

TEACHING STUDENTS TO READ FASTER: THE PROBLEM OF METHODOLOGY

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Abstract

The teaching of faster reading techniques is becoming increasingly recognized as an important educational objective. Students of various categories and literate professionals, such as doctors, teachers, lawyers, and administrators frequently get overwhelmed by the ever-increasing number of books, journals and other publications in their special fields. Furthermore, a large amount of reading is required for purposes of self-education, for the development and expansion of general knowledge, and also for recreation or the proper enjoyment of leisure. Reading improvement programmes which are usually designed to improve reading comprehension skills and to encourage flexibility in reading, prepare literate people in all walks of life. Two reading techniques were discussed in this study; the book-centred and the machine-centred methods. Both are centred on fast reading techniques. The book-centred approach consists of timed reading selection while the machine-centred approach is based on the tachistoscopic training, also known as Flash Recognition Training (FRT) which uses a device to flash words or images briefly to improve a person's ability to recognize and recall visual information quickly. This paper discusses these two methods to know the best approach that is more effective in increasing speed of comprehension and best sustain the interest of the students.

Introduction

Reading improvement programmes are very important to learning and should be targeted at providing interventions for struggling readers. The methods that are often used in such programmes fall under two major categories: book-centred and machine-centred. The book-centred method involves the performance of reading and comprehension exercises from books and other written (or printed) materials, and the discussion and application of helpful reading techniques such as columnar reading, indenting, phrase by phrase reading, swirling, skimming and skip-reading (Herrick, 2000). It also involves the discussion of the comprehension skills required in faster and more efficient reading. The machine-centred method demands practice with mechanical reading gadgets, such as eye-span trainers, reading accelerators, rateo-meters, and reading films, rather than with drill books.

Different teachers of reading (in schools, colleges, universities and other educational establishments) have used either of the two methods, or a combination of both to improve reading comprehension rates. Yet, the teaching of reading in universities is greeted with a measure of skepticism by many university students and staff, particularly in developing countries where little is known about the effectiveness of reading improvement programmes. The value of such programmes is often questioned, and the number of drop-outs among participants is usually high, except when the course is made compulsory.

The problem, then, is to discover:

- (a) Which of the possible methods of approach are really effective in increasing speed of comprehension;
- (b) Which of the methods can best sustain the interest of practicing students.

This study aims at finding at least tentative answers to these questions.

Previous Studies

Numerous studies have indicated that tachistoscopic or machine-centred training can be effective. Weber (1982) found that visual span could be increased, both horizontally and vertically, by means of tachistoscopic training. Robinson (1984) found he could secure 58 per cent gain in reading rate, and 5 per cent increase in comprehension, by gradually increasing the length of the phrases he used for ten weeks of tachistoscopic training of college freshmen. Wilson (2006), working with six groups of high school pupils, found that the group using the controller did made significant gains in rate, but that no perceptible increase in rate resulted from tachistoscopic training. Smith and Tate (2003) reported substantial increase in speed for a group of students at the University of Kansas who participated in at least twenty-five fifty-minute practice sessions in which both rate controllers and tachistoscopes were used. Weeden (2004), working with two groups consisting of Brooklyn college freshmen found that the experimental group which trained with a rate controller made some significant gains in rate than did the control group which had a book-centred practice. The superior gains of the controller-trained groups was, however, apparent only on a test based on the machine-centred practice, and not on ordinary reading tests.

Other experimental evidences reported seem indicative of the ineffectiveness of a machine-centred approach. Monolakes (1982) demonstrated in a carefully controlled experiment that when the effects of other factors were isolated, tachistoscopic training did not have any effect on reading performance and that it failed to increase speed or to improve the fluency of eye movement. Burmuth and Aker (1990) concluded from their study that the effect of a twenty-week tachistoscopic training on reading was ineffective for the improvement of reading rate, comprehension, and vocabulary. Jones and Van Why (2004), working with fourth-and fifth-grade pupils over a period of three months also reached a similar conclusion. Fink (1992) using sixteen college students as subject, came to the conclusion that tachistoscopic training in the perception of digits and words does not significantly change the duration and number of eye fixation of regressive eye movement. Fink's position is thus not one of complete denial of the value of tachistoscope training. Anderson and Dearborn (2003) have expressed serious doubts about the effectiveness of machine-centred training, and also have great support for a book-centred approach.

While the evidence in respect of machine-centred training is contradictory, there appears to be complete unanimity among teachers of reading as regards the effectiveness of a book-centred approach and a combined approach. In this regard, the findings of Jones (2007) appear typical. He used the combined technique in a reading programme involving 98 students. The students had a pre-training test and a post-training test, using the Iowa Silent Reading Test, their average pre-training comprehension was at the 45th percentile, but after training it moved up to the 96th. Their average reading rate increased from 212 to 570 words per minute. Eye-movement photographs of the trainees showed that the fixation pause had decreased and the span of recognition had increased from 1.16 words to 2.38 words.

