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The development of text reading fluency in English among Polish EFL learners

Purpose of work: The choice of subject of the following research was dictated by the need to investigate the development of reading fluency in English, in particular of word recognition accuracy, reading rate and oral reading prosody, among six 1st Grade Polish EFL learners. Materials and methods: The study employed was longitudinal and quantitative in nature. The learners were tested four times in accuracy and speed, and twice in prosody. Results: In general the results in all three aspects of reading fluency in English improved for all the learners, however some considerable individual differences have been noted. Conclusions: The results of the study suggest that educational efforts to improve reading fluency in English among EFL learners seem to be worthwhile.

Key words: early EFL reading, oral reading fluency, word recognition accuracy, reading rate, prosody

1. Introduction

Reading involves a number of complex and multileveled processes, like word recognition, syntactic parsing, semantic propositions encoding, text model formation or inferencing (Grabe, 2009; Young and Bowers, 1995), therefore achieving reading fluency requires time and regular reading practice. Slow reading, with frequent mistakes and poor expression hinders comprehension and might be an indication of reading disability requiring remedial action. The more fluent the readers are the less burden is exerted on their working memory. One attempt to explain this correlation has been made by Perfetti (1985) and his **bottleneck theory**, which posits that slow reading curtails comprehension because the information is not retained long enough in the working memory. The significance of fluent text reading in the release of mental resources to reach satisfactory comprehension was recognized as early as the beginning of the 20th century (Huey, 1905).

While the correlation between reading fluency and comprehension in L1 has been the subject of great interest among researchers, the same cannot be observed in the L2 context (Crosson and Lesaux, 2010: 488). The current research was

designed to investigate changes in reading fluency among six 1st grade Polish learners of English by assessing their development of word recognition accuracy, reading rate and oral reading prosody.

2. Reading fluency and its role in reading comprehension in L1 and L2

Despite the general agreement that **reading fluency** entails decoding print with **precision**, **speed** and **expression** (Fuchs, Fuchs and Maxwell, 1988; Kuhn and Stahl, 2003; Markell and Deno, 1997; Young and Bowers, 1995; Fuchs, Fuchs, Hosp and Jenkins, 2001; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000), discrete definitional differences can be observed. Interestingly, Breznitz (2006) discusses three possible ways to view reading fluency: 1) as "an outcome of the quality of the oral reading of words and connected text" where the rate and prosody of reading aloud and word recognition accuracy are measured; 2) as "an outcome of the development of accuracy and automaticity in linguistic components of reading" with word decoding and syntactic processing seen as the key aspects; and 3) as "an outcome of the effectiveness of various biological and cognitive systems" (p.4).

According to Wolf and Katzir-Cohen (2001), fluency refers to "a level of accuracy and rate where decoding is relatively effortless; where oral reading is smooth and accurate with correct prosody; and where attention can be allocated to comprehension" (p. 219). Hasbrouck and Glaser (2012) define it as "reasonably accurate reading, at an appropriate rate, with suitable expression, that leads to accurate and deep comprehension and motivation to read" (p. 13). A definition by Kuhn, Schwanenflugel and Meisinger (2010) states that "[f]luency combines accuracy, automaticity, and oral reading prosody, which, taken together, facilitate the reader's construction of meaning. It is demonstrated during oral reading through ease of word recognition, appropriate pacing, phrasing, and intonation. It is a factor in both oral and silent reading that can limit or support comprehension." (p. 242).

Thus, it is generally agreed that **reading fluency** incorporates a number of abilities, such as the **reading rate** (**speed**), **reading accuracy** and **prosody**, each of them elaborate and depending on a number of variables. However, while the researchers stress the importance of reading fluency in deep comprehension, only Hasbrouck and Glaser (2012) stress the role reading fluency plays in motivation to read. It is motivation that makes early readers reach out for texts despite the usually struggling character of early encounters with printed texts.

Achieving satisfactory reading fluency in a second or foreign language (L2/FL) seems to be more effortful than in the L1 context. This may be due to the fact that in the L2/FL context one of the underlying reading processes, word recognition, is usually hindered by poor vocabulary knowledge and insufficient oral language skills (Grabe and Stoller, 2002: 43). At the onset of their learning to read L1 learners are proficient vocabulary users and learning to read requires simply learning to match the graphic form with the otherwise familiar word (both in meaning and pronunciation), whereas for L2/FL learners, all the aspects of the word may be

unfamiliar. Therefore, in the latter case, the correlation between reading fluency and comprehension might not be as strong as in L1 reading context (Crosson and Lesaux, 2010: 492).

