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THE USE OF SPEED READING TO IMPROVE EFL LEARNERS' READING COMPREHENSION

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Abstract. The present study aimed to examine whether (a) students who participated in a speed reading course improved their reading speed more than those who did not, and (b) whether these students also achieved better comprehension. Thirty participants were divided into two groups: an experimental group and a control group. Data were collected using a test instrument. The experimental group received speed reading instruction, while the control group did not undergo any such intervention. The findings revealed that students who engaged in speed reading activities increased their average reading speed by 28 words per minute (23%) and improved their comprehension by 3.2 points. Additionally, the experimental group showed a significant improvement from pretest to posttest, whereas the control group demonstrated no notable difference between the two tests.

Keywords: reading comprehension, speed reading, reading speed

INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, university students majoring in English study reading alongside other core subjects such as speaking, listening, grammar, and writing. The primary objective of the reading course is to develop students' reading fluency and comprehension skills. Students' reading skills are varied. Some students are excellent at understanding the reading passages, while others may not be as good as their classmates. There are students who take less time to finish the reading comprehension questions but still can show a good understanding of the text, while others need more time to understand the text's content properly. Considering that some students spend a longer time reading but show poor understanding of the reading passages, I tried to find another alternative method that can be employed to meet the students' needs appropriately.

Over the past few decades, the importance of developing reading fluency has gained considerable attention in first-language contexts. However, this topic has received relatively little focus in second-language (L2) contexts. Therefore, further research on L2 fluency development is needed, as emphasized by scholars such as Grabe (2004), Taguchi (2006), and Fraser (2007). Dealing with studies concerning reading fluency development, some studies showed the relation among speed reading, reading speed, and reading comprehension (Chung & Macalister, 2010), while other

studies showed opposite results (Graf, 1973). These contradictory results lead to further investigation on the speed reading course in order to make some contribution to this area of study. Thus, this current study aimed to see whether speed reading intervention can be beneficial to be implemented in the language classroom.

It is hoped that this study has implications to shed some light on an effective L2 reading strategy and enrich the researchers' own knowledge as reading teachers. Hopefully, the study can provide more information in the area of study relating to the reading method as well. This writing is organized into 5 sections: the introduction, literature review, methodology, findings and discussion, and conclusion. References are also included as an essential source to back up this research.

This study investigated two research questions:

1. Do the students who attend speed reading course increase their reading speed compared to those who do not? If yes, by how much do they improve?
2. Do students who attend speed reading course comprehend better than those who do not?

LITERATURE REVIEW

As the recent study is mainly concerned with speed reading, reading comprehension, and reading speed, this section will look at the underlying theories on those variables.

Reading speed and reading comprehension

Bell (2001) noted that early studies on reading speed mainly emphasized techniques for helping learners read faster but overlooked the need to adjust reading pace based on the reader's purpose. However, Blevins (2000) mentioned that reading fluency is a crucial element of the language curriculum; thus, he suggested that in assisting students to improve their English reading skills, teachers need to focus on speed and accuracy. Similarly, Narayanaswamy (1975) asserted that reading ability should be evaluated through both reading speed and comprehension, as the two are so closely linked that discussing one without the other is meaningless.

In line with Narayanaswamy's statement, Rasinski (2000) found in his study that many poor readers with relatively minor comprehension considered reading rate as a problem. He continued by arguing that slow reading is linked to time-consuming text processing and comprehension, which can lead to increased reading frustration and degradation in reading progress, ultimately resulting in impaired reading performance. Furthermore, Nation (2009, p.134) described the physical signs of slow reading as follows: (1) focusing on units smaller than a word, such as letters or parts of letters, resulting in multiple fixations per word; (2) spending excessive time on each fixation; and (3) frequently regressing to reread previously viewed text. He proposed that increasing reading speed can help reduce these tendencies. Although reading speed is influenced by several factors, such as the reader's purpose and the difficulty level of the text, second language learners can still be trained to enhance their reading speed.

Another earlier study conducted by Letson (1958) also showed that there is a relation between speed and comprehension for easy material. Nevertheless, this relation weakens as the difficulty of the material increases. In accordance with this statement,

Nation (2009) stated that since the pressure of reading faster can decrease reading pleasure, it is important to make a choice on the purpose of reading.

