Scaffolding L2 Readers: How Can We Help Them Develop into Autonomous Lifelong Learners?

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Abstract
A critical component of L2 reading ability is reading fluency. One natural approach to L2 fluency development is to approximate the process of L1 acquisition through exposure to large amounts of comprehensible input, by means of extensive reading (ER), whereby readers are provided with a wide selection of materials in different genres and topics graded in grammar structure and vocabulary. L2 readers are allowed to choose what they read based on their interest and reading proficiency level. Given sufficient comprehensible input, learners will automatize their word recognition skills, and foster their comprehension and ability to use a repertoire of strategies, consequently promoting their L2 acquisition. Many L2 readers, however, still struggle to obtain a sufficient level of input during a typical school language course, and moreover, lack motivation to continue L2 reading and learning after their courses end. One factor is a lack of support in helping readers develop understanding of the process and therefore develop autonomy. Poorer L2 extensive reading performance often indicates that the learner does not know why reading speed is important, what level of books they should read, or how to deal with unknown words in text, causing them often to stop reading and use a dictionary rather than attempting to guess meaning from context. Accordingly, this paper proposes some scaffolding to help struggling L2 readers enjoy their reading, and hopefully to become life-long readers in L2. It includes using an auditory model, repetition in reading, and teaching learners to be responsible for their own learning.

Keywords: Reading Fluency, L2 reading, Scaffolding, e-Learning, Repeated Reading

1. Introduction

Reading can be a fun and enjoyable activity in a first language (L1). However, for those who read in L2, reading is often more effortful and demanding. The greater ease of reading in L1 ultimately results from a vast amount of language exposure. Extensive reading (ER) offers a way of simulating the L1 reading experience, and providing sufficient exposure to boost L2 readers' fluency and promote their language acquisition; see, for example, the reviews of extensive reading studies by Day (2015) and Nakanishi (2015). Nevertheless, many L2 readers will require some support, or "scaffolding," to derive full benefit from ER. The present paper summarizes the methodology of ER; describes some limitations observed with L2 learners using ER; delimits the types of scaffolding required; and introduces an online resource aiming to help provide some of the necessary scaffolding.

2. Requirements for successful ER implementation

The main requirements for features of successful implementation of ER (e.g. Day and Bamford 1998, pp. 7-8) may be summarized as follows. Firstly, the purpose of reading is explicitly for comprehension and for enjoyment. Secondly, by contrast, the purpose is not to study the language used in the text. Readers may notice new vocabulary and grammar items, but this is a byproduct rather than a primary goal. When unknown words are met, readers are encouraged to guess their meanings, or else to skip them and keep reading with the aim of understanding the main ideas of the text. Thirdly, readers need to be able to choose what they want to read, according to their reading proficiency level and their interest. If the reader finds a text is too hard to understand, or does not interest them very much, they can drop it and choose another one to read. Finally, readers should read as much as possible. Consequently, ER libraries should have a wide variety of reading texts in different genres and topics, and presented in varying levels of vocabulary and grammar structure.

However, in practice, some students do not enjoy ER because of their limited reading fluency. Even if they have chosen an easy text, they do not read much, and when they actually read, their reading is very slow, thus preventing them from achieving an adequate level of comprehension of the text. Thus their reading in L2 is quite laborious and effortful. This lack of reading fluency often traps such students in a so-called "vicious circle" (Nuttall, 1996, p. 127) in which they remain underdeveloped in their reading skills, unmotivated to read, and unable to develop by themselves into capable and independent readers in L2.

Even for some advanced-level readers in L2, low reading fluency still persists as a critical issue preventing such readers from developing an enjoyment of reading independently for fun and for information. It is rare indeed to see L2 readers actually enjoy reading for leisure, e.g. at a café, or on a train. Clearly, L2 reading is still an activity they do not feel as effortless as reading in L1. Ultimately, the difference in ease results from the fact that these readers have experienced vastly more language exposure in their L1 learning compared to L2 learning; and the amount of language exposure determines the degree of automaticity with which they can recognize (or, even better, predict) words in text. Automaticity Theory (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974; Samuels, 1994) posits that the more attention needed to recognize words in text, the more comprehension will suffer, on the basis that overall processing capacity is

limited, and so attention to word recognition limits attention available for text comprehension.

