Article

Students' attitudes on the importance of reading habits as a vital factor for L2 development: An example from higher education practice

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Abstract: Recent scientific research has emphasized that reading fluency is an important component of foreign language learning. The long-term goal of foreign language learning is directed towards reading prosody, fluency, and comprehension. The research was conducted among undergraduate students of German studies at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Split from May to the end of June 2022. The research examined students' attitudes on the frequency of using paired reading techniques, as well as the differences regarding the application of reading techniques in language and literature courses. The results of the research show that the majority of students believe that the paired reading technique can help in the development of reading habits in a foreign language, in the acquisition of new vocabulary, as well as in the development of reading fluency.

Keywords: higher education teaching; paired reading; speaking fluency; cognitive processing; training; innovative method

1. Reading fluency

Fluency is the ability to accurately read texts, with appropriate pacing and prosody. Reading skills are therefore very important for students to achieve success in the academic field (Tarigan, 2018). Paired reading is a designed process that helps students develop reading fluency and learn new vocabulary in a foreign language (Sandrieser, 2018; Hudson et al., 2020). Speech fluency can be observed in the broad and the narrow sense. In the broad sense, fluency is commonly used by foreign language teachers in terms of linguistic competence or good command of a foreign language. On the other hand, fluency in the narrow sense is associated with rapid and smooth oral proficiency devoid of hesitations. Such narrow understanding primarily includes the evaluation of speech with respect to the temporal variables and the frequency of speech disfluencies (Lennon, 1990, cited in Kovač, 2020). According to the latest results from the "National assessment of educational progress", a significant number of fourth and eighth-grade students in the United States cannot read at a satisfactory level. It was found that 32% of all fourth-grade students' reading skills are below the basic level. The students found it difficult to draw simple and relevant conclusions from the text (National Assessment of Educational Progress. The Nation's Report Card: Reading, 2019). The ability to read fluently relieves cognitive processing at the level of words and sentences to such an extent that students primarily focus on understanding the read text (Schneider, 2019). Furthermore, results of major studies on reading fluency over the last decade have shown an increase in poor reading skills in foreign languages at primary and lower secondary levels in many European countries. In Germany, for example, the results of the "Progress in international

reading literacy study" showed that the proportion of students with reading difficulties increased from 16.9% to 18.9% from 2001 to 2016 (Mullis et al., 2017). In other words, one fifth of all primary school students in Germany have inadequate reading skills (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, 2017). Insufficient reading skills lead to poor and superficial understanding and can therefore have a negative impact on the entire learning process. According to Lonigan and Burgess (2017), teaching fluent reading is often underrepresented in elementary school, possibly because classroom teachers are rarely provided with appropriate training on instructional strategies to promote oral reading fluency. The authors confirmed a developmental pattern for the emergence of decoding and reading comprehension, with a clear reading comprehension construct not emerging until third grade. More recent research reviews (e.g., Solari et al., 2020) indicated further precision around best practices for teaching reading. Hudson et al. (2020) reviewed 16 studies dealing with reading fluency and found that the studies mostly focused on speech rate, rather than prosody. Prosody is very often a neglected component of oral reading fluency. It refers to expressive reading and is associated with the ability to produce appropriate changes in pitch and stress, as well as use appropriate phrasing and intonation (Kim et al., 2021). Kim et al. (2021) examined various indicators of reading prosody and the relationship between word reading and listening comprehension. A total of 371 English-speaking children were examined. The following criteria were included: text reading, word reading, and listening comprehension. When reading texts, prosody was assessed based on pause structures (pause duration, pause frequency) and pitch (intonation contour, fundamental frequency change) using spectrographic analysis, as well as expressiveness, smoothness, phrasing, and pacing. The results suggested that prosody is a multidimensional construct and that pitch can be separated from general ratings and prosody. In addition, reading words is the main component in the development of various dimensions of reading prosody, at least for primary school-aged children. Kuhn et al. (2018) pointed out that prosodic elements are the most important elements of general language competence and reading comprehension, because reading words in meaningful sentences allows readers to focus on the ideas in the text. Those who read without appropriate expression may not understand the full meaning of texts. Recent studies have considered prosodic sensitivity (sensitivity to prosodic cues in spoken language) as an additional predictor of reading skills (for an overview, see Wade-Woolley et al., 2022).

