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Grade 8 Learners' Reading and Comprehension Level

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship of the reading speed and comprehension of Grade 8 ESL students in a public secondary school. The reading speed of the respondents was measured following the administration of an adopted reading comprehension test by the Department of Education. Results revealed that the respondents have an average reading speed of 129.78 wpm, which is the expected oral reading speed among Grade 4 students. In terms of their comprehension, it was found that the average total score is 8.63. Moreover, it was found that there is no significant relationship between the reading speed and comprehension of the students. Based on the results, a reading program that is recommended to enhance the reading abilities of the students is repeated reading. Repeated reading focuses on the automaticity of reading in terms of phonological segmentation, rapid word recognition, and the ability to derive meaning from the text.

Keywords: *reading speed, reading comprehension, ESL learners, repeated reading*

INTRODUCTION

Global innovations have been made to further develop the skills that are expected in a 21st century learner. The skills that are being developed focus on different areas that fall under the five (5) macro skills. All of these skills are beneficial in strengthening and making sure that an individual is well-equipped in responding to the recent innovations and changes occurring according to some worldwide phenomena. One of these skills is reading which is defined by Gates (1949) as —a complex organization of patterns of higher mental processes. Additionally, he stated that this skill has the ability to activate all types of thinking—namely, evaluating, judging, imagining, reasoning, and problem-solving. The types mentioned prove that the role of reading remain to be essential throughout decades.

In comparison, as this skill requires both deep understanding and skills, it has become one of the most complex activities human beings have engaged in. It has been widely known as one of the most difficult to grasp for readers (Stuart & Stainthorp, 2016). The reason behind this, as stated by Lee (1999) and Sellers (2000), is due to some factors such as linguistic competence, cultural awareness, and even motivation. This skill stems out in different areas; however, some readers encounter severe difficulties in specific areas of reading specifically in reading fluency that is also associated in reading speed, and in reading comprehension due to their reading attitudes.

Fluency itself can be covered in different skills. When a reader sees bigger units as wholes (chunking), a process which assists reading more quickly

(automaticity), this is fluency (Grabe, 2010). According to Nuttal (1996), there is a close link among speed, enjoyment, and comprehension. This then relates with Grabe's (2010) claim stating that there has been an association between reading fluency and comprehension in a wide range of research, particularly in the English L1 contexts, over the past 20 years. Reading fluency is an under-researched area in second language settings but its various dimensions have been receiving increasing attention (Grabe, 2014).

Two theories on how fluency contributes to a reader's understanding are stated by Kuhn & Stahl (2000). The first one emphasizes on the contribution of automaticity to fluent reading while the second one stresses on the role of prosody. Additionally, despite the lack of exact definition for fluency that is yet to be agreed upon, it contains three primary components: speed, accuracy, and prosody. Fluency has three components and these are (1) speed, (2) accuracy, and (3) fluidity (Kuhn & Stahl, 2000). However, speed and comprehension are two of the main elements of reading fluency (Aramagan & Gene, 2017). It is implied that reading slowly means poor comprehension for there is lack of comprehension, lack of automaticity when decoding word meanings, and lack of pleasure while reading (Chang, 2012). As stated by Nuttal (1996), —speed, enjoyment, and comprehension are closely linked with one another! However, this claim is contradicted by Berkoff (1979, as cited by Sackstein, Spark, and Jenkins, 2015), stating that a fast reader does not necessarily mean that he is also an efficient reader. According to LaBerge and Samuels' *limited attention model*, rapid and accurate word recognition, using unused processing memory, must be achieved first in order to have a superior comprehension. As stated by Samuels, (1976) and Aramagan & Gene (2017), the level of comprehension may be lower when a text is read fast because attention is lower. This highlights the presence of attention in reading with comprehension.

The relationship between reading fluency and reading comprehension development in L2 contexts are less investigated (Grabe, 2014). Having difficulty in learning a second language is often the result of students with language-based learning disabilities or differences (Csillag, 2016). However, in the secondary context, students are expected to read textbooks, handouts, recreational materials, and non-academic materials in countries where the medium of instruction is English, specifically on ESL countries. The language used in most of these materials is English. It is imperative for

secondary school students to read these materials and for them to understand these materials, they need to have a good command of reading speed and comprehension.

