Speed reading courses and their effect on reading authentic texts:
A preliminary investigation

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Abstract

Fluent reading is essential for successful comprehension. One dimension of reading fluency is reading rate, or reading speed. Because of the importance of reading fluency, fluency development activities should be incorporated into classroom practice. One activity that meets the fluency development conditions proposed by Nation (2007) is speed reading. An important question is whether reading speed gains measured in words per minute on controlled speed reading texts transfer to other types of texts. This paper reports on a preliminary, small-scale investigation of this question. The findings suggest that a speed reading course may contribute to faster reading speeds on other types of texts, but there remains a need for further experimental research into the impact of speed reading courses.

Keywords: reading speed, reading rate, reading fluency, speed reading, reading fluency development

The importance of reading speed to successful reading is neatly portrayed in the two contrasting circles of the weak reader and the good reader (Nuttall, 1996, p. 127). In "the virtuous circle of the good reader" reading faster is linked to greater quantity of reading, better understanding, and greater enjoyment, whereas in "the vicious circle of the weak reader" lack of understanding, lack of enjoyment, lack of reading, and slow reading feed off each other. It is the teacher's role, therefore, to help learners move from this "cycle of frustration and enter instead the cycle of growth" that the virtuous circle represents. One way of achieving this is through attention to reading fluency. Fluency skills in reading, Hudson (2007, p. 80) pointed out, "are directed at allowing the reader to see larger sentences and phrases as wholes, a process which assists in reading more quickly." While, as Grabe (2009, p. 292) pointed out, reading fluency is an under-researched area in second language settings, its various dimensions have been receiving increasing attention; Grabe (2009, pp. 291–292) discussed four dimensions: automaticity, accuracy, reading rate, and prosodic structuring, with automaticity and accuracy of word recognition being considered prerequisites for a rapid reading rate. Reading rate, or reading speed, is then a component of fluency, which may be loosely described as the ability to produce and process the target language with native speaker-like ease, and attention to fluency development should form part of any balanced language course. Nation (2007) described fluency

development as one of the four strands of a language course, and advised devoting roughly equal time to it and to the other three: meaning focused input, language focused learning, and meaning focused output. In order to be regarded as fluency development, Nation argued, activities need to meet a number of conditions, which are (a) all that the learners are listening to, reading, speaking or writing is largely familiar to them; (b) the learners' focus is on receiving or conveying meaning; (c) there is some pressure or encouragement to perform at a faster than usual speed; and (d) there is a large amount of input or output.

In the classroom, the three principal approaches to increase reading speed—easy extensive reading, repeated reading, and speed reading—all meet these conditions for fluency development to a considerable extent.

> 1. Extensive reading can be undertaken for either language development or fluency development goals (Hu & Nation, 2000, p. 423; Nation & Wang, 1999, p. 375). In easy extensive reading (Nation, 2009, p. 69) learners read materials that contain only known vocabulary; they are reading for pleasure, so receiving meaning is the focus; and they are reading a lot. The condition relating to faster performance is usually met by establishing targets or goals, such as reading for a set amount of time each day, or reading a book a week. A number of research studies have established a link between extensive reading and reading speed (e.g., Bell, 2001; Iwahori, 2008).

> 2. Repeated reading requires the learners to read the same text repeatedly, either silently or aloud. Nation (2009, p. 66) explained how this activity meets all his conditions for fluency development. There are several possible ways in which repeated reading can be implemented, with one variation being the amount of support provided to the learners. For example, in assisted repeated reading learners read and simultaneously listen to the text during some of the re-reading stages. In foreign language teaching, assisted repeated reading has been found to be effective in developing fluency as measured in words per minute (wpm), but with no significant difference between the impact of repeated reading and extensive reading (Taguchi, Takayasu-Maass, & Gorsuch, 2004).

> 3. Speed reading courses usually consist of a set number of texts of a fixed length, written within a restricted lexicon, followed by several multi-choice questions. The presence of the questions encourages learners to read the texts for understanding, rather than focus on skimming the text as quickly as possible. Such courses meet all Nation's conditions for fluency development. Because the texts are written with a restricted, known vocabulary all that the learners are reading is expected to be familiar to them, and as comprehension questions follow each text the learners' focus is on receiving meaning. At the same time, as learners are recording both their speed and their comprehension scores for each text there is some encouragement to perform at a faster than usual speed. The condition requiring a large amount of input is met by the number of texts.

