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Speed Reading in an Intensive EAP Course in Thailand: A Pilot Study

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Introduction

Reading has numerous benefits for language learners — improving vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, writing skills, and spelling (Kim & Krashen, 1997) — and is thus a critical skill for language learners to develop. When reading in a foreign language, learners often read "laboriously word by word" (Chang, 2010, p. 284), methodically looking up vocabulary as they work towards "decoding the word meaning and comprehending the content." Discussion of reading skills often centers on comprehension; however, it is not the only aspect to consider. Reading speed is also highly relevant to learners' success. Rasinski (2002) warned that "excessively slow reading leads to reading frustration" (p. 92). Slow reading presents problems in the classroom, where learners may be embarrassed that they cannot complete tasks at the same rate as their peers. It also presents problems for work done outside of the classroom: "Just to keep up with their classmates in the amount of reading done, these slower readers have to invest considerably more time and energy in their reading" (Rasinski, 2002, p. 92). This is particularly true at the university level, where many courses require learners to engage with dense texts about academic topics.

In the Thai context, the development of reading skills is particularly relevant. Thai learners of English often struggle to develop their reading skills (Chomchaiya & Dunworth, 2008; Suknantapong, Karnchanathat, & Kannaovakun, 2002). Chomchaiya and Dunworth (2008) explain:

> The reasons for this are numerous and include issues with first language reading ability, low level of decoding skills, lack of cultural knowledge of material, lack of motivation to learn, lack of diversity in teaching materials, over-dependence on the teacher and a concomitant lack of learner autonomy, lack of opportunities to read and inadequate exposure to reading materials. (p. 98)

This problem extends from the primary school level (Bowornkiengkai, 2011) to the graduate school level (Prapphal, 2003). For example, a study by Prapphal (2003) found that learners who had graduated from "international" (i.e., English medium) bachelor's degree programs at Thai universities received lower scores on the reading section of an English-language graduate school entrance exam than they received on the writing and listening sections. Investigation of various approaches to developing reading skills is thus of particular interest in the Thai context.

This paper reports on a pilot study investigating one approach to developing Thai learners' reading skills. The study was conducted in an intensive upper-intermediate level EAP class at a Thai university over the course of several weeks in one 10-week academic term. During this time, 25 learners completed Millet's (2017) "Speed Readings for ESL Learners 3000 BNC," which consists of 20 graded texts of 400 words each and associated comprehension questions. The intervention resulted in a 19.7% increase in reading speed, from 136.36 words per minute to 163.27 words per minute. After a brief review of the literature on fluency and speed reading, this paper describes the methodology used in the pilot study. It then discusses the results of the study and recommends avenues for further study.

Literature Review

The development of fluency, which can be defined as "getting good at using what you already know" (Nation, 2014, p. 5), is an important aspect of language programs. Nation (2014) divides language teaching into four strands: meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. He strongly recommends that language learners at all levels should take a balanced approach, dedicating approximately equal time to each strand (Nation, 2013). In fact, Nation (2013) states, "The most important planning that a teacher can do is to make sure that the course contains the four strands in roughly equal quantities" (p. 10). These four strands apply equally to the four skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing, which necessitates a more specific definition of fluency within each skill.

Reading fluency can be defined more specifically as "the ability to read rapidly with ease and accuracy, and to read with appropriate expression and phrasing. It involves a long incremental learning process, and text comprehension is an expected outcome of fluent reading" (Grabe, 2009, p. 291). In recent years, researchers have emphasized the importance of reading fluency in both L1 and L2 (Grabe, 2010). Grabe (2009) also notes that automaticity, accuracy, and rate are subprocesses of reading fluency. While reading fluency has many demonstrated benefits, researchers have commented that it often receives less attention and time in language programs than "accurate word decoding" (Chang, 2012, p. 56). This has led to a call for direct instruction in reading fluency in L1 contexts (e.g., Rasinski, Homan, & Biggs, 2009) as well as L2 contexts (e.g., Nation, 2014).

One common approach to developing learners' reading fluency is via a speed-reading course. In *What Do You Need to Know to Learn a Foreign Language,* Nation (2014) suggests several activities for building fluency in reading: speed reading, reading large amounts of easy material, and repeated reading. He recommends that learners of English aim to increase their silent reading speed to approximately 250 words per minute (Nation, 2014). Of these approaches, the most practical fluency-building activity to implement in a controlled classroom context is speed reading as it can be facilitated with a relatively small investment in time and materials.

In addition to increasing reading speed, Millett (2017) includes building confidence as an important objective of speed reading. She cites a lack of confidence as a barrier that learners must pass in order to continue their development: "Gaining confidence is an important aspect of the [speed reading] programme. A lot of learning is getting past the 'I can't do it' barrier. A speed-reading programme can push the student through this barrier" (Millett, 2017, p. i).

