What if they are set free? Using Autonomous Reading-Listening and Book Clubs in Reading Fluency Development

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Abstract

Recent research has shown that reading and listening together can be helpful in developing EFL reading fluency, but learner-autonomous bimodal reading research remains scarce. The present study, in an intensive academic English program in Japan, was intended to explore whether reading rates and related reading skills might improve while autonomously reading and listening outside class, holding "book clubs" in class, and while meeting course goals. Within the program setting's trimester sessions, young adult participants carried out extensive reading and listening online at their own pace, followed by small group "book club" discussions, and conducted monthly silent reading rate checks. Participant data collection found the participants (N = 130) reported approximately 64 wpm in overall average gain through their 9-10 week projects. Post-project survey responses and interviews also indicated positive views of book club discussions and possible growth in skills related to increasing fluency, such as mentally "hearing" while reading, and visualizing. Rates of spoken word delivery in audiobooks were measured and compared to reading rates and fluency development markers discussed in research to date. Correlating these with participants' reading rates was found potentially helpful in visualizing ranges in learners' reading fluency development. Further research investigating these points is suggested.

Keywords: language learner autonomy, listening and reading, online extensive reading, bimodal input, reading rates, book clubs, L2 reading fluency

L2 Reading Fluency Now

Recently, while research progress has been made investigating cognitive processes in developing fluency, moving this research from lab to classroom has been a challenge (Hanford, 2019; Kilpatrick, 2015; Seidenberg, 2017). A pressing concern for those involved with EFL and reading fluency, according to Van Amelsvoort (2020), is that crucial findings from this research regarding input and prosody have also not yet reached foreign language classrooms.

Fluency Measures Simplified? Reading Rates

Reading fluency is not simple, and second language reading fluency brings further questions (Grabe, 2010; Nation & Waring, 2020). Measuring reading speeds with comprehension is the usual method of assessing fluency (Nation & Macalister, 2021; Nation & Waring, 2020). Language learners are often encouraged to practice reading at higher speeds to promote their fluency, and teacher textbooks offer guidance and activities to try in the classroom (Nation & Waring, 2020). Regarding first language English reading, some popular literature suggests that very high reading speeds are necessary for performing well in studies and work, with reading rates such as 450 words per minute (wpm) for students and higher for successful professionals (Nelson, 2012). Over fifty years ago, however, research by Taylor (1965) examined eye movements, reading rates and comprehension, and found physical limits on reading speeds. Taylor's research in the U.S. also found that reading by college students averaged less than 300 words per minute (Taylor, 1965). In 2012, reading rate measures were re-investigated – this time with seventeen languages, and the young adult participants were found to read orally on average less than 250 wpm in all seventeen, including English (Trauzettel-Klosinski et al., 2012). Nation and Macalister (2021) have since stated that 300 wpm in English is at the high end of the range of reading speeds, and Seidenberg (2017) calculated 280 wpm as an approximate limit for reading with good comprehension. Researchers also caution that focus on reading rates should not be taken too far and that high target reading speeds should not be goals in themselves; rather, efficiency is useful when desired by the reader (Nation & Macalister, 2021; Nation & Waring, 2020; Rasinski, 2006).

A more urgent concern for EFL learners, especially for those from first languages with different scripts, however, is the issue of reading rates too low to provide comprehension. Assessing cognitive research and reading rates in languages around the world, Abadzi (2019) reports that in order to experience comprehension while reading, reading speeds should reach forty-five to sixty words per minute. Readers processing text in this way, within working memory's time-constraints, are thereby able to focus on the meaning. Crossing between languages with different writing systems, as is often the case for EFL learners, compounds this challenge (Nation & Macalister, 2021; Nation & Waring, 2020). "Dysfluent readers simply cannot decipher the symbols in sufficient time to get to the meaning..." (Abadzi, 2019, abstract).

Extensive Reading as a Remedy

One fluency-building approach, Extensive Reading (ER), has considerable research evidence as a route to improved reading skills, including higher reading speeds (Day, 2015; Iwahori, 2008; Nation & Macalister, 2021; Nation & Waring, 2020). In a recent overview of extensive reading, Renandya and Jacobs identified commonalities across ER programs:

> ...it is not always easy to find one definition that captures all of the essential elements of ER ... However, a survey of the literature shows that most ER definitions include at least three elements that most ER scholars consider crucial when discussing the concept, i.e., amount of reading, focus on meaning and general understanding and faster reading rate. (Renandya & Jacobs, 2016, p. 98)

Even when reading graded readers, however, and sometimes showing significant reading speed gains from extensive reading compared to grammar-focused reading instruction (see McLean & Rouault, 2017; Suk, 2017), post-intervention EFL reading speeds across the Middle East and Asia may, according to Chang and Millett (2015), remain very low. A concurrent study in Japan highlighted another facet of the EFL reading issue. Students' silent reading speeds may diverge widely, even within classes divided into levels by pre-testing. A study carried out by Ramonda (2017) found students assigned to matching levels in university English classes in Japan to be

reading at rates diverging by approximately 100 words per minute, and among the slower readers, at rates of less than 40 wpm. The wide differences between students' reading rates persisted through a full semester of reading, despite using carefully chosen extensive reading materials (Ramonda, 2017).

The Missing "Sound" of Reading and the Potential of Audio Support

Van Amelsvoort (2020) voices concern that this persistent lack of improvement in reading fluency may be connected to "an underappreciation of the role of sound in reading" (p.493) in EFL. Other researchers also argue that language students who have not heard the spoken language enough are often hampered in their EFL development (Lin, 2012; Stephens, 2011).

Chang and Millett's (2015) seminal study comparing silent reading to reading while listening sheds light on the possibilities offered by bimodal input to sustainably improve both comprehension and reading rates, even across distant foreign languages without shared scripts. Over a year-long English course in Taiwan with high school students reading and discussing 20 shared graded readers, half the students were assigned reading while listening, and the other half were assigned silent reading. While the silent readers improved incrementally (near 20 wpm) in reading rates, students who read while listening gained over 40 wpm, reaching average reading speeds of 145- and 149 wpm in post-tests and three-month delayed post-tests respectively, demonstrating not only larger gains and retention, but also matching recommended speeds for fluent oral reading (Nation & Macalister, 2021).

The Motivation of Autonomy and Community in Balance

A possible issue, though, when pairing complementary modes, such as reading and listening, is that learners often do not have matching listening rates with each other, or consistency in their own reading and listening abilities (Sakurai, 2018; Stephens & Aoki, 2021). Reading with listening may therefore be especially well-suited for autonomous learners, and a number of reading researchers have discussed possible benefits from adjustable audio speeds when pairing reading with listening, or setting learners to reading and listening at their own pace (McNabb, 2013; Padberg-Schmitt, 2020; Sakurai, 2018; Stephens & Aoki, 2021).

