






**Preparing Students for Post Covid-19 Transnational Study with Unassisted Repeated Reading and Extensive Reading Materials**

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# Preparing Students for Post Covid-19 Transnational Study with Unassisted Repeated Reading and Extensive Reading Materials

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## Abstract

As Covid-19 restrictions promise to loosen and international borders begin to open, transnational students are again preparing for language education abroad. However, due to students' low reading rates (RRs), target institutions' courses' large reading demands pose potential challenges to students' success. To address this, this study explored the potential of employing an unassisted repeated reading procedure (rate build-up, RBU) to increase prospective transnational students' RRs. The study investigated the RBU procedure's potential with this population by comparing the procedure's effects on traditional degree-seeking learners' RRs in a Taiwanese university setting and those of potential transnationals targeted for studies in a similar setting. Assessing each group's pre and post-reading gains using inferential statistics, significant reading gains and large Cohen *d* effect sizes were found for both groups, indicating the generalizability of this procedure. It was further found that students with higher starting RRs demonstrated greater gains. Limitations and suggestions for further research are also addressed.

**Keywords:** repeated reading, rate build-up reading, transnational students, EFL, replication, audio-assisted, unassisted

## Introduction

Prior to the Covid-19 era, a moderate amount of scholarship addressed the area of transnational education. These investigations explored areas to include, but not limited to, children and youth's transnationality (Ng & Nyland, 2020; Pustulka & Winogrodzka, 2021), refugee studies (Ganassin & Holmes, 2013), sojourners (Chao & Ma, 2017), and educational migration (Lo et al., 2021).

These subjects offered different lenses to explore this area, but constants can be found among them. The first is that (a) a magnanimous number of students sought international language education (Smith, 2020) and (b) the communities these students made up were often de-territorialized yet interconnected in that the students come together for the study of language (Kubota & McKay, 2011). Second, the educational programs offered were often in the form of commodified packages that offer English training in various formats (e.g., English as a second, foreign, academic, additional, international, world language, or for special purposes) (Stroud & Heug, 2011). At the crux of this phenomenon, there has always been a third area, student preparedness, for the reading loads these sorts of courses require can tax unprepared students.

As Covid-restrictions promise to loosen and international borders begin to open, the last century's

trend of offering language education programs delivered on an unprecedented scale across transnational global spheres has the potential to begin again, and thus the need to prepare students is once again a timely concern.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Extensive Reading and Graded Readers***

To prepare students for the reading demands of academic study, many educators encourage extensive reading (ER) (Waring, 2021) as ER has historically been found to offer reading-related benefits (Baker & Chau, 2021), to include positively facilitating incidental learning in the way of vocabulary (Nation, 2015), idioms, sentence patterns, organizational flow, cultural assumptions (Babayán, 2019), grammar (Albay, 2017), spelling (Chew & Krashen, 2017), increased confidence, and a general liking for the activity (Krashen, 2004). These benefits are indeed important to transnational ELLs who (like the population of this study) may have inadequate contact with target language materials as a result of the L2 impoverished environments they reside in.

To increase student contact with target language materials, ER is often employed using graded readers: abridged classics, bestsellers, and original stories with modern settings (Hill, 2013) written for ELLs where the language content is based on a language grading scheme (Richards & Schmidt, 2015). These texts have been employed around the world (Kepe & Weagle, 2020; Morabit, 2021), in Asia (Chou, 2021; Qiang, 2020; Ro & Kim, 2020), and Vietnam (the focus of this study) (Baker & Chau, 2021; Tran, 2018; Vu, 2020).

To meet the increased demand for graded readers, ELT publishers offer a surfeit of texts (Hill, 2013), but the length of these narratives (16 - 100 + pages) poses additional challenges as (a) such length is beyond that typically encountered in ELL course books (Browne, 2000; Waring, 2021) and (b) ELLs often read slowly (Baker, 2015), as low as 88 words per minute, far below the suggested minimum rauding rates for ER (225 wpm), reading at a rate with the intention of understanding the complete thoughts in the material (Anderson, 1999; Bell, 2001; Carver, 1992; Fraser, 2004).

