



# FreeReading: Eight minutes to motivate

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This article discusses a model of freereading and explores the benefits of freereading identified by the author and her learners. Data collection methods and findings, possibilities for improvement to methods, and suggestions for further study are discussed before concluding that while the study itself was imperfect, freereading is a worthwhile activity and a good use of eight minutes of class time.

この論文は freereading のモデルを論議し、著者および学習者によって見つけられるように freereading の利点を探検する。データ収集の方法及び調査結果は論議される。方法への改善のための可能性はそれを結論する前に、更に調査自体が不完全な間、論議され、freereading であるクラスの時間の8分の価値がある活動および活用調査し。

**T**his paper will discuss an 8-minute activity called *Freereading*, which was a regular part of a compulsory Vocabulary and Reading (V&R) class for second-year, non-English major, Japanese university students. The V&R classes met once a week for 90 minutes each week. There were 31 students in the class. Freereading was a part of the syllabus set by a coordinator.

As defined by the curriculum coordinator, freereading meant simply having the learners read aloud, as quickly as they could, for a short period of time. In the model of freereading used in the V&R classes, the learners would:

- 1) *read* aloud (teacher-selected text) for one or two minutes,
- 2) *count* the number of words they read
- 3) *record* this number on a record sheet

The goal of freereading was to increase reading fluency, i.e. the speed at which readers read and process text. Thus, learners were encouraged to not only keep track of how many words per minute they were

reading, but to also set goals for increasing their word/minute rate.

In the V&R class I taught, I made some modifications to the original *read-count-record* model of freereading, and collected data on the activity over a 12-week period. The following discussion describes the *new* freereading model, along with reasons for making the changes; identifies research questions and the data collection methods employed; and reports findings and conclusions, along with suggestions for further study.

### Freereading defined and redefined

#### *Original Model*

The original *read-count-record* model that introduced me to the concept of freereading was a model used by N. Birt, the coordinator of the V&R classes.

In Birt's model, all learners were simultaneously reading copies of the same text. The texts used were tapescripts from the Voice of America (VOA) radio programme (VOA online). An example of a tapescript can be found in Appendix 1. It was found that this freereading exercise was beneficial in helping learners improve their reading fluency (Birt, 2005).

#### *My adjustments to the model*

The 2nd year learners who participated in the current study had been using the *read-count-record* model for freereading with VOA tapescripts for one academic year. These students had already found freereading beneficial (Birt, 2005).

Although this original model had been successful, I made four changes to the model:

- 1) the reading material was changed.
- 2) A listener (who listens while a reader was reading) was added.
- 3) Time was added for the reader and listener to discuss the text after the reading was finished.
- 4) Some extra fields were added to the record-keeping sheet.

What follows is a discussion of the rationale for each of these changes.

#### *Reading texts*

There were two reasons underlying the decision to change the freereading texts. Firstly, the VOA scripts were quite difficult for these learners; students could not read and process the texts without using dictionaries, or without resorting to translation. Secondly, the students had no choice in the reading material.

Krashen (1989) claims that learners will learn best when they are processing text that is at, or slightly above, their current level of understanding. Chida (2005, 2007) states that the regular, and speedy (150 words/minute), reading out loud of texts that are *suitable* to the learners' own level (meaning understanding without using a dictionary) is the "key effective approach to improving one's skill in [a] language" (p. 1).

It seemed sensible, then, to have the learners read at their own level, but I also wanted the learners to select their own freereading texts. If the learners could choose a text that interested them, I reasoned, it would be easier and more enjoyable for them to read than a text that was imposed on them by a teacher.

With these two ideas (ease and interest) in mind, I decided to use graded readers, instead of the VOA tapescripts, as freereading texts. Our library had over 2000 graded readers for learners to choose from, offering a variety of genres and topics, and a variety of levels, ranging from very easy to quite advanced. Letting each student choose his or her own text could help ensure that they were reading something that was at their own comprehension level, and that the reading material was of interest to them.

### *Listener*

The next adjustment made to the model, was the addition of a listener. Students, instead of all reading simultaneously, would work in pairs: one student reading, one student listening. In one Freereading cycle, each student would be a reader for two minutes, and a listener for two minutes (the two-minute time frame was negotiated by the students to be the optimum amount of time for reading).

The reason I added a listener is because it felt artificial to me to have all the students reading at the same time without anyone listening to them. Even though it had been found to be beneficial, it seemed to me that the activity did not have a *real-life* feel to it.

