

**TEACHING
FASTER READING**

A MANUAL

**BY
EDWARD FRY, PH.D.**

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INTRODUCTION

This book is intended to help teachers give a course in reading improvement at either the secondary-school or university level. It may also be used as a text by teachers in training who can improve their own reading skills at the same time as they learn how to improve those of their future students. Finally the book may be used as a do-it-yourself reading improvement programme by any adult or older student. Previous training in teaching reading is not assumed.

Teaching Faster Reading is written to accompany the students' book *Reading Faster—A Drill Book* (Cambridge University Press, 1963) but the methods, course outline, and lecture material will work with a number of other students' drill books.

This book concentrates on the improvement of reading speed while making certain that the fundamental requirement of normal comprehension is not neglected. It is intended to supplement and not supplant other methods of teaching the understanding of written English, such as language study and literary criticism.

One of the major methods of improving both speed and comprehension is to set the students to work through a series of timed reading passages followed by comprehension questions. These passages are provided in the *Drill Book*. But in addition to the timed reading and comprehension drill, the student needs both encouragement and information about reading. The teacher will have to use his art and skill as an educator to provide the encouragement, and some learning discipline; while this teachers' book will provide material both for the teacher's own information and for classroom lectures.

The book is divided into ten chapters, as reading-improvement courses often cover a ten-week period. If the teacher sets three lessons a week out of the *Drill Book*, as is suggested, this too will cover a period of ten weeks. But the teacher may choose either to extend the course or to compress it to a somewhat shorter period, according to the problems of the individual school. Reading-improvement courses are seldom shorter than six or seven weeks and seldom longer than eighteen weeks, with most courses lasting about ten weeks. If a course is too short there is hardly time for enough practice and ingraining of the desired skills and habits. If the course is stretched out too long the student loses interest and becomes bored with the whole topic. Spreading the course over too long a period keeps it from picking up the critical momentum that can be seen in the week-by-week improvement in the class average.

The amount of class-time that the teacher devotes to the reading-improvement course will vary from school to school. It is suggested that the teacher take not less than two half-hour periods per week. There will also be a modest amount of homework required in addition to these class sessions. Usually one of the weekly class sessions will be a lecture and discussion based on the chapters of this book. The other class session will be a timed reading exercise done in class from the *Drill Book*, together with a check and discussion of the homework. The teacher may also wish to place some emphasis on comprehension by getting the class to discuss the answers to the test questions after the class has completed the exercise.

In addition to timed reading exercises and lectures, many reading-improvement courses also use tachistoscopic drill. This consists of flashing words, phrases and sometimes symbols on a screen for about one-twentyfifth of a second using a special device known as a tachistoscope. A simple but usable tachistoscope consists of an ordinary slide-projector, a shutter fitted in front of the lens and acting like a camera shutter, and a specially

prepared set of filmstrips. Though not all reading authorities agree on the necessity of using a tachistoscope, many reading instructors find tachistoscopic drill helpful in maintaining interest in the reading-improvement course and in breaking up slow word-by-word reading habits. In conducting reading-improvement courses I myself usually use tachistoscopic drill, consisting mainly of words and phrases of increasing length, for about 25 minutes each week. (See manuals and materials prepared by 'Learning Through Seeing', Box 368, Sunland, California, U.S.A.)

There are some successful courses aimed at improving reading speed and comprehension which do not use any mechanical aids such as the tachistoscope; but none of them is conducted without timed reading exercises and some lectures.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS FREQUENTLY ASKED BY STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

How much gain in speed can I expect from taking this course?

The author's courses in the United States and Africa usually increase speed by an average of 100%; that is, the class average roughly doubles. This is normal for such work in the United States and Britain. For example, C. Poulton, writing in the *British Journal of Educational Psychology* in 1961, after surveying the results of 40 classes in eight different settings, including industrial concerns, technical colleges, nursing colleges and university extra-mural departments (ranging from 15 to 27 hours of instruction), writes: 'Looking at the data from all institutions, the average reading normally started at between 160 and 280 words per minute, and ended at between 340 and 500 words per minute, giving increases of between 40 and 130 per cent.'

Does reading faster lower comprehension?

Generally not. Most of the author's classes begin and end at nearly the same normal level of comprehension. The African

classes showed some gain in comprehension, but their comprehension was at first a little on the low side. For British students Poulton says: 'There was more often a gain than a loss in comprehension as measured by the multiple-choice questions.'

Does training on one type of reading matter, such as easy factual material, help to improve reading on other types of material?