One of the implemented procedures for improving reading skills is reading aloud. This is significantly different from conventional reading, which is often criticized by authors as an ineffective technique (Rosebrock and Nix, 2017). Paired reading requires at least two partners (student-student or student-teacher) reading together. The first step is that both partners read silently. After the silent reading phase, one person reads the first part of the text aloud to the other. The listener asks questions about the text and then summarizes it. Afterwards, the same procedure is followed for the next part of the text, with a switching of roles—the listener becomes the reader. This can be implemented, inter alia, in text analysis, vocabulary acquisition, and poetry analysis. In addition, it can be associated with life situations, thus avoiding rote learning, i.e., memorizing information based on repetition (Rosebrock and Nix, 2017). The paired reading technique aims to develop speech fluency as well as raise awareness of the

importance of self-monitoring. Schneider (2019) summarized research results from the previous studies which examined the correlation between paired reading and speech fluency in children aged 5 to 7 years. One group had the experience of paired reading, while the other group of children did not. The research showed that the group of children who had experience in paired reading displayed a more sophisticated vocabulary and more fluent pronunciation, compared to the group of children without such experience. Schneider (2019) concluded that more frequent paired reading with students improves motivation for the development of reading habits. Many scientific studies have confirmed that the technique of reading aloud serves to promote reading fluency. It aims to improve decoding accuracy, word automatization, reading speed, and expressive reading (Ehri, 2017). Using the technique of reading aloud, students can quickly and reliably assign the semantic meaning of words, read texts at an appropriate speed, and use them in a meaningful way (Rosebrock and Nix, 2017). However, Álvarez-Cañizo et al. (2020) pointed out that there were no studies on the development of prosody during secondary education. The development of reading fluency and reading comprehension begins at an early age, which is why it has been studied more in primary-school children. Both reading fluency and reading comprehension continue to develop at middle- and secondary-school levels. Therefore, the authors investigated the correlation between reading fluency and reading comprehension based on a sample of secondary school students, comparing two texts (narrative and expository) which contained various types of sentences (declarative, adversative and enumerative sentences). The authors confirmed the differences in reading fluency between narrative and expository texts. In fact, expository texts were read with a more pronounced prosody. In other words, pauses and melodic contour were important for the proper understanding of the text. Furthermore, the authors concluded that reading fluency improved during secondary school. Page et al. (2017) found in a different study that reading prosody is an indicator of fluent reading, contributing to comprehension processing in students across elementary, middle, and secondary grades. The authors measured the growth of reading prosody and comprehension of 250 first-, second-, and third-grade readers throughout the school year. The obtained results showed that students gradually improved their reading prosody. An additional analysis confirmed that a reader's ability to accurately read coherent texts at an appropriate speed develops more quickly than expressive reading.

2. Current teaching practice

The approach to language learning should be holistic, without separating the four language skills, that is, listening, speaking, reading and writing. Consequently, it will positively influence children's reading (Dharma et al., 2023). Current teaching practice research has proven that the technique of reading aloud is very successful in mastering a foreign language. The peculiarity of the read-aloud technique is that reading is carried out in the form of collaborative learning among students. For example, more skilled readers (so-called tutors) read together with less skilled readers who are synchronously grouped in the classroom. In this way, they independently read the selected texts. This means that a highly skilled reader acts as a role model because