With the independence to comfortably match up the pace of inputs, though, can come concerns about maintaining motivation while working alone. Ramonda (2020) found students preferring to read shared books as well as independently chosen titles, based on the desire to discuss the shared ones, and some studies have indicated discussions may help learners retain language they come upon in their L2 reading (Chen, 2012; Webb & Chang, 2015). Padberg-Schmitt (2020) observed that when self-paced reading and listening with audiobooks is carried out, the practice "enables the hesitant readers to be included in the post-reading/listening discussion as they have a better understanding of the story. This again has a positive effect on motivation...." (p. 38).

What Happens with Fluency? Prosody and Processing: The Mind's Ear

A further salient point in relation to the significantly improved EFL readers in Chang and Millett (2015) is that their near-150 wpm reading rate corresponds with spoken language rates and may tie in in with research related to prosody. As noted by Seidenberg (2017), often it is because "we hear words when we read" and, further, "we 'hear' the appropriate stress patterns in the mind's ear" (p. 22) that we are able to comprehend print well. When considering the nature of reading fluency, Rasinski (2006) has urged more attention to the flow of the spoken language for not-yet-fluent readers, suggesting that prosody is, in essence, the bridge across which learners move from decoding to reading with fluent understanding and comfort.

What Else Do We See with Fluency? Fluent Reading and The Mind's Eye

Reading at speaking rates, however, still finds L2 readers below the estimated 250-300 wpm rates for fluent reading (Grabe, 2010). Some theories suggest that with full fluency a reader can "start to be able to forget about the words on the page and just see the scenes unfolding in their mind's eye" (Gillis-Furutaka, 2019, p. 9). Such visualizing has been discussed as both a feature of, and facilitative for further developments in skilled reading (Cheetham, 2017; Tomlinson, 1998; Tusmagambet, 2020; Vanderplank, 2008).

As complementary inputs, such as heard and written language, integrate and activate across brain areas, some research also indicates that readers develop the ability to have even single modes of input, such as silent reading, elicit imaging (Cheetham, 2017). Exploring visualizing when reading foreign languages a step further, Shiang (2018) asked university EFL learners in Taiwan to draw and discuss stories, and found significantly better reading comprehension when compared to a grammar-focused translating group.

Further Markers of Fluency: Visualizing Possible Stages of Developing Reading Rates

Seidenberg (2017), continues the fluency discussion, pointing out further pragmatic motivations for gaining fluency in reading, and markers for the experience of full fluency. When phonological awareness is sufficiently integrated and skills are consolidated, readers can outpace spoken word rates and read faster than receiving the same content by listening. Reading can simply be more efficient than waiting as "an utterance unfolds" (Seidenberg, 2017, p. 59). To gather examples of what rates might be involved, the spoken delivery rates of audiobooks at their original playback settings were measured from lower graded readers to highest. Natural speaking speeds were found in audiobooks performed at approximately 130 wpm and above. The highest sampled audiobooks played with spoken delivery near 190 wpm (see Appendix E for audiobook rates at different levels, counted in the present study).

Comparing these audiobook rates with research discussing the necessary reading rates for comprehension while reading (Abadzi, 2019), and for comfortable, prosodic reading and understanding (Rasinski, 2006), as well as reading which outpaces spoken word rates, as suggested by Seidenberg (2017), developing reading rates could, then, be hypothetically grouped into three approximate ranges. Reading with comprehension, but at rates still lower than speaking speeds might be visualized as a first range. Reading at rates within a range correlating with smooth oral reading or speaking speeds then might be considered a second. Exceeding normal speaking speeds, then, might be theorized as a third, and indicate a pragmatic reading fluency, though it would begin slightly lower than the fluency targets of 250-300 wpm suggested by Grabe (2010) and Nation and Macalister (2021).

Methodology

This study therefore sought to explore if young adult learners' EFL reading fluency would show development with outside class reading and listening by learner-controlled pacing, and sought to explore if in-class "book club" meetings might play a positive role.

RQ 1. To what extent may reading rates change while learners do extensive reading with extensive listening outside the classroom, with pacing under their own control?

  a. with one trimester

  b. with two trimesters

RQ 2. Would holding in-class "book clubs" be viewed positively?

RQ 3. Will more learners notice feeling able to mentally "hear" what they are reading?

RQ 4. Will more learners notice feeling able to visualize a story while reading?

RQ 5. Will any indications of theoretical stages in developing reading rates be visualizable?

Setting and Participants

The extensive reading and listening (ER-EL) projects took place in central Japan, in an intensive English program, over four 15-week trimesters with a total of 12 courses, from 2018 - 2019. The participants in the study were mostly young adult graduates of Japanese high schools (age 18-20), with six years of English as a school subject. A small number of students were returning to education, and a few were joining from other nearby countries or some time abroad. Classes involved in the ER-EL projects included a mix of new students and students who had been in the program from one to several trimesters.

The typical course schedule for students included three English classes, taught by three different teachers, five days a week. The majority of time in these classes was spent on the assigned ESL textbooks and tests, working to meet course goals. The ER-EL projects in the present study were complementary activities fit into the usual classes. Supporting the goals of the courses and completing the syllabi would maintain ecological validity compared to studies with much or all the class time devoted to the research in question, as discussed in Suk (2017). With the same considerations in mind, time on task with ER-EL in the participating classes taught by the author of this study was set to match guidelines for homework and supplementary class activities, across the program.

The majority of the participants were involved with one ER-EL project, within a single trimester. While progressing through the levels of the small program, however, some students were assigned by chance to another trimester course with an instructor they had studied with before. In the instances in which a student who had joined an ER-EL project in a previous course was assigned randomly to another course in which ER-EL projects were to take place, they were again asked for their participation and consent. In this way, with a small number of consecutive two-trimester students joining the ER-EL projects, changes found with longer-term engagement (19 weeks) could also be investigated. The cumulative number of participants (N =130) was totaled from four trimesters (three courses each term), and within the 130 participants, a subset of consecutive two-term students (n =25) was found.

Permission was sought and received from the Institutional Review Board. The purpose of the study was thoroughly explained to the students, with participation in the research voluntary, personal information and identities protected, and participants free to withdraw from the research at any point.

Logistics: Reading Online for Accessibility, Shared Books, and Functions

Providing sufficient books and audiobooks for independent choice, and book clubs' shared choices as well, raises practical issues of logistics and cost if using paper books and CDs. Recently some online platforms have become available; a well-regarded multiple publisher site called Xreading.com in particular offers subscriptions with functions for reading, listening with adjustable speeds, and a view of student activity (Nation & Macalister, 2021; Nation & Waring, 2020; Robb, 2018; see also Appendix A).

Design

The research design was mixed methods. The ER-EL projects began one or two weeks after the terms began and concluded near the final exams, averaging between nine and ten weeks in duration.

Pre- and post-surveys, reading rates, online reading and listening progress, researcher notes, check-ins, and interviews to seek the students' insights and self-observations were compiled to build a more comprehensive view of the learners' experiences.

Materials and Procedure

Xreading (online) was used in the present study. Because it was accessible by smartphones, personal computers, and other devices, extensive reading and extensive listening as suggested in the research above was possible. All classes in the present study's setting had subscriptions to the Xreading program, however, and therefore, it was not possible to arrange a control group in the study setting.

