The Effect of Teacher Language Pattern Use on Timed Reading Speeds

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Brian Cullen

This paper is a brief description of an investigation into the effect of teacher language on development of reading fluency.

1. Introduction

You probably remember a teacher who motivated you when you were in elementary school, high school, or university. When you think about that teacher again now, you may even be able to remember some of the words that teacher used, words that effectively motivated you to learn much faster and more easily than in other classes. As teachers, we are aware that students may be motivated or demotivated depending on which words and phrases we choose to use in the classroom, and an effective teacher carefully uses words and language patterns that influence students positively in their learning (see Cullen & Mulvey, 2012 for many examples of language patterns that you can use in your own classroom to motivate students.)

To give a simple example of how our choice of words may influence students, a teacher might ask students one of these two questions:

1) "What do you have to do so that you don't fail this course?",

2) "What is the best way to really improve your English in this course?"

Clearly, these two questions can have a very different impact on students. While both can cause students to become motivated to learn, the type of motivation and emotion engendered by these questions is very different. The first question induces in the student a motivation based on fear of failure. The second question contains a presupposition that supports the generation of student motivation towards the benefits of learning. There are

certainly cases where either of these approaches could be beneficial, and it is useful for a teacher to be aware of the effect of his/her words and to be congruent with the desired effect. In this paper, I will be focusing primarily on the second type of question and statement–the type of language use that can motivate students to learn English out of desire rather than fear.

The language patterns are drawn from the field of neuro-linguistic programming (NLP). NLP postulates that the most effective way to learn how to do a skill or to teach it to others is to model excellent performers of that particular skill. In the 1970s, the founders of NLP, Richard Bandler and John Grinder (1975), began to model excellent communicators. One of the people they chose to model closely was the hypnotherapist, Milton Erickson. Erickson used his knowledge of linguistic skills as a means to motivate people to learn or to change in positive ways by carefully choosing the words that he used. As users and teachers of language, there is much that we can learn from this modelling of excellence in communication.

When we talk to our students, the language that we use is inevitably expressing our beliefs about the students' capabilities and what we expect the students to be able to achieve in the course. This power of teacher expectations and beliefs has been recognized for many years as a shaper of learner performance. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) analysed teacher expectations and demonstrated the effects on teacher behaviour in the areas of socioemotional climate (e.g. smiling, nodding), input (e.g. amount of learning material given to students), output (e.g. repeating or rephrasing questions), and affective feedback (e.g amount of criticism and praise). In a later review of studies spurred by the original research, Rosenthal (1980, p.156) notes that "altogether, 345 studies have been conducted and they show beyond doubt that interpersonal self-fulfilling prophecies not only occur, but that their average size of effect is far from trivial." More recent reviews of the research in this area (Raths et al, 2003) strengthen this view by noting that many teacher beliefs are "incompatible or inconsistent" (p.3) and that these beliefs can be "stumbling blocks" (p.2) to student learning.

2. Reading Fluency

Taguchi et al (2004) have discussed the critical role that fluency plays in successful reading and investigated the positive effects of repeated reading in developing fluency:

"Good reading ability is virtually impossible in the absence of fast and accurate word recognition skills and reading fluency.... quantitative and qualitative analyses of participants' reading behaviors suggest that assisted repeated reading is equally as effective as extensive reading in increasing EFL readers' silent reading rate, and favorably affects learners' perceptions of reading activities. Assisted repeated reading can potentially develop weak ESL/EFL readers' fluency and help them become independent readers by providing a distinct form of scaffolding."

Repeated reading provides scaffolding and helps beginning readers to develop the eye movements and cognitive patterns of more advanced readers.

3. The Current Study

In the current study, repeated reading was carried out in the form of timed reading activities. The study was carried out with two groups of students which are referred to as Group A (experimental group) and Group B (control group) below. Group A was involved in this study for two semesters. Group B was only involved for one semester. Each semester lasted 15 weeks and the students had a 90-minute lesson once a week.

