

The Influential Factors on Fluency and Accuracy in Second Language Reading

Takara Kenza Allal-Sumoto

Konan University, Hirao School of Management

Abstract

While reading abilities are significantly important to succeed in academia for second language (L2) learners, they are not easy to acquire and many students seem to struggle with L2 reading. This paper highlights the factors that affect fluency and accuracy in L2 reading. In spite of its importance, there seems to be few studies that have been done about L2 reading. In terms of L2 reading, although learners' first language (L1) and function of memory might influence each point such as words, grammar and writing structure, learners' motivation may be the most influential factor. The students in the Management course at Konan University not only have reading activities, but are also introduced to several reading strategies to foster their reading skills and gain motivation.

Keywords: L2 Reading fluency, Motivation in reading, Memory in reading

Introduction

Reading skills are significantly important for English learners in academia to succeed in their courses or objectives. In addition, reading cannot be avoided in any tasks in English tests such as TOEIC, Eiken, IELTS, and TOEFL. Even in listening and speaking tests, questions and choices of answers are written in English so that students are required to read them. Students might need to read a large amount in a short period both in and outside of classes, and they need to accurately understand the contents and details. Thus, to succeed in academia, both fluency and accuracy in reading seem to be extremely important keys for students. In spite of knowing some vocabulary, grammar and strategies such as scanning and skimming, many students still seem to struggle with reading because of several reasons.

Even though reading skills require several abilities both physical and mental, reading and listening skills used to be understood as passive activities as opposed to writing and speaking skills, so the difficulties of reading skills tended to be ignored. From approximately four decades ago reading skills have been progressively viewed as active skills. However, although there have been many studies on reading skills in both L1 and L2, there is little research that focus on fluency and accuracy in L2 reading (Grabe, 2009). The reasons for this could be that reading skills are not simple and passive tasks. Reading in L1 and L2 might be different, and reading in L2 might be more challenging.

The aim of this paper is to identify influential factors such as differences between L1 and L2, language ambiguities and time pressure that make learners struggle with reading especially in terms of fluency and accuracy, and also highlight factors that have positive effects on reading skills. To begin with, the definition of fluency will be presented. Secondly, influential factors in L2 reading will be considered with micro components such as word and grammar, and will move to macro components such as writing structures and reading strategies. Finally, motivation in L2 reading will be discussed. In addition, some cases pertaining to the students in the Management course

at Konan University will be introduced at each point.

Differences between First Language and Second Language Reading

Definition of Fluency in Reading and Reading Rate

According to Grabe (2009), the definition of fluency in reading is the ability to read rapidly with ease and accuracy. To add to this, fluency is a critical component of skilled reading, and its effects are processing speed, word recognition, automaticity, accuracy, reading rate and appropriate prosodic interpretation (Grabe, 2009 & National Reading Panel, 2000).

Regarding reading rate, the average careful reading speed of L1 English readers is approx. 200 wpm (Carver, 1992), and the average rapid reading speed is approx. 250 to 300 wpm (Carver, 1990; Pressley, 2006; Rayner & Pollatsek, 1989). On the other hand, the average reading speed of L2 English learners is approx. 80 to 120 wpm, which is half or one-third speed of L1 English readers (Grabe, 2009). The average reading speed of the students in our course is also approximately 80 to 150 wpm. This could be a major disadvantage to learners in academia and even in their daily life. Moreover, people read text in order to obtain information so accurate comprehension is essential.

Vocabulary, Characters and Phoneme

Slow L2 readers are often characterized by their tendency to read word-by-word. Moreover, due to limited vocabulary, it is difficult to accurately guess the meaning of unknown words from context with minimal cues (Grabe, 2009). According to Hsueh-chao and Nation (2000), learners should know at least 95% of vocabulary in a text to guess unknown words correctly when they read. At this stage, the appropriate selection of reading materials might be significant. If a text contains a considerable number of unknown vocabulary, it may decrease the learners' reading motivation. Therefore, the teacher might need to consider the learners' amount of vocabulary when they choose materials. In our course, Extensive Reading is introduced as both in and outside-class activity in the required classes *CUBE English 1 & 2*. This class is streamed based on TOEIC or GTEC scores each semester, and the students in each class start reading at their level. In addition to this, vocabulary learning is also one of the activities and the students learn vocabulary from the New General Service List (NGSL) 501-1000 during the first semester and 1001-1500 during the second semester. The NGSL is designed by the word frequency and as they learn the vocabulary from the list, it can support the students' reading.