The development of reading fluency in early L1 reading has been investigated and norms for the speed and accuracy of reading have been established. However, there is still little insight into the way reading fluency might develop among Polish EFL early reading learners, and, so far, no norms have been established. The study discussed in this paper is an attempt to fill in the gap in research concerning the development of early reading fluency among Polish learners of English as a foreign language.

3. Reading fluency components: visual word recognition accuracy, reading rate, and prosody

In order to fully comprehend what one is reading, the words need to be recognized accurately and automatically, in particular their phonetic, orthographic and semantic properties. The higher the accuracy in **visual word recognition**, the easier it is for the reader to comprehend a text. Poor rate of reading accuracy may result from poorly developed phonological, orthographic, semantic, syntactic and morphological skills (Adams, 1990). According to the National Reading Panel (2000), early readers need to achieve some level of accuracy first to be able to subsequently work on the reading rate. What is more, the development of reading accuracy can be affected both by individual differences between learners as well as the level of orthographic depth between the languages. Naturally, achieving accuracy in a shallow orthography language is not as cognitively demanding or time consuming as in a deep orthography (Shany, Bar-On and Katzir, 2012). It should be added that the general accuracy rate below 90% leads to reader's frustration (Rasinski, 2004). Hicks (2009) adds that words can be read accurately either as sight words or through phonemic decoding.

A high **rate of reading**, referred to also as **speed** or **duration** of a reading act, is as necessary for fluent and satisfying reading as accuracy is (Breznitz, 2006). However, the nature of reading rate cannot be given precisely. One view asserts that, as a dependent variable, reading rate is influenced by the smooth operation of reading skills, such as matching phonemes with graphemes or letter clusters. The other perception of reading rate is that, as an independent factor, it influences the learners' performance in reading skills (Breznitz, 2006: 9-10). It is difficult to establish the optimal rate of reading fluency for L2/EFL learners as estimates vary from 100 to 300 words per minute (Anderson, 1999, Chodkiewicz, 2000). Reading rate has a developmental character, as it increases with reading experience (Rasinski and Padak, 2005). Both rate and accuracy of reading are often measured with RAN (Rapid Automatic Naming), that is a test in naming familiar stimuli (Rathvon, 2004).

The third component of reading fluency is **prosody**. Rathvon (2004) explains the term as "the rhythmic and melodic features of spoken language; prosodic features are measured in reading expression and some kinds of reading fluency

tasks" (p. 550). In more detail, prosody deals with such aspects of expression in oral reading as the right or natural length of phrase pronunciation, the rhythm, stress, pitch, intonation and loudness (McArthur, 1992: 818). Reading prosody can be measured by attending to pausing, phrasing, and the use of appropriate stress and intonation. Performance on all the four parameters is marked on a 4-point scale with 0 points as the lowest mark and 3 as the highest (i.e. Fountas and Pinnell, 2011). Although reading expression is often taken for granted, its lack in oral reading can be immediately noticed.

4. Activities in developing reading fluency

The way to achieve reading fluency is through regular practice in reading, including rereading the same text a number of times. However, repeated reading of familiar texts can be demotivating. To keep up the motivation of early readers, both the texts and the activities need to be engaging, but also just below the learners' level (Hicks, 2009). A sample of text and activity types aiming at developing reading fluency among early EFL readers is presented in Table 1.:

Table 1. A selection of text types and activities aiming at developing reading fluency (based on Blamey and Beauchat, 2016; Hicks, 2009)

TEXT TYPES	ACTIVITIES
Rhythmical, rhetorical, or	Teacher reading aloud to provide a model,
interactive texts such as poetry,	repeated reading,
song lyrics, chants, rhymes,	paired reading,
short plays, monologues,	echo reading,
dialogues, or letters,	choral reading,
humorous text with lots of	rereading a text using different 'voices', i.e. the voice of
action.	a powerful king or a tiny mouse,
	pupils reading along with the teacher or a recording,
	attractive, multisensory sight word reading practice,
	reading whole phrases instead of individual words,
	independent reading.

Some of the activities can be suitable for the introduction of a new text, for instance, the teacher reading aloud to provide a model. Other activities might be more suitable for reading familiar texts. One activity that the participants of the current study found particularly engaging was the activity in which they could read a text using distinct voices of their choice, for instance the high tone of voice (i.e. that of a mouse) or a low voice (i.e. that of an elephant). During this activity, the readers concentrated on producing the chosen voices rather than on the text itself, which added the element of fun to the reading practice. By assuming different voices the learners were motivated to reread a text numerous times, thus increasing their reading rate and widening their range of sight vocabulary with each attempt. All in all, the suggested activities can be easily incorporated into regular reading practice. However, while working on developing their reading

fluency learners need to be aware that fluent decoding of any text is not an aim in itself, but a tool necessary for satisfactory reading comprehension.

