



Douglas College

Douglas College Learning Centre

Developing Reading Fluency in a Second Language

This handout suggests strategies you can use to develop your fluency in reading.

Think Positively about Your Knowledge

When you read English, you should focus on what you understand, not on what you don't understand. Many people put a lot of energy into worrying about what they don't understand. This discourages learning and the development of fluency. You should be like a detective. You are looking for information. However, just as a detective does not need all the details to solve a crime, you do not need to know what every word means to guess the meaning. Many details are unimportant.

Read without Stopping

When reading something for the first time, do not stop and start. Do not re-read. Do not stop to look up words in a dictionary. The best thing is to divide your reading into sections, often about 2 or 3 pages of text each. Read a section from beginning to end without stopping or re-reading. Stopping and re-reading creates bad reading habits.

When you have finished reading a section from beginning to end, you can go back and look at trouble spots if necessary. You might look important words up in a dictionary or puzzle over the meaning of a difficult sentence. Then, if your understanding of the reading is very important, you can go back and read the section again without stopping.

Most important, however, is that the first time you read something, you should just read, getting as much meaning as you can without stopping. Your job is to take the information you understand and put it together like a puzzle. From the pieces of the puzzle you have, you can usually get the idea of what the whole picture looks like.

Remember to concentrate on what you do understand.

Read with a Purpose

We read for many different reasons. Sometimes we are looking for specific information, like when we look up a number in a phone book. Other times we just read for enjoyment, like when we read a novel or interesting magazine article. Other times, we read to find out the important information in a textbook in order to write an exam. Alternatively, we might read to get information to put in an essay.

No matter what your reasons for reading are, before you start reading it is important to consider your purpose. The purpose should affect how carefully you read and what kinds of information you want to take away from the reading process. Giving careful

thought to your purpose in reading something helps you to keep your focus on reading for meaning instead of reading for translation.

Read in Meaning Groups

One thing that can interfere with fluency is sounding out every word in your head while you read. Sounding out the words in your head is too slow. To solve this problem, you need to learn to read in phrases that have meaning. This focuses you on the meaning, not the words. Typically a meaning group is a phrase. The sentence below is divided into meaning groups:

Psychology, // broadly defined, // is the systematic study // of behavior and experience. // Within that definition, // there are many kinds // of subspecialists // with diverse interests and viewpoints. // Those interests range // from social and cultural influences // on behavior // to the effects // of brain damage // on animal behavior, // from helping corporations // select among job applicants // to helping mentally retarded children // to walk and talk. //

Source: J. W. Kalat (1986) *Introduction to Psychology*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth

Notice that meaning groups often begin with little words like prepositions. With your tutor, practice dividing sentences into meaning groups. When you read, try to focus on the end of meaning groups as the end is often where the important meanings are. Try to force yourself not to sound out the words in your head.

If you have difficulty doing this, try crossing out all the small words in a text before reading the passage. For example, the above passage would look like this:

Psychology, broadly defined, ~~is the~~ systematic study ~~of~~ behavior ~~and~~ experience. ~~Within that~~ definition, ~~there are~~ many kinds ~~of~~ subspecialists ~~with~~ diverse interests ~~and~~ viewpoints. ~~Those~~ interests range ~~from~~ social ~~and~~ cultural influences ~~on~~ behavior ~~to the~~ effects ~~of~~ brain damage ~~on~~ animal behavior, ~~from~~ helping corporations select among job applicants ~~to~~ helping mentally retarded children ~~to~~ walk ~~and~~ talk.

Source: J. W. Kalat (1986) *Introduction to Psychology*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth

Then, just read the longer words and get what meaning you can. You can get a lot of meaning from just reading the big words. In fact, your mind often fills in the meanings you are missing.

After practicing this, you may find it easier to read in meaning groups. You will notice the small words, but your eyes will pass over them quickly. You probably won't feel that you need to sound them out. Once you are comfortable with reading with the small words crossed out, try to use the same process without crossing out the words. Just focus on the longer words and let your eyes pass over the smaller words.

Conclusion

The approaches in this handout can help you to improve your reading fluency. To be successful, you need determination and practice. To make your practice enjoyable, it's a good idea to try to read things you enjoy. This will help you to practice more. You also need to be ready to take risks and accept the fact that perfectionism is not always a good thing.