

Repeated Reading with Retelling: A Multi-Skilled Fluency Activity

Fluency—the ability to smoothly and comfortably use elements of a language that are already known—is a key aspect of successful language learning. For a classroom activity to promote fluency development, ideally there should be intent to communicate a message, pressure to perform quickly, a great deal of input or output, and no unfamiliar language features (Nation 2009). This article provides overviews of two popular fluency activities, 4/3/2 (Maurice 1983) and repeated reading (RR), and contends that although these activities are beneficial for fluency development, they are limited in their communicative purpose. The article then introduces “repeated reading with retelling” (RRR), which combines elements of 4/3/2 and RR while addressing this limitation.

4/3/2

The 4/3/2 technique was designed to promote speaking fluency. Learners “talk to a partner about a familiar topic for four minutes, then repeat the talk in three minutes for another listener, and finally deliver the talk again in just two minutes for yet another listener” (Boers 2014, 221). Thus, 4/3/2 utilizes task repetition under increasing time pressure.

Research on 4/3/2 has found it to be a useful tool for fluency development. Early investigations observed an increase in speech rate and fewer hesitations when comparing the first and third performances of 4/3/2 (Arevart and Nation 1991; Nation 1989). Other studies comparing repetition of spoken monologues under both constant and decreasing time conditions have found various aspects of spoken fluency to improve in both

conditions, but more so under the latter (Boers 2014; Thai and Boers 2016). There is also evidence of long-term fluency benefits beyond the time frame of the activity itself, perhaps due to the automatization of common linguistic features that are useful across a range of topics (De Jong and Perfetti 2011).

On the other hand, the impact of 4/3/2 on linguistic complexity and accuracy has been less favorable. Initial qualitative evidence of increased *syntactic* complexity (Nation 1989) has not been corroborated by later empirical investigations (Boers 2014; Thai and Boers 2016). Similarly, studies examining *lexical* complexity—sometimes referred to as “lexical sophistication”—have not found improvement under either shrinking or constant time conditions (Boers 2014; Thai and Boers 2016). Regarding accuracy, significant improvements have been observed

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under constant but not shrinking time conditions (Boers 2014; Thai and Boers 2016). In short, in 4/3/2, when attention is focused on improved fluency under a shrinking time condition, linguistic complexity and accuracy may suffer.

Two other limitations of 4/3/2 are that learners sometimes do not perceive a communicative purpose to the activity (Boers 2014), and a high proportion of verbatim repetition across the three performances can produce the undesirable outcome of automatization of errors (Thai and Boers 2016). To improve 4/3/2, the following suggestions have been made (Boers 2014; Thai and Boers 2016):

- 1.** first provide model input that learners can “mine” for chunks of language to be integrated into their own monologues;
- 2.** offer opportunities for offline pre-task planning;
- 3.** give corrective feedback after the first delivery; and
- 4.** make “the speaking task more interactive so the speaker can benefit from feedback during the communicative activity itself” (Thai and Boers 2016, 387).

In response to points 3 and 4, recent research has explored the use of corrective feedback between the first and second performances of the 4/3/2 monologue, finding that it can indeed improve accuracy (Tran and Saito 2024). While this is encouraging, the one-on-one interactions that researchers can have with study participants differ from what teachers can do in a typical classroom environment. The challenge for teachers is in attempting

to provide individualized corrective feedback to each learner with numerous monologues taking place at the same time. The RRR activity introduced below provides a possible solution to this problem. Before that, there is a brief review of repeated reading, the second activity from which RRR was derived.

REPEATED READING (RR)

RR was designed to promote reading fluency, or “the ability to read rapidly with ease and accuracy, and to read with appropriate expression and phrasing” (Grabe 2009, 291). In RR, relatively easy texts are repeatedly read a fixed number of times or until a target speed is reached or learners are able to read with ease. Reading can be done silently or aloud and either with or without accompanying audio.