The use of speed reading courses has received sporadic attention in the literature, but their use in language learning programmes as a means of developing reading fluency has its advocates, among whom a leading figure is Professor Paul Nation. Chung and Nation (2006, p. 198), for example, recommended that "a speed reading course should be included in every reading class,"

a view echoed by Nation and Macalister (2010, p. 93), who suggested that "reading fluency activities should involve a speed reading course within a controlled vocabulary." While the target reading speeds for different forms of reading vary, "a good careful silent reading speed is around 250 words per minute," and this is a "reasonable [goal] for foreign and second language learners who are reading material *that contains no unknown vocabulary and grammar*" (Nation, 2009, p. 72, italics added). Speed reading courses, their advocates claim, can assist learners achieve target reading speeds. It is important to note, however, that Nation's 250 wpm target is for materials where vocabulary and grammar are known, such as the texts in a speed reading course. When there are unknown elements in the text, or the reading purpose is other than general comprehension, the reading speed will be considerably lower (Cobb, 2008; Fraser, 2007).

Despite the claims of speed reading advocates, it is my experience that teachers and researchers sometimes express scepticism about the benefits of speed reading. One of the reasons for this scepticism may be because relatively little research on its effect in a foreign language learning environment has been published (Bismoko & Nation, 1974; Chung & Nation, 2006; Cramer, 1975; West, 1941), and I am aware of only one study on the effect of a speed reading course in a second language learning as opposed to a foreign language learning environment (Macalister, 2008a). The existing research may be limited, but it does, however, support the use of speed reading programmes. Early studies investigated whether such programmes are best conducted in the first or the target language. West (1941) found a transfer effect from training in reading in English to first language (Bengali) reading speed and promoted the desirability of conducting speed reading courses in the first language. Bismoko and Nation (1974) and Cramer (1975) came to the same conclusion after experimental research in Indonesia and Malaysia respectively. Despite this, it is speed reading courses in the target language, English, rather than in multiple first languages that appear to have been developed (e.g., Nation & Malarcher, 2007; Quinn & Nation, 1974). Very little research has focussed on the use of such courses, although recently Chung and Nation (2006) reported on the effect of an English language speed reading course on the English language reading speed of 40 first-year university students in Korea. This course was delivered over a 9-week period, and almost all students gradually increased their reading speed, with most of the increase occurring over the first 10 texts.

A substantial question arising from Chung and Nation (2006) was whether the increase claimed at the end of the course was a result of a *practice effect*; the students read from two to four speed reading texts a week for 9 weeks, at the end of which period they would have become "practiced" at reading and responding to the type of texts. There was no evidence that any increases were maintained, which is an important consideration if learners are to enjoy ongoing benefits from following a speed reading course. West (1941) compared reading to physical activities such as swimming, and the analogy holds for this concern about a practice effect. Just as an athlete aims to reach peak performance through a training programme, the learner may reach peak reading speed after repeated practice with a series of controlled texts but fall away from that peak when the programme ceases. It seems reasonable to suggest therefore that if apparent gains in reading speed at the end of a speed reading course are the result of a practice effect, these gains may not be maintained when reading speed is re-assessed at a later date.

The hypothesis that apparent gains in reading speed will not be maintained when reading speed is re-assessed at a later date if the gains are a result of a practice effect was addressed in a study

in an English as a second language (ESL) context (Macalister, 2008a). Learners on a university preparation programme read the first 17 texts in a speed reading course as usual, with the remaining three texts being used as a delayed post-test several weeks after the end of the speed reading course. While most of the 29 students, as in the Chung and Nation (2006) study, increased their reading speed from the beginning to the end of the speed reading course, around one-half recorded no change or a decrease in reading speed from the end of the speed reading course to the end of the language programme, when the delayed post-test readings were delivered. While this may suggest that, at least for those students who decreased in reading speed, a practice effect was operating it was also the case that almost all the students in the study recorded an increase in reading speed from the beginning to the end of the language programme. However, it is perhaps worth noting here that the control groups in both Bismoko and Nation's (1974) and Cramer's (1975) studies recorded mean increases of 12% and 18% respectively in their English language reading speeds; in other words, increased reading speed may occur in the context of a language programme without the use of speed reading courses, although the gains are greater if speed reading is used.