The teacher (and researcher in the present study) introduced the ER-EL fluency projects, and showed, with slides and demonstrations, how to select books, play audio, and easily adjust audio speeds. Previous students' observations and comments, for example, noticing that listening while reading helped them catch the intonation, mood and rhythm of stories, and their suggestions for offering book discussion time were also shared.

Participants took initial measures of their reading rates by silently reading short passages, sourced from *More Reading Power* (Mikulecky & Jeffries, 1998). Consistent with the investigation by Ramonda (2017), which found wide divergences in student reading rates, in the present study considerable differences were also found, underlining the potential importance of learners pacing their reading and listening themselves. The students were encouraged to experiment while doing bimodal reading as homework and to find their most suitable input conditions. Adjusting input pace as needed was emphasized as well. The teacher-researcher could monitor students' progress online, and confirm details or intervene to help by checking in with the students in class. With direct student feedback and comments as well as the online view, it was possible to customize suggestions for next readings, gather similar levels within classes together to share books and discussions, and plan related activities.

Class members made brief notes and sketches about their books, writing memorable points or their reactions to support their "book club" discussions. As they progressed through the terms, interest groups and closely matching levels became apparent; these compatible readers became smaller "book clubs." In these small groups, after discussing and comparing notes about a book, the members accessed and examined the online library, discussing possible choices for their next books to ensure interest and suitable leveling for all in their group. They then "borrowed" these chosen titles to share and discuss. When planning for a coming book club meeting with separate, individual books, the decisions were also made with discussion, for the additional reason of ensuring all would choose different books. In their next book club meetings, the students would then review and recommend those titles (or not), according to their experience. These book club sessions took place once or twice a week. (See Figure 1, below).

The levels of books generally began in the lower end of the graded readers available, and increased in length and level depending on the reading skills of the students and their "book clubs." (See Appendix D, showing sample sets of books and the respective time-investment estimates). In order to answer questions, exchange opinions, and "coach" book club groups with suggestions fitting their requests, the teacher-researcher in the present study did as much ER-EL as possible. This knowledge of the online library was used also for guiding book club groups through appropriate, gradually rising levels.

The reading speed checks were taken in class with the students using individual timers, while the teacher-researcher was present to help and supervise. Handout charts were kept in the participants' reading notebooks, and they recorded their changing silent reading rates monthly, creating a simple, tangible record for themselves of this measure of their reading growth (see Appendix B). The worksheet passages of 200 words were chosen for reasonable ease of comprehension, and were returned to the teacher with the session's results written in. It was emphasized that the reading speeds activity had no bearing whatsoever on grades, and the students were asked to read at paces which ensured that they comfortably understood the passages. To avoid conflicting demands on class time, pages of follow-up comprehension questions were not required (see Nation & Macalister, 2021, pp. 99–100 for discussion of issues with comprehension questions in a second language).

Summary of Students' Activities

Week 1: Presurvey, reading speed check and recording in their notebooks. First book as sample for set up and troubleshooting. Follow-up in the next class with practice small group discussions.

Weeks 2 – 9 or 10

In class: Students choose book(s) for their next meeting, and set date for next discussions (within a few days or a week).

Outside class: Read-listen and make notes, drawings.

In class: Small groups ("book clubs") gather, discuss stories, exchange opinions, and complete related activities.*

Book clubs choose their next book(s) ...

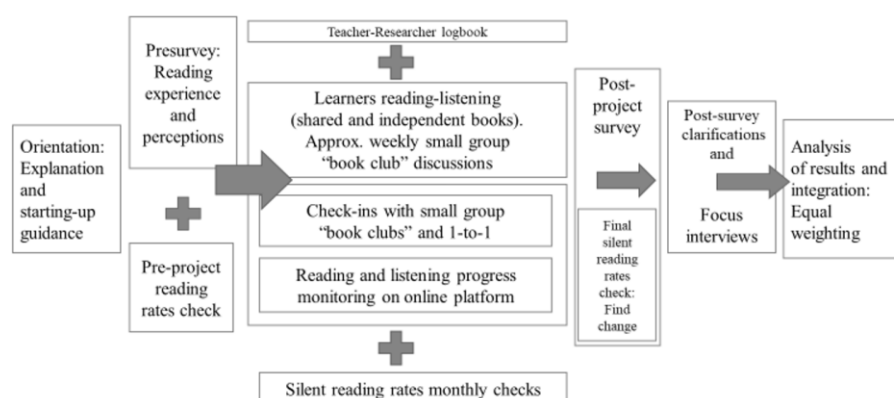*(Assistance from teacher on request, re. vocabulary, storylines, & book suggestions.)

Monthly: Short silent passage reading and reading rate checks.

Final week of ER-EL: Last reading rate check, post-survey.

Figure 1. Summary of Students' ER-EL Project Activities

Throughout the research projects, the teacher-researcher observed the online records of books, reading and listening times, and reading rates, to ensure the participants were consistently and comfortably using the reading and listening functions, progressing smoothly, and able to see their own progress and gains online when checking for themselves. These observations also served to correlate for overall consistency between the online reading-listening rates and the changes recorded for the silent reading passage rates.

ER-EL Projects: Design and Research Plan

Orientation: Explanation and starting-up guidance

Presurvey: Reading experience and perceptions

Teacher-Researcher logbook

Learners reading-listening (shared and independent books). Approx. weekly small group "book club" discussions

Check-ins with small group "book clubs" and 1-to-1

Reading and listening progress monitoring on online platform

Pre-project reading rates check

Silent reading rates monthly checks

Final silent reading rates check: Find change

Post-project survey

Post-survey clarifications and

Focus interviews

Analysis of results and integration: Equal weighting

Figure 2. ER-EL Projects: Design and Research Plans

Data Collection

The participants completed pre-and post-surveys, eliciting their experience with English reading, audiobooks, perceptions while reading and about carrying out "book clubs" (see Appendix C). First and final silent reading rate measures, taken by the students for their charts, were noted also in the pre-and post-surveys. The students retained their charts, while the teacher-researcher collected the silent reading passage worksheets to cross-check results, and to determine the reading rate changes. Calculations were first made manually and then confirmed and analyzed using Excel. Post-survey confirmations and interviews were carried out with the teacher-researcher taking notes (Bui & Macalister, 2021; Creswell, 2014). (Please see Figure 2, above). Participant numbers varied slightly due to absences and participation was voluntary throughout.

Results

RQ 1. To what extent may reading rates change while learners do extensive reading with extensive listening outside the classroom, with pacing under their own control?

Data for one-trimester projects of 9-10 weeks, and two consecutive trimesters (19 weeks of ER-EL project work) was collected.