he/she can read fluently, at a more appropriate speed, with the right intonation, thus supporting the reading process of a less skilled reader. The goal of the process is to enable less skilled readers to read texts more fluently and without errors. The motivating effect of the model is that both readers (more and less skilled) read together. Furthermore, the more skilled reader demonstrates the appropriate speech rate for a particular text type and indicates which parts of the sentence should be meaningfully emphasized. A more skilled reader monitors the occurring errors of a less skilled reader and simultaneously corrects them. While reading aloud in the classroom, it is desirable to form pairs of more and less skilled readers who will practice together. In addition, different versions of collaborative learning are possible in foreign language learning when using the paired reading technique. For example, the teacher can give a literary text, which should be read aloud together with a peer student, until the desired level of learning outcomes is achieved. This is how group work is achieved and collaborative learning develops. Collaboration is considered fundamental in order to promote motivation, in the sense that working together is better than working alone (Reinhardt, 2019). The teacher can play the role of an observer and/or read the assigned literary text first in order to show appropriate pacing, accuracy and prosody, with the ultimate goal of understanding the meaning of the text. He/she can also stop reading suddenly at certain points and let the student continue reading aloud (Arizpe and Morag, 2016). Furthermore, reflective processes are trained with the paired reading technique in foreign language learning. For example, a student should pay attention to his/her error in reading and deal with the complex task of thinking and modeling his/her own reading process. According to the available research results, significant factors affecting reading fluency and the comprehension of the read text are based on the following formula: three times a week for fifteen to twenty minutes for at least eight weeks. Adhering to this formula, it is possible to achieve the set learning goals. The maximum duration of about twenty minutes per text unit should be taken seriously, as this technique requires a high level of focus, and students may be cognitively overburdened if the practice time is longer. If the reading time is prolonged, more speech errors in vocabulary and grammar may appear. According to Mehmood and Kassim (2019), reading aloud helped students to increase their interest in learning more, as well as to improve listening, speaking and reading skills. The authors conducted a comparative study with students who were exposed to two reading modes: reading aloud and silent reading. It was concluded that reading aloud was more effective and that it resulted in better reading comprehension. In addition, students claimed that this reading mode helped them with learning, i.e., they were able to understand unfamiliar words and improve their confidence and motivation. It was also emphasized that reading-aloud strategies are useful in improving visual memory and spelling awareness. Jaelani et al. (2020) found that reading aloud not only increased reading skills and general knowledge of the language, but also improved oral expression. 16 students in the fifth semester of English language training took part in the study. The data was collected through interviews, questionnaires, etc. Based on the statements of the respondents, the authors found that the use of the reading aloud method stimulated reading comprehension and significantly improved pronunciation.

Hudson et al. (2020) reviewed sixteen empirical studies conducted from 2000 to

2019 that examined reading fluency interventions among elementary students. The researchers wanted to find out the effects of oral reading interventions on English reading fluency and comprehension. The systematic review found that interventions were primarily based on repeated readings (86.5%). The authors found that fourteen out of sixteen studies included a repeated reading intervention. However, the authors emphasized that none of the studies examined repeated reading as an isolated process. All studies included additional activities that accompanied the repeated reading instruction, such as the presence of a peer coach; teacher modelling where the teacher acted as a model for fluent and prosodic reading; error correction provided to students during the reading process or after reading; performance feedback where the teacher provided information about the student's prosody after reading; verbal cues that gave students specific instructions; goal setting; imitation—in which the student was asked to imitate the teacher's fluent and expressive reading style; the teacher and the students read the text aloud together; the teacher read the text with expression; answering questions after reading to promote comprehension; teacher read aloud slightly ahead of the student; vocabulary instruction.

Syahputri and Arianti (2023) described a contemporary language approach to improving students' reading skills in primary school. The aim of the research was to improve reading comprehension skills using the whole language approach. Language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) were taught in an integrated manner. The benefits of the entire language approach are the development of speaking and listening skills, as well as the integration of all language skills and linguistic components (vocabulary and grammar) with the use of multimedia. The authors concluded that a holistic linguistic approach can improve the speaking and reading skills of elementary school students. Also, there was a significant effect of the whole language approach on the learning motivation.

Another contemporary way of developing reading skills is the theatre method. Köse Akyǔz and Kanik Uysal (2023) conducted a research on using the theatre method in improving the reading fluency and reading comprehension skills of students at different reading levels. The research was conducted with fifth grade students attending a secondary school located in the eastern region of Turkey. The obtained results pointed to the conclusion that the theatre method contributed significantly to the development of reading fluency and reading comprehension of students.

The present study is thus expected to extend the current knowledge about the students' attitudes on the frequency of using paired reading techniques, as well as the differences regarding the application of reading techniques in language and literature courses.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Research and respondents

The research was conducted among undergraduate students at the Department of German Studies at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Split from May to the end of June 2022. An online questionnaire was compiled using Google Forms.

3.2. Aim and hypotheses of the research

The aim of the research was to examine students' attitudes on the frequency of using paired reading in higher education teaching, as well as the differences in their opinions with regard to the application of reading techniques in language and literature courses. Two hypotheses were established. H1. Paired reading techniques can improve students' reading skills, pronunciation and speech fluency. In addition, it is useful for acquiring new vocabulary. H2. It is expected that there will be differences in the perception of using the technique of paired reading between language and literature courses.

