

# Rapid Reading Drills for the ESL Classroom

by Neil J. Anderson

Rapid reading is an essential skill for all ESL students, and for the many advanced ESL learners who desire to attend an American university, it is an especially important skill to master (Eskey 1973, Oller 1972). Yet for many of these students, reading is a suffocatingly slow process in which they struggle laboriously along on a word-by-word basis. According to Coady (1979:9), "Alarming numbers of students have a great deal of proficiency in English and yet read very slowly and with poor comprehension. What we have is a reading problem and not a language problem." Harris says, "It has been our experience that even advanced learners of English as a second language tend to be slow readers and that their slow reading speed constitutes a serious handicap when they commence their studies at our universities" (1966:v). Perkins and Pharis (1980) found that average ESL readers are well below average college freshman in reading speed as well as general reading ability.

Rapid, fluent reading is a process which cannot creep from one word to the next (Eskey 1973, Clarke 1979). It must proceed quickly and smoothly. Nevertheless, the building of such skill is commonly neglected by teachers.

Recently, much work has been done in the area of speed reading. The earliest studies conducted with native speakers of English concluded that speed reading was only a skimming strategy used to cover the reading material (Brown et al. 1981). Yet more recent studies indicate that speed readers achieve not only rapid reading skills but also better comprehension when specifically taught rapid reading techniques (Cranney 1982). Very little has been done in teaching techniques for rapid reading to ESL students. Many texts emphasize that reading rate is an essential aspect of ESL reading but students are only given instructions such as,

"Read the following passage as quickly as possible." A component to increase reading rate with actual drills and activities would give students some concrete help in reaching that objective. I am not proposing that we teach ESL students to read thousands of words per minute, but I am proposing that we teach them to read at a faster rate than that at which many of them currently read.

One essential aspect of the reading drills described in this article is that most of them use reading material that the student has selected. In other words, it is not mandatory that everyone use the same text. Thus, each student can read material s/he is interested in.

Record keeping is an important part of rapid reading. Each student should keep graphs charting words-per-minute as well as comprehension scores. These are useful as each student goes about setting his/her individual goals. In addition a reading log should be kept. Students should practice rapid-reading techniques for thirty minutes every day outside of class time. They should record the type of material read, the time involved, as well as the words-per-minute. These reading logs should be checked each week by the instructor.

## Reading Drills

Here are four basic types of speed drills which, when used in sequence, can be used in the ESL reading class to help increase reading rate as well as comprehension.

### Add-A-Page

The first of these drills is an add-a-page drill. The drill is conducted in the following manner: Students are given sixty seconds to read as much material as they comfortably can in the book of their choice. They

then begin reading again from the same point and are given another sixty seconds. They are to read more material in the second sixty seconds than in the first. The drill is continued a third and a fourth time. The purpose of this drill is to reread old material quickly, gliding into the new. Students are encouraged to read one more page during each sixty second drill, thus the name of the drill, "add-a-page."

### Paced Reading

In the second rate-building drill a class goal is set for reaching a certain level of words-per-minute. Then the average number of words per page of the material being read is calculated. It is then determined how many pages need to be read in one minute in order to meet the class goal. For example, let's suppose that the class goal is to read 250 wpm. Let's further suppose that the reading material being used for this particular day has an average of 125 words per page. The

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class would then be expected to read one page every thirty seconds. As each thirty seconds elapses the teacher indicates to the students to move to the next page. Students are expected to do whatever is necessary to finish the page in thirty seconds and thus keep their rate up to 250 wpm. Of course, those who read faster than 250 wpm are not expected to slow their reading rate down. As long as they are ahead of the designated page they are fine.

### Self-Paced Reading

The third drill is a self-paced speed drill. Students read for three minutes and then calculate their average words-per-minute. Setting goals for wpm is expected of each student. The drill is repeated three or four times during a class period. Each student

is competing with him/herself to improve reading rate.

### Rate and Comprehension

The fourth drill in the sequence works on both reading rate and comprehension skills. Students are given a variety of reading passages and multiple choice comprehension questions. They set individual goals for wpm and percentage of comprehension. Students are encouraged to maintain at least a seventy percent comprehension rate.

### Conclusion

These drills have been used to achieve significant increases in student reading rates in an ESL reading program (Anderson 1983). Students from upper-intermediate and advanced ESL reading classes at Brigham Young University were involved in the study. The experimental group, which received instruction using the four drills described above showed a tremendous increase in reading rate when compared with the control group ( $F=37.871$ ,  $p .0001$ ,  $CV=16.2$ , 1 and 22 df).

ESL reading teachers should prepare themselves to assist their students to move into the area of rapid, fluent reading. Then they can help students overcome the barriers caused by slow reading rate that prevent them from enjoying more reading in English.

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