

MOVING FORWARD: USING ONLINE TECHNOLOGIES TO ADVANCE READING COMPETENCY

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ABSTRACT

It is possible to take advantage of promising online technologies such as Spreeder, Moodle and desktop capture software such as QuickTime to help students improve their reading ability and promote autonomous learning. We can do this by creating globally accessible speed reading passages followed up with various online comprehension confirmation questions stored at a Moodle or other website. This paper addresses materials selection and then explains how to exploit them with online technologies.

Key words: speed reading, reading competency, online technologies, Moodle, blended learning

INTRODUCTION

Except for the very few among us who are fortunate enough to teach gifted students in the very best universities, our students tend to be those who have had very little opportunity to experience foreign language reading. It comes as little surprise, therefore, that many of them are weak readers often requiring remediation. A perennial problem in many EFL classrooms is that due to their weakness, it limits what we, as educators, are able to offer them. Yet their weakness is not always necessarily due to a lack of ability. The problem is not receiving complete instruction in how to read efficiently and not having the means to practice regularly. In other words, inadequate time on task. As a result, we have to teach these students the mechanics of proper reading from scratch. While onerous, in fact this presents us with an opportunity to slowly introduce them to captivating authentic literature, including original, level-specific graded readers, which may result in them becoming hooked on reading. At the same time, now that we are able to integrate new technologies specific to reading, we can help them learn how to read efficiently and effectively. With some effort and planning we can initiate, innovate and enrich students' reading experiences by creating a new, blended teaching paradigm that incorporates the judicious use of technologies.

Selection of materials

It is always difficult to decide what materials to use with inexperienced, weak, young adult learners. Although they may appreciate the mature ideas in an engaging novel, they may lack the requisite skills to

immerse themselves in the content. Well-known novels that have been truncated and simplified in level-appropriate graded reader format are frequently opposed by some educators on the grounds that they have been largely stripped of their original genius. Now, however, there are graded readers featuring engaging original stories that have been custom written for a certain level and age group. A few EFL educators, such as this author (McNabb, 2012), have crafted short stories specifically for FL learners that can still be classified as authentic literature. In addition, we can still use some carefully selected, very short, classic short stories. The main appeal for using short stories is that they are short. Students will be less likely to be intimidated or demotivated when they can actually see it in its entirety on just one or two pages. Moreover, students usually know what to expect: there will be a beginning, middle and an end. In almost all cases, particularly with the classics, authors have paid close attention to every word and the interrelation of sentences, thus the language tends to be extremely precise. They have also carefully considered how to make their stories entertaining in a variety of ways, for example through metaphors and allusions to historical events. Because short stories are usually very well crafted, students tend to be motivated to continue reading them to the end in order to find out what happens. For EFL educators, short stories are desirable to use because there tends to be a lot of semantic and grammatical quality packed into a few pages. In addition to short stories, other suitable reading materials include myths, fables, fairy tales and detective stories due to their familiar content, form and length. With students who show a strong interest in science or engineering, instructors could also use simply written popular science articles such as those that are freely available at scienceforkids.org, sciencenewsforkids.com and howstuffworks.com.

*Received March 1, 2013

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2013年3月1日受理

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Research shows that it is important for students to have an opportunity to self-select what they want to

read at least some of the time. Indeed, Lao and Krashen (2000) report that in studies where students were given opportunities to read somewhat freely by choosing from a list, in *all* cases, using literature and popular literature resulted in reading gains and positive self-assessments, especially for students who read self-selected readings along with the well-assigned readings. In their own study, in the two groups that they compared, the experimental group that was able to self-select and read freely, scored substantially higher than the comparison group that was "enrolled in a typical academic skills development course" (p. 264). In addition, the experimental group showed substantial improvement in reading speed, whereas the comparison group did not. Although this study did not track multiple cohorts over a long term, the authors still asserted that "the differences in gains between the two groups is evident..." (p. 267). In spite of some unbalance between the two groups, nevertheless the researchers seemed quite confident that their results were fair and accurate. Moreover, as in other studies, (Erkaya, 2005) the students examined by Lao and Krashen reported very strong beliefs that pleasurable reading was valuable. In contrast, the students using traditional materials in traditional ways did not believe their study had much value. It should be noted, however, that this second group, which was much smaller than the experimental group consisted of only 39 students divided into two classes. Overall, the results of this and other studies consistently confirm that pleasurable reading can be beneficial and that students at all levels are fully aware that sometimes the textbooks they are being required to read are lacking in entertainment and educational value.

Advantages to using technology to improve reading ability and accessibility

Having established the validity of using level-appropriate short stories and authentic literature, I will show how freely available technologies are a boon to instructors wanting to take students to the stage where they can independently interact with actual literature. Unfortunately, not a few educators frequently bristle at the thought of adopting technology. Many of our students are 21st century digital natives, however, and many of them expect and appreciate an online or computer-based component in their courses. Therefore, irrespective of our own teaching practices and preferences, it is increasingly necessary that we embrace technology in education. Computers and their smaller counterparts, smartphones and tablets, can all be used to great advantage. In "Introduction: technology in teaching literature and culture: some reflections," last century, Porter (1999) stated that "Technology can give students a greater degree of control over the delivery

of their learning: by using technology, students can access information, learning spaces, and other resources at times which suit their lifestyle and their other commitments." She added that "Technology-based resources can be integrated into a course of study and used to complement classroom contact."

