Familiarizing High School Students with English Books

Kumiko Fushino
Tokyo University of Pharmacy and Life Science

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Extensive reading is important to develop reading ability. However, college-oriented Japanese high school students seem to believe only intensive reading enables them to prepare for college entrance examinations. In order to familiarize these students with English books, timed reading training was conducted by utilizing six easy stories. Ten students participated in this training for 12 weeks and recorded the results. While focusing on rate building, they were actually exposed to English books. Then, a questionnaire was given to them to investigate their attitudinal and habitual changes in reading English. The answers revealed a drastic improvement in their reading habits and attitudes toward reading English. As for reading speed, the results showed a modest improvement on average with a few exceptions. Therefore, this attempt was successful in bringing about positive attitudinal and habitual changes in reading English. However, this training was insufficient for a noticeable improvement in their reading rate.

多読はリーディング力を養成する上で必要である。しかし、大学を目指す日本の高校生は精読だけが入試に備える方法だと思っているようである。このような生徒を英語の本に親しませるために、やさしい６つの物語を使った速読トレーニングが行われた。10人の生徒がこのトレーニングに１２週間参加し、その結果を記録した。リーディング速度の向上に焦点を当てつつ、彼らは実際にはたくさんの英語の本に接したわけである。その後、彼らの読書習慣及び読書に対

する態度の変化を調べるためにアンケートが実施された。その回答からは英語の読書習慣、態度において目覚しい向上が認められた。リーディング速度については何人かの例外を除いて、控えめな向上が示された。したがって、この試みは英語リーディングについての習慣・態度の向上をもたらしたという点では成功であるが、リーディング速度に際立った向上をもたらすには不十分であった。

Background and Research Objectives

A lot of Japanese high school students study English very hard for college entrance examinations, and much of their school time is spent on reading instruction. However, they do not seem to be able to comprehend English texts properly without the help of dictionaries. My impression is that they read too slowly, relying only on bottom-up reading skills and being unable to utilize top-down processing strategies. This fragmented reading results in a failure to get a global understanding of the text they have read. Besides, they often show nervousness and dislike for reading English. In general, their attitude toward English reading is pretty negative.

According to the interactive model of the reading process, we utilize skills at all levels interactively in order to process and interpret the text when we read. In fluent, adequately accurate reading, bottom-up processes and top-down processes interact with each other (Eskey, 1988). However, the grammar-translation method is still dominant in Japanese high school English classes, and only bottom-up decoding skills seem to

be emphasized, with developing top-down processing skills being neglected. As Eskey (1988, p. 228) writes "people learn to read by reading, not by doing exercises," students need to read extensively. Unfortunately, Japanese students do not seem to be reading sufficiently. Many of them, as well as many of their English teachers, mistakenly believe that tackling difficult passages, analyzing sentences grammatically, and translating them into Japanese are the only ways to prepare adequately for entrance examinations. However, as recent research has revealed (Guest, 2000), questions on college entrance examinations require more comprehensive reading skills. One cannot learn this from fragmented reading or sentence-decoding skills. One way to narrow this gap is to help students acquire adequate reading skills and become fluent, confident readers. Also important is to persuade them to read extensively by convincing them that reading English is fun and reading easy stories is not a waste of time. If they realize that they can enjoy reading, even with their limited linguistic knowledge, then they will probably cultivate more positive attitudes toward reading English. I believe that it is these positive attitudes that lead students to become good readers.

This is the starting point of this attempt: timed reading training (TRT) utilizing graded readers. In an ordinary sense, TRT is done to improve reading speed. Increasing reading speed is very important because, as Adams points out, "only to the extent that the ability

to recognize and capture the meaning of print is rapid, effortless, and automatic can the reader have available the cognitive energy and resources on which true comprehension depends" (1994, p. 840). However, in this attempt, timed reading has another purpose: familiarizing students with English books. Therefore, instead of a workbook specially written for TRT, easy-to-read stories were chosen from commercially published graded readers.

During the TRT, I noticed some positive changes in my students' attitudes toward reading. In order to confirm these findings objectively, I made a questionnaire and asked them to fill it out after the TRT. I also evaluated the effect of the TRT on reading speed. The following are the research questions:

1. What reading habits and attitudes toward reading in English do Japanese high school students have?
2. What effects will the TRT have on the students' attitudes toward reading in English if easy stories are used?
3. Will the TRT actually increase students' reading speed?

