

THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING READING: IMPROVING STUDENTS' READING COMPREHENSION IN EFL CONTEXT EMPHASIZED ON READING FLUENCY AND ACCURACY

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Abstract

Current methods for teaching reading comprehension tend to emphasize the products of comprehension and neglect the processes of comprehension. Teachers often provide insufficient opportunities for learners to practice English in teaching reading. During teaching reading in a class teachers may confuse to give exercises relate to fluency or accuracy. The correlation between fluency and reading comprehension showed a significant positive relationship between oral reading fluency and reading comprehension performance. Therefore, automaticity of decoding fluency is essential for high levels of reading achievement. Assessing reading fluency, teachers need to listen to students read aloud to make judgments about their progress in reading fluency. In other side, teaching reading in accuracy exercises encourage a thoughtful use of language and the information is intended to help students understand how English works.

Keywords: reading, fluency, accuracy, and comprehension

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INTRODUCTION

Problems in teaching and learning English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) relates to both teachers and learners. This problem is partly affected by teaching methods. Lochana and Deb (2006), they state that most EFL teachers teach language by lecturing and focusing on grammatical rules instead of language use. It is much more effective to teach language from context and meaning (Ellis, 2003). Teachers often provide insufficient opportunities for learners to practice English. To make the situation worse, both teachers and learners frequently use Indonesian language throughout English classes.

According to Ruso (2007), learners do not like teachers who spend most of class time lecturing. Lecturing time de-motivates them because they do not like being passive in class. Consequently, learners have limited input to the learning process. Learners face various additional difficulties in learning English. Many EFL learners cannot effectively use English in

conversation or correspondence with others. According to Xiao (2009), EFL learners avoid employing target language and cannot apply it in genuine communication. Hashim (2006) shows that learning a language flourishes most when learners are in a positive environment and are given opportunities to communicate in authentic situations. Accordingly, it has been suggested that teachers abandon the traditional teaching approach and replace it with communicative language teaching (Lochana and Deb, 2006).

Current methods for teaching reading comprehension tend to emphasize the products of comprehension and neglect the processes of comprehension. There are two sets of skills that are particularly important to teach. The first set includes comprehension monitoring skills that involve readers' monitoring their continuing processing for possible comprehension failure and taking remedial action when failures occur. Comprehension failures can occur at

various levels, including: particular words, particular sentences, relations between sentences, and relations between larger units. For each kind of failure, there are specific remedial actions readers can take. The second set of processing skills that can be taught involves using clues in the text to generate, evaluate, and revise hypotheses about current and future events in the text. In teaching these processing skills, the teacher should first model these skills by reading and thinking aloud and then gradually turn over the processing responsibilities to the students.

As defined by Alyousef (2005) Reading can be seen as an “interactive” process between a reader and a text which leads to automaticity or (reading fluency). In this process, the reader interacts dynamically with the text as he/she tries to elicit the meaning and where various kinds of knowledge are being used: linguistic or systemic knowledge (through bottom-up processing) as well as schematic knowledge (through top-down processing).

DISCUSSION

The Importance of Reading Fluency

Fluent reading comprises three key elements: accurate reading of connected text at a conversational rate with appropriate prosody or expression (Hudson, Mercer, and Lane, 2000). A fluent reader can maintain this performance for long periods of time, can retain the skill after long periods of no practice, and can generalize across texts. A fluent reader is also not easily distracted and reads in an effortless, flowing manner. The most compelling reason to focus instructional efforts on students becoming fluent readers is the strong correlation between reading fluency and reading comprehension (Allington, 1983; Johns, 1993; Samuels, 1988; Schreiber, 1980).

Each aspect of fluency has a clear connection to text comprehension. Without accurate word reading, the reader will have no access to the author’s intended meaning, and inaccurate word reading can lead to misinterpretations of the text. Poor automaticity in word reading or slow, laborious movement through the text taxes the reader’s capacity to construct an ongoing interpretation of the text. Poor prosody can lead to confusion through inappropriate or meaningless groupings of words or through inappropriate applications of expression.

Assessing reading fluency Teachers need to listen to students read aloud to make judgments about their progress in reading fluency (Zutell and Rasinski, 1991). Systematic observation helps assess student progress and determine instructional needs. Teachers observing students’ oral reading fluency should consider each critical aspect of fluent reading: word-reading accuracy, rate, and prosody.