In timed silent reading sessions with short passages during the one-trimester projects, the overall average change in reading rate was 64.69 wpm.
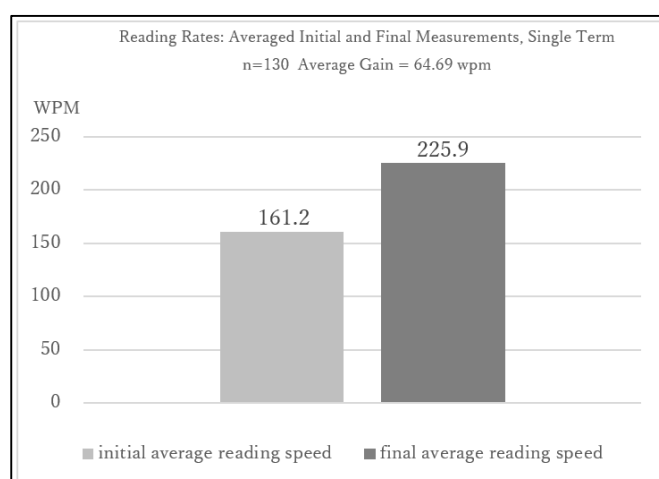
Figure 3. Reading Rates: Averaged Initial and Final Measurements, Single Trimester Term

A small subset of students within the participants, who happened to have two consecutive trimesters with the projects ($n = 25$) gained 118.56 wpm, measured from the beginning of their first ER-EL fluency project to the conclusion of their second (19 weeks' project work).
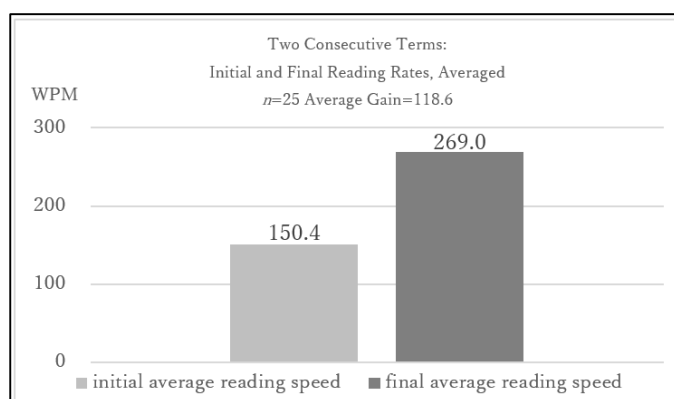
Figure 4. Two Trimester Reading Rates: Averaged Initial and Final Measurements

Four participants had reading rates drop between first and final measurements: 24 wpm, 20 wpm, 4 wpm, and 49 wpm, respectively. Clarification with the four participants whose reading rates dropped at the last measurement found that they were having temporary difficulty with other classes or factors affecting their motivation and performance. All four went on to higher levels and increased their skills in following terms.

As shown below in Table 1, participants' reading speeds at the beginning of ER-EL projects were found to average 161.18 wpm overall. Reading rates measured and reported at the completion of ER-EL projects averaged 225.87 wpm overall. This resulted in a significant difference (t (258) = -12, 90, p < 0.001), and the effect size indicated by Cohen's d was small (d = 0.27). (See also Figure 3).

Table 1. Reading Rate Changes of Project Participants: Initial and Final Measurements

	n	Initial		Final		t	p	Cohen's d
		M	SD	M	SD			
All participants, single trimester	130	161.18	56.23	225.87	73.66	-12.90	0.000	0.27
Subset: 2 consecutive trimesters	25	150.40	47.14	268.96	73.50	-6.98	0.000	0.43

The subset of two consecutive trimester participants' initial reading speeds, when averaged, was 150.4 wpm. At the completion of their second consecutive trimester terms, their overall average reading speed was found to be 268.96 wpm. This also resulted in significant difference (t (48) = -6.98, p < 0.001) and the effect size as indicated by Cohen's d was moderate (d = 0.43). See also Figure 4.

RQ 2: "Book Clubs." The second research question asked if holding in-class "book clubs" would be viewed positively.

The book club discussions were usually held after the completion of required academic practice tasks, and in the teacher-researcher's observation, the atmosphere when re-organizing into their book club groups and exchanging notes and opinions appeared animated. Ongoing check-ins, surveys, and post-project interviews sought more information about the participants' thoughts. Comments and feedback clarified some aspects, for example, "I enjoyed that I could hear other opinion[s]," and, "We can see if the comments are understandable." These participants seemed to be responding to the fresh perspectives of their "book club" speaking partners, and noting the chance to experiment with conveying meaning to others from their own writing with the low-pressure practice speaking of the book club sessions.

Other feedback referred to participants' motivation, with a participant writing "BIG" in capital letters before "motivation" in her post-survey, and another commenting, almost as succinctly, "I can maintain my motivation." A participant who noted, "If I didn't do homework [with Xreading] the next day I couldn't do discussion with my classmates" seemed to express a sense of responsibility to their "book club" group.

In the post-survey, to learn if in-class "book clubs" were enjoyable, the question was: "Did you like doing 'book club' discussions?" Below the main question were two follow-up questions to elicit more feedback if the participant chose: "Did 'book club' meetings help with reading the whole book?" and, "Any suggestions for making our 'book clubs' better?" Responses to

the main question were organized according to positive or negative evaluations written, with blanks also categorized as negative. ("Yes," or "Yes" with comments: "Yes! I think 'book club' is fun," were judged positively. "No," or "I didn't like doing discussions," were, of course, negative). These responses were then calculated for simple percentage compared to the total number of surveys collected. Overall, survey responses about book discussions were 92% positive (n = 116/126).

RQ 3: Changes in self-observed ability to mentally "hear" while reading.

The third research question intended to learn if participants noticing an ability to mentally "hear" what they were reading might increase. At the beginning of their ER-EL projects, 70.6% of the participants wrote in their surveys that they could "hear" mentally when reading in English (n = 89 of 126). At the end of their trimester projects, 89.6% responded that they were able to "hear" mentally when reading (n = 113 of 126), a 19% increase (Table 2, below). As this research question surveyed the participants about their perceptions, rather than conducting testing and collection of hard data, it was not investigated for statistical significance.

RQ 4: Would more learners notice feeling able to visualize a story while reading?

The fourth research question was intended to learn if participants noticing the ability to visualize a story while reading might increase. At the beginning of their extensive reading and listening projects, 87.3% of the participants wrote that they could visualize while reading in English (n = 110 of 126). At the end of their projects, 93.6% indicated they were able to envision stories while they read (n = 118 of 126), an increase of 6.3%. As this research question, also, asked the participants about their perceptions, rather than conducting testing and collection of hard data, the responses were not investigated for statistical significance. (See Table 2).

Table 2. Perceptions of Hearing Mentally and Seeing Mentally: Pre- and Post ER-EL Projects

N = 126	Pre-project	Post-project
"Hearing" mentally while reading	70.6% (n = 89)	89.6% (n = 113)
Visualizing while reading	87.3% (n = 110)	93.6% (n = 118)

RQ 5. Will any indications of theoretical stages in developing reading rates be visualizable?