The link between reading speed and enjoyment of reading is well established in the literature. In the widely cited *Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language*, Nuttall (1996) observed, "Speed, enjoyment, and comprehension are closely linked with one another" (p. 127). A more recent article by Chang (2010) more explicitly discussed the inability of learners who have slow reading speeds to enjoy reading: "By reading slowly ... students' exposure is limited, comprehension can be poor, and reading for pleasure nearly unthinkable" (p. 284). Advanced readers exhibit higher automaticity in their reading and can "carry out lower-level reading processing nearly automatically" (Nishida, 2014, p. 133). By

improving their reading speed, learners will be not only more prepared to succeed academically but more likely to enjoy reading for pleasure.

While there is a sound theoretical basis for including direct instruction in reading fluency as a significant component of second language instruction, there has been relatively little research into the effects of programs aiming to improve L2 reading rates (Chang, 2010). Existing studies indicate that a majority of learners participating in direct instruction in reading speed do experience gains, though these gains vary from study to study (e.g., Chung & Nation, 2006; Cushing-Weigle & Jensen, 1996; Macalister, 2008). The pilot study described in this paper is an initial step in empirically investigating the effectiveness of a speed-reading course in an intensive EAP context.

Methods

This pilot study included three main steps: testing learners' vocabulary size to determine the appropriate set of speed-reading texts; administering a set of speed-reading texts and associated comprehension questions; and collecting learners' reading times, comprehension question scores, and feedback. The study was completed over several weeks during a 10-week academic term in an intensive EAP program at a Thai university. The 25 participants were learners in an upper-intermediate level course at the CEFR B2 level.

At the beginning of the term, each learner tested his or her vocabulary size on VocabularySize.com and reported the score to the teacher using a Google Form. VocabularySize.com is based on Paul Nation's Vocabulary Size Test (Colophon, 2018). The results of the online test indicated that the average vocabulary size of learners in the class was 7,226 words. The minimum vocabulary size was 4,400, the maximum was 11,200, and the standard deviation was 1,720. Based on these results, Millett's (2017) set of speed readings at the 3,000-word level was selected. These readings exclusively use vocabulary drawn from the 3,000 most common words in the British National Corpus (BNC) plus the following: "words that are explained in the text, titles of passages, content words like country names and animal names, and some common words like television, cell phone and internet" (Millett, 2017, p. i).

A set of speed-reading texts well below the learners' average vocabulary size was selected because speed reading texts should not be overly challenging, allowing readers to focus on speed rather than comprehension. Nation (2009) explains, "There should be little or no unknown vocabulary or grammatical features in the speed-reading texts" (p. 2). Selecting texts that were well below the learners' average vocabulary size and over 1,400 words lower than the minimum vocabulary size ensured that there would be few words that would be totally unknown to the readers (Millett, 2017).

After selecting the set of speed readings, the readings were administered according to Millett's (2017) instructions. Each reading and its associated comprehension questions were printed back-to-back on a single sheet of paper and laminated. For ease of distribution, two complete sets were made. Learners were informed of the basic instructions for the reading activity: they were to begin a timer, read the passage as quickly as they could while still maintaining a reasonable level of comprehension, stop the timer, turn over the sheet to answer the comprehension questions, check their answers against the answer key, then enter their time and comprehension score on the provided graph. The graph showed times on the left y-axis and reading speeds in words per minute on the right y-axis, so they were able to check their reading speeds without performing any calculations.

The teacher also explained the purpose of the task — to improve the learners' reading speed and fluency so that they would be better able to read for enjoyment and for academic success at the university — and that the focus of the task was speed, not comprehension. Learners were instructed to aim to achieve a score of 70% (7 out of 10) on the reading comprehension questions. If they scored lower than 70%, they should decrease their speed; if they scored over 70%, they should increase their speed. Learners needed to be reminded of this as their initial inclination was to aim for 100% comprehension.

Learners were also reminded not to read along with their pen or finger because doing so slows their reading speed (Millett, 2017). One of the objectives of speed reading is to enhance learners' ability to "process meaning chunks" (Millett, 2017, p. 1), and this is inhibited by their tracing of each word as they read it. Rasinski (2002) observes, "A slow reading rate may be symptomatic of inefficient word recognition or lack of sensitivity to the phrase—the natural unit of meaning in reading" (p. 95). Developing more efficient recognition of phrases is better accomplished through speed reading in which readers do not focus on each individual word.

After leaners had finished the set of 20 texts, they submitted their speeds and comprehension scores via a Google Form. They also provided feedback on their perception of the speed-reading activity by completing a set of eight seven-point Likert scale items and an open-ended question.