Teachers’ Transferring Their Roles

With more and more attention being focused on improving students’ ‘communicative competence, the roles teachers have to play must be redefined. The best teachers are usually the ones who impart an attitude or an orientation related to the acquisition of mental abilities, or who are associated with the particular values that one finds personally motivating and inspirational. Specifically speaking, lecturers should take on the following roles in modern English classroom teaching.

First, instead of being the dominating authority in the classroom, lecturer must become learning facilitators to facilitate the communicative process between all participants in the classroom and between these participants and the various activities and texts (Breen and

Candlin, 1980), giving guidance and advice when necessary. Lecturer should also act as interdependent participants within the learning-teaching group (Breen and Candlin, 1980), which means that Lecturer need to perceive students as having important contributions to make, and then Lecturer must continually seek potential and exploit and actively share the responsibility for learning and teaching with them. Lecturer must realize that any unnecessary intervention from us may prevent them from becoming genuinely involved in the activities and thus hinder the development of their communicative skills. However, this does not necessarily mean that lecturer should be passive observers. Instead, lecturer should develop students' potential through external direction and help them develop their distinctive qualities.

Second, just as lecturer want students to be life-long learners, lecturer must exhibit a passion for learning, a desire and an aptitude to continue discovering new knowledge and exemplify by constantly refreshing educators' knowledge and skills to keep abreast with the latest developments in educators' area of specialization.

Third, to keep pace with the times, lecturers also need to be creative and innovative in integrating educators' teaching with thinking and learning processes. Lecturer must give students more opportunities for expression and provide an environment where creativity can flourish. And lecturer must encourage students to question and to express their thoughts freely so that they will have inquisitive minds.

Teachers' Equipping Themselves with Knowledge and Appropriate Teaching Methods

Lecturers must know something about linguistics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, education and so on, and

be able to demonstrate the target language with enough accuracy, but lecturer are also expected to know a variety of teaching methodologies, correct ways to research, and some basic principles of testing. Lecturer must realize that it is obligatory for lecturers to adopt different methods when dealing with different teaching materials and when faced with students with different levels of English proficiency. To achieve the purpose, lecturer must enrich knowledge of English and improve educators' English skills by various means such as listening to programs in English, watching English programs on TV and surfing the English versions of various news items on the Internet frequently. In a word, to improve students' oral proficiency, lecturer should try every possible means to make ourselves walking encyclopedias so that lecturer can teach any student anything with skill and ease.

Attaching Equal Importance to Both Accuracy and Fluency Exercises

As is mentioned above, accuracy and fluency are so closely related that they are inseparable. Skehan (1998) proposed that because learners have a limited capacity of attention, there could be trade-off effects between accuracy and fluency. That is, when attention is paid to accuracy, fluency is likely to suffer and vice versa (Patanasorn, 2010). So attaching equal importance to both accuracy and fluency exercises is a must.

Accuracy exercises encourage a thoughtful use of language and the information is intended to help students understand how English works, while fluency exercises invite them to take the parts of different characters when role-playing and to continue a dialogue in their own way, that is, the fluency exercises encourage free expression. Doing accuracy exercises does not mean

100% error-free, but a high degree of accuracy is required, and as a result, students are encouraged to make as few errors as possible and to manipulate the language as spontaneously and flexibly as possible.

But when assigning accuracy and fluency exercises, lecturer had better keep in mind the following: For one thing, lecturer had better assign exercises that need the knowledge with which students are familiar, because it is found that the personal task which is based on information well known to learners allows them to be more fluent in their performance.

For another, lecturer had better give students more planning time. With regards to planning, it has been suggested that providing learners with more planning time prior to conducting the task helps learners produce more fluent and complex language (Patanasorn, 2010). Generally, the more planning time they are given, the more familiar they will be with the inherent structure of discourse and as a result, the more accurate and fluent they will be in their performance, because familiarity with content and opportunity to plan help lessen the load of information processing which allows learners more intentional resources to focus on formal aspects of language as well as help them to become more fluent in their performance (Patanasorn, 2010).

Fluency

The two definitions of fluency by Fillmore (1979) are taken into account, which are:

1. “The ability to talk in coherent, reasoned and semantically dense sentences, showing a mastery of the semantic (meaning in language) and syntactic resources of the language”; and

2. “The ability to have appropriate things to say in a wide range of contexts, so that you do not become tongue tied or lost for words” (as cited in Brumfit, 1984).

