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RAISING READING RATES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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I have long been interested in applying rate-reading techniques to the reading of foreign languages. At one time a student who had made an excellent record in Reading Workshop brought her French books into the reading laboratory and succeeded in raising her French reading rate. But I had my first opportunity to apply these techniques to a group during our 1966 winter term. Although we were handicapped by a lack of material and by my own inexperience in working with languages other than English, results were encouraging.

During the 1967 winter term we adapted common methods for increasing reading rates. Briefly, this is what we did: Each student, no matter how far advanced, started with grade-one material. He used the Shadowscope to force his rate—and I mean *force*. He read his Shadowscope selection at approximately 300 WPM. If he did not understand it at that rate, he read it over until he did. Immediately after he had read a selection in the Shadowscope, he read another by the clock. After he had read a few selections in this manner, he read a selection he had just read by the clock in the Shadowscope. This made further rereading unnecessary, increased his understanding of what he had read by the clock and, more importantly, enabled him to carry over the momentum he had achieved by the Shadowscope to his following clock reading. All clock reading was sight reading. Occasionally the student varied his method of Shadowscope reading.

Since the student had no other work beside this project and since he spent a rather long time in intensive drill, it was necessary to guard against fatigue. Consequently, though the student reported for drill around 9 o'clock and drilled until 11:30 approximately, he was allowed two ten-minute breaks, which he took at any time he chose during these hours. In the afternoon he was on his own, but was expected to spend some time studying vocabulary, which he selected from what he had read previously, doing some timed reading from books he had not used during the morning, and writing in a daily journal. At night he came back for more laboratory drill.

The stated purpose for a student doing this work was twofold: first, to increase his reading rate in the language of his choice and, second, to observe and evaluate the methods employed to secure this increase. My students, naturally, were primarily concerned with the

first purpose, raising their reading rates. But, as I have pointed out, each one kept a daily journal and, on the basis of this journal and his rate-record cards, wrote his term paper. In this term paper he evaluated and criticized results he achieved, whether or not these results were increased rate or something else.

Ten students signed up for my project—five for French, four for Spanish, and one for Latin. One Spanish student did not complete his work. The Latin student's project turned into a research project in teaching methods. Hence this report deals only with the results of the five students who studied French and the three who studied Spanish.

Here is a summary of these results:

Rate

French

First Student

Daily Work

This first-year student increased his reading rate of first-grade material from 73 WPM (clock rate) with comprehension unrecorded to 395 WPM with satisfactory comprehension (not always measurable by percentages).

Test Results

On one test¹ near the end of the term this student read first-grade material at 230 WPM with a comprehension of 64%.² On a second³ test he read first-grade material at 300 WPM with a comprehension of 87%.

Second Student

Daily Work

This first-year student increased his reading rate of first-grade material from 145 WPM with good comprehension to 480 WPM with good comprehension.

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1. The French tests were administered and graded by a student helper assigned to a professor of French. She tested the students on selections they had not read earlier and used a stopwatch for timing.
 2. Whenever percentages are given, they refer to grades on test questions following the selection read.
 3. Most second tests were given on the same day as the first, Friday, January 27th. A few second tests, however, were given the following Monday, January 30th.

Test Results

On one test at the end of the year this student read first-grade material at 231 WPM with a comprehension of 87%; on a second test he read first-grade material at 230 WPM with 100% comprehension.

Third Student

Daily Work

This first-year student increased his reading rate of first-grade material from 77 WPM with poor comprehension to 297 WPM with fair comprehension.

Test Results

On one test near the close of the term this student read first-grade material at 318 WPM with a comprehension of 60%; on another test he read 360 WPM with a comprehension of 80%.

Fourth Student

Daily Work

At the beginning of the term this second-year student read first-grade material from 200 WPM to 250 WPM with fair comprehension. At the end of the term she was reading third-grade material at 458 WPM usually with 100% comprehension.