The Study
Participants and Course Description
This study was conducted from February to April 2000 at a private language institute in Saitama, Japan. Ten high school students (eight girls and two boys) participated in this study. They were second-year students at the beginning of the study, and were third-year students at the end. They all went to different schools. At the institute, they took two one-year college entrance examination preparatory courses (grammar and reading) which started in February 2000, and the TRT was conducted as part of the instruction in the reading course.

The students were divided into two classes based on their performance on two tests, one for vocabulary and the other for grammar, word usage, and reading comprehension, administered prior to the course. The detailed description of the tests is beyond the scope of this paper. The test results indicated that the students' vocabulary knowledge was somewhere between 1000 and 2000 words. Their grammar/word usage and reading ability was almost the same as that of those who could pass the pre-second grade STEP test (The Society for Testing English Proficiency, Inc.) or higher. Class A consisted of the five stronger students and class B, of the five weaker students.

From February to April, in-class instruction in the reading course was focused mainly on developing bottom-up decoding skills. Devine (1988), Cummins (1979), and others suggest that in order for L2 readers to be able to read effectively, they need to have developed some proficiency—the threshold level of linguistic competence. I felt that I should wait until the students

developed more syntactic and lexical knowledge and became comfortable with my teaching style before I taught top-down reading skills and strategies. However, I also perceived the necessity of increasing reading speed and developing confidence. Thus, the timed reading exercises were assigned as homework in this period. The instruction on how to do these exercises was given in the first lesson of this course.

Materials for the TRT

Six stories were chosen from commercially published graded readers for this TRT. They were: Red Shoes (Kaye, 1988), The Piper of Hamelin (Toyne, 1987), Gulliver's Travels (Storer, 1988), Mujina (Hearn, 1983), Girl Meets Boy (Strange, 1995), and Love or Money (Akinyemi, 1990). All the stories were beginner or elementary level stories (EPER levels E or F with about 500 to 800 head words, cited in Day and Bambord, 1998, p. 173). These books were considered to be far below the students' vocabulary and grammar levels. I also thought that easy novels would raise their interests in reading and would boost their confidence in L2 reading. Some books were chosen in consultation with an EPER bibliography of high-quality language learner literature (ibid. pp. 174-212). However, because of the time restriction, students' preference was not investigated upon choosing books.

Each story was divided into several sections, followed by five true-or-false questions. The running words of each text were counted and written on each exercise sheet. Since I divided the stories not to distort their meanings, the length of each passage varies, ranging from about 150 words to 400 words.

Design and Procedures
• Timed Reading Training

The TRT lasted for 12 weeks from the beginning of February to the end of April. The students were told to do four to six exercises each week. They kept track of the reading speed and the number of correct answers to the questions on their record sheets (Appendix 1). They also calculated each week's average speed and made a graph. The teacher checked the record sheets every week. The following directions were given on the outset:

1. Read as quickly as possible without a dictionary. However, try to maintain about 80% of the comprehension level by utilizing the true-or-false questions as a pacemaker. This instruction was given since, as Nuttall (1996) mentions, increasing reading speed without proper comprehension is meaningless.
2. Time only the reading time.
3. When answering the questions, do not go back to the text.
4. Read a passage a day.

After 12 weeks, the record sheets were collected and investigated by the teacher.

• *Questionnaire*
When the TRT finished, a questionnaire written in Japanese was distributed to the students. The questions and the results translated into English are shown in Appendix 2. There were 23 questions: Questions 1 to 10 were about students' L2 reading experience, habits, and attitudes they had before the TRT; questions 11 to 16, attitudinal and habitual changes through the training; questions 17 to 21, their opinions about the TRT. Questions 22 and 23 were open-ended questions, which provided them with opportunities to express their feelings about TRT freely.