In other words, fluency is about coherence and context sensitivity in utterances. In this study, the fluency of spoken English in the simulated role play situations which involve social interactions between two interlocutors is measured. The fluency level is measured using hesitation. This is because hesitation is one of the criteria considered in determining fluency in major standardized test such as Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), International English Language.

How Do Teachers Measure Fluency?

The easiest way to measure fluency in most skills is to select a repeatable action such as saying a word or writing the answer to a math problem, and to count how many times a person can complete that action in a fixed period of time. An educational methodology known as Precision Teaching (Binder, 1988; Binder and Watkins, 1990) has identified ranges of count per minute performance describing fluency for hundreds of academic skills. By specifying a range of count per minute of correct responses on specific types of materials and procedures, it is possible to set goals for practice that help both teachers and learners make timely decisions to change or modify educational programs with individual learners.

Achievement Gains from Building Fluency

When lecturer pinpoint key skills, set fluency aims for each, and combine teaching and practice with measurement to help students achieve

those aims, educational programs (whether school-based or home-based) often produce dramatic improvements in academic achievement. In an early demonstration program during the 1970's (Beck, 1979), adding just 20 to 30 minutes per day of practice, measurement, and charting of basic skill components to an otherwise ordinary elementary school curriculum increased children's standard test scores by 20 to 40 percentile points, compared with other students in the same district. More recently, fluency-based instructional programs have reliably produced multiple grade levels of improvement in a summer program among students diagnosed with "learning problems" (Johnson and Layng, 1992). In addition, fluency-based programs have markedly improved students' ability to maintain attention to task while working on a variety of different activities (Binder, Haughton, and Van Eyk, 1990).

Selected Fluency Ranges

People generally specify fluency ranges of count per minute performance to account for individual differences and to recognize the fact that fluency for a particular skill is not a single, precisely defined level but a band on the spectrum of all possible performance levels within which most learners seem to retain and maintain skills, perform over extended durations without undue distractibility, and apply what they learn to more complex types of performance. This is not an exact science, and there are differences in opinion among practitioners about what levels are absolutely necessary for optimal results. On the other hand, most practitioners who are experienced with measuring count per minute performance can confidently report levels that are not sufficient to support optimal performance, whether or not they agree

on the exact parameters of specific fluency ranges.

How Can Educator Help Students to Achieve Fluency?

Practice is the key to any fluency-based program. Athletes and performing artists have always been aware that focused repetition of important skills is the necessary prerequisite for achieving great performance. Sad to say, however, many educators may not realize this basic principle of skill development. Even for those who understand the value of practice, it is important to focus on the right kind of practice to produce the greatest gains rather than on practice routines that are boring, painful, and ultimately ineffective. Some of the important differences between effective and ineffective practice programs include the following: Efficient practice always has a goal. Athletes are always striving to achieve goals, often motivated by attaining their "personal best" performances. Similarly, students who have count per minute goals for reading, writing, math, and other types of skills are generally more motivated than those told simply to "practice until you get better."

It is easier to attain fluency on small, achievable "chunks" or components of a larger performance than to attain mastery of the whole thing at once. This is perhaps the most important discovery of fluency-based educators (e.g., Starlin, 1971; Haughton, 1972). When students lack fluency in writing letters and digits, decoding words, saying vowel sounds, or calculating answers to basic arithmetic problems, they often have great difficulty combining those skills into larger chunks. One of the most important ways to achieve fluency on anything is to find a way to practice and first master its smaller elements.

Correlation of reading fluency and reading comprehension

The correlation between fluency and reading comprehension was clearly established by a large-scale analysis of data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress in Reading (Pinnell, et al., 1995). In that study, 44 percent of the subjects were found to be diffident when reading grade-level appropriate materials that they had previously read silently; the study also showed a significant, positive relationship between oral reading fluency and reading comprehension performance. A comprehensive definition then would seem to relate the centrality of fluency to reading comprehension and the established dimensions of the construct.