Development of Reading Rates
pre- and post ER-EL projects (*N*=130)
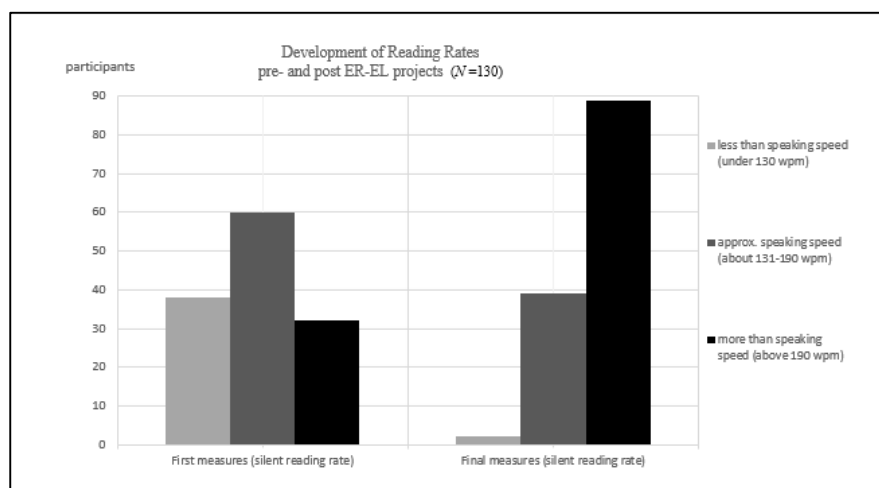
Figure 5. Development of Reading Rates, Comparing Pre- and Post-Projects

The final research question asked if the process of developing reading rates might be theoretically visualizable in stages, as learners gained comfort in L2 reading. In the initial silent reading rate measurements, nearly thirty percent of the participants were reading under 130 wpm; in other words, below the rates found in fluent oral reading in the measured audiobook samples. A larger percentage (46%) were reading within the range of fluent oral reading, while about 25% outpaced usual speaking speeds, as based on the audiobook comparisons. In final silent reading rate checks, 1.5% of the students remained below the estimated range for fluent oral reading and speaking speeds (*n* = 2). Ninety-eight percent had either moved to within the range of speaking speeds found in the audiobook measures (30%), or were exceeding these spoken word measures while reading (68%). Above, Figure 5 shows these theoretical stages in development of reading fluency applied to the reading rate changes in the present study. (See also Table 3, below).

Table 3. Distribution of Reading Rates by Ranges: Pre- and Post ER-EL Projects

Silent Reading Rate (*N*=130)	Below usual speaking speed	Approx. speaking speed	More than speaking speed
	(under 130 wpm)	(131-190 wpm)	(above 190 wpm)
First measures	*n* = 38 (29.23%)	*n* = 60 (46.15%)	*n* = 32 (24.62%)
Final measures	*n* = 2 (1.54 %)	*n* = 39 (30.00%)	*n* = 89 (68.46%)

Discussion

Reading Rate Development

RQ 1. To what extent may reading rates change while learners do extensive reading with extensive listening outside the classroom, with pacing under their own control?

The tentative findings of reading rates changes corresponding to ER-EL work in the present, small scale study were generally consistent with those found in other studies which investigated for reading changes with bimodal input (Chang & Millett, 2015; Tusmagambet, 2020). With one trimester the overall average change found in silent passage reading rates was 64.69 wpm, and with two trimesters, the average change after nineteen weeks of ER-EL work was 118.6 wpm.

Possibly supporting this development were the substantial numbers of books the students

completed, though the number was highly individual to each student and class, as the projects were intended to support learner autonomy, and were also affected by other parts of the students' class loads. The average number of books completed overall for single trimesters with the projects, however, was approximately twenty. This is consistent with Chang and Millett (2015), though contrasting with Tusmagambet (2020), in which significant gains were found with an intervention using audiobooks and reading together after only four books.

It is crucial to note that the study participants' reading rates varied naturally through their trimester ER-EL projects, depending on many factors. In the present study, participants read and listened to a wide variety of genres at different levels, as discussed by a participant who reported changing speed settings in accordance with the genre, topic, and level she was working with. With challenging nonfiction science-related books, in particular, she preferred to focus her attention carefully, and she adjusted audio rates downward temporarily to match.

Possibly, keeping their own monthly reading rate results in their notebooks may have helped the students maintain their motivation through these ups and downs as they challenged themselves with higher level books, concurring with Chang and Renandya (2017), regarding the value for learners of having visible evidence of improvement for their efforts with EFL reading. A possible example was also found in this comment from a participant whose silent reading rate showed a rise (from 84 wpm) to 200 wpm: "I saw this number and thought I would do my best in the future," again, consistent with the suggestion in Chang and Renandya (2017) that having tangible evidence for themselves could help learners maintain their motivation.

Book Clubs

RQ 2. Would holding in-class "book clubs" be viewed positively?

Based on approval (92%) and comments, holding regular "book club" sessions seemed to be useful for enjoyment and motivation, and these majority responses were generally consistent with Dörnyei's (1997) suggestion that peers collaborating in language learning and communication activities develop higher motivation. A two-trimester participant, responding in an interview that book club meetings had been "interesting and helpful" added, "students need practice to speak," and that the discussions had been effective for stimulating more active English use among her classmates. This was consistent with Tusmagambet (2020), also, who reported a positive cycle with book discussions: "students could demonstrate the results of their labor, which seemed to encourage them to continue reading" (p. 63).

Murphey and Jacobs (2000) have further suggested that autonomy: awareness and responsibility in one's own learning process, is facilitated by collaborative language learning. A student, explaining in an interview how the regular book club meetings had kept his motivation high, commented, "[It's] not a duty but rather a responsibility. It's my work ... significant to finish. Responsible thinking makes me feel improved." The observations of this student, noting the significance of finishing a book for the benefit of his book club group, and noticing the connections between his sense of responsibility and the growth in his learning, may possibly be an example of this kind of development.

Examining the post-surveys for suggestions on making "book clubs" better, from participants who had not liked book clubs, showed that students who enjoyed book clubs also replied. Though few, these suggestions together revealed a number of important points. Some suggested having pairs rather than small groups, or more guidance, such as the teacher providing examples of opinion expressions to use, practice summarizing the stories, or focusing discussion on the main ideas in the stories. One interesting development, perhaps illustrating the importance of customizing support as needed, was found when a student whose survey reply was that he did not like book clubs, surprised the researcher with a positive reply after a

second trimester with ER-EL. In checking in for clarification, he explained that he had trouble speaking when he was a new student, but in his second trimester, "I became able to talk," and that he had then enjoyed the discussions. Overall, and perhaps illustrated by this student's experience, the advice shared in these book club comments and suggestions showed that depending on level, experience, and confidence, discussion activities like the "book clubs" in the present study may require greater guidance and support, concurring with Daniels (2006), and Marinkova and Leslie (2021). Defining these levels and finding optimal balances between directed support and autonomy may be important in further research.

Mentally "Hearing"

RQ 3. Will more learners notice feeling able to mentally "hear" what they are reading?