Oller and Tullius (1973) compared the eye movement patterns of 12,000 English native speakers (in data taken from Taylor 1966) with those of English L2 readers (13 English as a second language (ESL) learners and 18 English as a foreign language (EFL) learners). Their results reveal large differences in eye movement fixation patterns, word span, and reading rate between L1 and L2 readers, all indicating more efficient processing among L1 readers. For example, L2 readers fixate longer than L1 readers. The mean duration time of fixations is significantly longer for English L2 learners (0.28s for both ESL learners and EFL learners) than for native English speakers (0.24s). L2 learners also attend to both content and function words equally, while L1 readers attend more selectively to content words (implying use of prediction or general shape recognition, rather than individual letter recognition, for grammatically-predictable elements and/or for more frequently-experienced word forms). The eye movements involved in reading are too rapid to be a result of conscious control, strongly suggesting that the difference in processing derives from L1 readers' much larger amount of language exposure compared to L2 readers. These differences in processing lead to differences in overall reading speed: mean reading rates are slower for English L2 learners (ESL learners = 239.77 wpm, EFL learners = 182.22 wpm) than for native speakers (280.00 wpm).

So how much exposure do learners need to achieve native-like effortlessness in their language use? Ericsson and Charness (1994) suggest that learners need 10,000 hours of regular, focused practice in some domain to achieve a recognized level of expertise. Native speakers of English will have had this amount of exposure before the age of 4 or 5 (Segalowitz, 2003). By contrast, the amount of exposure which is provided by a 6-year English study at junior and senior high school and 4-year university English classes approximates 736 hours (Benesse Educational Research and Development Institute, 2008). The total amount of time Japanese students invest on their English study varies depending on how many hours they study at home, yet the gap still seems remarkable.

This huge gap in amount of language exposure makes it difficult even for advanced-level L2 readers to enjoy reading after completing their course of study. The process by which L1 readers identify words in text has already become almost automatic. This means they are able to identify words in text without paying much attention to them, thus liberating their attentional resources from that process and enabling them to expend almost all of their attention on comprehending the text. By contrast, L2 readers' word recognition process is often laborious and effortful, reducing the amount of attentional resources available for comprehending the text. This difference in processing ease is a crucial factor explaining why many readers feel much more comfortable when they read in L1 than in L2, and thus why they are more reluctant to read in L2 and, in particular, less likely to find enjoyment in such an activity, or to seek out information through it. Hence many L2 readers are trapped in a vicious circle, in which they do not read fast, and they do not read very much, and thus they do not enjoy themselves reading in L2. For such readers, some form of additional support or scaffolding is needed to help them grow to be able to enjoy extensive reading. Similar assistance may benefit even advanced-level readers in L2 to find enjoyment in reading texts prepared for L2 readers, and also authentic texts

aimed at native speakers.

3. Proposed forms of scaffolding to support L2 reading

Previous research (Taguchi, Takayasu-Maass, & Gorsuch, 2004; Taguchi et al., 2012) has identified two forms of scaffolding as potentially beneficial for L2 reading: the use of repetition, and the use of an auditory reading model.

One very promising approach to build reading fluency in L2 is a method called repeated reading (RR) (Samuels, 1979). Studies on the effect of RR have shown that reading the same text multiple times helps readers accelerate their reading and facilitates their comprehension (Chung, 2012; Chung & Millett, 2013; Gorsuch & Taguchi, 2008; Taguchi & Gorsuch, 2002; Taguchi, Takayasu-Maass, & Gorsuch, 2004; Taguchi, Gorsuch, Takayasu-Maass, & Snipp, 2012). In addition, multiple readings help readers become able to distinguish what they have understood in a text from what they have not. Multiple readings further help them become able to deal with the unfamiliar words they encounter in the text. They often guess their meanings from context, judge how important those words are to comprehend the text, and sometimes choose to skip those words, placing more emphasis on comprehending the main ideas (Taguchi et al, 2012).