I tried to think of everyday situations where people might read out loud. At first I thought there were none at all, but on further consideration, I realized that there are indeed authentic situations (for example, reading stories to children, or reading magazine or newspaper articles to a friend) where people do read out loud. It was not as inauthentic an activity as I had first thought, but what all the real situations of reading-out-loud had that freereading did not have, was someone listening to the reader.

It was hoped that by having someone listen to the freereading, the activity would feel more authentic. Additionally, I had previously noted in my research journal that there were students who whispered or mumbled while they were freereading. Having an audience might also, I hoped, make the readers more aware of the importance of their reading being understood and give them a reason to read loudly and clearly.

### *Discussion time*

Along similar lines of reasoning for adding a reader, it was decided to add one-minute discussion periods to the freereading activity: Following each two minutes of reading, the reader and listener pair would take one minute to discuss what had been read and heard.

What was discussed in this minute was left entirely up to the students. In some pairs, the listeners would summarize what they had heard; in some pairs, the students would summarize together; in others, they would talk about their impressions or opinions of the text to which they had read or listened.

There were two reasons for adding the discussion section. Firstly, it seemed more authentic for the reader and listener to talk about the text after it was read, rather than to read or listen, and have that be the end of it. In real-life read-aloud situations, there is usually some interaction that accompanies the reading and listening act (for example, children ask questions about the stories being read, or friends discuss the content of a magazine or newspaper article after it is read).

The second reason for adding the discussion section was to keep both readers and listeners on their toes—if they had to have a discussion based on the content of the reading, immediately after the reading, it is more likely that they would read or listen carefully.

### *New record-keeping sheet*

The final adjustment to the original model was a change in record-keeping. The original record sheet had spaces for student goals (expressed in words per minute), the date, the amount of time read, the number of words read, and the word per minute average. To this, three sections were added (see figure 1 for a sample and appendix 2 for the full sheet):

- *A space for learners to write the title, author and publisher of the book they were reading.*

These particular learners were having trouble with plagiarism and proper citation of references in their writing—this seemed a good opportunity for learners to practice finding and recording important citation information.

- *A space to record the level of the graded reader they had chosen.*

This was added primarily for data-collection purposes, but also because it is desirable for learners to be aware of the level of texts they were reading. It was hoped that having this section on the record sheet might encourage students to choose texts carefully, based on their reading level, rather than just to go grab something off the shelf.

- *A space for writing down new words, with page numbers, that the learners had encountered while reading (R) or listening (L).*

This space was added to promote learner awareness of new words encountered in reading or listening, and to keep a record of them so that they could refer back if necessary. The purpose of including the page number was also for citation practice, as well as for convenience, should the learners want to find the word in the text again at a later date.

**Free Reading Record Sheet**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Number: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Group: \_\_\_\_\_  
 No. Lvs: \_\_\_\_\_

Last Quarter's result \_\_\_\_\_  
 This Quarter's goal \_\_\_\_\_  
 This Quarter's result \_\_\_\_\_

Date	Text Title, Author, Publisher	Level	Struc.	# of Pages	Words read	# of New words	New words (page #)
/						L _____ R _____	

**Figure 1: Freereading record sheet sample**

### *New Freereading model*

Thus, after the aforementioned adjustments, the new 8-minute Freereading model is:

- 1) Reader 1 reads (self-selected graded reader) for two minutes while listener 1 listens
- 2) One-minute discussion of what was read/heard
- 3) Reader 2 reads (self-selected graded reader) for two minutes while listener 2 listens
- 4) One-minute discussion of what was read/heard
- 5) Two minutes for record keeping

### **The study**

I was interested in studying the effects of having students do freereading regularly, so I had a group of 31 students do the activity every week for half an academic year (a total of 12 free-reading sessions, or 24 minutes of freereading), and collected data during this time.

### *The learners*

The learners were second year university students. They were all non-English majors who were required to take the V&R class for two academic years. Although the level of English was quite low (false beginner, or beginner), enthusiasm in the classroom for this particular group of students was always high.

Although there were 31 learners in the class, data from only 30 students was used, as one student had improbably

high numbers on the record sheet, even on the days he had been absent from class. All of the learners agreed that they wanted to do freereading weekly, and they were all willing to allow the use their data for research purposes.

### *Research questions and data collection methods*

Five research questions were pursued, with several different types of data collection method employed in the investigation.

### *Research questions*

1. Can Freereading help raise learners' reading level?

It is true that the more someone reads, the better their reading comprehension will be (Nuttall, 1996). Is it possible, however, that a mere two minutes of reading each week would make any difference in the learners' reading level?