All five studies reported here support the use of speed reading programmes but questions—and, as noted above, scepticism—about their use and effectiveness remain. A critical question is whether any gains in reading speed transfer to other forms of reading. The claims for increased reading speed in Chung and Nation (2006) and Macalister (2008a) are based on changes in reading speed on the speed reading course texts, which are carefully controlled for length and lexis. Whether there is a relationship between increased reading speed on speed reading course texts and reading speed on authentic texts (i.e., texts not written for language learning purposes) is the focus of the current study. The remainder of this article, then, addresses the following question: do students who make reading speed gains as measured in words per minute over a speed reading course also make reading speed gains on another type of text?

Method

This study was conducted with four intact classes on a university preparation course at a New Zealand university. Most teachers within this programme were familiar with and used speed readings (particularly Millett, 2005a, 2005b), usually in the manner discussed by Millett (2008) where they form the third part of a daily fluency programme that begins with 5 minutes of writing, followed by a 2- or 3-minute speaking activity based on the writing. For this study, one teacher agreed not to use a speed reading course with her class, while the other three did. The teacher who did not use a speed reading course chose instead to incorporate extensive reading into the programme (using class sets as described in Macalister, 2008b). At the beginning of the course, all students sat a form of the Vocabulary Levels Test or VLT (Nation, 1990, 2001); this test samples various vocabulary frequency levels and provides information to guide future vocabulary learning. Information provided to students on a course document advises them that "If you get 20–24 on [a] level, you know most of these words. If you get less than this, these are the words you should learn first." On the basis of this interpretation of their class' results (Table 1 shows the VLT results at the 2,000, 3,000, and Academic Word List (AWL) levels for students included in the study), teachers chose to use *New Zealand Speed Readings for ESL Learners, Book Two* (Millett, 2005b) with their classes. As mentioned earlier, the texts in a speed reading

course are written within a restricted lexicon. The texts in this teacher-selected book are written with the 2,000 most frequent word families plus the AWL, word families that occur frequently across a range of texts in a corpus of written academic English (Coxhead, 2000); while the texts in the speed reading course book may have been more difficult than ideal for a few students, they were chosen because they fitted the class profile. As Table 1 suggests, strictly speaking the groups were not quite comparable, and this caveat needs to be borne in mind when considering the results.

Table 1. *Vocabulary Levels Test results*

Score (max = 24)	No speed reading (*n* = 12)			With speed reading (*n* = 24)		
	2,000-level	3,000-level	AWL-level	2,000-level	3,000-level	AWL-level
20–24	12 (100%)	11 (92%)	8 (67%)	21 (87.5%)	17 (71%)	10 (41%)
≤ 19	-	1 (8%)	4 (33%)	3 (12.5%)	7 (29%)	14 (59%)

The three authentic texts were all taken from a long essay written by George Orwell ([1952] 2008) about his school days (see Appendix 2). As he was writing about public boys' school life around the time of the First World War, it was likely that the topic would be unfamiliar to all the learners, and as they were written by the same person would be of comparable lexical and syntactic difficulty (cf. Gardner, 2008). The extracts were selected and, when necessary, slightly edited. Table 2 compares them in terms of length and lexical coverage offered by the 2,000 most frequent word families in the General Service List (West, 1953) and the AWL as analysed by Range (Heatley, Nation, & Coxhead, 2002).

Table 2. *Lexical coverage of authentic texts* (% of tokens)

	Text 1	Text 2	Text 3
Tokens (*N*)	902	799	887
1,000-level	84.26	83.35	84.55
2,000-level	7.21	6.51	4.96
AWL-level	1.88	2.38	2.48
	93.35	92.24	92.00

Table 3. *Lexical coverage of language programme texts* (% of tokens)

	Text 1	Text 2	Text 3	Text 4
Tokens (*N*)	342	944	1,228	1,254
1,000-level	73.10	70.02	75.16	75.92
2,000-level	5.85	9.96	8.96	6.94
AWL-level	11.11	2.97	3.09	12.28
	90.06	82.94	87.21	95.14

By way of comparison, four texts from the six study themes used in the language programme were randomly selected and similarly analysed. These results are shown in Table 3, and suggest that the authentic texts chosen for use in this study were no less challenging, and in some cases much less so, than those included as course materials. The authentic texts were to be used for independent reading with a general comprehension goal, and to some extent sit between the speed reading texts used for independent reading with a fluency goal and the course materials

which would typically be used in-class for teacher-directed intensive reading with a language focused learning goal.