At the beginning of their ER-EL projects, 70.6% of the participants wrote that they could hear English mentally when reading in English ($n = 89$ of 126). At the end of their term projects, 89.6% indicated they were able to mentally hear while reading ($n = 113$ of 126), a 19% increase. This positive change may indicate development in phonological processing, a building sense of prosody, and self-awareness of this skill. Some blanks and misinterpretations suggest cautiously interpreting these results and also, suggest a closer research focus on the point would be illuminating in future investigations. Upon comparison to reading rates, a number of "no" and non-responses to, "When you are reading in English, do you feel you "hear" the words in your mind?" may have, counter-intuitively, been demonstrating evidence of higher skills. The majority of these were participants whose reading rates had become consistent with first language readers. As discussed by a number of researchers (Alexander & Nygaard, 2008; Field, 2008; Seidenberg, 2017), reading fluently at rates above speaking speeds often does not stimulate consciousness of phonological activation at work. Another relevant factor, discussed in Jeon and Yamashita (2014) and possibly found in the present study by the perception of primarily visual reading from a Chinese L1 participant, is the influence of the first language. The results therefore, while generally indicating that an increased perception of mentally hearing while silently reading may correlate with developing fluency, also indicate potential value in closer examination of the topic in future research.

Visualizing While Reading

RQ 4. Will more learners notice feeling able to visualize a story while reading?

The fourth research question surveyed for noticing visual imaging while reading stories. The percentage increase in participants' noting this skill, a 6.3% difference from pre- to post-survey, was not as large as the change found with mentally hearing. Being able to visualize a story while reading started out high (87.3%) and concluded slightly higher (at 93.6%). This skill was not specifically practiced for during the projects, in which the students and teacher were together focused on reading with greater ease and enjoyment. It was of interest, however, in tentatively exploring for correlations between theories which associate visualizing with fluent reading (Cheetham, 2017; Gillis-Furutaka, 2019, Vanderplank, 2008) and the participants' changing experiences as they gained in reading rates. A two-consecutive term student who noticed a change while increasing her reading rate during the projects commented in a final survey, "I could 'see' the situation." These reported increases in visualizing, though small, concur also with results found by Tusmagambet (2020) in which students reading with audiobooks demonstrated both significant gains in reading rates, and when interviewed, explained that they felt the opportunity to hear what they were reading, through the audiobooks, activated their visualizing abilities. How much experience with listening supporting L2 reading may facilitate activating visualization while reading, and from what range of reading rates, may merit more focused investigation in future research.

Theoretical Stages in Developing Reading Rates

RQ 5. Will any indications of theoretical stages in developing reading rates be visualizable?

In the present study, when comparing the reading rate changes reported by participants from beginning their ER-EL projects to completion, with spoken word rates found in audiobooks, general ranges for reading rates and their changes were, theoretically, visualizable. Considering three hypothetical ranges, (corresponding to less-than fluent speaking, to within a range of speaking speeds, and to exceeding usual speaking speeds) allowed for comparisons of participants' reading rate changes to meaningful markers of developing fluency skills discussed by researchers (Abadzi, 2019; Nation & Macalister, 2021; Rasinski, 2006; Seidenberg, 2017). While investigations have set useful target rates for highly fluent L1 and L2 reading, near the top of the physically possible range for reading with comprehension (Grabe, 2010; Nation & Macalister, 2021; Seidenberg, 2017), it may be important to also focus on the process of development through the pre-fluent ranges, especially for EFL readers who may be navigating from different writing systems.

Research studies in which EFL reading rates are near the baseline ranges for reading with comprehension, and below natural spoken word rates are not uncommon, including from EFL university classrooms (Chang & Millett, 2015; Ramonda, 2017). Nation and Macalister (2021) discuss some of these particular concerns for L2 learners crossing from different first language scripts, noting that reading rates well below 100 wpm may involve rudimentary comprehension: "Anyone who has learned to read another script knows the phenomenon of slowly sounding out the script and then having to go back and read the sentence again more fluently to see what it means" (p. 81).

In the present study nearly thirty percent of the participants were found initially to be reading below 130 wpm; in other words, below the rates found in fluent oral reading in the measured audiobook samples. A participant whose initial reading rate fell in this range (114 wpm) and whose final rate, 170 wpm, was in the higher ranges of speaking speeds, wrote in a final survey comment, "When I read listening and reading the same time, I understood so fast," possibly indicating that she had found bimodal input had helped her experience better comprehension. The comfortable comprehension referred to in her comment is consistent, also, with Rasinski's (2006) contention that passages read aloud at natural speaking rates show markers of good understanding and developing fluency.

The majority of the participants reported reading within the range of speaking speeds (30%), or exceeding the spoken rates found in the audiobook measures (68%) in their final silent reading rate checks. A nineteen-week participant whose initial reading measures showed reading within speaking-rates range and whose final measurement exceeded spoken word rates in the audiobooks, discussed her changing method with two trimesters. She had listened while reading at the same time, increasing audio speeds to match, in her first trimester project. In her second, "Suddenly audio was slow for me." She had switched to reading first and listening later, continuing complementary inputs and sharpening her listening, while her reading continued to improve. As she progressed further and into university classes in English, at the time of the interview, her reading was mostly academic texts and assignments, while listening was usually to relax with a variety of content (news and music) on the Internet.

A case study of a teenage EFL reader in Germany overcoming reading difficulties reported on what may have been an analogous process, also involving changing strategies with rising skills. With a period of listening to and reading novels with adjustable audio, and discussing books with her tutor, the teenage EFL reader soon "learned to use her inner voice and read the text to herself" (Padberg-Schmitt, 2020, p. 45). With this skill acquired, the case study student began

reading subsequent novels silently and freely, for pleasure (Padberg-Schmitt, 2020).

Visualizing stages with ranges of reading rates compared to spoken word rates may have potential applications in clarifying reading development stages, and helping learners recognize their own reading development.

Limitations and Future Directions

Lack of a Control Group

At the location of the present study all students were taking three English courses per trimester, and extensive reading subscriptions were provided to all program students. A control group for the present study was therefore not possible, and variables due to other English classes cannot be ruled out. This lack of a matching set of data for comparisons greatly affects the conclusions of the present study and the changes found, while correlative, cannot be interpreted as causative.

The present study had several other limitations. Though data was collected over four trimesters, increased length for the study, with a greater number of participants, would certainly have strengthened the research. Future research, especially involving a wide variety of language backgrounds, settings, and ages of participants would also help to clarify if reading would consistently show development across these conditions.

Reading Rates

Reading rate measures were taken in brief classroom sessions. Despite choosing passages carefully for consistent difficulty, varying levels of background knowledge about the content of the 200-word passages sometimes affected students' performance. Furthermore, performance with consistently manageable short reading passages certainly varies from reading paces on academic material, and generalizing from the data in the present study would result in overestimates for rates on more challenging materials (see also discussion section). Therefore, results should be interpreted cautiously. Also, follow-up pages of comprehension questions were not required, and this has been strongly criticized by some (Suk, 2017). Other literacy and testing specialists have found that while comprehension questions in a student's first language may assess reliably, questions in a second or foreign language present much more complex issues and may fail to assess as intended (Chang & Millett, 2017; Chu & Hooper, 2020; Nation & Macalister, 2021). To insist upon reading to memorize passage details for unknown questions was unreasonable while meeting the course goals in the research setting, especially, as pointed out by Waring and McLean, "comprehension is a property of learners" (2015, p. 163). With these points in mind, in addition to the limitations above, the changes found cannot be considered more than correlative, and control data will be crucial for future investigations.

