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EXPANDING READING FLUENCY ABILITIES IN ACADEMIC EFL CONTEXTS

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Abstract: Reading fluency is an important focus in foreign language instruction, as it is deeply correlated with reading comprehension and speech performance. The role of fluency and its impact on accuracy in language use are stressed by teachers and researchers in academic settings in general and university contexts in particular. Recent research on reading in English as a Foreign Language has associated reading–comprehension abilities with fluent reading, oral passage reading rate and extensive reading in both young age and adult learners. Teaching experience has revealed that it is common for EFL students to read in English with fair comprehension but with more or less limited fluency. In order to facilitate the understanding of such phenomena, this paper aims at exploring the relation between reading fluency and other language skills in EFL contexts, as well as its implications for good practice in teaching.

Keywords: fluency, comprehension, automaticity, accuracy, reading rate, prosodic structuring

Reading fluency is an important issue in teaching English as a foreign language, particularly in academic settings with high proximity to language use for research or work-related purposes. While students'awareness of the necessity of mastering English language skills in today's labor market has increased in recent years, their focus on grammatical accuracy and reading/speech fluency has diminished significantly as compared with 10 or 20 years ago. When asked about the causes of this phenomenon, many students formulate answers which imply the lack of significance of these aspects in multicultural communication contexts, in which they report to have functioned well regarding the use of English without perfect grammar or pronunciation and without high fluency. Nevertheless, when there is no more difference in pronunciation between "since" and "science" in one's English class, and when many students read different words than the ones they see printed on paper in a C1 level

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text, a teacher cannot help but wonder about the deep causes of such phenomena and about remedies that might work.

Some researchers of foreign language acquisition and use have questioned whether a student really needs to develop greater reading fluency if he or she can read with satisfactory comprehension, even if reading slowly.[1] Unfortunately, relatively little research has been conducted on word reading rate, fluency and accuracy in second language and foreign language instruction contexts, and there is very limited research that associates extensive reading with the improvement of reading-comprehension abilities. However, our own in-class experience at university level has revealed that students with higher fluency in reading and speaking perform much better on reading-comprehension tasks and reading-related activities as compared to their lower fluency colleagues.

Therefore, it becomes intriguing to study different views of fluency and its relation to comprehension and other language skills, as fluency has sometimes been a controversial topic among researchers, leaving space for various interpretations. W. Grabe, for instance, reflects on fluency using rather functional terminology: "fluency is what allows a reader to experience a much larger amount of L2 input, to expand the breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge beyond direct instruction, to develop automatic word-recognition skills, to read for additional learning, to build reading motivation, and, in L2 university contexts, to read the large amount of material that might be assigned every week"; he later concludes that "fluency must be a curricular and instructional goal for reading development."[2]

Other scholars (Schwanenflugel and Ruston, 2008 and Pressley, Gaskins and Fingeret, 2006) explain reading fluency in terms of other reading-component skills research, such as word-reading efficiency, vocabulary development, text-reading ease, reading with comprehension, using reading strategies, and reading with expression. According to such research, fluency may be defined as the ability to read and speak rapidly with ease and accuracy, and to read with appropriate expression and phrasing. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes, even at the academic level, the goal of having all these aspects checked in our students' reading performance is sometimes hard to attain or remains illusory for non-native speakers. Literature on reading fluency generally promotes the assumption that reading is a capacity-limited cognitive process, which has further led to the study of four main

[1] William Grabe, 2009, p. 290
[2] Idem

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subcomponents of fluency, namely automaticity, accuracy, reading rate and prosodic structuring.[3]

The concept of automaticity provides an important foundation for discussing fluency. Within the frame of the National Reading Panel of 2000 in the USA, automaticity was defined as "processing operations that are rapid, relatively resource-free, not subject to interference, unconscious, and hard to suppress"[4]; automaticity usually requires long periods of training and good fluency involves all of its above-mentioned characteristics as well. In the case of EFL learners, automaticity is not easy to develop and master - it is acquired through long term constant, intensive, perseverant language practice. In fact, with some EFL speakers and readers, automaticity is rarely achieved.

Accuracy is also a key component of fluency, which is always associated with recognition at the sub-word level, word level, or text level. In the case of English, a language where many words were formed by addition or fusion, it is obvious that certain students fail to be fluent readers because they fail to focus on and recognize word components and entire words. This may be caused either by a superficial or hasty approach to reading, or by insufficient vocabulary development and pronunciation practice, or even by poor cognitive capacities in certain cases. Throughout their instruction years, many English teachers (including myself) have experienced repeated cases of students who failed to reproduce an accurate pronunciation or to recognize a word after repeated instances of use in class.

Researchers found that the quality of lexical representations for words strongly influences reading-comprehension abilities.[5] They claim that fluent word recognition must not only be quick and automatic, but also complete and accurate. Yet, with EFL readers, complete and accurate word retrieval is generally hard to achieve and sometimes represents an unrealistic expectation of language instructors. As there is a direct connection between reading accuracy and comprehension, the latter often becomes degraded when the former is of poor quality.