The combined result is that slow readers (regardless of the simplicity of graded readers) are likely to read with poor understanding as their memory is taxed, i.e., they have forgotten the beginning of a paragraph by the time they have struggled to the end of it (Nutall, 1996). A strong causal factor of slow reading rates (RRs) that exacerbates cognitive load has been found to be limited lexical automaticity (i.e., how fast readers recognize words already in their lexical inventory). This is because when recognition of known lexis is slow, readers' attention is on decoding and thus not available for comprehension which negatively impacts both understanding and RRs (Samuels, 1979; 2012).

### ***Using Repeated Reading to Address Slow Reading Speeds***

Slow RRs have received a moderate amount of attention in the literature, resulting in several posited procedures to facilitate students' RR (e.g., metronomes, card guides, projected texts, and computer-aided models) (Nutall, 1996, Plaister, 1968). Unfortunately, regardless of the RR gains

associated with these methods, these procedures (due to the required devices) are not employable in large classes common to the Asian context, nor can they be easily utilized outside the classroom. Samuels (1979) proposed an alternative repeated reading procedure that can be employed in one of two ways: audio-assisted repeated reading, where students read the passage repeatedly while listening to an audio accompaniment, or unassisted repeated reading, where the students read the passage silently.

One major source of RR research has been Taguchi and his colleagues (1997, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2016, 2021), who approached RR by employing a combination of silent and audio-assisted repeated reading with graded readers, empirically demonstrating the value of repeated reading with these materials. However, as with earlier aiding devices, the audio-supported portion of this procedure, while shown to produce positive results, requires assistance (i.e., equipment and preparation). Furthermore, this technique has been reported to be prone to challenges: (a) technology issues (power outages, equipment failures) and (b) comprehension challenges (i.e., it forces students to rush through a text to keep up with the audio at the expense of comprehension) (Taguchi, 2012).

One very prolific proponent of repeated reading, Anderson, drawing on the early work of Samuels (1979), posited the second sort of approach, an unassisted repeated reading technique (Rate Build Up Reading, RBU) in a series of texts and conferences (Anderson, 1983, 1993, 1999a, 1999b 2002, 2003, 2006, 2012) that he argued requires no preparation or assistance and can be used with any material (e.g., graded readers). This proposition offers a solution to the technology and comprehension difficulties associated with audio-assisted repeated reading (Baker, 2015). In line with the importance of learner autonomy (Adamson, 2012), Anderson also explained that the method can be used in and out of the classroom. Anderson operationalized the technique as follows:

Readers have sixty seconds to read as much material as they can. They then begin reading again from the beginning of the text and are given an additional sixty seconds. They are to read more material during the second sixty-second period than in the first. The drill is repeated a third and fourth time. The purpose of this activity is to re-read 'old' material quickly, gliding into the new. As the eyes move quickly over the 'old' material, the students learn how to process the material more quickly; the exercise does not emphasize moving the eyes rapidly; instead, the material is to be processed and comprehended more efficiently. As students participate in this rate-building activity, they learn that they indeed can increase their RRs. (p. 62)

Anderson's claim was recently empirically tested with traditional degree-seeking Taiwanese university ELLs (Baker, 2015), demonstrating that RBU reading facilitates RR gains with this population. However, it has yet to be investigated with prospective transnational students (e.g., Vietnamese undergraduate ELLs aiming for transnational study in a Taiwanese educational setting). As such, whether the previous study's results may be generalizable to transnational students from the Vietnamese context arises. However, no replication studies have been undertaken to explore this.

The concern of replication is essential, as educators might mistakenly accept that measures developed in one country are generalizable to other countries, i.e., that "the construct is expressed

similarly in all countries of interest, and therefore has similar levels of reliability and validity" (Durvasula et al., 2006, p. 469), without empirically investigating cross-national applicability.

To address this, an external-approximate replication of Baker's (2015) study was undertaken with prospective transnational students at Ton Duc Thang University in Ho Chi Minh City to determine if the initial study's findings regarding employing the RBU procedure to increase Taiwanese degree-seeking students' RRs are generalizable to prospective transnational students.

## **Methods**

This study compared the RR gains of traditional degree-seeking Taiwanese undergraduate ELLs in a Taiwan university setting (Baker, 2015) with those of prospective Vietnamese transnational undergraduates aiming to study in a similar environment. To provide a trustworthy replication, APA 7 (2020) and Journal Article Reporting Standards (Appelbaum, 2020) guidelines were followed (i.e., the original study's parameters were attended to as closely as possible).