The author once conducted a course for employees of a research organization, and both before the course and after the course a company psychologist tested the students on very difficult reading material (on the theory of games). The author found that the students made a gain of about 100% on relatively easy factual material, while the psychologist found that their gain on very difficult material was about 90%, even though no training was given on difficult reading material. The actual rate in words per minute was of course slower on the difficult material than on the easier material. Further proof of the general help given by reading-improvement courses is that over 80% of United States institutions of higher learning offer some such course, and the courses are rapidly spreading in secondary schools. A more concrete example is the letter received from a former student which said that it was being written in 'saved time', for he could now go through his morning mail and business reports in half the time he needed before taking the reading-improvement course.

Will reading-improvement training in one language help the students to improve their reading in another language?

Michael West in his book *Learning to Read a Foreign Language* (Longmans) found that training Indian students to improve their reading in English also substantially improved their reading in Bengali. He concluded that 'Reading ability is a general power. It is not confined to one language, for improvement in the ability to read one language is "transferred" and

shows itself in improvement of the reading of another language.' The answers to this and the preceding question show that it is not necessary to train on a single precise type of reading material for reading skill to be widely transferred.

Can you be too old to learn to improve your reading?

The author has taught essentially the same course to groups varying from United States high school seniors (16- to 18-year-olds) to senior management executives in industry. In adult education work there is frequently a 16-year-old sitting next to a 60-year-old and there is no perceptible difference in their improvement scores. This is amplified by Poulton, who reports that 'A group of 26 students from the Scottish College of Commerce showed no difference between over- and under-40's'.

Do individual differences effect reading improvement?

Yes; as might be expected, the more intelligent and enthusiastic students do better. Though this course will help duller or backward students, it is more specifically designed for normal and above average students (as part of a total language-improvement programme).

Shall I be able to keep the reading improvement I make?

Studies in the United States, where students were tested for reading speed and comprehension after six months or one year, generally showed between 60 and 100% retention of the gain, according to the group, type of course, and type of test used. Studies in Britain show essentially the same results.

Poulton reports that one investigator found a 93% retention of gain after 13 weeks, while another found a 61% retention of gain after six or more months (using essay questions). He concludes, 'A moderate reduction in the average speed of reading without much change in comprehension will probably be found to be the rule. This would still be a reasonably satisfactory outcome.'

SUMMARY OF INTRODUCTION

1. This book is for classes at the secondary-school and university level.
2. The main method of reading improvement is by using timed reading passages followed by comprehension tests.
3. The teacher must provide:
 - (a) Encouragement and discipline.
 - (b) Information on reading provided in this manual.
4. Courses usually last ten weeks.
5. This manual has ten chapters.
6. Two weekly class sessions might include one lecture and one timed exercise.
7. Homework of two exercises per week, and sometimes additional homework, is set.
8. Additional class-time may be used to teach comprehension by discussing test questions.
9. Tachistoscopic drill may be used.
10. Students may hope to double their reading speed.
11. Reading faster does not usually lower comprehension.
12. Training in one type of reading matter, and one language, helps to improve reading of other types and other languages.
13. Students may learn to improve their reading at any age, and whatever their present standard in reading.
14. A high proportion of the improvement made is likely to be retained.

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1

THE IMPORTANCE OF READING FASTER

One of the most important functions of the teacher is to provide 'sales talk' for reading improvement. 'You can lead a horse to water but you cannot make him drink.' Students are often at school because the law requires it or because they are working for a certificate or diploma. They must be made to realize the importance of reading improvement.

If the students do not co-operate with the course, try to improve, and do their homework diligently, their reading will not improve. So the teacher must get them on his side and working to improve themselves. This should be fairly easy: one can point out to them that much of their homework consists of reading; that if they go further in their education much reading will be required of them; and that as adults they will probably do much reading, both for business and pleasure, of newspapers, magazines, books and directions. One can suggest the extent to which modern society depends on the ability to communicate through reading: every government official, business man and housewife must read and does read. One might give some examples from the students' own community.

Writing is used as a means of communication, because with it one man can share his knowledge with millions. Furthermore, it is fairly cheap, since modern printing-presses can make all types of material available at a fairly low cost. From the reader's standpoint, reading should be one of the fastest

methods of receiving information. English is usually spoken at about 150 words per minute, while an average person in England or the United States can read at 250 words per minute or faster. So we see that an average person can read nearly twice as fast as he can listen. Speakers of English as a second language can easily learn to read at that speed, or even faster.