Teachers were asked to use the authentic text reading in a particular way (see Appendix 1). There was a small amount of pre-reading activity to prepare the students for the reading; this was designed to orient the learners to the text and to introduce them to any potentially problematic proper nouns. There was also an explicit focus on a meaning-related activity after reading, to encourage reading for general understanding. The instructions also prepared the learners to start reading at the same time, and to be interrupted at a certain point during their reading. They were asked to mark on their text the point they had reached after 90 seconds, and then to continue reading to the end.

The implementation of the study is summarised in Table 4. It is worth clarifying that the term "speed reading course" refers to the systematic use of texts from the selected speed reading course book over the first half of the 12-week language programme; the speed reading course is embedded in the language programme.

Table 4. *Research design summary*

Timing	Measure	Description of activity
Week 1	Vocabulary Levels Test	The students take this test at the beginning of the course. It is used for diagnostic purposes. Teachers decide which speed reading course book to use with their class on the basis of this test.
Week 1	Speed reading course texts 1–3, and first Orwell text	All students read the first of the three Orwell texts (O1). All students do the first three speed reading texts; the average of the three scores establishes each student's initial reading speed.
Weeks 2–6	Speed reading course	The treatment classes continue to work through the first 17 of the 20 texts in the course book at a rate of approximately three per week. The average of the final three texts read establishes each student's reading speed at the end of the speed reading course.
Week 6	Second Orwell text	All students do the second of the three Orwell texts (O2).
Week 12	Speed reading course texts 18–20, and third Orwell text	All students do the final three speed reading texts; the average of these scores establishes a student's final reading speed. All students do the last of the three Orwell texts (O3).

Results

Thirty-six students in the four classes completed all three authentic text readings and missed no more than one of the speed reading texts used for measurement purposes; in fact, all but six of these students completed all. Twenty-four students were from the treatment classes that used the speed reading course; all 24 recorded increases in reading speed (as measured in words per

minute over three speed reading texts) from the beginning to the end of the speed reading course, and (using the same measure) all showed an increase from the beginning to the end of the language programme, although just under 50% recorded no change or a decrease in reading speed from the end of the speed reading course to the end of the language programme. This was in line with the results reported by Macalister (2008a), where a similar proportion of students did not maintain their gains in reading speed.

The 12 students from the comparison class that did not use a speed reading course did not show the same pattern. These students read three speed reading texts at the start of the language programme and a further three at the end. While 7 of the 12 recorded an increase in reading speed from the beginning to the end of the language programme, 5 did not. Furthermore, the size of the recorded increases for this class was smaller than those for the others.

The real interest, however, lies not in the results for the speed reading texts but for the reading speeds on the three authentic texts. The immediate impression was one of a great deal of individual variation over the three texts. Seven different patterns were identified, with three being judged to be positive, three negative, and one neutral. The three positive patterns were (a) a steady increase from one reading to the next; (b) a drop from the first to the second reading, but a rise on the third reading to a faster reading rate than on the first; (c) a rise from the first to the second reading, followed by a drop on the third reading but to a faster reading rate than on the first. The three negative patterns were (a) a steady decrease from one reading to the next; (b) a drop from the first to the second reading, followed by a rise on the third reading but to a slower reading rate than on the first; (c) a rise from the first to the second reading, followed by a drop on the third reading to a slower reading rate than on the first. The neutral pattern was one where results for all three readings fell in a 10 word band. As can be seen in Table 5, only students in the comparison class showed a neutral pattern.

Table 5. *Patterns of change in reading speed on authentic texts* (number of students and %)

Pattern	No speed reading (*n* = 12)	With speed reading (*n* = 24)	Total (*n* = 36)
Positive			
Steady increase	-	7 (29%)	7
Drop then rise to above start	4 (33%)	-	4
Rise then drop to above start	2 (17%)	8 (33.5%)	10
Negative			
Steady decrease	1 (8%)	3 (12.5%)	4
Drop then rise to below start	3 (25%	3 (12.5%)	6
Rise then drop to below start	-	3 (12.5%)	3
Neutral			
No change	2 (17%)	-	2

A slightly more nuanced picture emerges by examining differences in reading speed at different points in the course (Table 6). As shown in Table 4, the first authentic text (O1) was read by students at the start of the language programme and before the speed reading course. The second authentic text (O2) was read at the end of the speed reading course. At this stage of the programme only two students (17%) in the comparison class showed an increase, whereas 16

students (67%) who had completed the speed reading course showed an increase. The final authentic text (O3) was read at the end of the language programme; the column O1–O3 in Table 6 shows the recorded difference in reading speed between the first and third authentic texts.

