

Response to the critique of the Huffman (2014) article, “Reading rate gains during a one-semester extensive reading course”

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In his critique of the Huffman (2014) article, McLean (2016) undertakes an important reflective exercise that is too often missing in the field of second language acquisition and in the social sciences in general: questioning whether the claims made by researchers are warranted by their results. He makes some valid points, to which I respond here.

McLean’s (2016) first and strongest argument is that by having timed readings in the extensive reading (ER) course but not in the intensive reading (IR) course, a second independent variable has come into play, such that the results reflect not only the difference in treatment itself, but also the presence or absence of timed readings. This assessment is accurate. Because timed readings and other reading rate and fluency enhancement activities do not seem to be common practice in ER courses, at least as far as can be assessed from the academic literature, I should have made it clearer in my research questions, abstract, and limitations that I was referring to a type of ER treatment that includes timed readings.

Having said that, I would like to take this opportunity to promote the inclusion of reading rate and fluency enhancement activities in ER courses. While most discussions of the core principles of ER do include mention of a faster reading rate, they are generally referring to the fact that readers will naturally be reading faster if they are reading easy material (Day & Bamford, 2002; Waring & McLean, 2015). But because we know that reading fluency and reading comprehension are closely linked (for L1 studies, see Lai, Benjamin, Schwanenflugel, & Kuhn, 2014; Schwanenflugel et al., 2006; for L2 studies, see Breznitz, 1988; Jeon, 2012), and since empirical evidence indicates that timed readings and repeated readings are effective for improving reading rates (Chang & Millett, 2013; Chung & Nation, 2006), it seems logical that such activities should be included in ER courses. This is likely to be especially feasible and appropriate in dedicated ER courses at the college level, where 90-minute class periods need to be supplemented by reading tasks other than sustained silent reading, presumably by activities that support and enhance the core principles of ER.

McLean’s (2016) second point is one that was discussed in the limitations section of the article in question, namely the difference in time-on-task between the ER and IR group. As mentioned in the article, this is an unavoidable limitation because in a classroom-based longitudinal study, it is ethically irresponsible to give the demands of experimental research primacy over important pedagogical concerns. Attempting to limit the amount of time spent reading in an ER course would violate one of the core principles of the approach, namely that readers should be

encouraged to read as much as possible (Day & Bamford, 2002). Furthermore, this limitation is largely irrelevant if we assume that a greater amount of time spent reading is an inherent characteristic of ER itself, which it most certainly is. McLean disputes this point, but it is inherent in the very name that is used to describe this approach (*extensive* reading), as well as in the core principle that learners should be encouraged to read as much as possible. By contrast, the IR approach usually involves assigning the same text or texts to all students, which limits the amount of time they spend reading. If the core principles of ER are in effect, it is all but assured that students will spend more time reading than with IR or other traditional approaches.

In summary, my conclusion should have clarified that the results are only generalizable to ER courses that include reading fluency enhancement activities—in this case, a series of timed readings. However, ER courses greatly benefit from including such activities in order to enhance the improvement in reading fluency and comprehension that is likely to occur naturally from ER itself. Finally, the greater amount of time spent reading is pedagogically unavoidable, and it also does not clearly constitute a third independent variable (that of time-on-task) because it is inherent in the ER approach itself.

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