A second form of scaffolding is to provide readers with an auditory reading model as they read. The auditory reading model is an audio version of text approximating to natural speech rate and provided to the readers while they read the text. Past research findings show that an auditory reading model paces L2 readers' reading. It also facilitates their comprehension. This is especially helpful when the reading passage contains embedded dialogs. The auditory model helps readers comprehend that part of the text (Taguchi, Takayasu-Maass, & Gorsuch, 2004; Taguchi et al, 2012).

4. Our web-based repeated reading program

Over the past few years, my colleagues and I have been developing a web-based repeated reading program with a grant from the Education Ministry of Japan and a special research grant from Daito Bunka University, Japan. In this reading program, specially designed for L2 language teachers, students can do repeated reading online. The platform is simple, yet flexible. Specifically, teachers can decide how many times their students read the text. They can also decide whether to use an auditory model; and, if the auditory model is selected, they can also determine how many readings their students get with the auditory model. In addition, students are provided with some vocabulary and grammar support if they want it, addressing comments from some students in our past studies, who told us (for example) that they would have liked feedback on whether their guessing of unknown words was correct. Although these features are included in the program, teachers can decide whether or not to allow their students to use them. When they do not want it, this support can be switched off, and will then not appear on the menu for students.

This online reading program is a simple platform which is especially designed for L2 teachers and can be used for any language learners. The only resources needed for the program are the text and its accompanying auditory reading model. The content in this program will hopefully be expanded in future to suit different needs of L2 learners,

and to allow L2 learners of any language to use this system free of charge for their reading fluency growth and the target language learning. It is hoped that they will be able to achieve an adequate level of reading fluency, and enjoy reading in L2 through utilizing this system, and thus they will get into a "virtuous circle" in which their reading becomes faster, they read a lot more, and they enjoy reading in L2 more. Once they get into this circle, they will gradually become able to read progressively more difficult texts specially designed for L2 readers, and then can still go further to enjoy authentic texts written for native speakers of the language.

5. How the program works

When students access the project webpage, they will be requested to type in their ID and password to start their RR lessons, as in Figure 1.

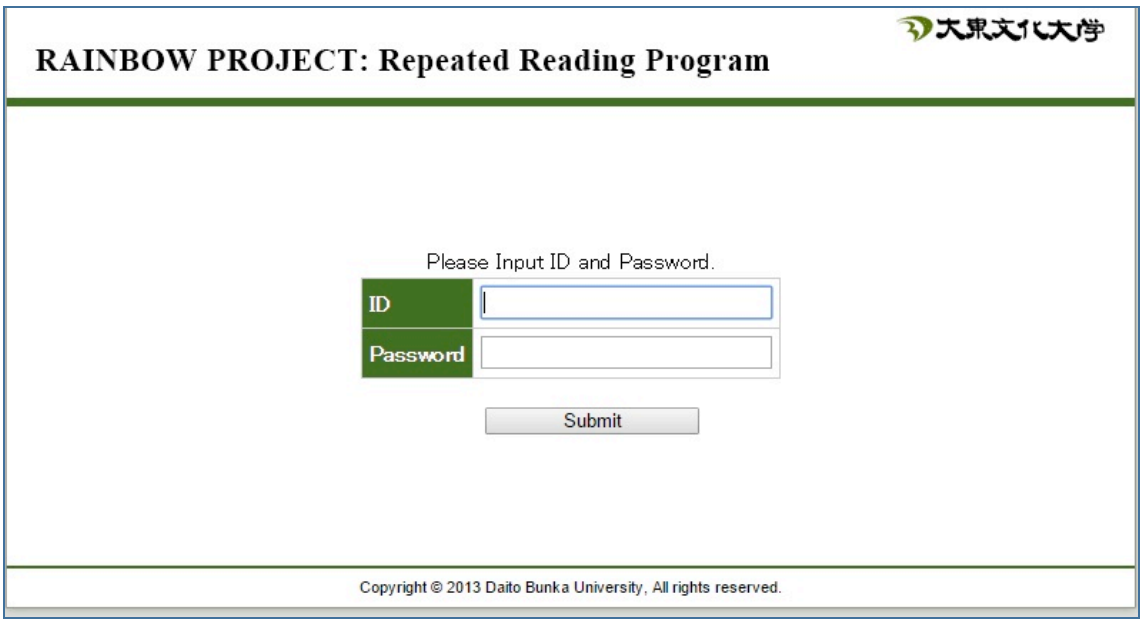

Figure 1: The login screen

After they have typed in their ID and password, the screen in Figure 2 comes up. Below is the typical procedure in which the students follow every step of RR in a session, proceeding in sequence from top to bottom:

A typical procedure of a RR session

1. Students silently read the previous passage (if it is a portion of a story).
2. Students timed their first reading of the passage with a PC timer.
3. Students answer some easy questions about what they have read.
4. Students read the passage while listening to a reading model.
5. Students read the passage silently a few more times while timing their readings.
6. Students write about their reflections on the RR session freely.