In terms of word recognition, there are differences between L1 and L2, and this may explain the difficulties of L2 reading. The character structures vary in each language such as orthographic and phonological processing. Similarly, there are phonetic difficulties as well, such as transparent and opaque. This might cause diminished word recognition speed or misreading for learners whose L1 does not share the same structures of characters and phoneme. Moreover, there could be a case that some learners are good listeners in L2 and they understand well, but those students sometimes struggle with reading. In this case, one of the major causes is the difference of orthographic systems. Thus, a lot of practice and reading experiences seem to be required to overcome these disadvantages.

Grammatical Structures

Secondly, grammar recognition has often been discussed. To add to the example of learners who are good at listening in L2 but struggle with reading, some learners may not be able to understand information in a text accurately through reading, but may be able to understand well if someone reads the text to them. This may be because some learners seem to have difficulties in recognizing chunks of words or the main part of speech such as subject and verb. Those students tend to pause at unusual points or never stop even if the point is between clauses when reading aloud.

Writing Structure

Thirdly, writing structures seem to be different in each L1. When learners read a text, their L1 writing structure may influence their reading, and what makes it more difficult is that writing structure seems to be intrinsic learning and learners might not realize how their L1 writing structure effects their L2 reading. For instance, where we can find the main points of essay is different in English and Japanese writing. In addition, English sentences should be clear and if it is not clear enough it becomes the writer's fault. This is because English is a low-context language (Hall, 1976). On the other hand, other writing structures such as Chinese and Japanese put the writer's main idea only at the end of essay and avoid repeating. Moreover, writers are often treated as authorities and if it the contents are not clear, it is not the writers' fault but the readers' lack of ability to understand the contents. In these languages, readers need to predict the writers' main idea and details. This is because these languages are high-context languages (Hall, 1976). In the Management course, the students take a twice-a-week writing class, and they are explicitly taught English writing styles in several genres and this may also help the students' reading.

Fluency and Motivation in Reading

Relationship between Fluency and Comprehension

Regarding reading speed and comprehension, there seems to be considerable arguments whether reading slowly leads to high comprehension. One research states that slow reading does not lead to higher comprehension (Gygax et al, 2007). Breznitz (2006) even claims that students gain higher comprehension with accelerated reading speed. On the other hand, there is a finding that slower reading does not lead to lower comprehension (Meyer, 1999). Nevertheless, regarding comprehension, reading speed seems not the only influential factor but also time pressure and motivation to understand information might have strong influence. Even though readers are forced to read quickly under time pressure but contents are not interesting to readers, the comprehension rate could be low. However, if readers eager to get information from a text and the contents interest readers, this might lead to a high rate of both reading speed and comprehension. On the other hand, students who are slow readers might not feel at ease to read fast because of fear of diminished comprehension. In our class, the students are introduced to some activities to foster their reading speed. One of them is called *reading sprint*. Students read their book for 1 minute, and after that students go back to the first point they started reading, and again start reading from the same point for two minutes. Students continue this and read for 3 minutes, and then for four minutes. Since students

are reading the same sentences again and again, especially the first part of the text, students can read fluently and would be able to gain a sense of fast reading. Students are told and also may realize on their own how they read differently the first time and the fourth time, for example their eye movement. In addition, the students measure their reading speed and decide their reading speed goal at the first time, and regularly keep their reading speed record with a reading speed chart. This is not conducted as a test and students can choose which book to read so that it might be less stressful.

Memory in Reading

To keep appropriate speed with high comprehension, memory seems to be one of the essential keys. According to Goodman (1988), when people read, memory is required to hold image, store information, retain knowledge, and understanding. In addition, Grabe (2009) states that memory consists of two components such as long-term memory and working memory. Long-term memory is a major function for reading and therefore affects learning. Working memory has limited storage and capacity but can deal with several processes simultaneously. Above all, working memory contains automatic processes with little attention to reading. The effective use of working memory might make a large difference between efficient readers and slow readers. In addition, reading requires the creation of organizational structure than just following words, and requires building textual meaning than just recognizing words (Grabe, 2009). When learners read a text in their L1, the information may be easily stored with little consciousness. This might be due to the fact that L1 readers can recognize words, structure and information more automatically than L2 readers, and information, which has strong impression, directly affects working memory. On the other hand, regarding L2 reading, it may require long time to recognize words, structure and information, and it seems to decrease the impression of texts, thus, the information might be hardly stored in working memory. This might be one example that when teachers ask reading comprehension questions from a text, students tend to re-read the text to search for the answer even though they has just read it. The students in our course read a book for 10 to 15 minutes during each class time and after that, they are tasked to present the book's story, why they chose the book, whether they recommend the book and so on to their partner. Since the students have to explain it later, they try to understand the content and memorize it harder compared to when they read text without such information exchange activity. Although it seems to be difficult for the students to memorize the contents as Grabe (2009) noted, this activity may be beneficial for students to foster not only reading fluency, but also accuracy.