### ***Participants***

The original study was performed with a moderately sized sample (N = 52), an in-tact class of undergraduate ELLs enrolled in a Taiwanese university course that introduced ER to promote self-access-language learning (SALL). Regular attendance was encouraged, but allowances were made for irregularities, i.e., absentees (n = 7) were permitted to continue RBU training activities, but their data were not considered. Forty-five participants completed the study (female; mean age of 25.8 years, range 21-36; Taiwanese, n = 42; Aborigine, n = 3). No incentives were offered for participation.

The current exploration was conducted at Ton Duc Thang University in Ho Chi Minh City with Vietnamese undergraduate ELLs projected for transnational study in Taiwan. A similarly moderately sized sample was chosen (N = 42). Similar allowances and data exclusions were made for students who missed sessions but wished to continue training (n = 2), and five were excluded due to absence from the final RBU session. In total, thirty-five participants completed the study (male, 9, female, 26; mean age, 19.5 years; range 18.3-20.4 years), all of whom were Vietnamese. No attempt to manage gender or age was made, and no incentives were offered for participation.

### ***Materials***

Following the original study, the materials employed in this exploration were two beginning-level texts from the Heinemann Graded Reader Series (Table 1). The texts were selected per Samuels' (1979) easy material requirement, i.e., the materials are below each student's *i* level (the reader's current level of linguistic competence). To determine participants' *i* levels, as with the original study, the Betts' Five Finger Method was conducted with texts from each level of the reading series. To provide the reader with a sense of the difficulty of these texts, both the Heinemann vocabulary and readability formulae rating (Flesch-Kincaid and Fry) indicators are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Readability Estimates for Pretest, Repeated Reading, and Posttest Passages

Text	Flesch-Kincaid	Fry	Heinemann
Winning and Losing	4.0	1.8	300 Vocabulary
The Wall	4.0	1.8	300 Vocabulary

### ***Procedures***

In line with the original study, to operationalize the RBU procedure, the texts were marked off in 250-word passages (50, 100, 150). After which, the RBU procedure was, following the original study, interpreted and administered as follows:

1. RBU reading was begun at the beginning of chapters and natural points in the texts' plots.
2. The instructor controlled the time with a stopwatch. The students read for one minute. At the end of one minute, the instructor rang a small bell. The students stopped and marked the last word they had read. Then, the students took a one-minute break.
3. The students repeated Step 2 with the same material (i.e., the first passage) three more times. This produced four readings of the first passage.
4. The students took a two-minute break. Then they repeated steps 2 and 3 with the second passage. This produced four readings of the second passage.
5. The students took another two-minute break and then repeated steps 2 and 3 with the third passage. This produced four readings of the third passage.
6. Each student counted her RR for each of the twelve readings (i.e., four readings per passage) and recorded them on an RBU sheet.

The RBU procedure was conducted for four class sessions, 48 readings in total. To avoid language difficulties, the researcher, a native speaker (NS) of English, was assisted by a Vietnamese NS who translated the instructions, and both monitored the procedure.

To encourage accurate recording and reporting, assurances were given to the participants that RBU performance would not affect course grades. To ensure construct validity, it was further explained that participation and submitting record sheets (which were absent of any identifying personal information) was completely voluntary.

As with the original study, of the 48 readings, only the rate gains between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 45<sup>th</sup> reading were considered. These scores were used as pretest and posttest scores, as the 1<sup>st</sup> resulted from the time scored for the first reading of the first treatment with new material (i.e., the first chosen passage from the text *Winning and Losing*), and the 45<sup>th</sup> was the first reading of the final timed scored reading of new material (i.e., the last chosen passage from *The Wall*).

**Data Analysis**

To address the question of generalizability, the original study’s results were revisited. Afterward, the current study’s data were explored. That is, the current study’s pre-and post-performance gains were investigated via a paired-samples *t*-test and Cohen *d*. Then, the original and current studies’ findings were compared.

**Results**

The original study (Baker, 2015) reported that 44 participants completed the treatment and produced measurable RBU record sheets. The paired samples *t*-test’s results showed a statistically significant improvement between the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 45<sup>th</sup> RBU readings. Specifically, it was found that (a) the pretest mean was 98.64 (SD = 23.99) (range 58-149) and (b) that the posttest mean was 142.18 (SD = 31.30) (range 82-222). The difference was shown to be a significant mean gain of 43.54 (*p* = .000) with a strong effect size (Cohen *d* = 2.79). This is illustrated in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Score Gains

Group	N	Pre	SD	Post	SD	M Gain	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Original	44	98.64	23.99	142.18	31.30	43.54	<.000	2.79

The results further showed consistent overall growth with occasionally retarded scores for a small number of students on various days and that some students' reading speeds increased more than others (range 14-85 wpm).