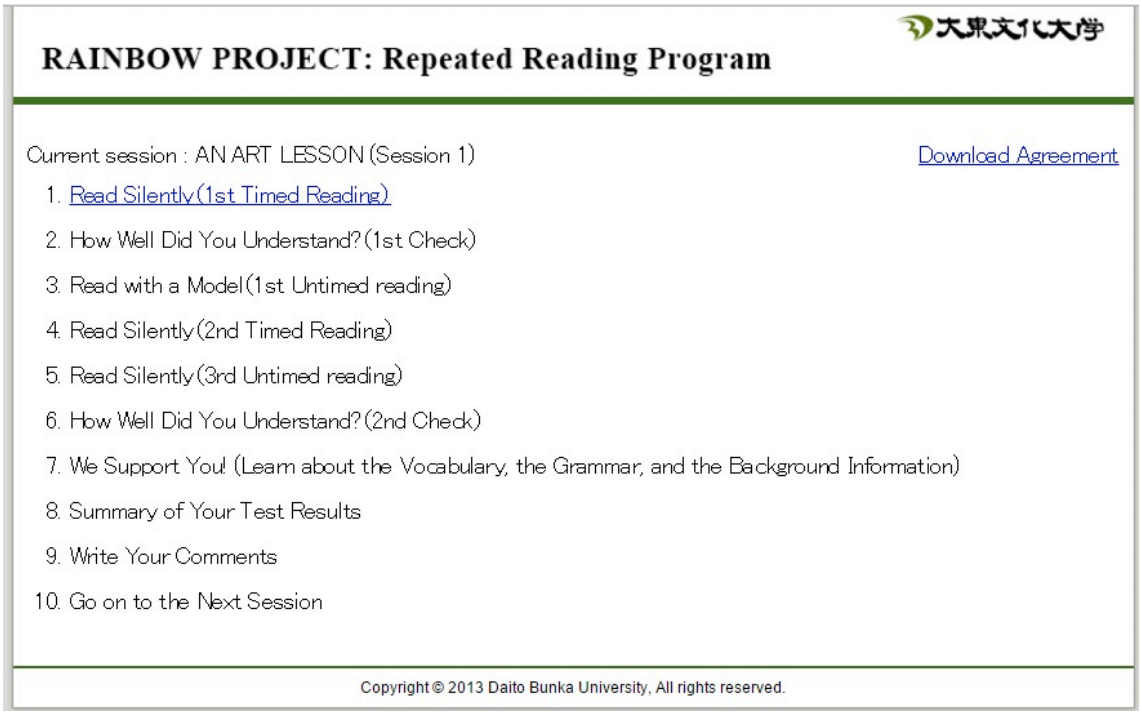

Figure 2: A sample RR session menu

At the beginning they read a session passage silently while timing their reading. After that they are required to answer some easy questions about what they have read. This is intended to let them know how well they have read the passage for their initial reading. Then they read the text along with an auditory model. Then they are requested to read a few more times to silently read the passage, while timing their reading. The number of repeated reading iterations with and without an auditory reading model should be determined by teachers, taking account of their students' reading proficiency level and text difficulty.

Teachers are administrators of this system and can customize its features. They can choose whether to use an auditory model and also whether to make vocabulary and grammar support available for their students. They can also decide the number of reading repetitions with and without a reading model. This system can be used for educational and research purposes. For example, it would be interesting to study how an auditory model affects L2 readers' reading behaviors and comprehension. The optimal number of repetitions for different proficiency levels would be another interesting issue to be explored.

We hope that many teachers and students will use this system for building fluency among L2 readers.

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