	Units 1-5	**Units 6-10**	**Language Patterns**
Group A	n=38	n=38	Used
Group B	N/A	n=39	Not Used

Table 1. Two learner groups in the study

The texts for the timed reading activities were taken from the textbook,

Academic Reading for Science and Engineering (Ishikawa et al, 2009) which was the required textbook for the course. Each unit of the textbook is divided into two sections (e.g. 1A, 1B, 2A, 2B) and one section was covered each week. The timed reading was based on that section in the following lesson. For example, if the reading in Unit 3B was used for reading comprehension activities in one lesson, the timed reading in the next week's lesson was also based on Unit 3B, while the comprehension activities were based on Unit 4A. Each text was about 800 words in length.

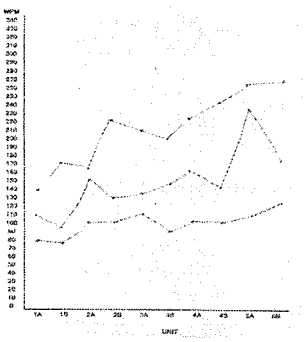
Students read the same text three times, starting from the beginning each time. The allotted times for each reading were 3 minutes, 2 minutes, and 1 minute respectively. Students calculated their reading speed in words per minute (wpm) based on the following simple formula:

Reading Speed (wpm) = Lines read x 15 / Time (minutes)

Each text displayed the line numbers which made it easy to see the number of lines read, and an average of 15 words per line was assumed for all texts.

As the students read, a timer was used to ensure that the alloted times of 3 minutes, 2 minutes, and one minute were precise. Students recorded their three reading speeds for each lesson on a graph which they had pasted in their textbook (see Figure 1). Subsequently, they entered their speeds into an online form (Figure 2) which stored the data in a database which was later used to analyze the results of the study.

Figure 1. A handwritten reading speed graph



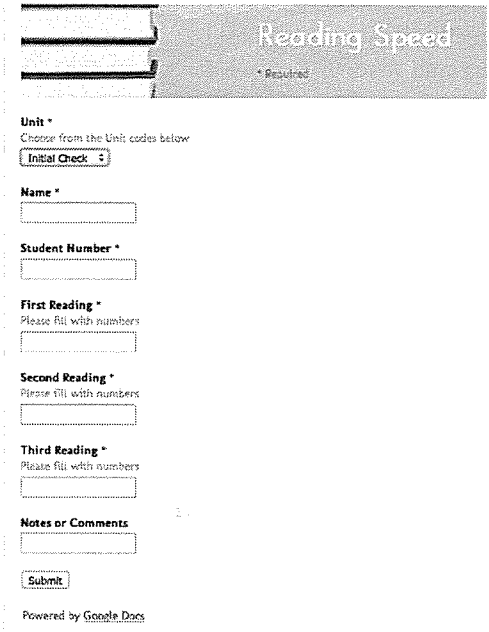


Figure 2. Online form

4. Language Patterns

Group A was treated as an experimental group and deliberate use of positive language patterns was made in order to motivate the students to read faster and to instill the belief that they could increase their speed easily. Group B was the control group, and the timed reading activities were carried out in a straightforward manner without any special focus on language patterns. Some examples of the language patterns used for Group A are shown below:

- "It's good to read quickly, isn't it."
- "And you've been studying and reading English for a long time and that means that you begin to read faster and faster."
- "You shouldn't read quickly just because your teacher says so... you can read more quickly because you know it is good for you, don't you?"
- "People who read more quickly get higher scores in tests such as TOEIC, and that means you can get a better job in the future."
- "You may like to read more quickly by letting your eyes dance across the page."
- "There are other things like reading that in the past you used to do slowly, and now that you are getting better, you can read faster and faster, with confidence that you can understand even more."
- "It's interesting that people who read faster actually understand more."
- "You can just read faster, be better, easily ... now"
- "And this is the second time you are reading this text, so you can easily read much more quickly and even relax as you read more quickly"
- "At the end of the semester, when you are a much faster reader, you can look back on today and realize that you are already beginning to read much more quickly."

For Group A, these language patterns and other variants were used consistently before and during each of the timed reading activities in every lesson.