5. The study

5.1. Purpose

The primary aim of the study was to investigate changes in the learners' reading fluency assessed in terms of accuracy in word recognition, reading rate, and prosody in oral reading. Three research questions were formulated:

- 1. Will there be changes in the learners' reading accuracy across the instruction period with four measurements taken?
- 2. Will there be changes in the learners' reading rate across the instruction period with four measurements taken?
- 3. Will there be changes in the learners' reading prosody between the first and final testing time?

To address these research questions, the author used longitudinal data gathered across the six months of early reading instruction.

5.2. Participants, materials, procedure

The participants included randomly selected six 1st Grade students from a single urban elementary school in Poland, three girls and three boys. The girls were the only children in their families while the boys had siblings. All the participants' mothers, also the major caretakers, were university graduates and their families represented similar SES (Socioeconomic status). At the commencement of the instruction the youngest participant (Zuzanna P.) was 6 years and 2 months old, and the oldest (Jakub) was 7 years and 9 months old.

The participants were exposed to six months of early EFL reading instruction, which consisted of forty 90-minute sessions, and focused on developing alphabetic knowledge, grapheme-phoneme correspondences, sight word reading, phonemic decoding, oral language skills, comprehension, vocabulary and spelling. The assessed component skills included: letter knowledge, sight vocabulary reading, phonemic decoding, reading comprehension, vocabulary knowledge and fluency of reading connected texts. The participants were tested four times: after the first 12 instructional sessions (Time 1), after the next 8 sessions (Time 2), after 10 subsequent sessions (Time 3), and after the last 10 sessions of the course (Time 4).

To assess reading fluency, the participants were asked to read short, familiar texts at their grade level (Appendix 1). The participants were recorded while reading, the recordings were subsequently analysed and the data was collected. Reading accuracy was evaluated by calculating the number of correctly read words among those found in the reading samples produced by learners at four measuring times. The speed of reading was assessed by calculating the number of all the words the learners read within 1 minute (Appendix 2). To measure the prosody of the participants' reading aloud, a 4-point scale (0-3) by Fountas and

Pinnell (2010) was used to assess pausing, phrasing, stress, and intonation. For greater objectivity prosody was assessed by two raters, experienced EFL teachers, and the average result was calculated.

5.3. Results

5.3.1 Reading accuracy

In the reading accuracy tests (see Figure 4.1. below for results), the score was the percentage of words read correctly out of all the words read within 1 minute.

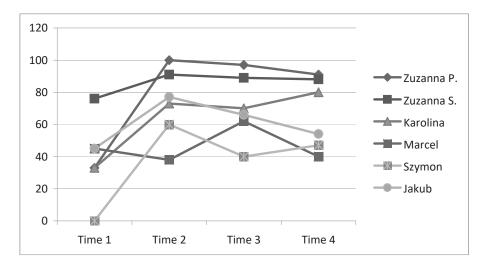


Figure 1. The trend in changes of the learners' reading accuracy across the four testing times.

As can be seen, the results show that the participants' reading accuracy had a tendency to increase throughout the 6 months of their reading course and across four measurement times. The highest results were obtained by two participants: Zuzanna P. and Zuzanna S. whose final results were close to the maximum (respectively 92% and 86% of reading accuracy). Of these two participants the most spectacular progress was made by Zuzanna P., whose starting point was 33% of correctly read words, yet the result at Time 2 was 100% and at Times 3 and 4 respectively 97% and 91%. Also Karolina, Szymon and Jakub made clear progress in reading accuracy. In the case of Karolina, reading accuracy rate was initially 33% and grew to 80% at Time 4, and in the case of Szymon the result changed from 0% to 60% between Times 1 and 2. Jakub's development of reading accuracy was also clearly visible and improved from 45% at Time 1 to 77% at Time 2. Marcel's results indicated a slight improvement in reading accuracy: the average result obtained by the participant at Times 1 and 2 was 42%, while the average result obtained at Times 3 and 4 was 51%. Drops in results could be observed in the cases of all the participants (except for Zuzanna S.) at various testing times. The development of reading accuracy, like that of speed of reading, may have been attributed to the frequent practice in reading both in English and in Polish.

The table below (Table 2.) shows the numbers of the learners' correct answers scored on the four reading accuracy tests with the percentage of all correct responses per test as well as the percentage of all correct answers per learner.