Research on RR has primarily investigated its effect on fluency, vocabulary acquisition, and comprehension. Regarding fluency, researchers have consistently observed increased reading speed in subsequent readings of the same text (Gorsuch and Taguchi 2008; Hansen et al. 2024; Taguchi et al. 2023; Taguchi et al. 2012) and of unpracticed passages after a RR treatment program (Gorsuch and Taguchi 2008; Taguchi et al. 2004). Acquisition of L2 vocabulary in RR has been observed in beginner (Webb and Chang 2012) and high-intermediate learners (Liu and Todd 2016). Research on the effects of RR on L2 reading comprehension, however, has yielded mixed results. In subsequent readings of the same text, there is qualitative evidence of improved comprehension both at the sentence level and in seeing how parts of a text are related to one another (Taguchi et al. 2012). For unpracticed passages, one quantitative study found significant gains in comprehension

In RRR, students work in pairs, one with Reading A and the other with Reading B.

after a 16-session RR treatment program (Gorsuch and Taguchi 2008), but other empirical investigations revealed no significant improvements (Taguchi and Gorsuch 2002; Taguchi et al. 2004).

One possible shortcoming of RR is that it has limited communicative purpose. Communicative learning activities are those which nurture language learning through the process of communication itself; that is, learners are encouraged to negotiate meaning through these activities (Richards and Rodgers 2001). Though reading is certainly an act of communication between the author and reader, once the message has been comprehended—which ought to readily occur with the relatively easy texts that should be used in fluency-development activities—any additional repetitions are of questionable communicative value even if they are useful in developing fluency. Though this question of communicative purpose has not been investigated directly, learner feedback has revealed that RR sometimes leads to boredom and demotivation (Taguchi et al. 2012).

Another limitation of RR is that in subsequent readings, learners may not always attend to every word in a passage. There is evidence of this in research by Gorsuch and Taguchi (2008), which reported an average reading rate of over 350 words per minute, which is beyond what is physiologically possible in normal skilled reading when every word is read (Nation 2009). This could curtail a primary goal of RR, the automaticity of word recognition. A suggestion in the literature for improving RR has been to provide an opportunity to check comprehension during the activity (Taguchi et al. 2012). This suggestion is incorporated into the RRR activity described next.

REPEATED READING WITH RETELLING (RRR)

RRR is a 20- to 30-minute activity that combines elements of 4/3/2 and RR and is intended to develop various aspects of language fluency. For materials, two readings of similar length—approximately 100 to 300 words—and complexity are needed (Readings A and B). Following Nation's (2009) guidelines for fluency activities, these texts should contain few or no new linguistic features and should be conceptually easy to understand. It may be beneficial to have some overlap in lexis or thematic focus between the two texts as a way to reinforce the connection between written and spoken forms of words and encourage the development of automaticity of word recognition (Gorsuch and Taguchi 2008). Timed-reading textbooks like the *Reading for Speed and Fluency* (Nation et al. 2018) and *Timed Reading for Fluency* (Nation and Malarcher 2017) series are ideal sources of readings for RRR. Another valuable resource for quickly developing your own texts is the New General Service List (NGSL) Project Text Tools (<https://ngslprofiler.com/>; Browne 2024). This online app uses artificial intelligence (AI) to generate short, simplified passages about any nonfiction topic and allows users to easily edit the generated passage to suit the needs of learners at different levels of ability. It also has a tool to simplify authentic texts that are pasted into the app window.

In RRR, students work in pairs, one with Reading A and the other with Reading B. Here are the steps in the activity:

1. Students have a few minutes to read their own text silently. They may use a dictionary or ask the teacher to check unknown words or pronunciation, but there should be little need for this if the texts are of appropriate difficulty.

Compared to both 4/3/2 and repeated reading, RRR may provide a more meaningful communicative context.

2. Student A has three minutes (or less for shorter passages) to read their text—Reading A—aloud while Student B listens and takes notes. If A finishes early, B may ask for specific sections to be repeated, or A can start reading again from the top until time is up. This gives B a chance to revise their notes and ensures that students remain active.
3. After a short time to review their notes, B has one minute to use the notes and orally summarize A's passage. Student A listens and checks the accuracy of B's summary against the text.
4. Next, the partners briefly work together to check missing or misunderstood information in B's summary. This often occurs naturally, an indication that both learners are invested in the accurate communication of the message.
5. Partners switch roles and repeat Steps 2 through 4.
6. Students repeat Steps 2 through 5 once or twice more, switching to a new partner each time. Students should read the same text throughout the activity. Similarly, they should listen to the same passage each time, and after the first time, they should simply follow along their notes and add information as needed. They should also listen for useful words or phrases for their summaries and add them to their notes or commit them to memory.