Results and Data Analysis
Timed reading Results
• *Reading Speed.*
As Graph 1 shows, the average reading speed (words per minute, w/m) of the ten students increased as they proceeded, from 142 w/m (Week 1) to 171 w/m (Week 12), which was a gain of 29 w/m (Table 1). Seven students improved their reading speed while three students decreased it. The average rate of the five better students (class A) was 156 w/m in Week 1, and 194 w/m in the Week 12, a gain of 38 words in 12 weeks. The five weaker students (class B) increased 21 words from

127 w/m to 148 w/m on average. This shows that more proficient readers read faster and improved their reading speed more than weaker readers did. However, each student showed a different degree of improvement from the others. While one student increased her reading speed by 85 words from 179 to 264 w/m, another student decreased it by 24 words from 243 to 219 w/m. Also, there's a lot of difference in the reading speed between the fastest and the slowest readers. In Week 12 the fastest reader read 264 w/m while the slowest student read only 111 w/m.

Table 1 Timed Reading Results (words/min)												
Feb. 2000 - April 2000												
	W-1	W-2	W-3	W-4	W-5	W-6	W-7	W-8	W-9	W-10	W-11	W-12	Average
A	137	135	167	176	164	155	194	160	183	194	188	193	171
B	243	210	209	295	258	263	211	287	220	215	227	219	238
C	97	107	96	99	100	98	110	91	112	102	110	116	103
D	179	185	176	148	175	179	189	185	208	213	270	264	198
E	125	136	121	143	145	151	153	150	149	151	155	179	147
Ave.(Group A)	156	155	154	172	168	169	171	175	174	175	190	194	171
F	95	116	154	134	141	145	172	180	206	201	189	194	161
G	123	198	195	94	119	129	107	109	132	110	116	111	129
H	108	99	102	129	142	124	140	116	113	140	141	120	123
I	158	140	107	119	133	133	134	119	128	125	149	133	132
J	153	175	218	197	187	158	176	157	142	163	154	181	172
Ave.(Group B)	127	146	155	135	144	138	146	136	144	148	150	148	143
Total Average	142	150	155	153	156	154	159	155	159	161	170	171	157

Table 1: *Timed Reading Responses (words/min)*

Graph 1 Timed Reading Results (words/min)
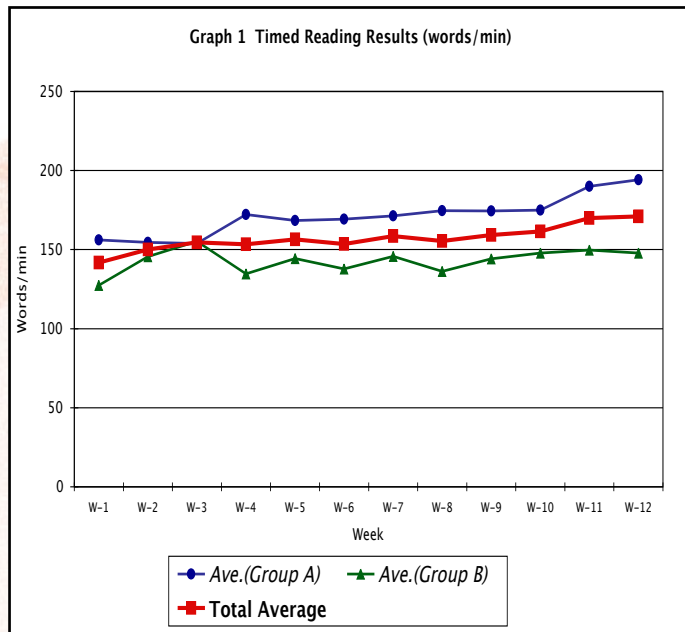
Graph 1: *Timed Reading Responses (words/min)*

• *Comprehension*
Table 2 indicates that all the students used the comprehension questions as a pacemaker and maintained approximately 80 percent of the comprehension level. The average number of correct answers was 4.2 in Class A and 3.8 in Class B (Table 2), and this difference may imply that the passages were easier for the stronger students to comprehend than for the weaker ones. Another finding was that two slow

readers (Students C and G) answered the questions more correctly on average than faster readers, which may indicate they could not overcome their tendency of trying to understand everything written. The reader who increased her reading speed the most (Student D) decreased her comprehension level from 4.8 (Week 1) to 3.8 (Week 12), which shows she improved her reading speed at the expense of comprehension, but still maintained an acceptable comprehension level.