Table 2. Number and percentage of words read accurately out of all the words read by particular learners within 1 minute across four measuring times

	Number and percentage of the words read correctly out of all the words read within 1 minute								
	Tin	ne 1	Tin	ne 2	Tin	ne 3	Tin	ne 4	
Learners	No. of all read words	No. of correctly read words	No. of all read words	No. of correctly read word	No. of all read words	No. of correctly read word	No. of all read words	No. of correctly read words	Number and percentage of correctly read words per Learner
Zuzanna P.	3	1 (33%)	10	10 (100%)	30	29 (97%)	22	20 (91%)	60/65 (92%)
Zuzanna S.	25	19 (76%)	32	29 (91%)	28	25 (89%)	25	22 (88%)	95/110 (86%)
Karolina	12	4 (33%)	22	16 (73%)	20	14 (70%)	20	16 (80%)	50/74 (68%)
Marcel	11	5 (45%)	8	3 (38%)	26	16 (62%)	10	4 (40%)	28/55 (51%)
Szymon	4	0 (0)%)	15	9 (60%)	15	6 (40%)	19	9 (47%)	24/53 (45%)
Jakub	33	15 (45%)	22	17 (77%)	29	19 (66%)	24	13 (54%)	64/108 (59%)
No and percentage of correctly read words per measure	88	44 (50%)	109	84 (77%)	148	109 (74%)	120	84 (70%)	

From the data shown in the table it can be seen that the study participants improved their reading accuracy over the period of six months of instruction. While at the initial measurement time the percentage of all the correctly read words out of all the words read within 1 minute was 50%, at Time 2 it reached 77% to drop by the final measurement to 70%. The mean scores of individual learners also showed considerable differences. While the highest score (gained by Zuzanna P.) was 92%., the lowest score was obtained by Szymon (45%). Apart from Szymon, the reading accuracy of all the other learners reached over 50%.

5.3.2. Reading rate

Figure 2. presents the results of the reading speed test. The learners' task was to read the texts aloud for up to 1 minute.

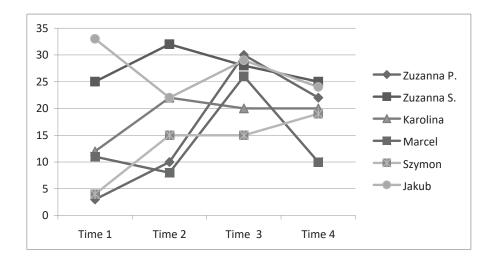


Figure 2. Changes in the number of words read by the learners within a minute across four testing times

The results indicate that the speed of reading improved over the period of training, despite the tendency to fluctuate. A steady gain in the speed of reading could be observed in the case of Szymon whose starting point was only 4, but at Time 4 he read 19 words. The results of Zuzanna S. and Karolina increased between Time 1 and 2: in the case of Zuzanna S. the results grew from 25 to 32, while in the case of Karolina, from 12 to 22. Zuzanna P. and Marcel's results improved between Time 1 and 3: Zuzanna P. read only 3 words at Time 1, yet by Time 3 the number grew to 30; Marcel's results grew from 11 to 26. Only Jakub's results seem to have declined from 33 at Time 1 to 24 at Time 4, probably due to the fact that with time and subsequent testing Jakub paid more attention to accuracy. Marcel's results dropped between Times 3 and 4 from 26 to 10, probably for the same reason as Jakub. During some of the tests, some participants managed to read all the words in the texts in less than one minute, as in the case of Zuzanna S. and Karolina at Times 3 and 4, and in the case of Jakub at Times 2, 3, and 4.

In order to demonstrate the results of the speed of reading tests from the perspective of the whole group, the number of words read per minute per measure and per learner has been presented (Table 3).

Table 3. Number of words read by particular learners within 1 minute across four measuring times.

	Numb	Number of			
	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3	Time 4	words read per learner
Zuzanna P.	3	10	30	22	65
Zuzanna S.	25	32	28	25	110
Karolina	12	22	20	20	74
Marcel	11	8	26	10	55
Szymon	4	15	15	19	53
Jakub	33	22	29	24	108
No of words read per measure	88	109	148	120	

The collected data presented in the table above show that the study participants improved their speed of reading over the 6 month period of the instruction. At the first measuring time the number of all words read per 1 minute was 88, at Time 2 – 109, at Time 3 – 148, and 120 at Time 4. By Time 3, the number of words read per minute almost doubled in comparison with that at Time 1. Individual participants' results also showed considerable differences. The highest number of words read in all the four tests were those of Zuzanna S. (110) and Jakub (108), while the lowest were those of Szymon (53) and Marcel (55). Generally, despite the drop in the results of four learners at Time 4, the speed of reading improved over the period of the early EFL reading course.