Table 6. *Change in reading speed on authentic texts at different points in the language programme (number of students and %)*

| | No speed reading (*n* = 12) | | With speed reading (*n* = 24) | |
	O1–O2	O1–O3	O1–O2	O1–O3
Increase	2 (17%)	4 (33%)	16 (67%)	15 (62.5%)
Decrease	9 (75%)	4 (33%)	8 (33%)	9 (37.5%)
No change	1 (8%)	4 (33%)	-	-

Table 7. *Group mean reading speeds on authentic texts* (in wpm)

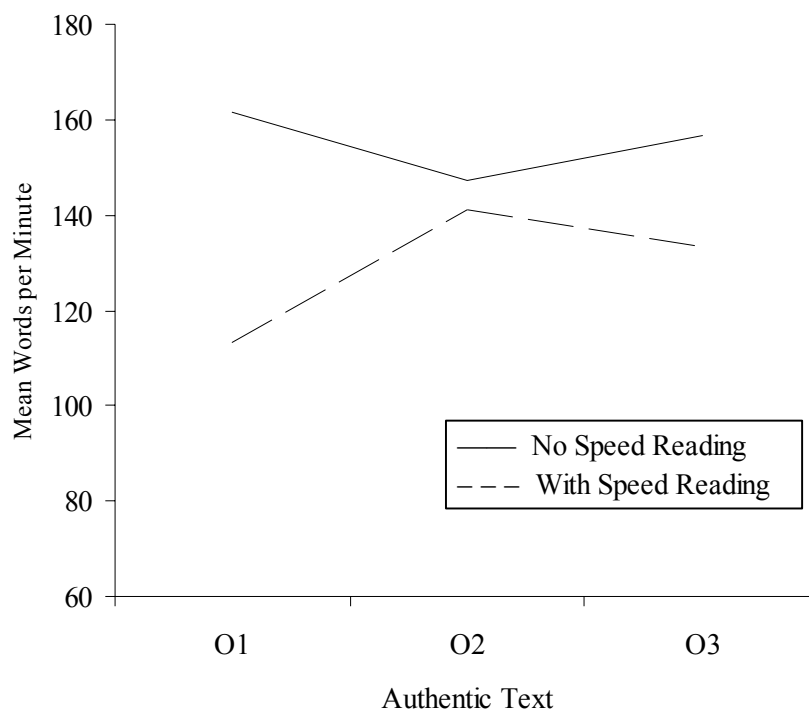| Measure	Group	*N*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*p* (2-tailed)	Mean wpm change O1–O2	Mean wpm change O1–O3
O1	Comparison	12	161.67	38.19	3.43	.002		
	Treatment	24	113.36	42.93				
O2	Comparison	12	147.44	22.92	.50	.620	-14.2 (-8.8%)	
	Treatment	24	141.00	54.14			+27.6 (24.3%)	
O3	Comparison	12	156.61	21.38	2.05	.048		-5.1 (-3.2%)
	Treatment	24	133.50	46.27				+20.1 (17.7%)

Figure 1. Group mean reading speeds on authentic texts (in wpm).

As a final way of considering the findings, other studies on the effect of speed reading courses on reading speed have made claims for the effect based on group means (Bismoko & Nation, 1974; Cramer, 1975; Nation, 2009, p. 64, discussing Chung & Nation, 2006). Table 7 shows the mean reading speeds for the two groups of students in the current study at each authentic text reading. The changes in mean reading speeds are also shown in Figure 1. As can be seen, the two groups were reading at dramatically different rates at O1, but after the speed reading treatment there was no significant difference on reading speed. At O3, however, the two groups again diverged. This may be related to the practice effect of the speed reading course wearing off (Macalister, 2008a). Also of interest is the fact that only the students who did a speed reading course recorded mean wpm increases on the authentic texts. They appear to have reached realistic reading speeds for English language learners reading texts which contain unknown elements (Cobb, 2008; Fraser, 2007).