Table 2 Timed Reading Results (comprehension)												
Feb. 2000 - April 2000												
	W-1	W-2	W-3	W-4	W-5	W-6	W-7	W-8	W-9	W-10	W-11	W-12	Average
A	3.8	4.6	4.2	3.8	4.2	4.4	3.7	4.4	4.2	3.8	3.8	4.0	4.1
B	4.2	4.2	4.2	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.6	4.2	3.6	4.4	4.0	4.1
C	4.0	4.8	4.4	4.3	4.4	4.2	4.5	4.2	4.4	4.8	4.0	4.8	4.4
D	4.8	4.6	4.6	3.5	4.8	4.8	4.5	4.2	4.4	4.0	3.8	3.8	4.3
E	3.8	4.8	5.0	4.5	4.8	4.8	4.2	3.6	3.6	4.0	3.2	2.8	4.1
Ave.(Group A)	4.1	4.6	4.5	4.0	4.4	4.4	4.2	4.2	4.2	4.0	3.8	3.9	4.2
F	4.4	4.8	4.2	3.5	4.6	4.0	3.7	4.0	3.6	3.6	3.4	3.6	4.0
G	4.0	4.8	4.2	3.5	4.4	4.2	4.3	4.4	4.6	4.2	4.4	4.8	4.3
H	4.6	4.2	3.4	3.5	3.0	3.6	3.2	3.8	4.0	4.0	3.8	4.0	3.8
I	3.0	3.8	4.0	3.3	4.6	4.0	3.3	4.0	3.8	4.2	3.8	4.0	3.8
J	3.6	3.8	3.8	3.3	3.0	3.0	3.2	2.6	3.0	3.0	3.6	3.4	3.3
Ave.(Group B)	3.9	3.8	3.8	3.5	3.9	3.8	3.5	3.8	3.8	3.8	3.8	3.9	3.8
Total Average	4.0	4.4	4.2	3.7	4.2	4.1	3.9	4.0	4.0	3.9	3.8	3.9	4.0

Table 2: *Timed Reading Results (comprehension)*

Questionnaire Results
Since this study was conducted at a private language institute where each class was very small, intimate, and grade-free, the answers to the questionnaire seem to reflect the students' honest opinions. Thus it should be considered to be fairly accurate.

• Previous Reading Habits

As I had expected, the students had not read many English books for pleasure before the TRT. Half of them had read no English books other than their textbooks and workbooks despite the fact that eight students expressed their liking to read Japanese books. Nine students wrote that they did not know the existence of English books that they could enjoy even with their limited English ability. Among those who had some experience reading English books, only one student had read more than five books, and the rest had read only a few. As for dictionary use, they confessed that when they read English books for pleasure they did not rely on their dictionaries very much but used them a lot when they read their textbooks. At the same time, they wrote that they had guessed the meaning of words from the context. These two results look contradictory, but it is not clear when they attempted to guess because the question on the questionnaire did not specify that they should state particular occasions.

• Effects of the TRT

The TRT appears to have positive effects on the students' reading habits and attitudes. Eight students thought that their reading speed increased at least a little. The students also mentioned the amount of the reading prescribed was adequate, and nine of them were willing to do more TRT with a little more difficult passages or at least did not mind doing so. In short, they seemed to perceive this TRT beneficial. As for their attitudinal changes, seven students reported their decreased hesitation in or resistance to reading English through the TRT. Eight students wrote that they started enjoying English reading, and nine indicated they would like to read English books after college entrance examinations. Most of them reported their gained confidence in reading English (at least easy English) and thought they became capable of it without using dictionaries. Concerning the ways they read, five students wrote that they did not translate sentences into Japanese while engaging in the TRT, and two students mentioned that translating into Japanese became unnecessary as they proceeded through the training. All the students reported that they kept reading without going back and forth, or they only did so occasionally. However, despite the fact the instructor told the students to do one timed reading exercise at a time, only three students actually followed the instruction. Six students read some or a whole week's exercises at a time. One student even confessed that she sometimes postponed the exercises for a few weeks. This may have affected the results of the TRT.

Discussion and Conclusion

The questionnaire revealed students' rare experience in L2 extensive reading, negative attitudes toward reading

English, and poor reading habits before the TRT. However after the three-month TRT, they improved their attitudes toward L2 reading drastically, reducing their resistance to reading English and starting to like it. Their increased interest and confidence in reading English were also reported. Regarding reading speed, the TRT result shows a modest improvement in their reading speed. However, a close observation disclosed some individual differences in the development of their reading speed. The reason why some students' reading speed decreased must be further analyzed. Besides, the fact that even the average speed at week 12 did not reach the crucial 200 w/m (Eskey and Grabe, 1988) may imply that this TRT was effective but not sufficient to improve students' reading speed remarkably. The right amount of reading needed in order to gain the desired speed requires further investigation.

