The Advantages of Using Technologies to Improve Reading Ability and Accessibility

Gregg McNabb

Shizuoka Institute of Science and Technology, Japan

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Abstract

The application of technologies, particularly Moodle, to the so-called "traditional classroom" has transformed teaching, resulting in a new methodology, blended learning. Through it, students can be empowered to become more autonomous learners, while instructors can control aspects of the reading process that were formerly impossible.

This paper provides step-by-step details of how to integrate effective technology into reading development, using online speed reading, standard computer software and Moodle. This paper also indicates that by adding the Moodle e-learning dimension to the typical classroom experience, it is likely that some teachers will ensure that even weak learners will increase the time spent reading.

Key words: *speed reading, desktop capture, Moodle, autonomous learning, blended learning*

The Case for Going Online

Regarding the benefits of using level-appropriate short stories and authentic literature that were discussed at the ACTC Conference 2013, please refer to the first section of my article in *The Journal of Literature in Language Teaching* (McNabb, 2013a p.39-41).

There is a veritable explosion of available technologies for instructors who want to take students to the stage where they can independently or quasi-independently interact with all manner of texts, including actual literature. One obstacle, however, is that some educators frequently bristle when the topic of using technology is brought up. It can be a polarizing topic where "claims showing exaggerated 'awe' at a new technology's potential, are frequently matched by exaggerated 'fear'" (Bax, 2011). Usually this "fear" tends to be an unwillingness to try something new or a belief that valuable time will be wasted digitizing an already acceptable analog practice. At my own university, we have a state-of-the-art, custom-designed Moodle system with full training and support available to all instructors. Moodle is a powerful online Learning Management System (LMS) that can be used to complement regular classroom practices. In addition to empowering instructors to create and upload a plethora of different materials and courses individually or as part of a team, it lets them organise, observe and measure students' online course presence and performance. Our system is fully compatible with smartphones. However, despite our comprehensive training sessions, which include the ways the system can complement the traditional "chalk and talk" approach, after 2.5 years, the technology is only being used by ten professors, six of whom are in the English department. Yet our students are 21st century digital natives (Bibby, 2011; Prensky, 2005), many of whom do expect and appreciate an online or computer-based component in their courses, so it behooves us to embrace technology. By way of example, as of April 2013, two groups in the freshman cohort have been bringing their laptops to class without ever having been asked to do so. Embracing technology may have even more significance in Japan, where many institutions need to capitalize on every opportunity to differentiate themselves from their competitors in order to remain viable.

Nearly fifteen years ago, Porter (1999) presciently stated, "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." We should also note that Bibby's research (2011) explained that students prefer to use their cell phones over computers for online activities. A further argument is that current smartphones and tablets are very smart indeed, as will become clear in the section dealing with implementing speed reading online.

It is very easy to find many suitable, well-known stories online such as at searchlit.org and www. short-stories.co.uk. All kinds of other authentic materials are also just a few clicks away. Thus, in addition to paper (still preferred by many), making a story or other materials fully accessible by putting it online has never been easier. These days most people have a phone, an iPad or a computer with them most of the time. This is especially true in the case of young people (Bibby, 2011). Therefore it is easy *and likely* that instructors will increase a student's contact time with the L2 by making

materials available online, particularly if the materials can be viewed on a smartphone. For the skeptical reader, the ample statistics gathered from weak learners, and detailed in the following paragraph, should validate these assertions. Even the very weakest students at my institution regularly access our Moodle site. It should be noted that according to the Japanese education ranking hierarchy, *all* students at this university are classified as weak. Therefore, even weak or very weak, mostly unmotivated students will use online materials.

According to the data from our Moodle server, in January 2012 there were 30,287 hits by 927 students. By January 2013, there were 112,129 hits by almost the same number of students. Students even continued to access the Moodle site in February, after the semester had finished. In February 2012 there were 3,492 hits and in February 2013 there were 5,209 hits. Finally, well after the end of semester, by the end of March 2012 there were 169 hits, all of which were in my short story section. As of this writing, by early March 2013, the same section has already received 104 hits. Indeed, we have found that after each semester approximately 60 students regularly access and reaccess materials during the semester breaks. As students have become familiar with the site and as our content has expanded and improved, usage has increased. On average, when classes are in session, our site gets approximately 60,000 to 65,000 hits per month, most of which are related to English courses. This seems to suggest that even weak students do not mind using online technology. Our students do not mind reading short stories online. This bodes very well for using certain technologies to improve students' reading ability. In addition, by using a Moodle website for reading short stories, instructors can better understand their students' habits because, when files are uploaded to a Moodle website, comprehensive data mining is possible.