Studies Related to Speed Reading

Generally, previous studies on speed reading are very limited but contradictory. Back in 1973, Graf found out that speed reading cannot double readers' reading speed without losing the information provided in the reading source. He claimed that increasing reading speed without missing comprehension is unsupported. Other scholars, such as Becker (1987), showed skepticism by contending that speed reading is often not an appropriate strategy for comprehensive reading. Additionally, Bell (2001) claimed that speed reading techniques are likely to decrease levels of reading comprehension. However, another study conducted by Krumian (2000) showed that a speed reading course can potentially increase reading speed and improve comprehension. Although Macalister (2008) suggested for more further studies about the function of speed reading, his study resulted in finding that the speed reading course had a positive relation with reading speed. In her study which was a replication of a previous study conducted by Chung and Nation, Chung (2010) found that all of the participants increased their speed. She claimed that one of the advantages of a speed reading course is that it takes a small amount of time to spend. Thus, it is valuable to practice speed reading with EFL learners. Another study conducted by Macalister (2010), which tried to find the relation between speed reading and reading authentic texts, also suggested that speed reading activities may promote faster reading speed on texts that are not designed to meet language learning purposes. In his study, he involved thirty-six students who were taking a university preparation program. He discovered that all 24 students who participated in the speed reading course improved their reading speed by the end of the program, although fewer than half maintained or further increased their speed between the course's completion and the end of the language program. These findings were consistent with his 2008 study, which also showed that some students did not sustain their reading speed gains. In contrast, among the 12 students who did not take the speed reading course, only seven showed improvement in reading speed. Drawing on his research, Macalister reinforced Chung and Nation's recommendation that speed reading should be incorporated into all reading classes.

Paying attention to those previous studies related to speed reading, this study aimed to contribute to the value of speed reading. Since recent studies on this field of research are mainly concerned with the relation between speed reading and reading speed, I tried to expand the topic to learners' reading comprehension and perceptions towards the speed reading course. Indeed, there are studies on speed reading and reading comprehension in the past, but considering that there are some disagreements between researchers about the effect of speed reading on reading comprehension (Becker, 1987 and Graf, 1973 versus Krunian, 2000 and Chung, 2010), this study tried to investigate more about the connection between the two variables.

Speed reading activities

The current study primarily focused on the implementation of the speed reading activity. The theoretical basis for the notion that speed reading improves reading fluency is derived from studies on working memory, also known as short-term memory. This

type of memory refers to information that is temporarily activated for immediate processing and storage, but it has a limited capacity and fades quickly. Such characteristics create challenges in reading, a cognitively demanding task, because comprehension or meaning-making depends on the functioning of short-term working memory (Smith, 2004). To overcome these limitations, several strategies have been proposed, including speed reading. This approach requires students to read within a set time limit, aiming to increase reading speed to an optimal level that supports comprehension rather than merely producing fast readers. Moreover, time constraints may improve comprehension by fostering greater mindfulness in learners, encouraging them to exert more focus and motivation (Walczyk et al., 1999).

How to Apply the Reading Speed Technique

This study discusses speed reading as a strategy that can be applied in a language learning classroom. This section mainly refers to Macalister's (2010) and Nation's (2009) as the techniques they offer focus on specific reading texts (restricted vocabulary texts) and reading purpose (reading for understanding) which becomes the main concern of this study. According to Macalister, speed reading is one of the approaches to increasing reading speed, along with the other two approaches: easy extensive reading and repeated reading. In extensive reading, learners are reading for pleasure, with various types of reading materials that contain familiar vocabulary. On the other hand, repeated reading entails readers repeating the same texts. Moreover, Macalister states that speed reading courses typically include a series of texts of uniform length, written with a limited vocabulary range, and accompanied by multiple-choice questions. These questions aim to ensure that learners focus on comprehension rather than merely skimming. Students are also expected to record their reading speed and comprehension scores for each text, which serves to motivate them to gradually increase their reading pace beyond their usual rate. Nation (2009) provided instructions for students and teachers when speed reading is applied in the language classroom as follows: the teacher gives a command to students to start reading in earnest. As the learners are reading, the teacher points out minutes and seconds which are written on the board to remind students how much time they have spent since they began to read. As learners finish with the short text, they note down the time they have spent reading and then start trying to answer the reading comprehension questions. After finishing all questions, students get the answer key and score their answers. They write down their speed and enter their comprehension score. The teacher's role is to move around checking the students' work, commenting and encouraging students as well. The whole activity takes around seven minutes to finish. This activity is repeated twice in the same week to finish reading twelve texts.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Thirty students attending the third course of reading (reading 3) at English Education Study Program in a private university in Indonesia were involved in this study. The participants were divided into two groups. Each group consisted of 15 students. The

first group is treated as the experimental group (EG), and the other group is the control (CG).