	1st week		7th week		Gain	
	Speed (w.p.m.)	Compre- hension (%)	Speed (w.p.m.)	Compre- hension (%)	Speed (w.p.m.)	Compre- hension (%)
B.A. Science	171	56	385	77	214	21
B.A. Arts	220	65	370	72	150	7
Mixed B.A. and sixth form	201	63	395	75	194	12
Sixth form	154	40	381	70	227	10

Table 1. Reading-speed and comprehension improvement of four classes at Makerere University College after 7 weeks of instruction. (Classes were approximately 85 % African students and 15 % Asian. Sixth-form classes are students about 18 years old in a senior secondary school who are preparing for the university in one or two years.)

These reading-improvement scores are based on exercises found in the *Drill Book* and given under classroom conditions. There is some evidence that students, when relaxing at home, do not read as rapidly as they do in class under test conditions but there is also evidence that a good deal of the reading improvement shown in class tests transfers to other types of reading, such as that done for recreation or study.

Even if these improvement figures seem ambitiously high, the teacher might suggest that students could at any rate improve their reading by 25 %. This would mean that in the time normally taken to read four books they could now read five. In the course of a lifetime this could mean important time-saving

or increased reading. Doing a few arithmetic problems on the board with the students' own estimate of the amount of time they spend reading per week will be quite convincing.

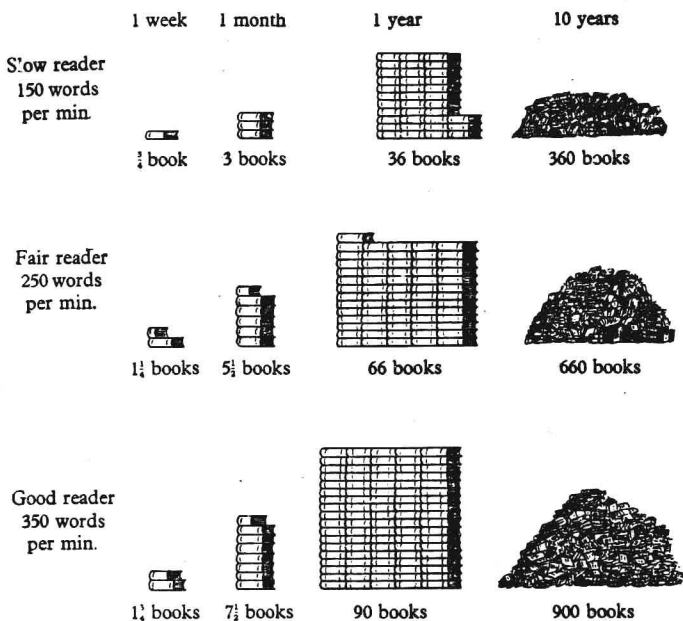


Fig. 1. Sample arithmetic problems showing benefits of increased speed. (These problems assume that the student reads 1 hour per day, 6 days per week; and that the books read are of an average length of 70,000 words.)

Some students may feel that fast readers do not understand as much as slow readers. This fallacy can easily be disproved when you give the first reading test in class. A quick glance at the scores will show that fast readers sometimes have very good comprehension and sometimes poor comprehension. Some slow readers will have good comprehension and others poor comprehension. In short, there is little relationship between

reading speed and comprehension. This statement needs to be made with caution because sometimes when a slow reader suddenly improves his reading speed it will *temporarily* lower his comprehension (this will be discussed in later chapters). But the essential point for the class to grasp is that fast readers can certainly comprehend as much as, or more than, slow readers.

SUMMARY AND SUGGESTED LECTURE OUTLINE

WEEK I, SESSION I

1. The importance of reading in school, for pleasure, or for business.
2. Give local examples.
3. Reading is the fastest form of communication—twice as fast as listening.
4. Reading courses can often double speed without losing comprehension.
5. The teacher may work arithmetic problems on the board using students' estimate of the time spent reading per week, year, etc., using speed increases of 25, 50, 100%.
6. The teacher may also wish to discuss the course with the class (see Introduction summary, p. xii).

INITIAL READING TEST

For the good of the student, the teacher and the administration it is as well to begin the course with as accurate a reading test as possible. Since the object of the course is to show some improvement in reading speed and sometimes in comprehension as well, it is necessary to have some measure of the students' reading speed and comprehension at the beginning of the course. This can be obtained by using the first exercise

in the *Drill Book* or a standardized reading test which measures reading speed and comprehension from any other source. If some test other than the first drill passage is used care must be taken in selecting it so that it will be at the correct level of difficulty.