Modeled Reading

One way to enhance fluency is for teachers to read aloud to students (Dowhower, 1987; Hoffman, 1987; Smith, 1979). The process of reading aloud to students needs to be supplemented with procedures which actually engage students in interaction with text, but reading aloud does provide them with a model of how to pace reading in connected text and how to infuse expression (attend to dialogue marks and punctuation). Taped or computer modeled reading is also a viable way to provide fluency support. However, for younger and less able readers taped or computer modeled reading seems more effective than no model, but not as effective as a teacher model (Daly and Martens, 1994). For lower performing readers, an additional benefit of having text read initially by a model improved comprehension. It seems that the reading model allowed students to focus on the content of the passage initially before they read it independently (Monda, 1989). While it varies from study to study whether

students followed along in copies of the texts, experts recommend this as a way to engage children in the text prior to their reading it independently.

Repeated Reading of Familiar Text

Rereading text or repeated oral reading is perhaps the most frequently documented approach to improving fluency (National Reading Panel, 2000; Rashotte and Torgesen, 1985) and has been associated with improved outcomes for young students (O'Shea, Sindelar, and O'Shea, 1987) as well as college students (Carver and Hoffman, 1981). Generally, intervention research on fluency development has been dominated by research on repeated reading. This likely reflects the application of the theory that fluent reading is promoted by frequent opportunities to practice in familiar text and to increased exposure to words.

Wide Independent Reading

Research does not yet clearly indicate whether repeated reading is superior to wide, sustained reading of different texts. Currently, it seems that for more able readers, repeated reading of the same texts is not as necessary as it is for struggling readers and that increasing the amount of reading that is done is sufficiently, and perhaps more, beneficial (Homan, Klesius, and Hite, 1993; Mathes and Fuchs, 1993; Rashotte and Torgesen, 1985). The beneficial effects of wide reading were somewhat called into question by the fairly recent Report of the National Reading Panel (2000) which concluded: "Based on the existing evidence, the NRP can only indicate that while encouraging students to read might be beneficial, research has not yet demonstrated this in a clear and convincing manner".

Coached or Assisted Reading

Heibert and Fisher (2002) studied fluency development as it relates to the features of the texts used for promoting fluency. Specifically, they were interested in examining the effects of texts in which particular text dimensions or features were carefully controlled. The treatment texts Heibert and Fisher designed were characterized as having the following key features: a small number of unique words, a high percentage of most frequently used words, and often repeated critical words (those words that influence the meaning of the text most). Students in the comparison group read from texts typically associated with commercial reading programs. Using a repeated reading (three times) instructional routine in a nine-week intervention, students reading in the treatment texts made significant gains in fluency over their peers in the comparison condition. There also seemed to be an effect for comprehension for second language learners. These findings suggest that the features of the texts being used to promote fluency should be carefully considered.

Chunking Texts

Another approach to fluency building is to provide struggling readers with text in which meaningful groups or words or phrases are signaled for the reader as a means of improving fluency and comprehension (Cromer, 1970; Young and Bowers, 1995). Research reveals that different amounts of text presented in repeated reading do not seem to change the outcome. However, control of the amount of text presented may be beneficial for students who are experiencing difficulty with reading accuracy as it may force them to focus on the words for a longer period of time (Cohen, 1988). Carbo (1981) used a phrased or chunked approach to assisted repeated reading. She had students listen

to tapes and follow along in books in which the text was chunked into short phrases. Carbo reported significant gains in word recognition ability suggesting that this approach might be helpful for improving accuracy. Several researchers have studied the effects of parsing or chunking texts into phrase units. While most of these studies have been with older students, Kuhn and Stahl (2000) reported that reading phrase units rather than conventional text does seem to result in improved fluency.

Word Reading Practice

Based on Ehri's stage model of reading and previously offered theoretical descriptions of fluency, the importance of individual word reading automaticity would seem to have practical implications for fluency building. Studies in which teachers had students practice reading lists of words that they were to later encounter in connected texts consistently resulted in increased fluency (Fleisher, Jenkins, and Pany, 1979-80; Levy, Abello, and Lysynchuk, 1997). It is important to note, however, that there was no concomitant increase in comprehension.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, with people's attention being focused more and more on the oral proficiency of English learners, teachers have realized the urgency of shifting their emphasis from form to use and communicative language principles are subscribed to. But the reality is that linguistic competence continues to be emphasized while there is no corresponding change in the classroom teaching modes and teaching methods. Hence, what educators should do now is conscientiously try to shift educators' attention from emphasizing the accuracy of students' oral presentation to developing their ability to express themselves both accurately and

fluently in English, for which educators can employ various means such as combining grammar-translation method and communicative approach, transferring teachers' roles, and attaching equal importance to both accuracy and fluency exercises.

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