Instrumentation and Procedure

A test was used as a research instrument in this study. The test is given is the form of pretest and posttest instrument. Both pretest and posttest assess students reading comprehension performance and reading speed. During three weeks between pretest and posttest, the experimental group practices reading exercises which includes indicating the main ideas in paragraphs and longer reading passages and making inferences. The reading texts provided have familiar vocabulary which appropriate with students' reading comprehension level. Learning materials and teaching methods are adopted from Nation (2009). The students attend 7 minutes of classroom teaching twice a week. The total number of meetings with the experimental group is six. The students in the experimental group are provided with a speed reading course as a model offered by Nation, while the students in the control group merely follow the regular or normal reading course. After the three-week program, both groups take the posttest, which seeks to assess the effect of speed reading on comprehension and speed.

Study Materials

For the speed reading activity, I utilized *Reading for Speed and Fluency* by Nation and Malarcher (2007), specifically Books 1 and 3. This series, consisting of four books, is designed to help learners practice rapid reading either individually or in class settings. Books 1 and 2 contain passages of approximately 300 words each, while Books 3 and 4 feature passages of about 400 words. The texts are written using familiar, high-frequency vocabulary to minimize the hindrance caused by unfamiliar words. In each session, two reading passages were used, resulting in a total of twelve passages throughout the activity.

Pretests and Posttests on Reading Speed and Comprehension

To assess the impact of the speed reading technique on students' reading rates, a reading speed test was administered to participants in both groups before and after the experiment. The test used two passages from the *Reading for Speed and Fluency* series—one from Book 1 and the other from Book 3. After reading each passage, students completed a comprehension test. The first test included five multiple-choice questions, while the second contained eight, totaling 13 items. Each question offered three answer choices and primarily targeted overall understanding rather than specific details (e.g., identifying the main topic or purpose of the passage).

The same reading test was repeated at the end of the course. During the pretest, students were not informed that the identical test would be administered again, and none were allowed to keep the test materials. Reading speed, measured in words per minute (wpm), was calculated using the formula: total words divided by total seconds, multiplied by 60. The average reading speed was determined by summing the two passage speeds and dividing by two. Reading comprehension scores were based on the number of correct answers, with one point awarded per correct response.

Data Analysis

The obtained data is analyzed using quantitative method. In analyzing the data statistically, a paired samples t-test is used to investigate the difference between pretest and posttest scores of experimental and control group. The results indentified the changes of students' reading comprehension proficiency after attending speed reading program. An independent t-test is also employed to analyze the difference between both control and experimental groups in pretest and posttest.

FINDINGS

Reading Speed

Table 1 presents the mean reading speeds of students in both the pretest and posttest. The results indicate that at the pretest stage, the two groups had similar reading speeds (120 wpm for the experimental group and 124 wpm for the control group). However, in the posttest, the experimental group showed greater improvement than the control group, reaching 148 wpm compared to 132 wpm—an increase of 28 words per minute (23%) and 8 words per minute (6%), respectively.

Table 1. *Descriptive statistic for means of students' reading speed measured by words per minute in pretest and posttest*

Group		Pretest	Posttest	Gain
Experimental *n* = 15	*Mean*	120	148	28 (24%)
Control *n* = 15	*Mean*	124	132	8 (6%)

Since the progress of the speed reading (experimental) group is the main focus of this study, Table 2 provides a more detailed overview of the changes in their reading speed. As shown in the table, during the pretest, 7% of students read at a rate of 100–109 wpm, 33% read between 110–119 wpm, 47% read around 120–129 wpm, and only 13% achieved a reading speed of 130–139 wpm. However, from the result of the posttest, it shows that about 47% of students could read between 140-149 wpm, 47% could read around 150 wpm, and only 6% are between 130-139 wpm.

Table 2. *Range of changes in speed by student percentage in the experimental group* (*n* = 15)

Speed ranges	Pretest	Posttest
100 - 109	1 (7%)	-
110 - 119	5 (33%)	-
120 – 129	7 (47%)	-
130 – 139	2 (13%)	1 (6%)
140 - 149	-	7 (47%)
Above 150	-	7 (47%)

A paired samples t-test was conducted to examine the pretest and posttest results within each group. As shown in Table 3, the experimental group demonstrated a significant improvement between the pretest and posttest scores, $t(14) = -4.42$, $p < .01$, whereas the control group showed no significant progress, $t(14) = -0.58$, $p > .05$. To further compare the reading rates between the two groups before and after the treatment, an independent samples t-test was carried out.