Discussion

This study showed gains for students doing a speed reading course in reading speed as measured in wpm on speed reading texts and on authentic texts. When considered alongside the results of earlier studies, a number of conclusions can be drawn.

> 1. Students who do a speed reading course are very likely to increase their reading speed (as measured in wpm on speed reading course texts) from the beginning to the end of the speed reading course (cf. Chung & Nation, 2006; Macalister, 2008a).

> 2. Students may increase their reading speed (as measured in wpm on speed reading course texts) from the beginning to the end of a language programme whether or not a speed reading course forms a component of the language programme (cf. Bismoko & Nation, 1974; Cramer, 1975). However, students who do a speed reading course tend to show greater gains in reading speed than those who do not, even if their gains from the end of the speed reading course to the end of the language programme may not be maintained at peak levels (cf. Macalister, 2008a).

> 3. Students who do a speed reading course are significantly more likely than those who do not do a speed reading course to read an authentic text more quickly at the end of the speed reading course than they did at the start of the speed reading course. They are also more likely to read an authentic text more quickly at the end of the language programme than they did at the start of the language programme.

From a pedagogical perspective, then, these points would seem to add weight to Chung and Nation's (2006, p. 198) suggestion that "a speed reading course should be included in every reading class". It is likely, however, that a speed reading course may not, of itself, be sufficient to increase and maintain reading speed. The challenge for teachers is to decide how best to reinforce the reading speed gains that a speed reading course can deliver. Opportunities to read, possibly through an extensive reading programme, are needed so that learners can maintain their gains in reading speed. In other words, as the popular saying has it, "use it or lose it."

Concluding remarks

The study reported here was a preliminary investigation of the effect of speed reading courses on the reading speed of authentic texts, and has a number of limitations which would need to be addressed in a future study. These limitations include the small size of the sample, the lack of comparability between the two groups, and the use of only one measure of reading speed transfer. In future studies it would also be useful to include a measure for comprehension. Furthermore, this study was a quasi-experimental one, reflecting the reality of working with intact classes in an authentic learning context. As a result, not all variables of interest could be controlled and two questions that arise from this study also deserve to be the focus of further attention. The first relates to the effect of receptive vocabulary knowledge on changes in reading speed. While higher VLT scores did not necessarily equate with faster reading speeds on an individual basis, it was the case that the class without a speed reading course had higher mean VLT scores (see Table 1) and faster mean reading speeds (see Table 7) at the beginning. The question is whether the lower gains in reading speed can be attributed to the absence of a speed reading course, or whether students with this proficiency profile have less room for improvement in reading speed (although, as shown in Table 7, they have not reached target reading speeds suggested by Nation, 2009, p. 72, for careful silent reading). If it is the latter, then this has pedagogical implications as it raises the supplementary question of when speed reading courses are most effective as a teaching intervention.

The second question of interest is triggered by the recognition that six of the nine students who had a speed reading course and showed a decrease in reading speed on authentic texts (Table 6) belonged to the same class. This may suggest that teacher variables played a role in the outcome, and that the identification of optimal delivery conditions for a speed reading course could be worthwhile. As part of that inquiry, the interplay between speed reading and the opportunities for reading offered by an extensive reading programme could also be considered.

It would seem, therefore, that there is still more to discover about the contribution of speed reading courses to reading fluency development, and that future studies will continue to build on the work of Bismoko and Nation (1974), Chung and Nation (2006), and others.

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Appendix A

Instructions to Teachers for First Orwell Reading

Tell the students they're going to be reading an extract from an essay George Orwell wrote about his school days. (Feel free to ask questions along the lines of: Has anyone heard of George Orwell? etc. etc.) Explain that he was at a boarding school around the time of the First World War and write on the board the name of the school—*St Cyprian's.*

Before giving them the story, explain that they're going to be asked to do 2 things. At the end, they're going to work in pairs to re-construct the story and to consider what happened next. However, while reading, you're going to interrupt and ask them to mark on the handout exactly where they are at that stage by drawing a line after the word they've just read. So they'll need to have a pen or pencil beside them when they read.

Finally, ask them to read without using dictionaries etc.

Hand out the story. Ask them not to start reading till you say so. Like a test!