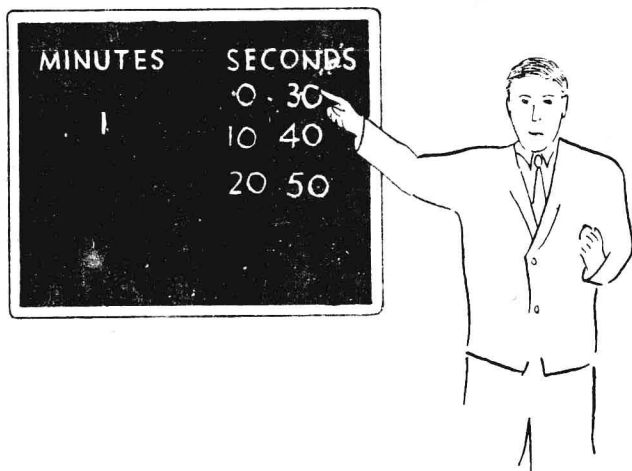


Fig. 2. Method of showing students their reading time.

If the first drill passage is being used as the first reading test, explain to the students that this is to be a test of both reading speed and comprehension. They are to read the passage as rapidly as possible, and to note down the time taken either in the *Drill Book* itself or on a separate sheet of paper.

Timing of the reading test requires a little careful attention from the teacher, but is not difficult. The first requirement is a watch which has a second hand. On the blackboard the teacher then writes the word 'minutes' and the word 'seconds'. Underneath the word 'seconds' he should write a column of numbers: 0, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50. The teacher then starts the class

all at once, saying 'ready—go'. At the same time he glances at his watch and after one minute has passed he writes '1' on the board underneath the word 'minutes'. He then immediately places his finger alongside the zero under the seconds column. Keeping his eye on the watch, he moves his finger down to 10 when 10 more seconds have passed, to 20 when 20 seconds have passed, and so on. When two minutes have passed he quickly erases the '1' under the minute column and writes '2', then continues the same procedure, pointing his finger to the correct number of seconds.

As each student finishes reading his passage he glances up at the board, notes the time that the teacher is indicating, and writes it down in the *Drill Book* or on a separate sheet of paper. It is important that each student should record this time accurately, as it is used to determine his reading speed in words per minute. The teacher should explain carefully how the student is to begin reading when the teacher says 'go' and to look up as soon as he is finished and record the time accurately.

Students should then turn the page and answer the ten multiple-choice questions without looking back at the passage. They should write 'a', 'b', 'c' or 'd', according to their choice of answer either in the *Drill Book* or on a separate sheet of paper. The comprehension questions are not timed, but if one or two of the class continue working long after most have finished a halt should be called, so as not to waste too much time. Extreme slowness is often a measure of poor comprehension and should be penalized a little anyway.

The teacher should not give out the *Drill Book* to the students until he is ready to give the reading test. This will keep the class from looking through the book and becoming familiar with the test material. After the books have been given out the teacher should tell the students not to read on beyond the passage which is set. The teacher should decide whether the

books are to be written in or not. It is easier and neater to let the readers do all the work in the *Drill Book*, but sometimes for the sake of economy and re-use of the *Drill Book* the teacher may tell the students to do all writing on a separate sheet of paper or in a separate notebook.

The comprehension test is often scored by letting the students exchange papers or books and correct each other's work while the teacher slowly reads out the correct answers. But on a first reading test it is perhaps better for the teacher to correct the comprehension test himself so that there will be less chance of error. A normal comprehension score is 70% (7 out of 10 correct). More discussion of normal comprehension will be given in a later chapter.

A reading score in words per minute can be obtained from entering the table at the end of the *Drill Book*. This table gives the reading rate in words per minute, for every ten- or fifteen-second interval, for articles of various lengths. Each timed passage in the *Drill Book* has the approximate number of words in it at the bottom of the page on which it is printed. The first article, for example, contains 525 words; if a student reads that passage in 3 minutes 15 seconds his reading speed would be 162 words per minute. The paragraph below the table also gives directions for determining the words per minute in other ways, though usually use of the table is the easiest.

The teacher should make a chart listing all the students names down the left-hand side. In the first column after the names, the teacher should put the results of the initial test. The reading speed in words per minute should be placed first followed by an oblique stroke and the reading comprehension score as a percentage. Each week, as the students take their test in class, the teacher adds each student's speed and comprehension score to the chart. This chart is an easy way to follow each student's progress as well as a record for the class as a