5. Results

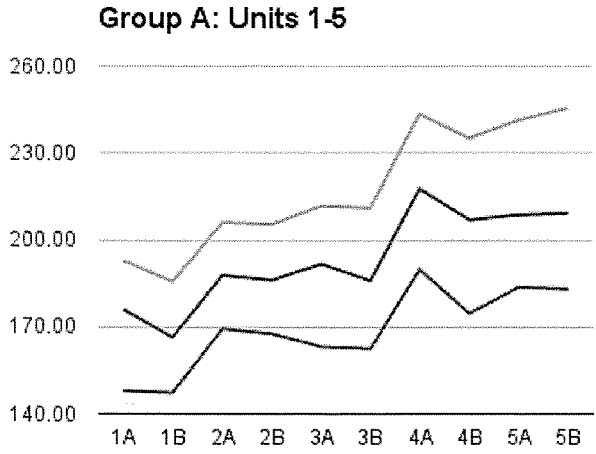


Figure 3. Group A (Units 1-5)

Figure 3 and the accompanying data table show the change in average reading speed for Group A for the first semester (Units 1-5 of the textbook). The lines on the graph represent 1st, 2nd and 3rd reading respectively. Group B was not part of the study in the first semester so equivalent data is not available. Figures 4 and 5 show the change in average reading speed for the second semester (Units 6-9 of the textbook). Insufficient data was available for Unit 10, so it has been omitted.

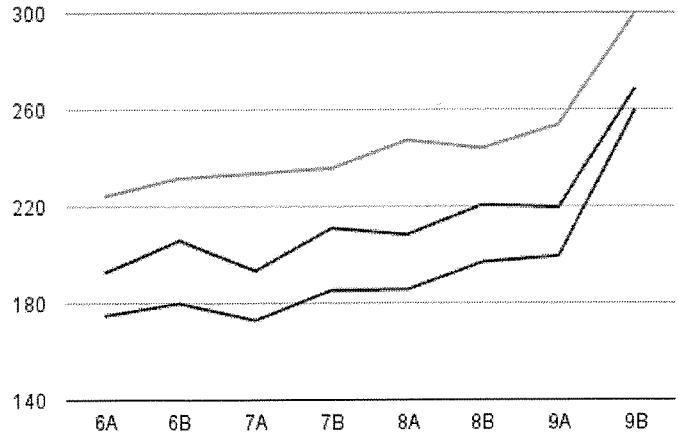


Figure 4. Group A (Units 6-9)

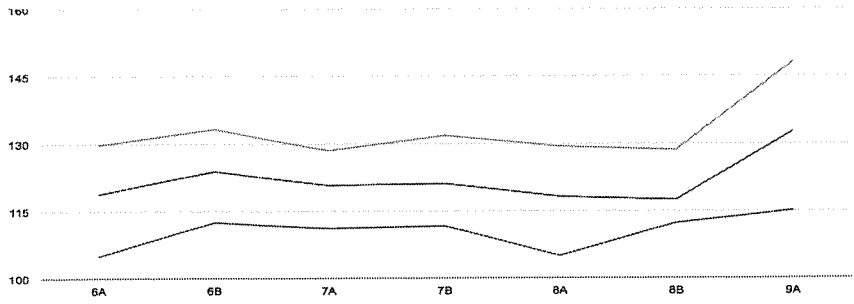


Figure 5. Group B (Units 6-9)

6. Student Attitudes

While both Group A and Group B had good rapport with the teacher and applied themselves to their studies, the attitude of Group A (the experimental group) towards the timed reading activities was entirely different. They were highly motivated and competitive towards each other. They enjoyed comparing their speeds, both with each other and with their own previous results. Many students set specific goals (e.g. 250 wpm) for the end of the semester.

7. Conclusions

While Group A had a steady and substantial increase over both semesters, Group B showed relatively little change over the second semester. This difference between the two groups correlates with the controlled use of teacher language patterns. With regard to the usage of language patterns, while this study shows very promising results it is important to note that it is based on a small sample size and other factors may have also influenced the results. In future work, a larger sample size and the involvement of other teachers will help to determine whether consistent teacher language pattern use can contribute to increased reading speeds and other benefits.

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