I have already suggested above that some instructors are reluctant to adopt new technologies. This reluctance is usually out of fear that learning new procedures will be too complex or that preparing materials online will be too time consuming. In fact, the technology used to improve students' reading ability is easy to use except for the actual, original set up of a Moodle server, which does require specialized knowledge. While it is advantageous to use Moodle, it is by no means mandatory. Having made a case for going online, in the next section I will explain how to set up an online speed reading system, but the objective does not necessarily have to be speed reading. Using the system to improve reading fluency or even giving certain students a helpful push to read could be equally valid purposes.

Setting Up Speed Reading Online
First of all, instructors need to find a suitably interesting, level-appropriate story, such as those in my collection, *Fifteen Little Stories For English Language Learners* (2012). Ranging from about 800 to 1,800 words, these are low-intermediate, mostly light-hearted stories that focus on vocabulary development while not letting too many new words obstruct the goal of reading for pleasure. Once a reading has been found, they can save it for future use in Word or another common format. At this point, the instructors could upload it to their website as a stand alone file that students can access any time. Many are already doing this. For instructors who do not have a website, it is extremely easy, free and even enjoyable to create one at Weebly.com., which is totally compatible with current smartphones. There is also Weebly for Education, which is also free. Even without any website at all, instructors with a

Gmail account can upload files to Google docs, which is easy to access. Moreover, Google Forms is expanding, allowing for gradekeeping.

After a good website has been created, the next step is for instructors to practice reading the selected story at spreeder.com. Spreeder is free online speed reading software. It is extremely easy to use. My students were using it within five minutes. Before introducing students to Spreeder so that they can improve their reading speed, however, first, instructors need to familiarize themselves with it. At www.spreeder.com, paste the previously saved story into the window. After "spreed!" has been clicked, the story will appear according to the default reading speed (the default setting is 300 words per minute (wpm)). Spreeder parameters will likely need to be adjusted according to the complexity and flow of the story. Chunk size (the number of words to be viewed) can be changed according to students' levels. For example, five-word chunks will be appropriate for one story, but six-word chunks may suit another. 135 wpm might be suitable for Hemingway's "Old Man at the Bridge," but perhaps only 100 wpm would be optimal for *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. It is possible to set font size, colour, background, alignment, and window dimensions. There are even several, simple "advanced" settings, such as adding a slight pause at the end of sentences and paragraphs.
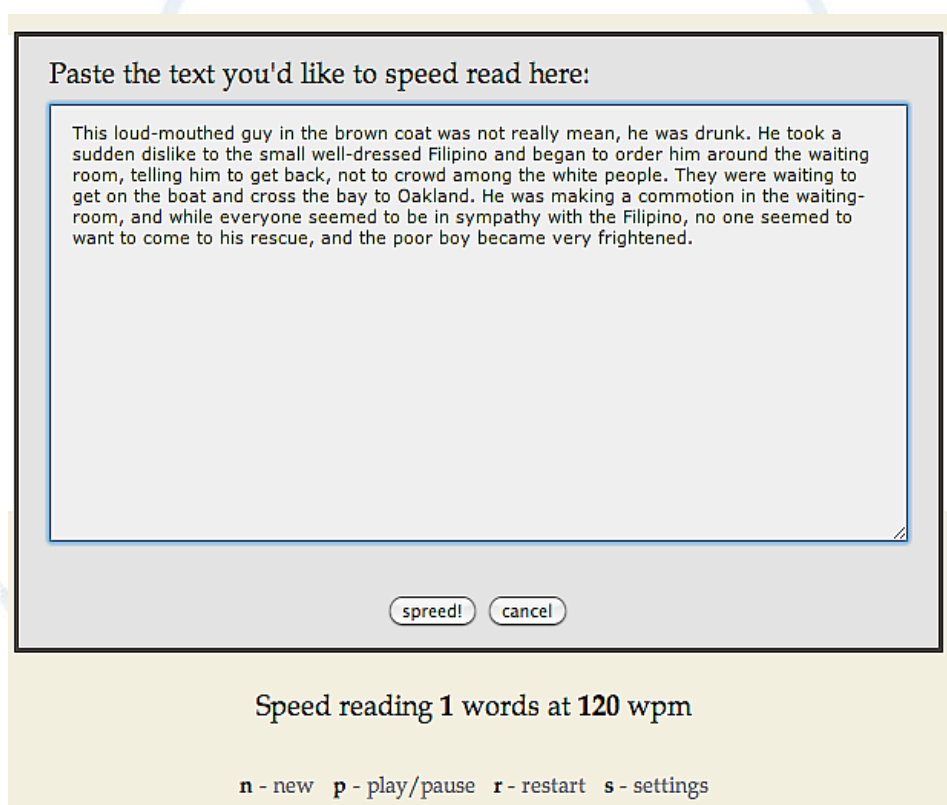

Paste the text you'd like to speed read here:

This loud-mouthed guy in the brown coat was not really mean, he was drunk. He took a sudden dislike to the small well-dressed Filipino and began to order him around the waiting room, telling him to get back, not to crowd among the white people. They were waiting to get on the boat and cross the bay to Oakland. He was making a commotion in the waiting-room, and while everyone seemed to be in sympathy with the Filipino, no one seemed to want to come to his rescue, and the poor boy became very frightened.

