
Poster Presentation

Using Powerpoint to Increase Reading Speed for an Academic English Course

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This article reports on a class activity to help students increase their reading speed and comprehension. The activity is for an Academic English course preparing Japanese university students for academic study at universities in Europe and North America. The time to prepare the students for academic study in English is limited to a 10-week course, although they will be participating in one-year exchange programs abroad. The use of Powerpoint slides to introduce the target input allows the teacher to have direct control over the reading time.

First of all what is Academic English? Academic English is often defined as English used during formal study at an institution of higher learning such as a college or university. It is the kind of English needed for reading and understanding study materials; writing about the subject material; and describing a process or how something works or explaining something in English. Much of academic English is about expressing the relationship between ideas. This is how Academic English differs from everyday English.

This activity I have used is an exercise in “Timed Reading” (TR) according to Atkins (2010). Timed Reading differs from “Speed Reading”. Speed Reading as defined by Atkins (2010) is “a practice that is essentially skimming a text for information and not actually reading every word” and “is usually practiced by native speakers of a language” (p. 662). TR, on the other hand, “is the reading of texts of equal length and equal lexical difficulty, regularly over a period of weeks or months” (p. 662). Furthermore, “texts are read against the clock and followed

by a set of comprehension questions” (p. 662).

According to Chang (2010) TR requires students to read a passage under time constraints for the purpose of improving reading speed to “an optimal rate that supports comprehension rather than developing speedy readers” (p. 287). She cites Walczyk, Kelly, Meche, & Braud (1999) that “time limitations may enhance reading comprehension by promoting mindfulness in students, a construct which involves exertion of more effort and motivation” (p. 156). In their study they stated “The best reading comprehension was observed under mild time pressure” (p. 156). Chang (2010) reviewed other studies looking at the effects of time constraints and came to a similar conclusion that “moderate pressure facilitates reading rates and comprehension” (p. 288)

TR has other benefits for students in an Academic English course. Browning (2003) cited Anderson (1999) by stating “the student will increase their reading speed, which will better prepared[sic] them for the challenges they will encounter when they enter the collegiate playing field”. Browning elaborated further on the benefits of timed reading supporting both reading speed and comprehension. He stated that students “are able to concentrate better which leads to greater comprehension” (although he provides a caveat about some cases in which students tried to raise their reading speed only to suffer with loss of comprehension). He also believes students tend to do better academically, and TR will promote “greater extensive reading”.

As stated earlier this activity is for an Academic English course. Other skills needed for academic study at universities in Europe and North America are included but not as explicitly stressed as reading rates and reading comprehension.

Presenting the Lesson

The activity itself is very simple. It begins with short (80- to 100-word) newspaper articles shown to the students via Powerpoint for about two to three minutes. During this time the students are allowed to take brief notes. The Powerpoint slide is then turned off, and the students are given a short comprehension quiz related to the article. They can refer to their notes when taking the quiz. The

inclusion of some vocabulary questions on the quiz accesses and reinforces the students' prior knowledge of English.

One important skill which is implicit in this reading exercise is note taking. While the students are reading, they are encouraged to take brief notes to help them answer the comprehension questions following the exercise. Even though note taking is not an explicitly stressed skill, students do learn to take brief notes, which over time and with practice can improve their overall note taking skills. As one student reported: "taking notes was useful but sometimes I couldn't read my handwriting."

Discussion

Note-taking is an important part of academic study for two main reasons (Gillett 2014). First, when we are reading or listening, taking notes helps us concentrate. In order to take notes and write something sensible, we must understand the text. Because listening and reading together are interactive tasks, taking notes helps us make sense of the lecture and the text. Taking notes does not mean writing down every word we hear or read; we need to decide what the gist of the lecture is and how it is related to what we need to know. Second, notes help to keep a permanent record of what we have heard or read. This is useful for reviewing in the future for examinations or other reasons. Good notes should be clear and concise, and most importantly accurate. Notes should show the organization of the lecture and the relationship between the ideas that are presented.

In academic reading, we need to be flexible when we read. We may need to read quickly to find relevant sections, then read carefully when we have found what we want. General efficient reading strategies include scanning to find the book or chapter, skimming to get the gist, and careful reading of important passages. These are necessary as well as learning about how texts are structured in the subject.

This paper has described a work in progress. To expand the activity, it can be used as a critical listening and note taking session as follows. One student listens to another student speaking and takes notes, then the student who was listening rephrases what the speaking student has said. The student who spoke

will confirm the accuracy of the listener's notes, then their roles are reversed. Other ways this activity has been used is in a speaking fluency activity by having the students form pairs then express their opinions to each other in the 4/3/2 speaking fluency activity by Maurice (1983). The 4/3/2 signifies repeated conversations (4 minutes, 3 minutes, 2 minutes) on the same topic to different partners to build stronger fluency by focusing on the topic better each time.

In addition TR can also promote automatic processing according to Schneider & Fisk (1983, cited in Yoshimura, 2000), who stated "automatic processing typically develops when subjects deal with the stimulus consistently over many trials" (p. 5). Yoshimura felt that in order for automaticity theory to be applicable in the Japanese EFL environment a "systematic and efficient learning environment" (p. 4) needed to be intentionally created. Yoshimura further elaborated on how the application of automaticity theory is justified in the Japanese EFL environment which cannot be further elaborated on within the scope of this paper.

In conclusion this TR activity can improve reading speed and comprehension if practiced on a regular basis. With a moderate amount of pressure induced by the imposed time constraints and it can also promote automaticity theory in the classroom. The flexible nature of this activity allows it to be adaptable to other teaching situations.

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