It is very easy to find many suitable, well-known stories online such as at searchlit.org and www.short-stories.co.uk. Thus, in addition to paper books (still preferred by many), making a story accessible by putting it online has never been easier. These days most people carry a phone, an iPad or a computer most of the time. This is especially true in the case of young people. This suggests that it is *very* likely that we will be able to increase a student's contact time with the L2 by making materials available to these devices. Students are able to access our materials from their phones and tablets from just about everywhere, and, in fact they do. For skeptics, there are ample statistics at our Moodle website that fully substantiate these assertions. Even the very weakest students are able to access and do regularly access our Moodle site at university, at home and from their smart phones. In fact, we discovered in 2012 that up to 60 students regularly accessed and reaccessed materials during semester breaks. This bodes very well for teaching reading. In addition, by using online technology to improve reading competencies, we can actually better understand our own role in students' learning by observing their autonomy; this can be accomplished by reviewing the detailed usage statistics provided by online learning environments. We can know exactly what they were doing, when they were doing it and how well they did it.

Taking reading materials online

Once a level-appropriate story such as from *Fifteen Little Stories For English Language Learners* by Gregg McNabb, "The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson or Hemingway's "Old Man at the Bridge" has been found, it should be saved in a Word or other format for future use. At this point, it can be uploaded to a website as a stand alone file that students can access any time. In fact, many of us already do so. For those who do not have a website, a free one can be created in under 30 minutes by using Weebly.com. Next, go to Spreeder.com and copy/paste the selected story's text into the text box. Watch as the story appears according to the reading speed that has been set (the default setting is 300 words per minute). The speed will need to be adjusted based on the story selected. Chunk size can be set according students' levels. For example, 5-word chunks may be suitable for one story, but 6-word chunks might be better for another. 135 wpm might be appropriate for "Old Man at the Bridge" but only 100 wpm for *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. It is possible to set the font size, colour, background, alignment, and window dimensions.

according to individual preferences. There are several, "advanced" settings, such as adding a slight pause at the end of sentences and paragraphs. Every aspect of Spreeder can be understood in under ten minutes. At this stage, we have learned how to use the Spreeder application. This means students can copy the files that have been put online in Word or other formats and use Spreeder over and over again after they have been instructed how to use it. Weak students have informed us that reading and rereading individual paragraphs, as opposed to the full story, is preferable. As homework, students can be required to read the story at least X times at X wpm. Students can be given the chance to read the same content faster if the instructor creates new files containing the same content, only read faster (refer to the last stage below). If an instructor hooks up his own computer in class, students' progress can be tracked by having them read in class from a large screen or from monitors. This is good pedagogy in that it is *the instructor* who sets the pace. Reluctant readers will be forced to read in chunks for 2-3 minutes, instead of word by word for 20 minutes. It is quite easy, and even amazing, to demonstrate to reluctant readers that they are reading multiple times faster than they do normally and that they are mostly "getting" what the chunks and the story mean. Krashen's testing in Lao and Krashen above and my own bear this out. I upload all of my comprehension questions in the form of Practice Quizzes to our Moodle site, so I can determine how well students have understood a story just by looking at overall quiz results and can even perform item analysis of individual questions. Because they are Practice Quizzes that can be attempted endlessly for a small percentage of their total grade, students tend to do them without extensive preparation. As a result, the first few attempts tend to accurately reflect their actual understanding of the story. This data would be impossible to duplicate in a traditional, low-tech classroom setting using pencil and paper quizzes. These data give me insights into what parts or aspects of a story are problematic and therefore need to be addressed or reviewed in class. Finally, with some students, instructors could introduce an element of competition by rewarding those who improve their reading speed the most by setting a very challenging wpm target, and possibly across sections where there is a large number of students reading the same materials. The main objective, however, is to try to improve students' automaticity in reading.

The last stage is to introduce an aural component. Since there is already a file of a story or stories online, print out a copy in a font size that is easy to read. Next, go to Spreeder and paste the story into the window using desired settings. Practice reading it aloud. There will be hesitations and difficulties, so being able to refer to the printed copy helps to

produce a more polished reading of the Spreeder text. When satisfied with reading fluency, pronunciation, volume and energy, use a desktop capture to record Spreeder. Most newer operating systems have this capability. If not, it is easy to download an application. For example, with a MacBook Pro with QuickTime 10.0, open "New Screen Recording" in "File" and practice reading several times for 20 to 30 seconds. Play back the file(s) and evaluate them. If the reading is smooth and otherwise suitable, the entire story can be recorded or only as much input as is appropriate for the students, for example, just two to three paragraphs. Upload this file (usually in mp4 format) to the website. Students are now able to read and listen to the story at the wpm rate that has been set. Of course they can read it silently, too, by turning down the volume. It is possible and preferable to upload several files with *different* wpm rates so that students can challenge themselves. If the files are uploaded to a Moodle site, any teacher can check when and how many times each student accessed each file. If instructors can succeed in getting students to use Spreeder often, as with other speed reading programs, there will be improvement. Students can also be asked to record their own reading to submit as e-homework adding an oral/fluency component. Such homework can be evaluated in numerous ways, although according to fluency is preferred since that is a key goal of all speed reading programs.

Conclusion

Using these technologies, at the very minimum we can make it easier for students to read on their terms. Most likely, however, a whole new dimension will be added to teaching reading because traditional classroom practices will be reinforced when students read and listen to self-selected, interesting materials numerous times. When various types of comprehension questions, including simple listening questions made by using QuickTime or similar desktop software, are put online and can be accessed at any time, students are able to repeatedly reconfirm their understanding. Instead of spending just 90 minutes in a week in classroom reading and study, students engage with the materials more often.

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