(spreed!) (cancel)

Speed reading **1** words at **120 wpm**

n - new   **p** - play/pause   **r** - restart   **s** - settings

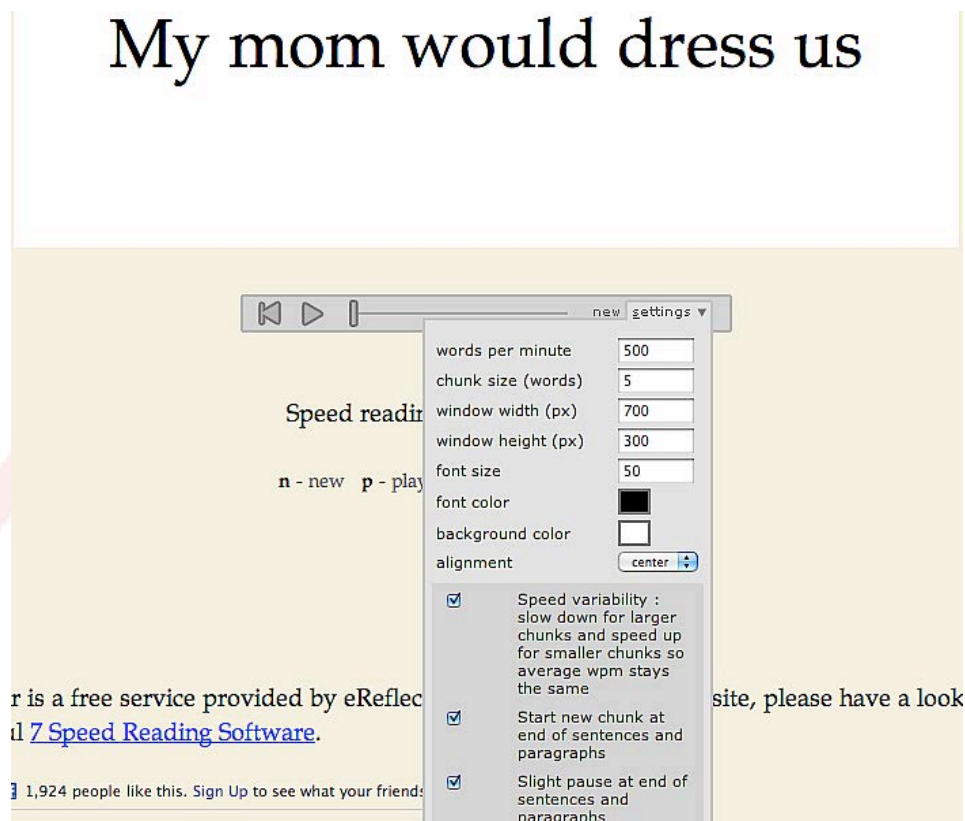**Figure 1. Pasted text in the Spreeder window**

Figure 2. Setting Spreeder parameters

Once instructors have learned how to use Spreeder, they will show students what to do. After students have been instructed how to use Spreeder, they should be encouraged to read the story again and again until reading becomes automatic at a particular rate. I have found that reading and rereading individual paragraphs, as opposed to reading the full story, is preferred by weak readers. Setting targets of reading X times per week at X wpm will put some positive stress on students to strive to attain a goal, but this should be balanced by free reading opportunities, so that "reading" does not deteriorate into to a set of tasks assigned by the instructor. Depending on the students, an element of competition could be introduced by rewarding those who improve their reading speed the most by setting a challenging wpm target. The main objective, however, should first be to improve automaticity in reading.

By using his computer in class, an instructor can follow up on students' progress by having them read in class from a large screen or monitors. This is good pedagogy in that *the instructor* can set the pace. In particular, even reluctant readers will be forced to read in chunks for 2-3 minutes, instead of word by word for 20 minutes. Actually, it is a very positive thing to demonstrate to such 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 (2000) and my own experiences in the classroom bear this out.

