

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-21346-2 - Practical Faster Reading: A Course in Reading and Vocabulary for Upper-intermediate and More Advanced Students

Gerald Mosback and Vivienne Mosback

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Preface

The reading practice offered by this course draws on a wide variety of general knowledge topics. The final selection is the result of several major revisions in the course of extensive use of the materials in a number of university, adult education and senior secondary school contexts, where English is the medium of instruction for non-native speakers. Experience suggests the course is best used as one element in a general scheme of work in English, and covered at a rate of one or two hours per week.

The passages are of approximately equal length (500 words) and the same level of difficulty throughout, to allow a really meaningful comparison of reading speeds and comprehension scores at the beginning and end of the course. In practice, reading speed improvement has been found to be in the region of 80–100% over 30–40 hours of instruction, but equally important has been the improvement in comprehension and extension of vocabulary resulting from other elements of the course.

The vocabulary level basically corresponds to level 5 of the *Cambridge English Lexicon*, and is entirely within the 5,000 words of the *Ladder* vocabulary, developed initially by the United States Information Service, both of which were closely consulted during preparation of the material. The Thorndike and Lorge *Teacher's Wordbook of 30,000 words* (Columbia University Press) was also consulted.

Words which fall outside the CEL level 5 are occasionally explained for the student, where such words are not semantically contextualized and the reader has no way of working out the meaning. Sometimes, however, such a word is the subject of a vocabulary question and is therefore not glossed.

We should like to thank the many teachers who used these materials in the experimental stage – particularly Janet James at the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa Headquarters, and John Murray-Robertson and Michael James, British Council instructors at the General Wingate School, Addis Ababa.

G. M.
V. M.

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How to use this book

Students should be aware at the outset that this is not exclusively a speed reading course. Reading practice courses to date have tended to fall into two sharply distinct categories – those which concentrate almost entirely on reading for speed, and those which seek to encourage comprehension at some leisure and in depth. This book is designed to improve the reading of expository English in two ways. It should certainly increase reading speed, through the first ‘Ideas’ exercises, but it should also improve comprehension in the areas of vocabulary, sentence patterns and paragraph structure through all the subsequent exercises.

Ideas

The reading *speed* element is covered by this section. The best method is to begin each reading practice session with the speed/ideas exercise. Since the passages are all approximately 500 words long, timing is simple. The teacher should make sure he has a watch with a seconds hand or a stop-watch. He marks up on the blackboard the passing of each ten seconds. As the student finishes reading and turns to the Ideas questions, he notes down the last time the teacher has written on the board. The values for a 500-word passage are roughly as follows:

Reading time (min/secs)	Speed (w.p.m.)	Reading time (min/secs)	Speed (w.p.m.)
1.00	500	3.10	158
1.10	427	3.20	150
1.20	375	3.30	143
1.30	334	3.40	137
1.40	300	3.50	131
1.50	273	4.00	125
2.00	250	4.10	120
2.10	231	4.20	116
2.20	215	4.30	111
2.30	200	4.40	107
2.40	188	4.50	104
2.50	174	5.00	100
3.00	167		

Students should answer the Ideas questions without looking back to the passage and in as short a time as possible. Five or six minutes should be enough to answer these questions so that the whole speed section, a reading of the passage and answering the Ideas questions should not take more than ten minutes altogether.

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The students should keep a record in a convenient place of their reading time and Ideas score for each session. The Ideas score should not fall below 6 or 7 out of 10, while a steady and encouraging improvement should be noted in the speed. The passages are definitely not designed for lecture/explanation presentation in the first instance, and bearing in mind that a reading speed of 250 w.p.m. is at the low end of the scale for an educated native speaker dealing with this kind of material at upper high school and college level, ESL students should certainly not take more than three to four minutes for a passage, with comprehension at around 70%. Initially, students will probably underestimate the time they need to read a passage under the mistaken impression that *speed* is the only important object of the exercise. It must be remembered that mere speed without retention is valueless.

Note that although units 1–4 are the same in length and format as all other units in the book, the passage content forms a revision of points relating to the process of reading speed improvement and should be re-read and explained with care by the teacher. If he wishes to time one or more of them for familiarization and as a check on students' reading speeds at the beginning of the course, care should be taken to go over the passage again in detail on completion of the exercise. Since this is an upper-intermediate to advanced course, however, it is expected that most students will already be familiar with many of the points covered in units 1–4.

Vocabulary

As far as possible, the vocabulary questions are designed to provide not only a contextually identifiable *correct* answer, but, in addition, to expand the student's vocabulary by including secondary and related meanings among the distractors. The student *must* look back to the passage for this exercise, as only the context will tell him which of the possible meanings of a word is the correct one for the passage. In many instances the student may be definitely misled if he does not look back. In passage 22, Vocabulary, for example:

roughly (line 2)

- a) approximately
- b) crudely
- c) impolitely
- d) exactly

the correct answer for this context, a), is probably no more common a meaning for 'roughly' in general English than either b) or c). This is an area where the teacher can considerably expand the students' recognition vocabulary when he discusses the answers with the class. Shades of meaning between apparent synonyms, prefix, suffix and root meanings can be explored. Of course it is not possible for all the distractors to be relevant in this way since the number of words with four or more meanings is limited, but the opportunity has been taken wherever possible, and it is just as important to explain why the wrong answers are wrong as why the

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right answers are correct. Certainly the teacher should not be content merely to read off, or have the students read off, the list of correct answers.

Similar or different?

This exercise brings the student from word level to phrase and sentence level in close reading practice. Under the teacher's guidance, and with reference to the passage, he will consolidate his understanding of relationships between the more common sentence patterns in English.

Missing word summary

With this exercise, the focus widens still further to the relationship between sentences within the paragraph. In each exercise, five of the missing words are structural and five contextualized vocabulary.

Spot the topic

Here the student's attention is drawn to the thematic nature of the English paragraph, and the total effect in combination of its component sentences.

Discussion and writing topics

Towards the end of the course (passages 26–30) discussion and writing topics are introduced. These are designed for the most general use possible, either for oral work with smaller groups, or writing practice after class preparation by the teacher. They broaden the scope of the course towards the end to lead on to more general work when sound reading habits have been firmly established.

All the later exercises should be worked through with as much guidance from the teacher as necessary. We should like to emphasize that only the Ideas questions are concerned with checking the reading *speed* practice. The remaining exercises should be covered in detail and with care.