From educational points of view, this TRT can be viewed as a good first step toward turning my students into good, fluent readers. However, how long they keep these positive attitudes after this training depends on later reading instructions, and a follow-up study would be required. Also, the materials used in the TRT are much easier than those the students will encounter on college entrance examinations or in the real world. Therefore, some intervention is necessary to narrow this gap.

These findings are not readily generalizable because of the small number of participants. The design of the questionnaire also requires further refinement. Therefore, this study must be regarded as a pilot study. However, the fact that the students did read much more than ordinary college-oriented high school students should not be forgotten. Moreover, this TRT has had positive effects on students' perceptions toward reading English. The enjoyment and confidence brought about through the TRT are what students need to become good readers. In this sense, I can conclude this TRT was successful.

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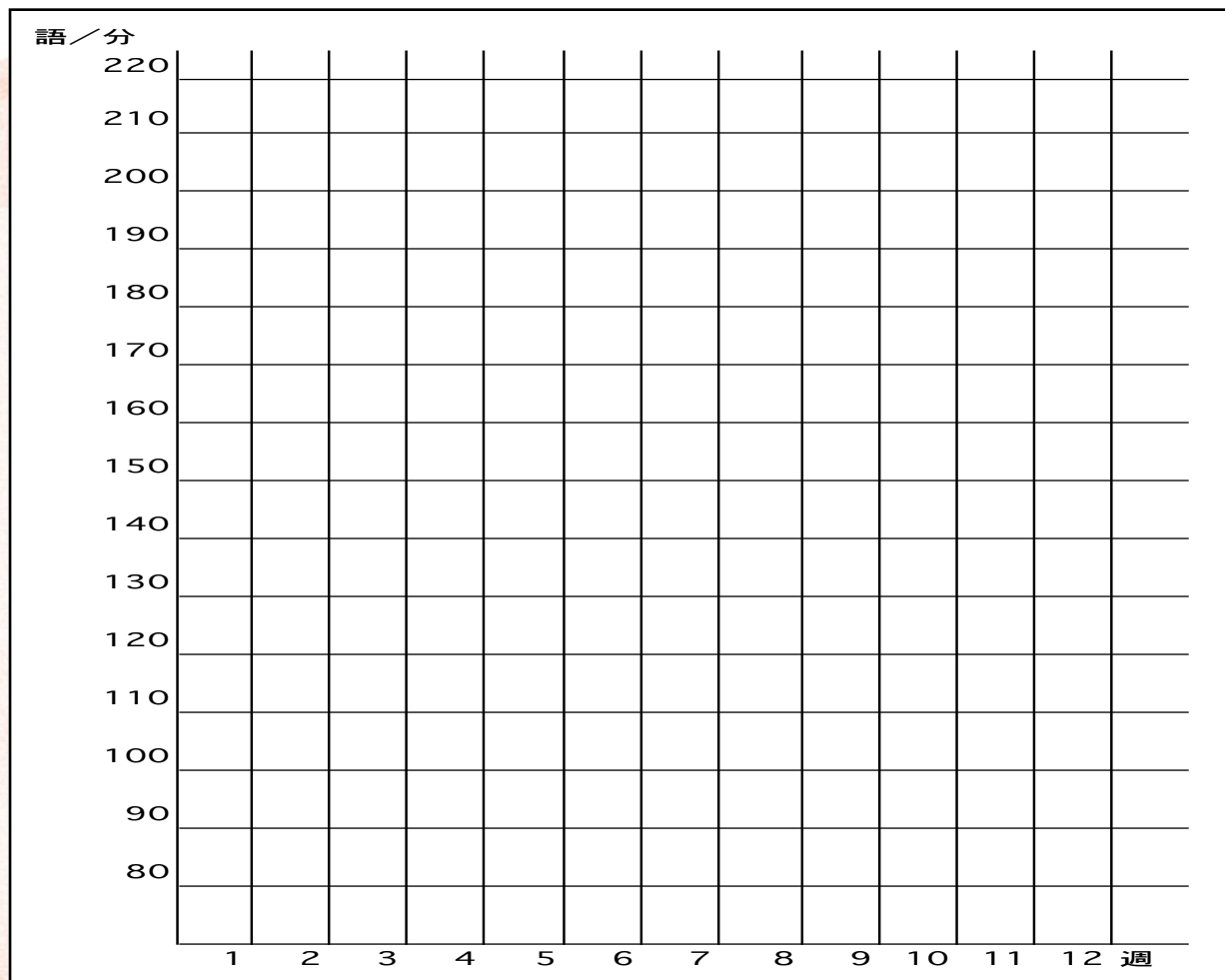
Appendix 1