To succeed in reading, reading strategies are often pointed out. There are many reading strategies such as scanning, skimming, bottom-up and top-down. Anderson (2000) claims that learners can perform better with knowing how to read in particular purposes. However, teachers tend to tell the meaning of reading strategies and treat them as if they are easy tasks. Students might be able to tell the meaning of each strategy, but they may often fail dealing with those strategies. If the writer's main idea could be easily identified with skimming, nobody would have struggled with finding a main idea. Moreover, even though L2 readers know useful strategies and the structure of English, the knowledge may help readers but still it is not easy to locate information quickly and accurately. This might be the result of language ambiguity. Therefore, L2 readers need

to be flexible when they read. L2 readers tend to have difficulties in shifting strategies to different reading purposes, while fluent readers can deal with different strategies and tasks depending on situation (Horiba, 2000 and Grabe, 2009). Reading might be similar to playing sport. Even though students might know the rule such as the reading strategies, but if they have never played or used the strategies, so they would not be good players.

Motivation in Reading

Since motivation might play a large role in language acquisition, the study of motivation has been progressively focusing on reading as well. In terms of motivation in reading, the lack of awareness of the reading goal and objectives may affect negatively on their performances (Grabe, 2009). It seems to occur often during in-class reading. Some students may not understand the reason for reading a text. This may lead to decreased readers' motivation. Moreover, according to Grabe (2009), automaticity in reading might be the outcome of a large amount of meaningful input. Therefore, meaningful materials cannot be effective unless readers do not realize the objective of the reading.

Finally, to improve fluency in L2 reading, a large amount of reading experiences might be required. One finding shows that 'the amount of reading was the best predictor of gain in reading achievement' (Anderson et al. 1988). In addition, meaningful reading experiences and reading materials should be authentic, enjoyable, active and not frustrating. In our course, 60,000 words at their reading level is the target in the first semester, and 40 books is the target for the second semester. After reading each book, students have to write a book report or take a quiz on M-Reader and if they pass the quiz, they can obtain points towards their grade. Since the system is straightforward, many students try to read a lot to reach the target. Some students may read a lot only for their grade, but since they can choose which book to read based on their interest, some students seem to start to enjoy reading through the activity. According to Robb and Susser (1989), students who did extensive reading performed significantly better on comprehension test than students who did not. In addition, one study shows that learners who did extensive reading improved significantly in TOEFL test than learners who did not. Therefore, extensive reading might lead to high achievement of reading comprehension (Anderson et al. 1988), increased vocabulary growth (Cunningham et al. 1997), and motivating students (Day et al. 1998). Moreover, Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) state that motivation has a great impact on the depth and breadth of reading. From all of these studies, it is clear that motivation might be a major factor of fluency and accuracy in reading.

Conclusion

L2 reading is not a simple ability. It requires several cognitive skills and is affected by various factors. The reading rate of L2 is approximately half or one-third the speed of native English readers, and this appear to be a major disadvantage for L2 learners in academia. One of the causes might be differences between learners' L1 and L2 in terms of words, grammar and writing structures, and their L1 can influence L2 reading. As a result, this may lead to decreased fluency and accuracy in L2 reading. As such, in spite of there being few findings about the connection between fluency and accuracy in L2 reading, readers' motivation and obtaining clear objectives toward reading seem to

provide a large impact on L2 reading. Motivation appears to affect the readers' memory function and the amount of reading.

In conclusion, motivation might be one of major influential factors on L2 reading, affecting the amount of reading and memory function. Moreover, since reading abilities are significantly complicated skills, a large amount of reading appear to be essential to acquire the abilities. As a result of the fact, the extensive reading seems to be one of most effective activities to gain and maintain learners' motivation, and improve their fluency and accuracy in L2 reading. It should be mentioned that the study about motivation has been conducted by many researchers but the further details of motivation are not discussed in this paper. A future study could be conducted with such details of motivation, and the relationship between fluency and accuracy in L2 reading would also be studied in detail. This subject would be of interest to both L2 teachers and L2 learners.

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