Procedure

For purposes of the present experiment, sixty first-year undergraduates in Arts, Social Sciences and Education, at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, were divided into four groups (A,B,C& D), with fifteen in each group. The groups were fairly well matched in reading ability as measured by the University of Nigeria, Nsukka Reading Centre's READING SPEED AND COMPREHENSION TEST, which was also used for the post-training test. Group A was taught by a book-centred approach; Group B, by a machine-centred approach; Group C, by the

combined approach (i.e. book-centred/ machine-centred), and group D was given no instruction after the pre-test.

Materials used for the book-centred instruction were taken from "Dynamic Reading" by R.C. Hunt and D.G. Spencer (prepared for Rapid Reading Programme, Mapple, Chesire)". These consist of timed reading selections and "Studies in Vocabulary". The machine-centred practice was based on the use of A.V.R. eye-span trainers, E.D.L. Reading Accelerators, and E.D.L. Controlled Reader together with appropriate film-strips. Each of the Three experimental groups (A.B.&C) had two practice sessions for a period of eight weeks. Each practice session lasted an hour. Each week, Group A devoted two hours to a book-centred practice, and Group B devoted two hours to machine-centred practice, and Group C devoted one hour to a book-centred practice and another one hour to a machine-centred practice. Thus, Group A had a total of 16 hours of book-centred practice, group B a total of 16 hours of machine-centred practice and group C a total of 8 hours of book-centred practice and 8 hours of machine-centred practice, all of which was spread out over a period of eight weeks. The book centred and machine-centred techniques were explained and demonstrated to each of the three groups in a preliminary lecture, before each group embarked on actual practice.

Result

The four groups were retested at the end of the eight-week course. Table 1 shows the pre-training test scores and table 2 the post-training test scores, of the four groups. It would appear that the three experimental groups succeeded in at least doubling their effective reading rates (i.e. efficiency indexes) regardless of the practice technique each group adopted. Group C, which adopted the combined method achieved the highest efficiency index of 233, even though this is not significantly higher than those achieved by groups A and B. Group D made a "normal" improvement without formal practice. However, the improvement made by group A, B and C was significantly greater than that made by group D. This seemed indicative of the effectiveness of the training.

TABLE 1
Mean Pre-Test Scores

Group	Rate w.p.m	Compre. %	Index	No.
A	150	72	108.0	15
B	153	70	107.15	15
C	151	71	107.21	15
D	155	69	106.395	15
			Total	60

TABLE 2
Mean Post Training Scores

Group	Rate w.p.m	Compre. %	Index	No.
A	305	71	216.55	10
B	320	68	217.6	14
C	321	70	223.0	15
D	180	73	131.4	10
			Total	49

In order to discover the opinions of students about the relative value of the machine-centred and the book-centred approaches, three different questions were put to the three experimental groups at the end of the course. These, together with the responses made, were as follows:

1. QUESTION PUT TO GROUP C AND THEIR RESPONSE

Which of the two methods do you think proved the more effective in helping you to achieve a higher reading comprehension rate?

Proportion	Percentage	Responding	Responding
Type of Response			
Book-centred method		3/15	20
Machine-centred method		10/15	66.67
Can't tell		2/15	13.33

2. QUESTION PUT TO GROUP B AND THEIR RESPONSE

Do you think a book-centred approach would have increased your effective reading rate more than did the machine-centred approach?

Proportion	Percentage	Responding	Responding
Type of Response			
Yes		4/14	28.57
No		8/14	57.14
Can't tell		2/14	14.29

3. QUESTION PUT TO GROUP A AND THEIR RESPONSE

Do you think a machine-centred approach would have proved more effective in increasing your reading rate than did the book-centred approach?

Proportion	Percentage	Responding	Responding
Type of Response			
Yes		6/10	60
No		2/10	20
Can't tell		2/10	20

Discussion

The three techniques tried out experimentally seem to have proved equally effective in increasing speed of comprehension. Although the highest efficiency index was achieved by the group which adopted the combined method or approach, this does not provide adequate evidence to show that it is the most effective of the three methods.

It is, however, clear that the students themselves have greater faith in the value of a machine-centred approach than in that of the book-centred-approach. Each of the three groups has expressed implicit confidence in the effectiveness of the machine-centred approach, despite the contradictory nature of the research evidence reported in the literature.

It is perhaps significant that group A (the book-centred practice group) had the highest drop-out percentage. Five people (representing 6.67%) dropped out of group B, and no person dropped out of group C. A possible explanation of the high percentage of drop-outs in group A is that many students felt rather bored by the apparent monotony of the book-centred technique, and some did not even see how they could learn to read faster by means of such timed reading and comprehension exercises. Most of the students must have longed for the use of mechanical reading gadgets which would, they imagined, yield quick and lasting results.