3.3. Statistical analysis

The descriptive analysis of relevant data is summarized in *N* values and percentages (%). In order to determine the differences in individual variables (nominal scale), the non-parametric chi-square test (χ^2) was used, and the *p*-value and the significance threshold of $\alpha = 0.05$ were presented. Data analysis was performed using STATISTICA 12 software.

4. Results

The online questionnaire consisted of twenty open-ended and closed-ended questions and was available on the Google Classroom platform during the research. A total of 53 students of German studies from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Split participated in the research. A total of 30.2% of students attend the first year of undergraduate studies, 30.2% attend the second year, and 39.6% attend the third year of study. The proportion of students who participated in this research was calculated by dividing the total number of students attending classes and converting it into percentages (**Table 1**). Out of the total number of respondents, 62.3% are women, 35.8% are men, and 1.9% opted for other. Regarding the study programs, the majority attend the study program of German studies combined with Croatian studies, English studies, Italian studies, History, and Philosophy. Students mostly live in the city (58.5%), 26.4% in the countryside, and 15.1% on an island or peninsula. **Table 1** shows the sample of participants by year of study in the academic year 2021–2022.

Table 1. Descriptive data of respondents ($N = 23$).

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	Undergraduate studies	*N*	%	Ratio of students who participated (%)*
	1st year	16	30.2	76.2
	2nd year	16	30.2	84.2
	3rd year	21	39.6	95.4

[1]Note: The ratio of students who participated in this research was calculated by dividing the total number of students attending classes and converting it into percentages (source: authors).

The majority of students rated their overall academic success as very good (54.7%) and good (28.3%) (**Figure 1**). Only 13.2% of students rated their previous success as excellent, and 3.8% of them as sufficient.
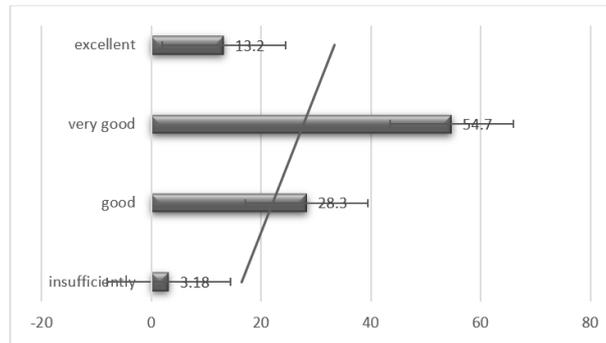
Figure 1. Perception of success in the previous years of study ($N = 53$) (source: authors).

From the obtained answers, it is evident that during classes students were introduced to the paired reading technique, mainly in language courses (83%), which primarily refers to Language exercises. A total of 17% of the students became familiar with those techniques in literature courses (for example, Introduction to Literary Didactics). The courses in which students were introduced to the technique of paired reading for the first time were Language exercises (64.1%), Phonetics of the German language (16.9%), Morphosyntax (1.9%), and Introduction to the study of German literature (3.8%). According to students' assessments, the paired reading technique was used in language and literature courses usually several times a month or several times a week. A smaller number of the research participants believe that it was used less often than a few times a month or that it was used daily (**Table 2**). In order to demarcate language and literature courses, students who used the paired reading technique during classes were asked how often the method was used in language and literature courses. The chi-square test displayed a significant difference between the language and literature courses ($\chi^2 = 12.96$; $p = 0.01$; $p < 0.01$).

Table 2. Representation of the paired reading technique for language and literature courses ($N = 53$) (source: authors).

	Courses	
	Language courses	**Literary courses**
On a daily basis	28.3%	3.8%
Several times a week	30.2%	39.6%
Several times a month	28.3%	35.8%
Less often than several times a week	11.3%	13.2%
None of the above	1.9%	7.5%

The paired reading technique was used by combining two modes—reading aloud and/or silent reading. **Table 3** lists the preferred ways to use the techniques. A total of 35.8% of students prefer the reading aloud mode, when the text is read by the teacher, and then followed by the student. As far as the silent reading mode is concerned, the absolute majority of students prefer it when the student reads the text first and the teacher provides corrective feedback afterwards.

Table 3. Silent and aloud reading modes (source: authors).