In the current study, 35 participants completed the treatment, and 33 produced measurable record sheets. Three outliers were removed, providing 30 measurable data sets. Examining the data, it was found, as illustrated in Table 3, that (a) the pretest mean was 244.62 (SD = 77.59) (range 124-490), (b) the posttest mean was 369.9 (SD = 117.76) (range 198-663), and (c) that the gain difference was significant (M = 125.28; *p* < .001) with a large effect size (Cohen *d* = 1.76) (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Score Gains

Group	N	Pre	SD	Post	SD	M Gain	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Current	30	244.62	77.59	369.9	138.7	125.28	<.001	1.76

Similar to the initial study, the results showed consistent overall growth with occasionally retarded scores for a small number of students in various sessions, but there was overall consistent growth. As with the original study, the results further showed that some participants' RRs increased more than others (range 0 - 262).

Surprisingly, the data also showed negative growth for three students between the pretest and posttest. In these cases, intermediary gains were made but later lost in the final session. These students' data were not included in the analysis, being attributed to a lack of interest and fatigue.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

Comparing both studies' results, it was found that each demonstrated significant gain increases. These findings illustrate that Anderson's RBU strategy, when used with graded readers, significantly positively affects RR gains for both Taiwanese undergraduates in the original study and prospective Vietnamese transnational students. The results further demonstrate that the transnational students showed higher pretest rates and would potentially be competitive in the target environment. However, the transnational students could benefit from repeated reading training as many still had pretest scores below the requisite 225 wpm mark.

Opportunities for further study also presented themselves. Two surprising results, for instance, were found. First, the transnational group's data showed three participants' negative growth. Additionally, The initial study showed a lower pretest mean ( $M = 98$ ) and lower gains ( $M = 43.54$ ,  $p = .000$ ), whereas the transnational group demonstrated a higher pretest mean (244.62) and higher gains ( $M = 125.28$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This seems to indicate that students with higher pretest means outperform those with lower ones, but this needs further exploration.

The study's limitations also provide opportunities for additional explorations. First, while there were significant increases and continued progress in both studies towards the requisite 225 wpm level (and beyond that level for some students in the Taiwan study and many in the Vietnam study), no plateaued levels were observed, which begs the question as to what progress would occur if a more extended treatment period were introduced.

Second, no attempt to assess comprehension was made during the treatment phase. That is, no immediate assessment was conducted to determine how increased rates impacted students' immediate comprehension. As with the original study, this omission was, similar to other studies (Taguchi, 1997), intentional. This was omitted to (a) avoid disrupting the course's overall goal of preparing students for ER, as the core definition of ER discourages assessment (Day & Bamford, 1998; Waring, 2021) and (b) to ensure that participants did not artificially slow their RRs in anticipation of comprehension questions (i.e., memorizing every detail in preparation for a multiple choice test instead of reading), a difficulty that has been noted in other studies (Gorsuch & Taguchi, 2008; Taguchi, 2012). Following this, if an assessment is desired, it is suggested that future studies address assessment in the least disruptive way, one that is per the precepts of ER and does not interrupt repeated reading, e.g., prior to the beginning of the RBU procedure (the first time reading) using the target material (i.e., pages from the graded reader) and again after the last timed reading (the 48th) (Baker, 2015).

Finally, there was no investigation of students' comprehension levels as RRs increased. This is a separate issue from immediate comprehension, and one that needs to be addressed because repeated reading (e.g., RBU) is a procedure that promises increased comprehension as reading speed improves (La Berge & Samuels, 1974; Samuels, 1979; 1994) though its role with L2 learners is still unclear (Taguchi & Gorsuch, 2012).



Accepting that educators can positively affect students' reading difficulties (Nunn, 2009), it is hoped that the results of this study and these suggestions for future research may inform and provide impetuses for both educators and future researchers who seek to facilitate and explore students' RR gains as they once again prepare for transnational study.

### **Declaration of Conflicts of Interests:**

The authors reported no potential conflict of interest

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