Book Clubs

The research question was addressed by observation, check-ins and interviews, and principally by the participants' survey replies. Although the survey responses indicated that 92% of the participants felt positively about the inclusion of book clubs, future investigations will be essential, to learn what alternative activities may work well for the eight percent whose surveys did not show value found in the book discussions. Furthermore, as discussed in Ramonda (2017), positive attitudes in student survey feedback overall, and particularly about the book club activities in the present study, may be partly attributable to teacher attitude and learners' high motivation. Therefore, these results should be interpreted with caution.

Mentally Hearing and Visualizing

These research questions, about the participants' perceptions, did not involve testing

participants. Especially with equipment now available and employed in other research, potential findings are extremely valuable, but outside the scope of the present study. The voluntary survey questions were intended to learn if mentally "hearing" and visualization were becoming noticeable to the participants themselves while reading. Therefore it was their replies, showing their self-observations, which were of interest, rather than testing, which might show the presence of phonological, or visually connected activity irrespective of the readers' conscious notice. The participant responses were therefore also not investigated for statistical significance. This limits the interpretation of the results and does not allow for generalization to other contexts or settings. Hard evidence and further investigation would be of great interest in future studies.

Theoretical Stages in Developing Reading Rates.

Distinctions between pre-fluent ranges of reading rates, tentatively visualizable in the present study, will require future research to assess if evidence will support the concept. If potentially utilizable, further studies will certainly also be needed to learn with more accuracy where the pre-fluent stages of development might begin, and where they would transition to higher levels of reading skill.

Conclusions

The results in the present, exploratory study tentatively suggest that with bimodal input available for autonomous reading and listening, EFL learners may be able to raise their silent reading rates. Collaborative "book clubs" also seemed potentially to support increases in enjoyment and motivation. Self-observed skills such as smoother comprehension while reading, and mentally hearing and visualizing were, in the reporting of some participants, also increased.

This preliminary study applied the participants' changing reading rates to a hypothetical model of pre-stages in L2 reading fluency, based on the literature and audiobook rates measured in this study. Stages in developing fluency could possibly offer a meaningful frame of reference for learners while improving in reading efficiency. Future, more extensive research investigating for connections between rising reading rates and emerging skills may offer more precise evidence for stages in pre-fluency and their ranges, and recognizable progress markers for learners in their reading fluency development.

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About the Author

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Appendix A

Audio Functions on Xreading.com: Play, Pause, Back, Forward, and Speed

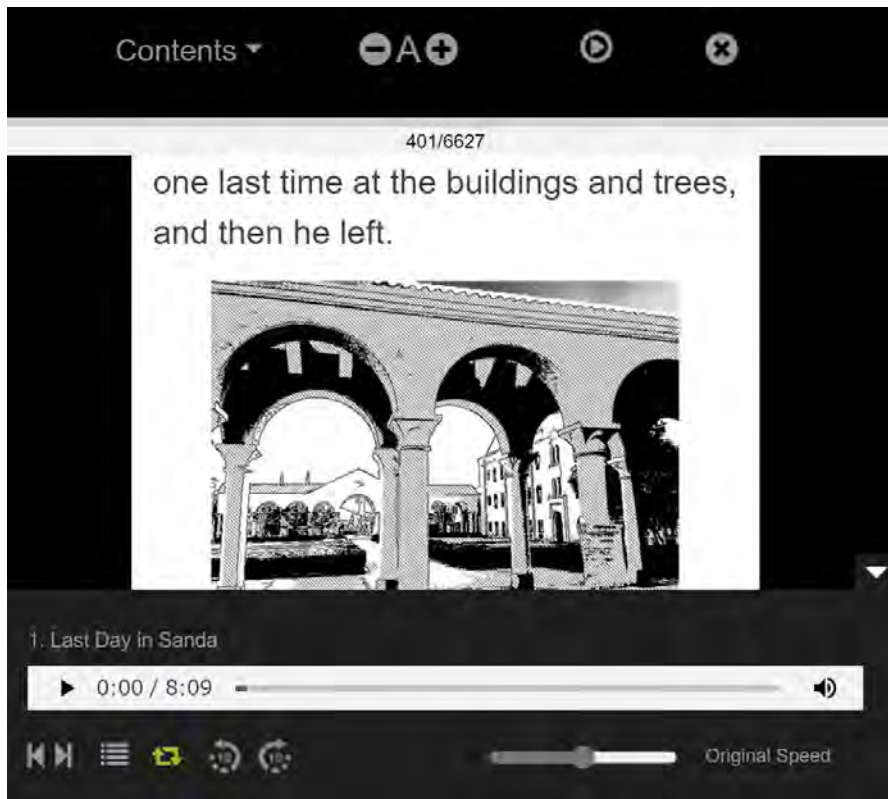See: Chapter Choice (bottom left) and Audio Speed Adjustment (bottom right)

Image clip from *100 Days at Sea* by K. Ramonda, in Xreading.com. Copyright XLearning Systems, 2022. Reprinted with permission.

Appendix B

Reading Rates Handout Chart for Students (abridged example)

Quick reading chart   Your name_____

Words per minute: Month 1._____   Month 2._____   Month 3. _____   Month 4. _____

Formula: ___ minutes X 60 + seconds = (your seconds)

Ex: 200 words, divided by your seconds = _____ then multiply by 60 for your words per minute.

You can check yourself anytime you like with the formula, or if you count 200 words, you can use the below chart.

For a paragraph of 200 words

Reading time	Reading rate (words per minute)
0:40 seconds	300 wpm
0:45	266 wpm
0:50	240 wpm
0:55	218 wpm
1:00	200 wpm
1:05	192 wpm
1:10	183 wpm
1:15	175 wpm
1:20	167 wpm
1:25	158 wpm
1:30	150 wpm
1:35	142 wpm
1:40	133 wpm
1:45	125 wpm
1:50	117 wpm
1:55	108 wpm
2:00	100 wpm
2:05	97 wpm
2:10	94 wpm
2:15	91 wpm
2:20	88 wpm
2:25	85 wpm
2:30	83 wpm
2:35	80 wpm
2:40	77 wpm
2:45	74 wpm
2:50	71 wpm
2:55	68 wpm
3:00	66 wpm
3:05	65 wpm
3:10	63 wpm
3:15	62 wpm
3:20	61 wpm
3:25	59 wpm
3:30	58 wpm
3:35	57 wpm
3:40	55 wpm
3:45	54 wpm
3:50	53 wpm
3:55	51 wpm
4:00	50 wpm

Sources:

The formula was found and adapted from the *Informed Literacy.com* website.

Darasz, W. & Yagid, J. (2018, April 24). How to calculate fluency rate. *Informed literacy* weblog. http://www.informedliteracy.com/calculating-fluency-rate/

The numerical time and word speed calculations were found and adapted from:

The University of Utah Reading Clinic (2018), *Forms and Charts*, College of Education University of Utah. See also: Forms and Charts pages https://uurc.utah.edu/General/Forms-Charts.php

Appendix C

Pre-and Post-Project Questions

The questions below are the relevant questions from two slightly longer surveys; the present report was part of a larger study.