	Modes	
	Reading aloud	**Silent reading**
The student reads the text, and the teacher provides corrective feedback	28.3%	73.1%
The teacher reads the text, followed by the student's reading	35.8%	-
Students take turns reading aloud in front of the classroom	26.4%	-
After reading the text aloud, oral peer feedback is used to minimize the students' errors in pronunciation	9.4%	-
Silent reading precedes loud reading. Afterwards, oral peer feedback is used to minimize the students' errors in pronunciation	-	26.9%

The results of the study have also shown that the paired reading technique can help with the overall success of language learning, the development of pronunciation strategies (expressive reading) (32.1%), and the acquisition of vocabulary (9.4%). Nevertheless, 58.5% of respondents believe that the technique helps with all of the above.

Considering these results, it is clear why 75.5% of the students want the teacher to use the paired reading technique more often in class (15.1% answered that they are not familiar with it, while 9.4% answered that they do not want it to be used).

Students who expressed the desire for the teacher to use the paired reading technique more often stated that this mainly refers to reading aloud (30.8%), silent reading (21.2%), or both reading modes (48.1%). The reasons provided by students for using the aloud/silent reading technique or both are as follows: "improving vocabulary, pronunciation fluency, and overall speech fluency; when reading aloud, the student pays more attention to errors, and self-corrections will occur sooner; practicing reading; improving speaking skills; acquiring vocabulary." Students also mentioned different teaching activities which they would like the teacher to use in the future, and these are as follows: grammar activities; analyzing a literary work; learning new vocabulary; reading texts; reading literary texts in lectures. These results might be used as guidelines for improving the teaching practice. Furthermore, the majority of students believe that the paired reading technique can improve reading habits and thus contribute to the further development of reading skills (84.9%), as well as to the development of collaborative learning (86.9%).

5. Discussion

There is a strong correlation between the paired reading technique and the development of reading fluency, as well as the acquisition of new vocabulary. However, the use of paired reading techniques in foreign language learning requires clear methodological guidelines. This research had two hypotheses: i) paired reading techniques can improve students' reading fluency and contribute to the acquisition of new vocabulary, and ii) differences will be recorded between language and literature courses. Both hypotheses were confirmed. The research showed that the majority of students believe that the paired reading technique can help with the acquisition of German vocabulary and the development of reading fluency. The results of the research also showed which teaching activities related to the paired reading technique

should be practiced in the future. Tasks that most students prefer to use in combination with the paired reading technique are as follows: grammar teaching; literary analysis; learning new teaching content; reading texts which are important for the acquisition of new lexical items; reading literary works. It may be concluded that the paired reading technique could be a key factor in foreign language learning, especially in the acquisition of new vocabulary, the development of speech and reading fluency, as well as the development of reading habits. However, more research on the use of the paired reading technique is needed in order to confirm its positive effects on learning. In addition, it is important to establish concrete practical guidelines. Based on the obtained answers from the questions in the questionnaire, the following comments may be taken into consideration: a) error correction may be necessary, but it should be postponed initially for motivational reasons; b) spaces between the lyric lines should be used, as this encourages additional questions; c) short stories or poems are particularly suitable for introduction or repetition; d) for exchange and answering questions, it is usually helpful to create additional linguistic support material, so that communication can take place in the target language.

6. Conclusion

The research was conducted among undergraduate students of German studies and examined students' attitudes on the frequency of using paired reading techniques, as well as the differences regarding the application of reading techniques in language and literature courses. Considering the students' attitudes, the absolute majority of students would like the teachers to use the technique of paired reading as often as possible. Furthermore, according to their views, the paired reading technique can help with the overall language learning success and the development of fluent reading— the ability to read texts with accuracy, appropriate pacing and prosody—with the ultimate goal of understanding the meaning of the text. It is also evident that the students became familiar with the paired reading technique mainly in language courses and less in literature courses. The research data suggest that the repeated practice of reading short texts in a partner environment can largely improve accuracy, word automation, speed fluency and expressive reading. In other words, reading-aloud techniques are used to promote reading skills and many studies have confirmed it. In sequential reading aloud, the focus is on practicing through repetition, which is an explicit training method. The less skilled readers should expand their vocabulary and gradually automate their decoding skills by rereading the same section of the text. This means that they will read faster and increasingly use their cognitive resources for reading processes at a higher level, i.e., for understanding the read text. However, more research on the use of the paired reading technique is needed to improve the methodical practice, thus offering concrete practical guidelines.

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