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英文速読練習　記録表

</div>

週	第１週					第２週					第３週					第４週				
回																				
語／分																				
正答数																				
週平均	語／分					語／分					語／分					語／分				

週	第５週					第６週					第７週					第８週				
回																				
語／分																				
正答数																				
週平均	語／分					語／分					語／分					語／分				

週	第９週					第10週					第11週					第12週				
回																				
語／分																				
正答数																				
週平均	語／分					語／分					語／分					語／分				

語／分の計算のしかた
① 　読むのにかかった時間を「秒」に換算する。例）２分34秒　→　154秒
② 　語数を秒で割る。　　　　　　　　　　　　例）語数＝230語　230÷154＝1.49
③ 　その答えに60を掛ける。　　　　　　　　　例）1.49×60＝89語／分

グラフ

語／分

220	
210	
200	
190	
180	
170	
160	
150	
140	
130	
120	
110	
100	
90	
80	

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 週

Appendix 2

The Results of the Questionnaire (English Translation)

1. Have you ever read English books other than school textbooks, side-readers, and workbooks? (Experience of reading for pleasure)
   1) yes--5 books or more (1 student)
   2) yes--2-4 books (4)
   3) no (5)

2. What did you do when you encountered unknown words while reading for pleasure? (Ways of reading English books) This question was asked only to those who answered "yes" in Question 1.
   1) checked almost all words (0)
   2) occasionally checked (1)
   3) seldom checked (0)
   4) guessed first where necessary, then checked dictionary for confirmation (1)
   5) marked unknown words and checked after reading the book (1)
   6) used glossary and didn't use dictionary (0)
   7) didn't check at all (2)

3. Why have you not read English books? (Reasons for not reading English books) This question was asked only to those who answered "no" in Question 1.
   1) had never been told to read such books (1)
   2) didn't know that there were books that I could read with my English ability (3)
   3) no books that I wanted to read (1)
   4) don't like reading in the first place (0)
   5) didn't like English and hated to see English books other than school textbooks (0)
   6) tried to read but gave up in the middle (0)

4. Do you like reading Japanese books? (Overall preference of reading in L1)
   1) like very much (2)
   2) like a little (6)
   3) don't like very much (0)
   4) dislike (1)
   5) hate (1)

5. Did you know that there are books that you can read with your current level of English? (Knowledge of graded readers)
   1) yes (1)
   2) no (9)

6. Did you translate passages in your English textbook into Japanese when you read them? (Translation while reading)
    1) translated everything (2)
    2) usually translated (5)
    3) didn't translate except difficult part (3)
    4) never translated (0)

7. Did you use a dictionary when you encountered unknown words while reading passages in your textbook? (Use of dictionaries)
    1) used a dictionary whenever I encountered an unknown word (4)
    2) checked most words immediately in a dictionary (1)
    3) sometimes used a dictionary (3)
    4) used dictionary after finishing reading the passage (1)
    5) didn't check because it was too troublesome (1)

8. Have you ever guessed the meaning of unknown words from the context? (Guessing from context)
    1) tried to guess all the unknown words (1)
    2) tried to guess only where necessary (8)
    3) seldom tried to guess (0)
    4) never tried to guess (0)

9. Do you think your reading speed in English has increased through this speed reading training? (Self-evaluation of effect of speed reading training)
    1) improved very much (0)
    2) improved a little (8)
    3) almost no change (2)
    4) decreased a little (0)
    5) decreased a lot (0)