Pre-project:

1. Did you ever read a whole book in English before?

2. Did you ever listen to an English story (chapter book) in an audiobook before?

   If yes, what was it?

3. When you are writing and reading in English, do you hear the words in your mind?

   writing _____ reading _____

4. When you read a story or book in English, do you sometimes "see" ("visualize") and imagine the story in your mind?

5. What is your current reading speed in English?

   _____ words-per-minute:

Post-project:

1. Did you ever read a whole book in English before this term?

   If yes, what book or books?

2. Did you ever listen to a long English story (chapter book) in an audiobook before?

   If yes, what was it?

3. Did you like doing "book club" discussions?

   Did "book club" meetings help with reading the whole book?

   Any suggestions for making our "book clubs" better?

4. When you are reading in English, do you feel you "hear" the words in your mind?

5. When you are reading an English story, do you feel you sometimes "see" the story in your mind?

6. What is your usual reading speed now?

*Note: Questions 1 and 2 were closely worded (nearly repeating) in both surveys for confirmation purposes.

Appendix D

What Does 100,000 Words as a Target for Extensive Reading Mean?

Approximate time investment for popular books, if reading and listening is done at the original spoken recording pace.

Example 1. Fiction only, and lower levels only (up to Level 5).

Title, Author(s), XR Reading Level	Word count	Publisher	Audio minutes (rounded)
1 *I Spy* (Waring, Jamall) 2	1320	CFR	15
2 *Go Jimmy Go!* (Waring, Jamall) 2	1368	CFR	14
3 *Slam Dunk for Mark* (Waring, Jamall) 2	805	CFR	9
4 *Soccer Crazy* (Leather, Julian Thomlinson) 2	3308	CPT	19
5 *Roommates* (Leather, Julian Thomlinson) 2	4095	CPT	26
6 *Come Home* (Leather, Julian Thomlinson) 2	3416	CPT	22
7 *Road Trip* (Leather) 2	4141	CPT	31
8 *Trouble at Sea* (Waring, Jamall) 3	2372	CFR	20
9 *Boys vs. Girls* (Waring, Jamall) 3	1757	CFR	21
10 *No, You Can't!* (Waring, Jamall) 3	2424	CFR	22
11 *The Beautiful Game* (Leather, Julian Thomlinson) 3	4468	CPT	28
12 *Dirty Money* (Leather) 3	2112	CER	23
13 *Big Hair Day* (Johnson) 3	2080	CER	27
14 *You Just Don't Know Her* (Leather, Julian Thomlinson) 3	3733	CPT	25
15 *It's Just a Cat* (Thomlinson) 3	3554	CPT	22
16 *Arman's Journey* (Prowse) 3	2112	CER	26
17 *Hacker* (Leather, Julian Thomlinson) 3	3918	CPT	25
18 *Book Boy* (Moses) 3	2692	CER	32
19 *The Secret Tunnel* (Waring, Jamall) 4	2388	CFR	20
20 *Love Online* (Waring, Jamall) 4	2692	CFR	27
21 *Hotel Casanova* (Leather) 4	3755	CER	36
22 *Three Tomorrows* (Brennan) 4	3976	CER	40
23 *Just Like a Movie* (Leather) 4	3824	CER	34
24 *Zoo Diary* (Viney) 5	3450	GOR	31
25 *The African Mask* (Gerngross) 5	1676	HEL	14
26 *The Angels* (Leather, Julian Thomlinson) 5	4169	CPT	30
27 *Running Free* (Leather, Julian Thomlinson) 5	4781	CPT	30
28 *A Kitchen Love Story* (Leather, Julian Thomlinson) 5	4120	CPT	28
29 *100 Days at Sea* (Ramonda) 5	6627	XR	44
30 *The Time Capsule* (Campbell) 5	8674	HEL	87
Total	**100146**		**828**

100,146 words, 30 books, 828 minutes = 13.8 hours (13 hours, 48 minutes),

or 41.4 sessions of 20-minute reading time.

Example 2. Non-fiction and higher level fiction selections

Title (+ level), author, publisher	Word count	Audio minutes (rounded)
Non-fiction		
1 *Cheese-Rolling Races* (level 7) ed. Waring, CF	982	7
2 *Farley the Red Panda* (level 7) ed. Waring, CF	913	8
3 *Princess Diana* (level 5) Collins, MAC	10,173	89
4 *Nelson Mandela* (level 9) Hart, MAC	12,978	103
5 *Gandhi* (level 9) Bladon, MAC	16,908	118
6 *Afghanistan's Heroic Artists* (level 13) ed. Waring, CF	2904	18
Higher Level Fiction Titles		
7 *Battle for Big Tree Country* (level 12) Strong, CPT	16,711	95
8 *The Long Road to Lucca* (level 10) Barrall, CPT	15,746	89
9 *In the Shadow of the Mountain* (level 13) Naylor, CER	22,903	142
Total	**100,218**	**669**

100,218 words, 9 books, 669 minutes = 11.15 hours, (11 hours, 9 minutes), or 33 - 34 sessions of 20-minute reading time.

Publisher/Series codes:

CER: Cambridge English Readers

CF: Cengage Footprints

CFR: Cengage Foundation Readers

CPT: Cengage Page Turners

GOR: Garnet Oracle Readers

HEL: Helbling

MAC: Macmillan

XR: Xreading Original

Appendix E: Graded Reader Audiobooks' Sampled Oral Reading Rates

Accessed on *Xreading.com* Dec. 2018, played at original speeds.

Level 2 *Road Trip* – Sue Leather, Cengage Page Turners. 118 words per minute

Level 3 *Arman's Journey* – Philip Prowse, Cambridge. 100 words per minute

Level 4 *Three Tomorrows* – Frank Brennan, (ed. Philip Prowse) Cambridge. 111 words per minute

Level 5 *100 Days at Sea* – Kris Ramonda, Original. 133 words per minute

Level 6 *A Faraway World* – Maria Banfi, ELI teen readers. 124 words per minute

Level 7 *Milo* – Jennifer Bassett/Peter Viney, Garnet Oracle Readers. 133 words per minute

Level 8 *Space Romance* – Peter Viney, Garnet Oracle Readers. 138 words per minute

Level 9 *Mandela* – Carl W. Hart, Macmillan. 137 words per minute

Level 10 *The Long Road to Lucca* – Irene Barrall, Cengage Page Turners. 184 words per minute

Level 11 *The Story of the Reformation* – Joseph Poulshock, (ed. Rob Waring) Seed World History Readers. 144 words per minute

Level 12 *Cheetahs in Focus* – ed. Rob Waring, Cengage Footprints. 170 words per minute

Level 13 *Afghanistan's Heroic Artists* – ed. Rob Waring, Cengage Footprints. 186 words per minute

Level 14 *Frozen Pizza* – Antoinette Moses, ed. Philip Prowse, Cambridge English Readers: two selections from the eight stories – *Frozen Pizza* 138 words per minute, *Sweetie* 144 words per minute