2. Can freereading help learners' reading fluency

Would the new model of Freereading also be beneficial to learners' reading fluency, as the original model had been found to be?

The minimum word-per-minute goal of reading fluency is not agreed upon (Anderson, 1999): Chida (2005) suggests 150 words a minute; Higgins and Wallace (1989) claim 180 words per minute, and Dubin and Bycina (1991) raise the bar, saying that 200 words a minute is necessary for full comprehension. I wanted to know how close the learners were to this goal, and if engaging in Freereading brought them any closer.

3. Is Freereading beneficial for learners' vocabulary building?

It has been found that extensive reading is beneficial not only for learners' reading comprehension level, but also for vocabulary building (Krashen, 1989). In the absence of opportunities to pursue extensive reading in the classroom, it was wondered if Freereading might have similar benefits.

4. Do learners find freereading interesting or useful?

The most important question to me in all classroom activities is whether or not the learners find the activities useful or enjoyable (ideally, both).

5. Might freereading promote voluntary reading?

Along with reading skills, might freereading help promote learners reading on their own, when they were not required to do so? A colleague had also used freereading in her classes, turning to graded readers when they finished the required VOA scripts. She was delighted to report that she had caught some students reading their freereading books when they had finished the exercises they were assigned in class.

If learners were interested enough in the books to read in English without being told to do so, surely this would be the best benefit, by far, of freereading. Were the students found reading in class an isolated case, or was this happening with other students?

#### *Data collection methods*

In searching for possible answers to the questions, several sources of data were used: Results from pre- and post- level

checks were examined, as were the freereading record sheets, student journals, and responses to an open-ended questionnaire. Each of these methods will be discussed below.

#### 1. Pre- and post- level check

To check whether learners' reading comprehension level had increased over the course of the 12 weeks, a very simple *test* was used: The Oxford Bookworms series of graded readers comes with a level check chart. This is a poster, which has a small blurb from each level of the series printed on it. To check their level, learners simply read the blurb from the lowest level (the S, or starter, level). If this is easy, they go on to the next level (level 1); if that is easy, they go on to read the blurb from level 2. This continues until they have found a level that is neither too easy nor too difficult.

The reading level, then, is the level at which the learner perceives him or herself to be, according to how difficult they find the blurbs on the Bookworms level chart.

#### 2. Freereading record sheets

From the freereading record sheets, four things were examined. Firstly, I checked to see whether or not learners were choosing increasingly higher levels of graded reader, or if they were staying at the same level. Although there is no way of telling if learners were choosing books that were too easy or too difficult for them, it still seemed useful to check if there was an increase in the level of book that learners were choosing to read. Secondly, I looked at the word-per-minute figures to see if learners were, on average, increasing their reading speed. Thirdly, I looked at the number of new words learners recorded encountering in either the reading or listening parts of Freereading.

Finally, I attempted to get some indication from the record sheets as to whether or not learners were reading outside of class. I recognized that the information might not be entirely accurate; nevertheless, it seemed worth having the data, so learners were asked to write “finished” by books they finished reading outside of class.

### 3. Student Journals

Students wrote weekly journals for another English class. I asked the learners for permission to look at these journals for research purposes. Because I did not want to influence the students’ writings in their journals, I did not tell them until after I had collected the journals that I was looking for the use of the new vocabulary they had reported coming across in their Freereading.

### 4. Questionnaire

A very casual, open-ended questionnaire was carried out at the end of the 12 weeks. The questionnaire had only two questions, written on the white board, and learners were told they could write their answers either in English or in Japanese. The questions were:

- Did you enjoy freereading? Why/why not?
- Do you think freereading is useful? Why/why not?

## Data and Discussion

In this section, I will report the results of data collection, and discuss the implications of these results.

## Data results

### Reading level

In answer to the first research question about whether or not freereading will help increase learners’ reading level, I found that the perceived reading level increased by slightly more than one Bookworm level. The average starting level, according to the learners’ self-assessed check was .93 (I used a numerical value of 0 for the “S” or “starter” level books in the Bookworms series), thus, the learners started, on average, at the higher end of the Starter level of Bookworms. The average post-test score was 1.95, almost at level 2 on the bookworms chart.

### Reading Fluency

In answer to the second research question, regarding benefits to reading fluency, it was found that the students’ average word per minute (wpm) score increased slightly. Compared with an average of 99 wpm in the first six weeks, the average wpm score of the second six weeks had increased to 103.84 wpm—an increase of 4.81 wpm (see appendix 3).