10. How has your resistance to English reading changed through this speed reading training? (Change in resistance in English reading)
    1) no resistance in the first place (1)
    2) almost overcame resistance (2)
    3) decreased the resistance a little (5)
    4) almost no change (1)
    5) increased resistance (0)
    6) don't know (1)

11. Has this timed reading course helped you come to like reading English? (Change in liking of English reading)
    1) came to like even more (0)
    2) came to like very much (1)
    3) came to like a little (7)
    4) almost no change (2)
    5) rather came to hate it (0)

12. Now that you have finished the timed reading training. Can you keep reading English books without a dictionary?
1) can read easy English without a dictionary (3)
2) feel no resistance in reading in English without a dictionary (4)
3) still tend to rely on a dictionary (3)
4) no change (0)

13. Did you translate the sentences in your head while reading the passages in the speed reading training?
1) not translated at all (0)
2) almost never translated (5)
3) translated at first but gradually came to read without translation (2)
4) translated a little (2)
5) translated all sentences (1)

14. Did you go backward while reading the passages in the speed reading training?
1) never went backward (6)
2) occasionally went backward (4)
3) went back and forth many times (0)

15. Are you confident in reading English (at least easy English) now?
1) yes, a lot (1)
2) yes, a little (9)
3) not a lot (0)
4) not at all (0)
5) rather lost confidence (0)

16. If you have time after entrance examinations, would you like to read English books?
1) yes, (strongly) (5)
2) yes, (weakly) (4)
3) no, (weakly) (0)
4) not at all (1)

17. Which story did you find most interesting?
1) Red Shoes (0)
2) The Piper of Hamelin (2)
3) Gulliver's Travels (4)
4) Mujina (1)
5) Girl Meets Boy (1)
6) Love or Money (2)

18. Which story did you find most boring?
1) Red Shoes (2)
2) The Piper of Hamelin (2)
3) Gulliver's Travels (0)
4) Mujina (1)
5) Girl Meets Boy (4)
6) Love or Money (3)

19. Did you do the exercise every day? Write honestly.
   1) yes (3)
   2) read two or three times a week, a few passages at a time (3)
   3) read all the assignment at one time in a week (3)
   4) postponed all the passages assigned for a particular week until a few weeks later and then read all of them (1)

20. Was each passage the right length?
   1) too short (0)
   2) a little too short (1)
   3) right length (8)
   4) a little too long (1)
   5) too long (0)

21. What would you think if you were asked to take another timed reading training with more difficult words and sentence structures?
   1) yes (strong positive)(1)
   2) yes (weak positive) (3)
   3) don't mind (5)
   4) no (weak negative) (1)
   5) no (strong negative) (0)

22. What do you think about reading many easy stories following a set pace? Write freely.
   a) I think it good to read many books if they are interesting.
   b) It's good because it reduces my resistance to reading English (2 students).
   c) It's good because I read English every day, and I don't get sick of it because the stories are easy to read.
   d) It's good because I got used to English sentences.
   e) It's ok to read English stories as long as they are easy, but now I'm too busy studying to enjoy reading.
   f) I think it's good because reading English got more fun as I read more.
   g) It was very useful.
   h) It's fun to read, but I don't want to read difficult stories. However, if I can come to understand more difficult stories little by little, it'll be good.
   i) It's good to read many easy English stories because I get used to reading English. Before this training, just looking at English passages made me feel discouraged to read, but now I'm used to it.

23. Please write freely about any aspect of the timed reading training.

    a) I sometimes wanted to read stories more slowly to fully enjoy them.

    b) The stories in this training were easy, so it was OK to read them, but it'll be tough to read more difficult stories.

    c) I have never experienced this kind of training, so at first I didn't know what this training was like. But now I think I should have done this earlier.

    d) I found that even if I read fast, I can understand overall meaning of the passage, so it's useful for entrance examinations.

    e) Since I only focused on increasing reading speed, it's a pity that I couldn't appreciate the contents deeply. Especially, I wanted to read the last murder story (Love or Money) deeply.

    f) It was good to read English a little every day.

    g) No comment.

    h) I'm not sure if I really improved my reading speed.

    i) I knew it would have been much easier if I had done an exercise every day as I was told, but I sometimes didn't do it at all for some days, then I had many passages to read to catch up, which made me feel tiresome to do this training.