EFFECTS OF RRR

RRR may be beneficial in several ways:

Communicative focus. Compared to both 4/3/2 and repeated reading, RRR may

provide a more meaningful communicative context. When a text is read aloud, the reader has an audience who benefits from a prosodically appropriate performance for comprehension, and the listener requires information to successfully summarize the text later. In the summarizing phase, the shared communicative goal is to check the accuracy of the ideas in the summary.

Speaking fluency. RRR may promote the development of speaking fluency in two ways. First, when participants orally summarize the same passage three times, there are opportunities for proceduralization of repeated words and phrases, as in 4/3/2. Second, repeated reading aloud may also nurture L2 speaking fluency (Gorsuch 2011).

Speaking accuracy and complexity. In RRR, students listen to a syntactically error-free model before each spoken summary and receive learner-specific feedback afterwards. This can provide input beyond their current productive abilities and informs adjustments to subsequent speeches.

Reading fluency. RRR should promote the development of reading fluency, much as RR does. However, compared to repeated reading, RRR provides a greater incentive not to skip words (because a classmate needs to hear each word to understand the text), which may promote greater automaticity in word recognition.

Reading comprehension. RRR should also promote the long-term development of reading comprehension, just as RR does, by improving reading fluency. Additionally, when learners listen to their partner's summary in RRR, it encourages them to monitor their own comprehension by interacting with the text in a way that differs from start-to-finish reading; they need to scan the text to check the accuracy

of their partner's summary and be ready to provide corrective or missing information.

Listening comprehension. RRR has two listening stages, one during which listeners take notes of their partner's reading, and another when the readers attend to their partner's summaries and check them for accuracy. Compared to 4/3/2, in RRR more-careful listening is required to complete the communicative task.

Productive vocabulary knowledge. The ability to use vocabulary productively usually lags behind receptive knowledge (Webb 2008). In RRR, before giving spoken summaries, learners receive lexical

input when their partners read the text; appropriately leveled passages, which contain lexis that learners understand but infrequently use, may promote the development of the productive lexicon.

ADDITIONAL TIPS AND FINAL THOUGHTS

RRR is suitable for learners of any age who are capable of reading short, simplified passages in their L2. The activity can stand alone or be integrated into the broader framework of class content. In content-based classes, texts related to the course content can be used as long as they are not too difficult. If such texts are unavailable, the previously mentioned NGSL Project Text

Timed Reading for Fluency
Book 2

Reading 1 — Snack Rules

Listen to your partner and try to complete the notes below.

Notes:

I. 'Stop-Snacking Moms' ("Probably you grew up with a ... ")

II. The Rules of Snacking

A) Rule 1 ("The first rule ... ")

B) Rule 2 ("The second rule ... ")

C) Rule 3 ("The third rule ... ")

III. Conclusion ("With one or two snack breaks during your day ... ")

Figure 1. Example note-taking sheet for the RRR activity

Although RRR is flexible enough for use with a variety of text types, readings that have a clear and simple rhetorical structure with plenty of signposting may be best to facilitate listening comprehension and note-taking, especially for novice and low-intermediate learners.

Tools (Browne 2024) can be used to easily create them. Additionally, recordings of the passages—commonly available with timed-reading textbooks, such as the Nation and Malarcher series mentioned above—can first be played for the class to serve as pronunciation models for readers and as additional input for summarizers.

Although RRR is flexible enough for use with a variety of text types, readings that have a clear and simple rhetorical structure with plenty of signposting may be best to facilitate listening comprehension and note-taking, especially for novice and low-intermediate learners. This means using texts with a clear introduction, body, and conclusion and with familiar connecting words and phrases (e.g., *first, the second reason, as a final example, in summary*) to support listening comprehension. Though optional, I have also found it helpful to make and provide students with a note-taking sheet that contains key words and a basic outline of the text that students will hear (see Figure 1 for an example). Teachers might also follow the advice of Gorsuch (2011) and select texts containing functionally relevant language for the class. Thus, a general English class could use passages with dialogues of students speaking with instructors about class matters if the ability to fluently speak about such things is a class goal.

I have used RRR with hundreds of learners over many years. My personal observation is that students like the activity and find it engaging, and in class surveys, they usually rate it as having a clearer communicative purpose than either 4/3/2 or RR. While

those tried-and-true activities should certainly remain an important part of the fluency toolbox, RRR is another way to help students become more-fluent users of their L2.

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