5.3.3. Prosody in oral reading

To investigate the changes in the oral reading prosody (see Table 4. below) two independent raters, experienced EFL educators, analysed the recordings of the learners' oral reading at the initial and final testing time. The results are the percentage assigned on the basis of the learners' performance in reading prosody, in particular in pausing, phrasing, stress and intonation. All four parameters were marked for each of the learners using a 4-point scale, where 0 points is the lowest mark and 3 is the highest (Fountas and Pinnell, 2011).

Table 4. The percentage assigned on the basis of the learners' performance in pausing, phrasing, stress and intonation

Dantiginants	Results in pausing, phrasing, stress and intonation				
Participants	Time 1	Time 4			
Zuzanna P.	92%	92%			
Zuzanna S.	83%	92%			
Karolina	67%	75%			
Marcel	33%	67%			
Szymon	25%	42%			
Jakub	42%	33%			
Average score per group	57%	67%			

The data presented in the table shows that also prosody in reading aloud improved over the period of 6 months of instruction. While at Time 1 the average result was 57%, at Time 4 it reached 67%. Two of the participants' prosody results reached an impressive 92% by Time 4. Also in prosody results individual participants showed considerable differences. While the highest score (gained by Zuzanna P.) was 92% at both measuring times, the lowest score was obtained by Szymon (25% at Time 1 and 42% at Time 4). Apart from Jakub, the prosody results improved from Time 1 to Time 4.

6. Conclusions

In general, word recognition accuracy, reading rate and oral reading prosody improved for six 1st grade Polish EFL learners participating in the six months of early EFL reading instruction. The improvement could be attributed to the fact that over the period of instruction the participants had practiced reading using different strategies (reading words as sight vocabulary and through phonemic decoding) which contributed to reading fluency. At the same time the learners were also undergoing intensive oral reading training in Polish at school. Another reason may lie in the fact that while initially the learners felt apprehensive about reading aloud in English, over the course they visibly gained in confidence and often enjoyed oral reading practice. However, an increase in the speed of reading was not always followed by an increase in reading accuracy as some learners read words at a faster rate, yet inaccurately. The results of the study indicate that regular engagement in activities aiming at the development of reading fluency is bound to bring positive effects.

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Appendices

Appendix 1.

Contextual reading fluency tests

Time 1

This is Ben's family. These are Ben's mum and dad. This is Ben's tree house. Ben has got a TV and a telescope.

- What can you see, Ben?
- I can see the moon and the stars.

Name _____

this	is	Ben's	family these		are
Ben's	mum	and	dad	this	is
Ben's	tree	house	Ben	has	got
A	TV	and	a	telescope	what
can	you	see	Ben	I	can
see	the	moon	and	the	stars

Time 2

This is an island. And this is a beautiful garden.

- What can Tom see in the garden?
- Tom can see a monkey!
- What has Tom got?
- Tom has got a drink.
- It is very hot.

Name _____

this	is	an	island	and	this
Is	a	beautiful	garden	what	can
Tom	see	in	the	garden	Tom
can	see	a	monkey	what	has
Tom	got	Tom	has	got	a
drink	it	Is	very	hot	

Time 3

The monkeys are in the jungle. What are the monkeys doing? This baby is sleeping. This one is playing football. What has daddy monkey got? He has got jeans and socks.

Name	

the	monkeys	are	in	the	jungle
what	are	the	monkeys	doing	this
baby	is	sleeping	this	one	is
playing	football	what	has	daddy	monkey
got	he	has	got	jeans	and
socks					

Time 4

- Look at this! What a mess!
- What are the children doing? asked Sam.
- They are packing and singing.- said Tilly.
- Whose jeans are these?
- They're mum's.
- And what has Ben got?
- He has got a red T-shirt.

Name	

look	at	this	what	a	mess
what	are	the	children	doing	asked
Sam	they	are	packing	and	singing
said	Tilly	whose	jeans	are	these
they're	mum's	and	what	has	Ben
Got	he	has	got	a	red
t-shirt					

Appendix 2

The table of results:

No	Recognising words in context	Number of words read	Number of words read correctly
	Words recognised on sight		
	Words recognized through phonological decoding		
	The sum of correctly recognized words:		
Comm	ents on the intonation:		
Additional remarks:			

(liczba znaków ze spacjami 30 493)