In the context of secondary students, speed with comprehension must be improved to continue to the next courses (Adaba, 2017; Miller & Groff, 2005). Subsequently, there is not much study focusing specifically on Grade 8 students in terms of these variables. Most of the studies about reading fluency or reading speed and comprehension are directed towards adult learners or learners at the tertiary level. From there, these two components—the context from Grade 8 ESL learners, must be identified and must be improved. Reading speed and comprehension are distinct however these two must be improved simultaneously in order to develop one's skill in reading. Both must be included in any reading program (Gates, 1921, as cited by Sackstein, Spark, & Jenkins, 2015). With regular practice, increasing reading speed is possible (Guy, 2015, p. 65). Hence, the main focus of this study is to find the reading speed and comprehension of the Grade 8 ESL learners and to see the relationship between the two variables.

METHODOLOGY

Instruments

The researchers used various instruments for data gathering. First, they made use of a demographic profile which was used to identify the gender and age of the students. Second, two (2) reading selections were taken from the Philippines' Department of Education site, namely, "The Storm" and "Ursula Pugh."

"Ursula Pugh" will be read silently by all students and they will answer fifteen (15) comprehension questions related to the selection.

Respondents

According to Hasbrouck and Tindal (2006), a reader generally cannot orally read faster than his ability to read in the 8th grading level. Adding to that, Grabe (2014) stated that the relationship between the reading fluency and reading comprehension development in L2 contexts are less investigated on. Hence, the study will be conducted among Grade 8 ESL learners specifically in a government public school in Manila, Philippines named Araullo High School.

Two sections were involved in the Grade 8 level. A total of sixty-four (64) students were selected to participate in the study. There were eighteen (18) boys and forty-six (46) girls.

Administration and Procedure Guidelines

Demographic profiling was done to first identify the information about the students in terms of their names, age, and gender. Consequently, each respondent was tasked to read the selection, —The Storm! to gather the data for their reading speed. To determine the time spent in reading, the task of student-respondents while reading was recorded. This test was then followed by the reading comprehension test with the use of the selection entitled —Ursula Pugh!. The students were tasked to read the text silently and answer the corresponding comprehension questions about the text.

After the administration of the different reading instruments, the researchers proceeded in organizing the data gathered. For the demographic profile, each respondent was represented through numbers, as well as their gender and age. Subsequently, the reading speed of each student was measured. The researchers employed the reading speed formula and sorted the data collected according to the oral reading rates per level of Hasbrouck and Tindal. The comprehension test was then checked to see which questions the respondents mostly got the correct answer or which questions they mostly got erroneous answers. In determining the percentage of students who got the correct answer for each item, the frequency formula was employed.

In seeking the relationship between the reading speed and comprehension of the students, the Pearson Correlation Coefficient formula was applied, and the data used were the reading speed profile of them and the results of their reading comprehension test.

FINDINGS

1. Reading Speed of Grade 8 Students

Distribution of Respondents Based on Reading Speed Level

Grade level	Age	Reading Speed Level	Frequency	Percentage
8	13-14	2	3	4.69%
8	12-15	3	22	34.38%
8	12-15	4	21	32.81%
8	12-14	5	11	17.19%
8	13	7	1	1.56%
8	N/A	6	0	0%
8	12-14	8	6	9.38%
8	12-15	TOTAL	64	100.00%

Out of the 64 respondents, 4.69% (3) are at level 2. For levels 3 and 4, 34.38% and 32.81% (22 and 21) are pegged at these levels. Meanwhile, there are 11 respondents or 17.19% at level 5. For the last two levels, level 7 and 8, there are 1 (1.56%) and 6 (9.38%) respondents respectively.

From the table above, only 6 out of 64 students were at their appropriate reading speed. Chang & Millett (2017), stated that there are many variables that may affect reading rates such as the reading purpose, text complexity, and text difficulty related to an individual's reading ability. The variables that may have affected the reading speed of the students are the text complexity and text difficulty.

According to Birch (2002), as cited by Guimba and Alico (2015), limited vocabulary contributes to difficulties the learners experience in reading. It can be implied that this is a reason behind the poor reading rate of the students.

Reading speed of Grade 8 EFL students in words-per-minute

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Reading Speed (Words per Minute)	129.7783	16.24692	101.84	176.40

For Reading Speed which is measured in words per minute, the average score is almost 130 words with a standard deviation of 16.25. The lowest score for this test is 102 wholesome the highest is 176.

On a study by Chang (2012), among thirty-five part-time adult EFL students, the average words per minute (wpm) calculated was 102 wpm. This is significantly lower than the results from the ESL secondary students of this study. Moreover, based on the oral reading rates of Hasbrouck and Tindal (2006), the average oral reading rate of these learners belong to second graders. According to Longcope (2009), ESL learners have more exposure to L2 compared to EFL learners, hence, this can be a reason.