A third aspect that determines fluency is the rapid reading rate. High fluency implies the ability to maintain good comprehension, irrespective of the length of the text which is being read. Without these aspects, one cannot speak of reading efficiency; an efficient reader reads fluently and understands easily and completely, being able to make use of the

[3] See Kuhn and Stahl, 2003
[4] National Reading Panel, 2000
[5] Perfetti, 2007

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information he or she has read. Efficiency is made apparent in class on the occasion of reading follow-up activities that check comprehension.

A final, important component of fluency which reading researchers discuss is prosodic structuring, which basically implies the recognition of prosodic phrasing and contours of the read text.[6] This aspect of fluency becomes apparent during oral reading, as opposed to instances of silent reading where it cannot be noticed and corrected accordingly by the EFL instructor. Students who have a problem with prosodic structuring tend to make pauses in reading at inappropriate junctures, to overlook punctuation marks, or to process pieces of text in ways that do not match the larger structural units of the text.

Many researchers agree that fluency and comprehension are strongly interrelated, and we share this belief, based on our own teaching experience at various grade levels. Snow and Sweet, for instance, note that "Fluency is both an antecedent to and a consequence of comprehension. Some aspects of fluent, expressive reading depend on a thorough understanding of a text. However, some components of fluency… appear to be prerequisites for reading."[7] If fluency is such an important element of accurate reading (and speech, accordingly) in English, the natural question that arises is - in what cases and through which methods can teachers intervene to help develop fluency in their students' reading practice?
Fluency development may be supported by certain general teaching practices used for enhancing reading skills, such as reading-rate development, assisted reading, timed reading, repeated reading, paced reading, text rereading, word-recognition exercises, extensive reading, and others. An overview of research focusing on in-class fluency instruction has revealed that there are few studies on reading fluency practices in EFL contexts. After doing empirical research on oral passage reading with university students in Japan, Taguchi published some papers which report interesting results. His first study[8] involved 16 first year EFL university students, in three reading level groups, who practiced rereading short pieces of text. The students, especially the lower level ones, are reported to have increased their reading rate through seven rereadings of the 28 sections each text was divided into. Taguchi and Gorsuch later carried on a second study[9] on repeated reading, in which, over a ten-week period, nine students reread 28 sections of a text seven times while nine control students worked with Science Research Associates reading materials. The conclusion was that

[6] Kuhn and Stahl, 2003; Schwanenflugel and Ruston, 2008
[7] Snow and Sweet, 2003, p. 5
[8] Taguchi, 1997
[9] Taguchi and Gorsuch, 2002

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experimental students read significantly faster in the post-reading text as compared to the pre-reading one while demonstrating the same levels of comprehension, and they also read faster than the control student group.

In the area of research on instructional implications for reading fluency development, Rasinski's book[10] makes a notable contribution related to reading-fluency practice involving oral reading. The author explains the best-known fluency teaching practices under three subsections: supported reading, repeated reading, and performance reading, and discusses ways to integrate fluency practices into current lessons. The numerous supported reading instructional practices presented by Rasinski include: students listening or reading silently while teacher reads; students reading along with the teacher; paired reading; choral reading; recorded reading; echo reading, and others. Despite their old-fashioned feel, choral reading, recorded reading and paired reading have been proven to generate good results in improving fluency even with university EFL students of intermediate language level (- this is a claim we make based on recent in-class experience). We have practiced choral reading in which different individuals, pairs or groups read different sections of a text and have noticed on many occasions that when hearing themselves and their colleagues read, students take the opportunity to improve their pronunciation and fluency, being motivated by a sense of competitiveness.

Repeated reading practice, according to Rasinski, implies that a student should reread a short passage in front of his/her teacher until an appropriate reading rate is achieved. The radio-reading technique is a group technique which supposes that groups of four to six students read aloud a text for the class. The text and sections for each student are provided the day before the in-class reading, and students work on their fluency by preparing individually or together for the reading in class the next day. In the case of cooperative repeated reading, which is a very stimulating experience, one student reads a short passage several times while the other assists; after a few readings, students switch roles. The motivational goal for each student may be, for instance, to receive better rating in the end from his/her colleague.

A third type of reading fluency practice discussed by Rasinski in his book is performance reading, which includes activities like readers' theater, "say it like a character" and poetry recitals. Students usually practice and rehearse their parts/texts before presenting them in front of the class. Such techniques are efficient mostly with intermediate and

[10] Rasinski, 2003

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advanced students in EFL classes, who already master a certain degree of fluency. In our in-class practice, similar exercises which involved reading a famous personality's discourse aloud in class while performing the role at the same time have proven useful in developing awareness of students' fluency and comprehension and have generated motivation to improve both aspects of students' reading practice.

Reading-related tasks can also prove very helpful in developing fluency and comprehension at the same time. Rereading a text or parts of it may be stimulated by some of the following tasks, and more: read the text to look for structural or composition elements; read the text to identify the main ideas; read the text to connect to information from a previous reading; read the text to identify the author's point of view and find evidence for it; reread the text to answer comprehension questions or determine if affirmations about the text's content are true or false; reread the text to see if a set of affirmations would be supported by the author.

Each instructor can take the challenge of finding as many reasons as possible to deepen the study of texts before moving on to new units, as reading and rereading activities play the major part in improving fluency with both undergraduate and graduate EFL students. Good practice in reading instruction often results in improved fluency and comprehension and in superior reading and speaking skills that help students gain a more satisfactory experience from the use of English both in-class at university and in work-related contexts later on.

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