Although the average showed an over-all increase, not all students’ wpm score increased. Ten of the students’ scores decreased. Of the students whose scores went down, there was an average 6.56 wpm drop (see appendix 4). When I examined the record sheets of these students, I found that six of these 10 students were choosing books that were two or three levels above the level they assessed themselves to be. This may account for the drop in wpm score for those six students. Happily, twenty of the students’ wpm score did increase, and the average increase of these students was 10.5 wpm (see appendix 5)



### *Vocabulary building*

The data regarding freereading benefits to vocabulary acquisition was inconclusive. The average number of new words the learners reported encountering was .85 during reading, and 1.06 during listening. Since the learners were encouraged to read a level of book that was easy for them, it is not surprising that few new words were encountered. Reading of the learners' journals revealed very few instances of these new words being used in the students' writing.

### *Interesting or useful?*

Generally, the students found freereading interesting and useful. Analysis of the short essays students wrote in response to the questionnaire indicated that 19 of the learners considered freereading useful in improving their reading ability. Unfortunately, the students did not elaborate on why or how they perceived this benefit. The comments were little more detailed than "it helps me read better" or "it helps my reading ability."

I was pleased with the response to the question "Did you enjoy freereading?" In response to this question, all but five students reported enjoying the activity; mention was made by 13 students that they enjoyed talking to their partner about the books they had read. Seven of the students said that they wanted to do freereading more often.

Along with enjoying freereading, for some of the students, freereading was a liberating experience. Six of the learners said that they had never read an English book before, and seven said that freereading made English books less "scary." One young woman said that she had never before ventured

into the English section of the library—the books were too intimidating. After engaging in freereading, however, she no longer avoided the English books in the library, and even had a look at English books in bookstores (though she had not yet purchased any).

### *Voluntary reading?*

No conclusion could be drawn regarding whether or not freereading promotes voluntary reading; I could not tell from the record sheets if learners were finishing the books in their "off" time. About one third of the learners used the same book for the full 12 weeks. Others did change books, but only two students wrote "finished" by the book title, so I could not tell for sure how many books were actually finished, or how many had been abandoned and exchanged for something else. I e-mailed the students who had reported using different books for freereading, but received only six replies. Of those six students, three reported that they were finishing the books every week. The other three said that they finished some books, but the other books they returned to the library unread, and checked out something more interesting.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, the results of this study were largely positive: even in the short time spent on freereading (24 minutes), the average perceived reading level increased by more than one graded-reader level, and reading fluency showed nearly a five percent increase. Although freereading is not a particularly useful tool for increasing vocabulary in the



short term, the benefits of freereading for increasing reading level and reading fluency might, in the long term, indirectly affect learners' vocabulary. Most importantly, learners liked the activity, and some students started reading voluntarily as a result of engaging in freereading. That this model of freereading made reading in English less scary for even one student made the project seem well worthwhile. Although the outcomes of this study were largely positive, it will be necessary to look at this model and its usefulness to more students who do freereading over a longer period of time.

I hope to replicate this study with more students, and with more than 24 minutes of freereading. In replication, I would recommend changes to the design of the study. While the use of graded readers was successful, and the model of freereading, along with the record sheet were useful as they are, looking back, I could have done things differently (and will do things differently next time) in my data collection.

First, I would do some audio recording: It would have been useful to audio-record the learners reading in both the pre- and post-tests. This would facilitate teacher assessment of the students' reading level, as well as students' self-assessment. Further audio recording could be done while learners were reading, as well as during their post-reading discussions. The discussion minute could present interesting possibilities for data collection and analysis. Perhaps the new words from the reading would make their way into the discussions, or perhaps the discussions would be an additional indication of students' reading/listening comprehension.

Next, I would make a more thorough questionnaire (for example, including specific questions about voluntary reading). Additionally, I would conduct follow-up interviews to supplement the questionnaires.

Regardless of the imperfections of the study design, and even though the positive outcomes need substantiation by further study, I have found this project educational and rewarding, and have found Freereading itself a worthwhile activity. It takes only eight minutes of class time, and as it incorporates reading, listening, and speaking, it is ideal for an all-around warm-up. Better still, students felt they benefited from, and enjoyed, those eight minutes. Best of all, because of freereading, some students were motivated to read in English on their own. All things considered, teachers and learners might find Freereading a good use of eight minutes of classroom time.

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