Since I put all of my comprehension questions on our Moodle site, I can determine how well students have understood a story by looking at the overall Practice 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, normal students tend to do them without extensive preparation, but they still do make an effort to answer, which is different from some very weak students who enter the quiz merely to find out what the questions are. As a result, the first few attempts of normal students tend to reflect their actual understanding of the story. Sometimes these data give me insights into what parts or aspects of a story are problematic and therefore need to be addressed in class. To this point I have explained how to conduct silent reading and control the pace or let students read on their own using technologies, but where there is mild pressure to read faster.

Figure 3. Using Moodle testing for evaluation and feedback

The last stage is to introduce an oral component. The story file should be printed out in a font size that is easy to read. Next, at Spreeder the story needs to be pasted into the window with the desired settings and then read aloud several times. There will be hesitations and difficulties, so being able to refer to the printed copy helps to produce a more polished reading. Once the story can be performed smoothly, a desktop capture application such as QuickTime needs to be opened to make a YouTube style video of the reading while using Spreeder. Most newer computers have desktop capture capability. If not, it is relatively easy to download an application. First, the story should be pasted into Spreeder, ready to be read. This should be on a tidy desktop so that the finished product will not appear cluttered and unprofessional. Then a desktop capture application needs to be opened to record the instructor reading the story on Spreeder. Procedures will vary slightly according to the operating system on the computer, but using a MacBook Pro with QuickTime 10.0, QuickTime 10.0 must be opened. Then after selecting "New Screen Recording" from the drop-down File menu, the reading should be practiced several times for at least 20 to 30 seconds.

First, click the "Record" button and then click on "spreed." A video of the reading will be made. Next, the file(s) should be played back, evaluated and redone if necessary. Next, the entire story can be read or as much as is appropriate for the students. As described in the preceding section, this file (usually in mp4 format) can be uploaded to a website or to Google docs. Students will be able to read and listen to the story at the wpm rate set by the instructor. Of course they can read it silently, too, by turning down the volume. It is possible *and preferable* to upload several files of the same story using different wpm rates so that students can challenge themselves. Since not all students read at the same rate, different wpm rates will help more students.
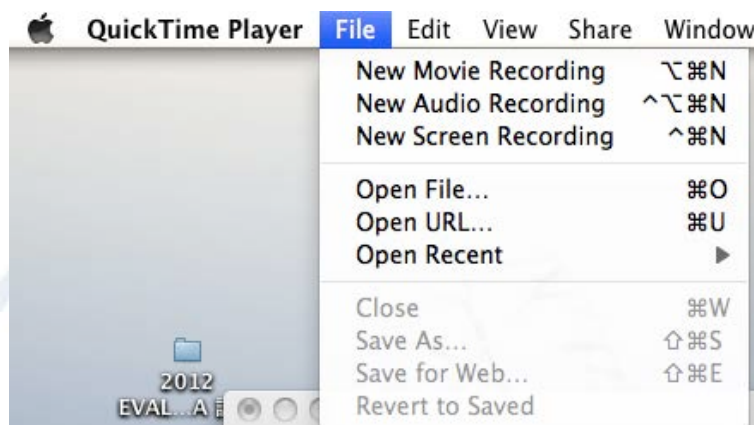

Figure 4. Opening QuickTime to make a New Screen Recording

Figure 5. Beginning a screen recording (of the Spreeder window)

Although this explanation may seem onerous in print, actually creating the videos is easy. If good readings are made, they can be reused for many years. If the files are uploaded to a Moodle site, when and how many times each student used each file can be checked. If instructors can succeed in getting students to use Spreeder often, the same as with other solid speed reading programs, there will be improvement. It is also possible to have students record their own reading and submit it as e-homework.

By making story files available online and introducing Spreeder, at the very minimum

it will be easier for students to use their smartphone or computer to read whenever and wherever they want. Most likely, however, a whole new dimension to teaching reading will be added because traditional classroom practices will be reinforced and complemented when students are able to read and listen to authentic materials numerous times. When various types of comprehension questions are put online that can be accessed at any time, students will be able to check their understanding. Instead of spending just 90 minutes a week in classroom reading and study, students will likely engage with the materials more often, as has been shown above

Conclusion

There is no need for instructors to eschew online technologies due to their perceived lack of confidence. It has been demonstrated that it is neither difficult nor especially time consuming to adopt powerful new technologies that enhance students' reading opportunities. Blended learning, which combines traditional classroom practices with new e-learning technologies, has never been easier. By offering students enjoyable, manageable materials to read and simultaneously hear via new technologies that they can control according to their own schedules, we are moving forward to create what is expected to quickly become the new paradigm for teaching reading, one that will, hopefully, increase students' interest in reading literature and a wide variety of other materials for pleasure, in addition to reading for course credit.

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