The machine-centred approach certainly has many things to commend it. In spite of the contradictory reports of research workers and reading teachers, there is no doubt that tachistoscopic drill and controlled reading, by means of reading accelerators and reading films, are capable of encouraging fluency of eye movements and concentration at faster reading rates, while also discouraging such slow reading habits as regression, word by word plodding, and a tendency to vocalize or sub-vocalize word-by-word. Furthermore, they help to sustain the interest of practicing students, on account of their novelty and the confidence most students seem to have in them. As Dearborn (1998) says, methods "which are intrinsically not even sound or sane, may, because of the novelty of their appeal and their assurance of success, arouse the students to new hopes and efforts at improvement". With reference to visual training, the same writer has stated that: "What these methods may do is to increase perceptual span by offering the reader fresh motivation. That is, they succeed, not by stretching the visual span, but by "spurring the mind" (Dearborn 1998, p.6).

We must, however, bear in mind that there is in the machine-centred form of practice the danger of acquiring a mechanical approach to reading which bears but little resemblance to normal reading situations. The machine-centred approach does not encourage flexibility in reading; it rather concentrates on fluency of eye movement. We would do well to note Vernon's (1986) warning: "Devices which compel the readers' eyes to move at an even pace whatever the nature of the material read, or his intention in reading it, might in the long run destroy the flexibility for intelligent reading" (p. 88). Gates (1953, p. 26) also points out that tachistoscopic training is unnatural, that it introduces elements of artificiality, distorts the natural process of reading and lacks proper flexibility and adaptability to the reader's needs. For these reasons, the machine-centred method needs to be supplemented by a book-centred approach, a point to which we shall return presently.

A book-centred approach also has a great deal to commend it. The practicing students is brought in contact with actual books and other printed materials - in short, with a normal reading situation. He can read flexibly, can learn or take into account many relevant linguistic factors in faster reading, such as, sentence and paragraph structure, vocabulary expansion and word connotations, the system of punctuation and other linguistic signals, and the plan or organization of written materials. In spite of its great possibilities, this method does not always appeal to university students, though the personality of lively and enthusiastic teacher could minimize the risk of students' loss of interest.

On the whole, university students are far too sophisticated, and perhaps far too impatient with anything that appears dull and uninspiring, to follow without an element of compulsion, a reading programme that is based solely on book-centred practice. On the other hand, the skills required for faster reading at university level cannot all be acquired from a machine-centred practice, sophisticated and highly motivating though such practice may be. In this connection, the views of Spache (2008) who has made a detailed evaluation of the machine-centred approach are worth noting:

More real and permanent growth in rate can be accomplished by teaching the student how and when to use rapid reading and by direct instruction in reading for ideas, scanning for single facts without actual reading, and skimming by reading only heading and topic and summary sentences. The student achieves flexibility in rate (which, after all, is the real aim of rate training) only by learning to vary his speed and reading techniques according to his purposes,

the difficulty and style of the reading materials, and his familiarity with the context of the reading matter.

In a subsequent review Spache (2001) pp. 126-129) has again commented as follows:

“We should like to suggest that mechanical training is successful in accelerating rate because the student is in effect being taught to read with fewer cues, to guess more readily what he sees peripherally, to overcome the caution exhibited in slow or word-by-word reading, to be more confident in dealing with vague or indistinct portions of words...”

What Spache is saying, in effect, is that when teaching faster reading, we must adopt methods that will encourage permanent growth in reading comprehension rate along with measures that will mechanically accelerate reading rate or promote fluency of eye movement. It must be noted that, in a typical faster reading programme, overcautious readers, word-by-word plodders or habitually slow readers are likely to be found. Such people may find it extremely difficult to break their slow reading habits of reading except compelled by mechanical reading gadgets to acquire the habits of reading visually with concentration. Yet, understanding the theoretical processes involved in faster reading, and learning to make practical applications of such processes by means of book-centred practice could lead to a more lasting speed.

Conclusion

This research report is suggestive and by no means conclusive. But the combined methods is tentatively recommended as the best means of promoting permanent growth, encouraging students participation, and sustaining students' interest in a faster reading programme at university level. There are, however, a number of unanswered questions. Although many research reports have indicated that a high percentage of rate gains acquired in reading improvement programmes is usually retained over a long period, and that acquired capacity for the rapid reading of relatively easy materials does result in the ability to read more difficult materials at relatively fast rates, it is not clear whether the rate gains achieved in this experiment will be retained over a long-period of time, and whether they have enabled the students to read more difficult materials faster than previously. If previous experimental evidences in this regard are anything to go by see Weber (1982), Mullins and Mowry (1994), Fry (1983), Spache (1988) and Grosper et al (2005) - then these questions may be answered in the affirmative. However, a more ambitious study than this, or a follow-up study, could help to find correct answers to these questions.

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