2. Reading Comprehension Level of Grade 8 students

Frequency of Correct Answers in the Literal Level of Reading

Level	Question	Item number	Frequency	Percentage
Literal	As used in paragraph 5, why was the narrator's decision fortuitous?	5	28	43.75%
Literal	What program were the boys suggesting when their mother wanted them to attend theatre classes?	6	63	98.44%
Literal	Why were the boys immediately thrown on almost every production possible?	7	32	50.00%
Literal	What convinced her to go out and be in the Ursula's Children Theater?	8	39	60.94%
Literal	Among the lessons learned by the boys which one is not included?	9	22	34.38%
Literal	Which of the following events did not happen to Ursula?	10	47	73.44%

The findings suggests that several questions in the literal level were deemed as difficult by the students but most of them found the questions rather easy for a number got the correct answer. A number of students did not get the correct answer in questions 5 and 9 having only 28 and 22, respectively, out of the 64 students got the correct answer which is equivalent to 43.75% and 34.38% respectively. However, 63 students were able to answer question number 6 which is equivalent to 98.44%. Fortunately, more than half of the participants were able to answer questions 7, 8 and 10 having 32, 39, and 47 students, respectively, were able to get the correct answer which is equivalent to 50%, 60.94%, and 73.44% respectively. This result implies that the students only aimed to finish the task at hand and did not work on to comprehend the text. It is like reading for the sake of accomplishment.

Frequency of Correct Answers in the Interpretive Level of Reading

Level	Question	Item number	Frequency	Percentage
Applied	If you were on these kids' position what will you do to achieve success?	12	57	89.06%
Applied	Which best describes the literary technique used in the following sentence from paragraph 9?	15	39	60.94%

The findings suggest that the students had a hard time answering questions in the interpretative level. In item number 3, only 12 out of the 64 students were able to get the correct answer which is equivalent to only 18.75%. In the table above, you would see that item number 3 only asks for the definition of a term which is quite obvious already, however, it is where the most number of students got the wrong answer. On the other hand, item numbers 1, 2, and 4 have similarities in a sense that you have to use context clues in these items to find the antonym and synonym of the word being asked for. An average number of students got the correct answer for numbers 1 and 2 having 43 and 35 students, respectively, out of the 64 students got the correct answer which is equivalent to 67.19% and 54.69% respectively. However, they found item number 4 difficult since only 23 out of the 64 students got the correct answer which is equivalent to 35.94%. It could be inferred that the students were unfamiliar and deemed the word in item number 4 as a foreign word having a minimal number of students who got the correct answer. Items 11, 13, and 14 are mostly questions that centers on one's inferences regarding the story. In item 11, 52 students were able to get the correct answer which is equivalent to 81.25%, while in items 13 and 14 only 27 and 28 students, respectively, out of the 64 students got the correct answer which is equivalent to 42.19% and 59.38% respectively. The data showed in the table only summarizes the fact that the Grade 8 students of Araullo High School are not good in making inferences or they are just too lazy to bring out the creativity in them. Most of the students did not get the correct answer in a number of items which implies that they need to work on their skill of making inferences or making meaning out of the text read.

Frequency of Correct Answers in the Applied Level of Reading

Level	Question	Item number	Frequency	Percentage
Applied	If you were on these kids' position what will you do to achieve success?	12	57	89.06%
Applied	Which best describes the literary technique used in the following sentence from paragraph 9?	15	39	60.94%

According to the data stated above, a lot of students are having a hard time with regards to their reading comprehension. This is evident with the results of their reading comprehension tests. With the literal level

questions, most of the students incorrectly answered them. Moreover, the researchers have observed that more students were able to correctly answer the comprehension questions belonging to the applied level rather than the interpretative questions or the questions wherein they would have to infer what they have learned throughout the text that they have read. Consequently, the data have shown that the Grade 8 students from Araullo High School could be regarded as students who have low reading comprehension due to the fact that a number were not able to answer correctly questions at the literal level and also because they were not skilled in making inferences on the text that they have read.

Descriptive Statistics for Test Scores

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Total Score in Reading Comprehension	8.625	2.1119	3.0	12.0

The average total score of the respondents in Reading Comprehension is 8.63 or almost 9 with a standard deviation of 2.11. The lowest score for this test is 3 while the highest is 12.

According to Cayubit, a Filipino child needs to develop their higher order skills and functional literacy for if a Filipino child has sufficient reading skills, then he/she would have greater chances of success in school. On the other hand, those with poor reading skills, when assessed properly, are diagnosed with reading disability due to the fact that poor reading skills are manifested with comprehension.

3. Relationship of Reading Speed to the Comprehension of Grade 8 Students

Determining the Relationship of the Variables Based on Pearson's Correlation Test

Test	Pearson Correlation Coefficient	Significance (p-value)
Reading Comprehension vs. Reading Speed	0.166	0.19

When Reading Comprehension is tested against Reading Speed, there is no significant relationship (p-value=0.19).