After 90 seconds, ask them to mark on the page where they are, and to continue reading.

At end, please collect text back, with names written on.

Thank you!

Appendix B

First Orwell Reading

Extract from Part I of Orwell's "Such, Such Were the Joys" (1952), reprinted in Orwell's (2008)
***Books v. Cigarettes*, Penguin Books.**

Soon after I arrived at St Cyprian's (not immediately, but after a week or two, just when I seemed to be settling into the routine of school life) I began wetting my bed. I was now aged eight, so that this was a reversion to a habit which I must have grown out of at least four years earlier.

Nowadays, I believe, bed-wetting in such circumstances is taken for granted. It is a normal reaction in children who have been removed from their homes to a strange place. In those days, however, it was looked on as a disgusting crime which the child committed on purpose and for which the proper cure was a beating. For my part I did not need to be told it was a crime. Night after night I prayed, with a fervour never previously attained in my prayers. "Please God, do not let me wet my bed! Oh, please God, do not let me wet my bed!", but it made remarkably little difference. Some nights the thing happened, others not. There was no volition about it, no consciousness. You did not properly speaking *do* the deed: you merely woke up in the morning and found that the sheets were wringing wet.

After the second or third offence I was warned that I should be beaten next time, but I received the warning in a curiously roundabout way. One afternoon, as we were filing out from tea, Mrs W—, the Headmaster's wife, was sitting at the head of one of the tables, chatting with a lady of whom I knew nothing, except that she was on an afternoon's visit to the school. She was an intimidating, masculine-looking person wearing a riding-habit, or something that I took to be a riding-habit. I was just leaving the room when Mrs W—called me back, as though to introduce me to the visitor.

Mrs W—was nicknamed Flip, and I shall call her by that name, for I seldom think of her by any other. (Officially, however, she was addressed as Mum, probably a corruption of the "Ma'am" used by public schoolboys to their housemasters' wives.) She was a stocky square-built woman with hard red cheeks, a flat top to her head, prominent brows and deep-set, suspicious eyes. Although a great deal of the time she was full of false heartiness, jollying one along with mannish slang *("Buck* up, old chap!" and so forth), and even using one's Christian name, her eyes never lost their anxious, accusing look. It was very difficult to look her in the face without feeling guilty, even at moments when one was not guilty of anything in particular.

"Here is a little boy," said Flip, indicating me to the strange lady, "who wets his bed every night. Do you know what I am going to do if you wet your bed again?" she added, turning to me. "I am going to get the Sixth Form to beat you."

The strange lady put on an air of being inexpressibly shocked, and exclaimed *"I-should-think-so!"* And here there occurred one of those wild, almost lunatic misunderstandings which are part of the daily experience of childhood. The Sixth Form were a group of older boys who were selected as having "character" and were empowered to beat smaller boys. I had not yet learned of their existence, and I mis-heard the phrase "the Sixth Form" as "Mrs Form." I took it as referring to the strange lady—I thought, that is, that her name was Mrs Form. It was an improbable name, but a child has no judgement in such matters. I imagined, therefore, that it was *she* who was to be deputed to beat me. It did not strike me as strange that this job should be turned over to a casual visitor in no way connected with the school. I merely assumed that "Mrs Form" was a stern disciplinarian who enjoyed beating people (somehow her appearance seemed to bear this out) and I had an immediate terrifying vision of her arriving for the occasion in full riding kit and armed with a hunting-whip. To this day I can feel myself almost swooning with shame as I stood, a very small, round-faced boy in short corduroy knickers, before the two women. I could not speak. I felt that I should die if "Mrs Form" were to beat me. But my dominant feeling was not fear or even resentment: it was simply shame because one more person, and that a woman, had been told of my disgusting offence.

A little later, I forget how, I learned that it was not after all "Mrs Form" who would do the beating. I cannot remember whether it was that very night that I wetted my bed again, but at any rate I did wet it again quite soon. Oh, the despair, the feeling of cruel injustice, after all my prayers and resolutions, at once again waking between the clammy sheets! There was no chance, of hiding what I had done. The grim statuesque matron, Margaret by name, arrived in the dormitory specially to inspect my bed. She pulled back the clothes, then drew herself up, and the dreaded words seemed to come rolling out of her like a peal of thunder:

"REPORT YOURSELF to the Headmaster after breakfast!"

About the Author

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