Table 3. *Descriptive statistic of the comparison of reading speed between pretest and posttest between EG and CG*

Paired differences		
Group	*df*	*t*
Experimenal	14	-4.42
Control	14	-0,58

Table 4 displays the results of the independent t-test, indicating no significant difference between the two groups in the pretest. However, a significant difference emerged in the posttest results. It is also noteworthy that, while the experimental group initially read more slowly than the control group in the pretest, they surpassed the control group in reading speed by the posttest.

Table 4. *Comparisons of reading speed between groups at pretest and posttest*

Paired differences		
	t	*df*
Pretest	1,53	28
Postest	2,28	28

From the analysis above, it can be concluded that the group receiving the speed reading intervention showed a greater improvement in reading speed compared to the group without the treatment. The experimental group's reading speed increased by about 23% (an average gain of 28 words), while the control group showed only a slight improvement of around 6% (an average gain of 8 words).

Reading Comprehension

Table 5 presents the descriptive statistics for students' comprehension scores. The results indicate that both groups showed only slight improvements in comprehension, with higher scores recorded in the posttest. Notably, the experimental group scored lower than the control group in the pretest but outperformed them in the posttest. The mean score of experimental group in the pretest is 7 while the control group's mean score is 7.20. However, in the posttest, the experimental group scores 10.2 and it gains 3.2 higher than its pretest. On the other hand, the control group only has 8.46 and thus it is higher 1.26 point to the pretest. Thus, in response to the second question, the group that received the speed reading intervention demonstrated an improvement in comprehension scores compared to the control group.

Table 5. *Descriptive statistics of means of students' comprehension scores measured in the pretest and posttest*

Group		Pretest	Posttest	Gain
Experimental *n* = 15	*Mean*	7	10.2	3.2
Control *n* = 15	*Mean*	7.20	8.46	1.26

DISCUSSION

This study examined the improvement of students' reading speed through the implementation of speed reading activities. The findings revealed that the group exposed to speed reading intervention increased their reading speed by 28 wpm (23%) and their comprehension score by 3.2 points, whereas the control group, which did not receive the intervention, showed a smaller gain of 8 wpm (6%) and 1.26 points in comprehension. Although the differences between the two groups were not statistically significant, participants in the experimental group reported perceiving notable benefits from the speed-building exercises. However, their actual gains in reading speed and comprehension were relatively modest. The results suggest that incorporating speed reading activities into the regular curriculum, even for as little as 14 minutes per week, can positively influence students' reading speed.

When compared with a previous study by Chung and Nation (2006), the improvements in this research were smaller. Two main factors may account for this outcome. First, the treatment sessions were conducted only twice a week for seven minutes each, totaling just 42 minutes overall. Nation (2005) emphasized that fluency practice should occur regularly—ideally at least three times per week—otherwise, progress in reading speed tends to remain minimal. Another reason for the average reading speed improvement is small is that not all students in the experimental group attend the course completely, causing them not to finish all 12 texts. Based on the writers' calculation, only eight students completed all 12 texts and they increased their reading speed by 37 wpm. Five students read 8-10 passages, and their improvement by only 22 wpm. Two other students completed fewer than eight texts and showed an increase of 19 wpm in their reading speed. Based on the number of passages completed, it can be inferred that students who read more texts tended to make greater progress. However, it remains uncertain whether this improvement resulted from reading a higher number of texts or from reading under time constraints. It is also possible that students who read fewer than ten passages were less motivated to enhance their reading skills.

Additionally, the limited opportunity for repeated practice may have influenced the overall outcomes. Since students read only two passages per week and were required to submit them after each session for evaluation of reading speed and comprehension, they did not have the chance to reread the same texts. Students then did not have a chance to read the text repeatedly in order to make them familiar with the vocabulary and text structure.

CONCLUSIONS

This current study looked into the effect of speed reading activities on students' reading rate and comprehension. The findings showed that students who participated in speed reading improved their reading speed by an average of 28 wpm (23%) and comprehension by 3.2 points, while those who did not engage improved only 8 wpm (6%) and 1.26 points, respectively. Although the difference between the groups was not statistically significant, students in the experimental group perceived notable benefits from the speed reading practice. These findings imply that incorporating brief, frequent speed reading sessions can contribute to improving learners' reading fluency. The finding also revealed a clear relationship between the number of passages read and the amount of progress achieved: students who completed more texts showed greater improvement in reading speed. In addition, the lack of repeated reading opportunities may have restricted vocabulary familiarity and text processing fluency, thereby reducing the overall effect of the intervention.

To sum up, although the speed reading activity led to modest improvements, the findings highlight the need for frequent, consistent, and repeated reading practice to enhance reading fluency. Future research could consider extending the intervention period, maintaining full participation, and incorporating opportunities for rereading to obtain more substantial and reliable results.

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