1991) state that: "a rate of 200 *wpm* (words per minute) would appear to be the absolute minimum in order to read with full comprehension." (1991, p. 198). On the other hand, Jensen (1986) suggests that "300 w.p.m. is the optimal rate and recommends that second language readers seek to "approximate" native speaker reading rates and comprehension levels in order to keep up with the classmates." (1986, p. 106). Whether it is 200 or 300 w.p.m. normally depends on the text, upon familiarity with the vocabulary items and upon students' interest. If students are to read a long passage which contains known vocabulary items, it would normally

take less time to go through, on the contrary, even if a passage was shorter in length, but contained long, unfamiliar words, it would normally take longer time to go through. If students lack interest in the reading, then presumably, both hypotheses fail. In short, reading comprehension in a foreign or second language requires much more than knowing how to read. It requires a certain interest, a certain speed and certain interaction with text.

Insufficient/inefficient reading rate causes frustration

The main aim of this article is to discuss issues that have a great impact on reading comprehension, one of which is frustration caused by insufficient reading rate and speed. I associate frustration caused during exams, during standardized tests etc. and suggest that reading speed/rate should be relevant factors in the overall reading process. There are cases when our students fail because we have not taught them how to extract information, how to focus on relevant information and how to actually deal with written texts. I personally experienced difficulty to an extent when passing TOEFL, not because I did not understand the texts, but because they were too many in number and my time limit was too short. This experience made me think of time-based tasks and activities that would help learners practice their reading skills and made me aware of the frustration my students had with readings with limited amount of time upon which the study was conducted. The study participants were 3rd year students of the English department, a total of 55 of both genders and between the ages of 20-21. The study lasted over a period of 4 weeks, during which participants were asked to read different passages and texts, (Appendix 1) with different terminology and length as fast as possible and to answer comprehension questions afterwards. The students were previously interviewed (Fig.1) as to whether they believed that time-based reading caused frustration and if the actual meaning of the text was lost. Students did not believe that timed-reading actually caused any frustration and were very self-confident at the beginning however, the results obtained were quite different.

Study procedure

Part 1

Q1. Are you a fast reader?	Q2. How much do you read?	Q3. How many w.p.m.do you think you can read?	Q4. Do you think that timed-reading would cause frustration?	Q5. Would it cause insufficient comprehension?	Q6. Would your focus be on your speed, the time or on comprehending the text?	Personal assumption
Yes 44	Often 23	Don't know 23	Yes 10	Yes 12	Speed 6	

No 11	Rarely 15	Have never thought of this issue 12	No 29	No 43	Time 14	
	Never 17	Am curious to know 20	Don't know 16		Comprehension 35	

Fig. 1 Whole Class Interview Questions

Study procedure part 2

The students were previously informed about the study, were interviewed and lastly tested, in duration of 4 weeks. Week 1 proved to be a bit difficult in terms of students' habit-formation with the drills. The proceeding weeks were easier, enjoyable and proved to be more successful once students' clearly understood their role, the task and once I had pointed out time-consuming factors that resulted in dissatisfaction (mouthing out words, stopping too long at unknown words, movement of pens, and other distractions).

Students were seated individually and provided with texts. All students began at the same "start" time and were to read as fast as they could. (Texts were adopted from "*Reading power: reading faster, thinking skills, reading for pleasure, comprehension skills*" Mikulecky & Jeffries, 1986, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company. Longman, pgs.201/203, 205/206 etc.).

Instructions were clearly explained. Students had to write the start time and read the passage as quickly as possible. They had to write down the finish time when they were done reading. Start time minus finish time equaled students' *wpm* time. Calculation of time served as a minor distraction from text. Students were afterwards required to answer comprehension questions without referring to the text for help. This served as an instrument to actually "measure" how much students had understood relevant information and how many correct answers they could provide.

Study hypothesis concluded

Study hypothesis were based upon previous experience while teaching reading comprehension skills. The following hypotheses were concluded:

H.1. Practiced reading skills develop better comprehension.

My personal assumptions tied to reading were that the more students read, the better they comprehended. This assumption stands not only for different texts, but even in content areas

(imagine how little students know about a subject matter during week 1 of lectures, or even during their whole first month). Even a whole semester can be frustrating. However, the more students read, analyze and deepen their personal theory regarding the subject matter, the more they comprehend and the better their results become. Similarly, practicing reading in e SL or FL would normally enhance better comprehension and develop vocabulary acquisition. Regarding my first hypothesis, even during timed-reading, practiced reading skills did develop better comprehension. Even though texts provided always differed in topic, terminology and length, students scored better results during week 3 and 4 than they did during week 1 or 2.

H.2. Time-based reading results in higher level of frustration.

During students’ interview, most students had self-confidence regarding their frustration level. They believed that the matter of time would not at all bother them or their level of comprehension and even denied focusing on their speed rather than on the text. Others believed that they could manage both factors. Results obtained afterwards were quite different. Students proved to be frustrated much more with timed-reading activities than during free reading. Their focus on their speed de-concentrated them from the actual text, resulting in incorrect answers.

H3. Most students’ current optimal reading average is lower than 200 wpm.

My personal assumption regarding students’ optimal reading average was that they were lower than 200 wpm was basically because students rarely read. Reading rate and speed depend on students’ experience with written works, either on paper or on screen. Results provided below in bold (Fig. 2) show that paper based comprehension scores were in their average, even though 20 out of the total were insufficient readers, 30 were average readers and only 5 were good readers (the term good reader defines those individuals that can read 400 wpm and can comprehend 80% of the text). Comprehending only 50% or 60% of the text is not efficient especially when students’ want higher marks.