The finding suggests that there is no significant relationship between the reading speed and reading comprehension of the participants. This implies that the speed of reading does not affect the readers' understanding of the text. There are certain indicators that explain the reason behind the insignificant relationship between these two among grade 8 Filipino learners.

Luz (2007) as literacy and reading require a different level of competency; reading requires development of other skills, as well, for one to be competent enough in it. This indicates that regardless of having an appropriate level of reading speed from the participants, there is still poor performance in their comprehension.

4. Repeated Reading

With the data gathered, it is seen that the performance of the students in terms of reading speed and comprehension is in the lower than the level for their age or level as readers. One of the most effective activities suited for this study would be the Repeated reading - tasks the students to read a short passage for number of times until they are able to achieve an appropriate level of their reading speed and comprehension (Anderson, 1999). This is then the recommended reading activity since it helps the students remember the details of the text and they read it faster for the next times they read it as the text already becomes automatic for them.

CONCLUSION

1. The respondents have a lower speed reading rate

Out of the 64 Grade 8 respondents, the most number of students have a reading speed level of Grade 3 and 4 with 22 and 21 respondents respectively which is based on the oral reading speed rate of Hasbrouck & Tindal (2006). With this, the researchers concluded that the respondents still have a lower reading speed rate as compared with the matrix presented by Hasbrouck & Tindal (2006).

2. General data of word-per-minute (wpm)

Based on the findings, the researchers can conclude that the reading speed of the learner is an average of 129.77 wpm which is close to 130 words. The fastest reader can read 176.40, rounded off to 176 words per minute and the slowest reader can read 101.84, rounded off to 102 words per minute.

2.1 Fastest reader

The fastest reader can read 176.40, rounded off to 176 words per minute. Based on the oral reading speed rate of Hasbrouck & Tindal, 2006, which is a reading rate of a Grade 8 student already, matched with their current grade level. It goes to show that the student can read their reading selections with ease.

2.2 Slowest reader

The slowest reader can read 101.84, rounded off to 102 words per minute. Based on the oral reading speed rate of Hasbrouck & Tindal, 2006, which is a reading rate of a Grade 2 student. With their current grade level, the student may have difficulty in reading in class.

3. Reading comprehension of Grade 8 students

The researchers conclude that students can easily answer item number 6, "What program were the boys suggesting when their mother wanted them to attend the theatre class?" With sixty-three (63) students got it right in our comprehension questions. It is a literal question - the basic level in the reading comprehension level. While, on the other hand, the students had a difficulty in answering item number 2, "As used in paragraph 3, which is the synonym for biased?" With only twelve (12) students got it right in our comprehension questions. It is a interpretative question - the second level in the reading comprehension level.

4. Relationship between Reading Speed to Comprehension

Reading speed does not necessarily affect the reading comprehension performance of the students. It means that when a student reading speed is fast, it does not guarantee that the reading comprehension of the student is high, and vice versa. It goes to show that students may read fast but will not comprehend the text completely. Likewise, when students have great comprehension but cannot easily read the text orally. Teachers must be observant of these things and balance each factor out.

This study is focused on reading orally; students have the tendency to focus on decoding words rather than comprehending the whole text itself. This observation is supported by the study of Grabe (2014), stating that L2 readers tend to focus more on decoding the words read rather than comprehending it. As they decode the words, they tend to read slower which affected their reading speed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Bigger population gives bigger sample size

There was a limited size of population in this study wherein 64 students were only able to partake in the actual data gathering.

2. Public and Private school

The environment, specifically the external noises and temperature, where the data gathering took place may have been a factor that affected the performance of the students in terms of reading. The researchers recommend that the data gathering should be held in a more conducive place where the students can be comfortable and focus more on reading.

3. Focus Group Discussion

As there has been a limited time given to data gathering, one significant type of data gathering was not able to be conducted which is the FGD or focus group discussion. This is significant as the researchers would be able to identify the dilemma that the students had during the data gathering. This would also further elaborate the reason behind the findings based on directly from the respondents themselves.

4. Reading Anxiety

The difficulties experienced by language learners would be the limited vocabulary they have on the language which affected their decoding of words they are not familiar with. According to Birch (2002), as cited by Guimba and Alico (2015), one factor that contributes to the difficulties experienced by language learners is the limited vocabulary they have on a certain text. This then contributed difficulty in decoding words which provokes reading anxiety. It is recommended that the text that will be used must have less factors of contributing anxiety and testing the reading anxiety of the students could also be

incorporated as this highly affects the reading speed and comprehension of student. ■

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