Test Results

On one test at the end of the year this student read first-grade material at 575 WPM with 100% comprehension. On a second test she read second-grade material at 560 WPM with 100% comprehension.

Fifth Student

Daily Work

At the beginning of the term this fourth-year student read first-grade material at 250 WPM with a comprehension of 90%. At the end of the term she was reading fourth-grade material at 570 WPM with a comprehension averaging 90%.

Test Results

On one test near the end of the term this student read third-grade material at 400 WPM with a comprehension of 90%. On a second test she read fourth-grade material at 560 WPM with a comprehension of 80% (there were only five questions at the end of the selection used).

Spanish

First Student

Daily Work

This first-year student increased his reading rate of first-grade material from 111 WPM with a comprehension of 60% to 476 WPM with a comprehension of 80%.

Test Results

On one test near the end of the term this student read first-grade material at 276 WPM with a fair comprehension. (In this test he encountered vocabulary difficulty.) On a second test he read 395 WPM with good comprehension.

Second Student

Daily Work

This first-year student increased his reading rate of first-grade material from 150 WPM with a comprehension of 90% to 400 WPM with good comprehension.

Test Results

On a test⁴ near the end of the term this student read first-grade material at 520 WPM with fair comprehension.

Third Student

Daily Work

At the beginning of the term this second-year student read first-grade material at 185 WPM with a comprehension around 85%. At the end of the term he was reading second-grade material at 450 WPM with a comprehension averaging 90%.

Test Results

On one test near the end of the term this student read first-grade material at 350 WPM with good comprehension. On a second test he read second-grade material at 250 WPM with good comprehension.

Vocabulary

Though an increase in vocabulary was not a goal in this project, it is not surprising that all the students reported such an increase. One student estimated that he had increased his vocabulary by 75%; another, that he had learned at least 200 new words; a third, that he had learned about 300 and 400 new words. Still another wrote,

4. The Spanish tests were administered and graded by a student helper assigned to a professor of Spanish. He used the same procedures as were used in French.

"I believe it [increase in vocabulary] is the major accomplishment of the program for me."

Literature

A pleasant result, unexpected by some critics, was an increase in the students' appreciation of the literatures of the languages they were working in.

One student wrote, "My pursuit of French literature will be more interesting to me now than it ever would have been before."

And another, "I began to enjoy the stories [Spanish] as stories, and not just as translations."

And another, "My largest gain in the course was the fact that I learned to enjoy the language [French] much more than before."

Other Results

Some other results (however unplanned) are seemingly worthwhile.

One student said that he felt somewhat more confidence while reading Spanish than he had felt before and that he learned to get the gist of a passage when he could not translate it word for word without the aid of a dictionary.

Two students said they had gained insight into the way they read; one of these said she wanted to put this knowledge to use in her reading of English.

Still other results are illustrated by the following quotations:

"My concentration while reading has become intense."

"I again find myself thinking in Spanish." The student who wrote this had two years of Spanish in high school, but was not taking it currently.

"Just knowing that language can be read as I have [read] Spanish will make so much difference in my attitude toward any language."

"This experience . . . will be for me the beginning of increased confidence and fluency in the spoken language." This comment was made by a fourth-year French student.

Comments

Though the situation was better than in 1966, one of the difficulties that I and my students faced was the lack of carefully graded and abundant material so arranged as to be suitable for the work we were attempting to do. We also lacked good tests. One of the results of these lacks is shown by the varied ways I have reported rate gains. Nevertheless, such gains as I have reported in this paper, together with those made in the 1966 project, do indicate that students can learn to read foreign languages at a reasonable rate.

Some of the other results reported may possibly have been brought about not by increases in reading rate but by concentrated exposure to the languages studied. Even so, these other results surely must indicate that the comprehension and enjoyment of a language is not hindered by a reasonable reading rate.

Is it not possible, therefore, that instruction designed to increase reading rate would be a helpful addition to foreign-language programs?