Screen	Paper	Comprehension	Reader profile
100 wpm	110 wpm	50% (20/55)	Insufficient
200 wpm	240 wpm	60% (30/55)	Average reader
300 wpm	400 wpm	80% (5/55)	Good reader
700 wpm	1000 wpm	85% (0/55)	Excellent, accomplished reader

Fig.2. A general idea of average reading scores

H4. Reading speed depends on terminology, on text length, and upon the fixation of the eyes and their movement.

In cases when students lack previous knowledge, when they lack vocabulary and do not understand terminology in texts, the reading normally becomes slower. Students’ stumble over

unknown words and trying to comprehend texts the reading becomes frustrating and immensely slow. When longer length texts are used, some things occur. For starters, students tend to focus on all the information and usually remember only some; longer length texts might contain more unknown words than shorter texts and normally have more information to remember. There are some habits that can also slow down the reading for instance, trying to pronounce words while reading, mouthing them out, and stopping for a longer period of time on the same word. Students agreed that results during their second, third and fourth time were better after they had practiced reading with their eyes and not involving other movements. Their reading speed had normally undergone improvement to some extent.

Limitations of the study

Throughout the years of reading, research and teaching, I have concluded that our ideology, point of view and personal theory change. We now think deeper and analyze issues that seemed unnecessary then. Our personal theory has changed accordingly to our students and to their expectations i.e. their overall success. I am aware of the fact that the instruments, number of participants and elaboration might not be enough, though I have tried to be brief and to not over exaggerate. The texts used, I agree could have been different and covered different topics, however this was only a first attempt and the study is at its initial phase. Since academic reading issues are part of my PhD dissertation, I aim at specifically designing other instruments and aim at including a whole chapter on reading speed and rate and other issues. In spite of everything, I believe that it will still inspire those that will read it and will provide a scope of information, experience and contribution.

Conclusion and further recommendations

The focus of this paper was to address the issues of reading rate/ speed and reading comprehension in a detailed description. It was addressed to learners' needs and the improvement of reading comprehension skills, with enhancing the practice of speed. The main aim was to actually help learners develop the preciseness of reading habit and to make them aware of certain issues that might affect either positively or negatively their overall scores and marks. It was especially focused on time-based readings that might be found in national exams, placement tests, TOEFL etc. and also on overall readings in English in different academic subjects that were time consuming and frustrating for students. I advise further elaboration of the issue wherever the English language is taught as an SL or FL.

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Appendix

Note: The following text serves only as an example of similar texts that were used for the study.

Susan and Sam Diamond were enjoying themselves very much in London. They were lucky with the weather. No rain for ten days! They couldn't believe it. England is famous for bad weather. Londoners couldn't believe it either. Everyone was smiling all the time. At lunch time the parks were full of people sitting in the sun.

With the good weather, Susan and Sam spent many hours outside. They visited Kew Gardens and Kensington Gardens several times. The flowers there seemed bigger and more beautiful than the flowers at home. Susan especially loved the roses. She wished she could take some home with her.

The Diamonds visited many of the historical places around the city. They went to the Tower of London. It is one of the oldest buildings in the city. King William built it in about 1080 to keep his family safe. Later it became a prison. Many famous kings and queens were prisoners in the Tower. Now it is a place for tourists to visit.

Susan and Sam also went to Westminster Abbey, the most famous old church in London. Many people are buried there. Susan and Sam looked at all the names. They found the names of kings, queens, poets and scientists. For example, Queen Elizabeth I is buried there. So are Charles Darwin and Robert Browning. Susan and Sam were learning a lot of history. There was so much more history in England than in America!

And of course, the Diamonds went to many museums. In the British Museum they found very interesting and very old art from Greece and Egypt. They were surprised to see all these things in England. In the National Gallery and the Tate Gallery they saw fine examples of English art. Susan decided her favorite painter was John Constable. She liked his pictures of English farms, hills and rivers.

But the museum they both preferred was the Victoria and Albert Museum. There they saw very interesting old clothing from different times and places. They also saw old musical instruments from Italy. Sam's favorite was a beautiful old violin made by Antonio Stradivari in 1690.

Susan and Sam were very happy at the end of every day in London. But they also were very, very tired. One evening, they went to the opera at Covent Garden. They both fell asleep in the middle of a song!

Starting time _____
Finishing time _____
Reading time _____

Turn the page and answer the questions.
Don't look back at the passage.

Circle the best answer.

1. This passage is about 1.
 - a. English museums.
 - b. how Susan and Sam enjoyed London.
 - c. how tired Susan and Sam were at the end of every day.
 - d. historical places in London.
2. In London ten days of good weather is 2.
 - a. not surprising.
 - b. not lucky.
 - c. unusual.
 - d. famous.
3. Susan thought that English roses were 3.
 - a. not as beautiful as American roses.
 - b. difficult to grow.
 - c. more beautiful than American roses.
 - d. not as big as American roses.
4. The Tower of London is 4.
 - a. full of prisoners.
 - b. a famous church.
 - c. one of the oldest buildings in the city.
 - d. where the king lives.
5. The Diamonds think England 5.
 - a. has a longer history than the U.S.
 - b. has less history than the U.S.
 - c. has few museums.
 - d. isn't interesting.
6. Many famous people 6.
 - a. lived in Westminster Abbey.
 - b. were prisoners in Westminster Abbey.
 - c. are in the British Museum.
 - d. are buried in Westminster Abbey.
7. Susan and Sam are especially interested in 7.
 - a. science.
 - b. history and art.
 - c. opera.
 - d. English farms.
8. At the end of every day, Susan and Sam were 8.
 - a. at the opera.
 - b. thinking about New York.
 - c. happy and tired.
 - d. unhappy.

Go back and answer the questions a second time. You may look back at the passage. Write the answers in the boxes on the right.
Check your answers in the Answer Key. Number correct _____
Find your Reading Rate. Fill in the Progress Chart.