Results

The average reading speeds increased steadily as the learners progressed through the texts. Learners' average reading speed on the first text was 136.36 words per minute, and their speed on the final text was 163.27 words per minute. This represents a 19.7% increase in reading speed from the first text to the last. The mean reading speed from each text is displayed in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Mean Speed and Comprehension Scores

Text	Mean Time (m:s)	Mean Speed (Words per Minute)	Mean Comprehension Score
1	2:56	136.36	77.9%
2	2:51	140.35	79.2%
3	2:44	146.34	78.3%
4	2:34	155.84	79.6%
5	2:44	146.34	78.8%
6	2:41	149.07	78.3%
7	2:38	151.90	80.0%
8	2:35	154.84	79.2%
9	2:33	156.86	76.3%
10	2:39	150.94	79.2%
11	2:40	150.00	81.3%
12	2:38	151.90	78.3%
13	2:27	163.27	75.4%
14	2:39	150.94	75.8%
15	2:33	156.86	72.9%
16	2:31	158.94	72.1%
17	2:32	157.89	80.0%
18	2:29	161.07	82.5%
19	2:28	162.16	72.9%
20	2:27	163.27	79.2%

The mean comprehension scores hovered around 80% (8 out of 10) throughout the set of speed-reading texts. The minimum average score of any text was 72.1%, the maximum average score of any text was 82.5%, and the mean score was 77.9%. Table 1 contains the mean comprehension scores.

The learners' responses to the Likert scale items were also positive. These items investigated whether learners found speed reading interesting, felt it improved their English, felt it improved their reading comprehension, perceived reading quickly as important, found the activity challenging, believed speed reading is a good use of class time, enjoyed speed reading, and thought speed reading should be part of the curriculum at all levels of the intensive EAP program. The overall average was 5.83, indicating a high

level of agreement with the statements. Table 2 contains mean scores and standard deviations of the results.

TABLE 2
Mean Score and Standard Deviation of Likert Scale Survey Items

Likert Scale Item	Mean Score	Standard Deviation of Scores
1. The speed-reading activity was interesting.	6.05	0.81
2. The speed-reading activity helped me to improve my English.	5.50	1.00
3. The speed-reading activity helped me improve my reading comprehension.	5.64	1.15
4. Being able to read quickly is important.	6.00	0.83
5. The speed-reading activity was challenging.	5.50	1.33
6. The speed-reading activity is a good use of class time.	5.91	1.12
7. I enjoy speed reading.	6.09	0.93
8. Speed reading should be part of the curriculum at all levels or our program.	5.95	1.00

Learners' responses to the open-ended question were overwhelmingly positive. The responses fell into three categories: comments on perceived skill improvement, comments on enjoyment of speed reading, and suggested alternative uses of class time, which included two games and literature analysis. The frequencies of these categories appear in Table 3. The remainder of the learners declined to comment or wrote general statements (e.g., "Good!"). Two of the learners commented that they enjoyed speed reading and mentioned that they would prefer more fiction than nonfiction.

TABLE 3
Categories of Most Responses to Open-ended Question

Category	Number of responses in category	Percentage of total responses
Perceived skill improvement	6 out of 25	24%
Enjoyment of speed reading	5 out of 25	20%
Suggested alternative uses of class time	3 out of 25	12%

Discussion

The results of this pilot study seem to indicate that speed reading is an excellent use of class time in this context. While the increase in reading speed of 19.7% was lower than that of some other studies, e.g., Chang (2010) reported a 25% increase, it remains a significant gain. The use of class time to perform this activity is further justified by learners' enjoyment of the activity. The learners' increased reading speeds should also allow them not only to spend less time on future reading assignments at university but also to be more confident in their reading skills and more appreciative of reading as a source of enjoyment. Learners' responses to the Likert scale items in the current study demonstrate their perception that they are making progress. Responses such as "It helped me a lot in improving my speed and during the assignment period I can gradually see a change in speed" provide further evidence of this.

One means of improving the speed-reading activity in subsequent terms would be to further emphasize to learners that a comprehension score of above 70% indicates that they should push themselves to read faster. The mean comprehension scores throughout the course of speed-reading texts was above the level indicated by Millett (2017). With proper explanation and encouragement, future groups of learners may be able to experience the 25% average gain in reading speed reported by Chang (2010). Increasing learners' reading speed aligns with the goal of the EAP program as doing so would allow the learners to read more efficiently and confidently, thus preparing them for success in their English-medium content courses at the university. Furthermore, increasing their reading speed could potentially increase the

enjoyment that they draw from reading and therefore increase the total amount that they read over the course of their university educations.

Conclusion

This pilot study investigated the effectiveness of a speed-reading course in the context of an intensive EAP program in Thailand. Based on the encouraging results of this study, we will continue with the implementation of speed reading in the intensive EAP program. The pilot study shows the potential for learners to improve their reading speeds, bolster their confidence in their reading skills, and enhance their enjoyment of reading. Learning from this pilot study, we will make minor adjustments to future iterations of this speed-reading program with the goal of further enhancing learners' reading speed. Similar speed-reading courses have been implemented in diverse contexts, and this pilot study makes a small contribution to the growing body of evidence supporting the usefulness of this activity.

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