Spreeder: A web app to develop and enhance reading speed

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Reading is an essential language skill for second language (L2) learners. Possessing good reading ability in L2 is important for a number of reasons: First, much information that learners need to learn a new language comes from written texts. Krashen (2004) maintained that reading is a rich source of comprehensible input to learners and can aid language acquisition greatly. Second, development in reading ability is conducive to improvement in general language proficiency. Cummins (2003), for instance, argued that when learners' reading skills improve, so will their listening, speaking and writing skills. Third, reading is a part of any course of study and is a strong predictor of academic success (Bernhardt, 2011; Mansor, Rasul, Rauf, & Koh, 2013). L2 learners with good reading comprehension strategies are more likely to perform better on school subjects than poor and less-skilled readers (Birch, 2006; Elabsy, 2013; Koda, 2005).

Much of the research on reading in L2, however, has focused on reading accuracy rather than reading fluency (Grabe, 2009), probably because reading in L2 contexts has mainly been deemed as a vehicle for developing vocabulary and syntactic knowledge (Bernhardt, 1991). As Grabe (2009) aptly pointed out, fluency in reading is needed if students wish "to experience a much larger knowledge beyond direct instruction, to develop automatic word-recognition skills to read for additional learning, to build reading motivation, and, in L2 university contexts, to read the large amounts of materials" (p. 290).

There are different definitions of reading fluency. Meyer (1999) characterized reading fluency as the ability "to read text rapidly, smoothly, effortlessly, and automatically with little attention to the mechanics of reading such as decoding" (p. 284). Similarly, the National Reading Panel (2000) defined reading fluency as the ability to read a passage accurately, quickly, and with proper expression or meaning. As seen in these definitions, the reading rate or speed is an important component of reading fluency. It is also one of the most noticeable differences between reading in a first language (L1) and reading in an L2; many studies have shown that L2 learners read much more slowly in their L2 than in their L1 (e.g., Cook, 2008; Fraser, 2007; Hickey, 2005). Slow reading is not without consequences for L2 learners. It may lead to reduced comprehension, lack of concentration, limited exposure to L2 input, and overall reading frustration. In other words, learners will no longer enjoy reading. As Nuttall (1996) put it, "speed, enjoyment, and comprehension are closely linked with one another" (p. 127).

One way to nurture fluent reading in an L2 is to incorporate technology into the learners' reading activities, and it is the intention of this report to introduce a reading speed training app by the name of Spreeder, which promises to improve reading speed by eliminating bad reading habits.

Spreeder is a free web app that offers rapid serial visual presentation of a text; that is, it divides a text into segments (single or multiple word strings). The genius of Spreeder is that it is so easy to use. Its use will be demonstrated graphically below using a line from "Old Indian Trick," written by Craig Johnson (2014, p. 1):

I was driving Lonnie Little Bird up to Billings for an evening diabetes checkup at Deaconess Hospital when we pulled into the Blue Cow Café, on the Crow Reservation just off I-90, for some supper.

How to Use Spreeder

To use the app, readers need to go to http://spreeder.com/. As illustrated in Figure 1, there is a text box into which the passage to be read should be pasted. It should be noted that there is a default text already in the box, in case readers want to give the software a quick try without having to look for a text of their own. They can delete the default text by left clicking once in the box and then pressing the "delete" button on their PC or laptop keyboard.
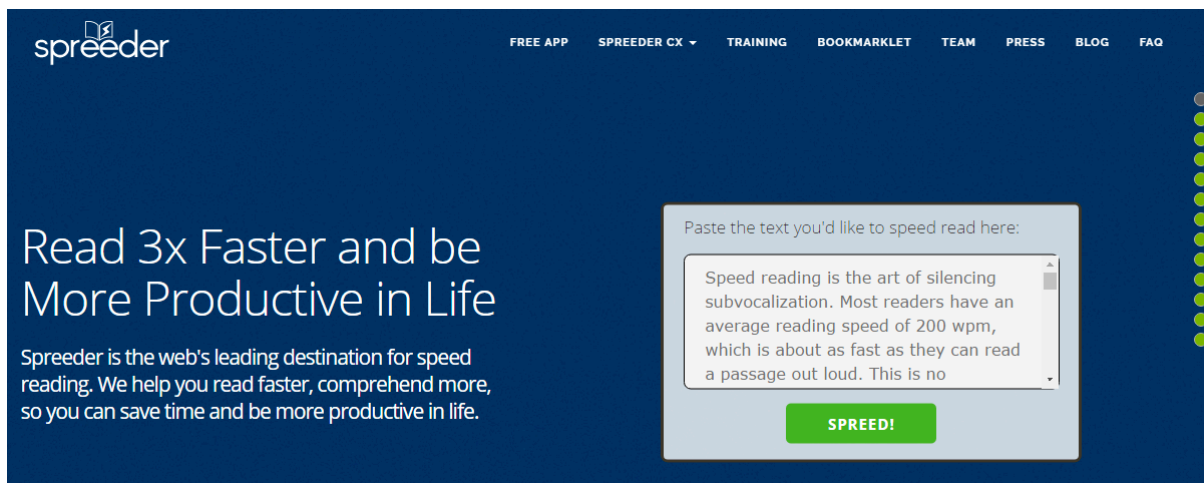

Figure 1. Spreeder homepage in Google Chrome

After readers have pasted the whole or a chunk of a text into the box, they click the "SPREED" button. Clicking the button takes them to another page, as shown in Figure 2, where they see the first word or words of the text. The word displayed in the text box in Figure 2 is "I," the first word in our example sentence.
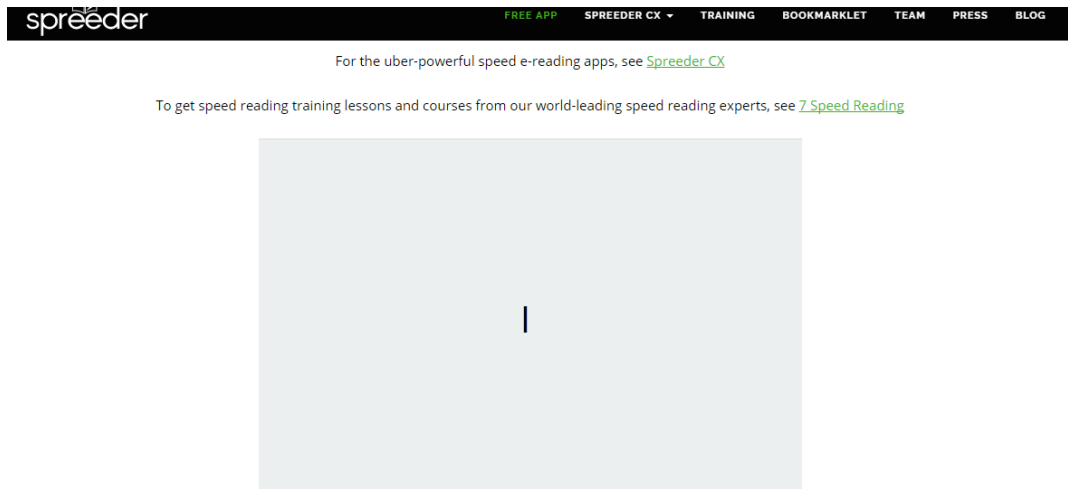
Figure 2. The words appear one by one in the text box

To continue reading the text, readers only need to hit the play button in the control panel beneath the text box (see Figure 3), and the words start playing out one by one. Figure 3 shows 36 words (the number of words in the example sentence) to be read one by one at the default speed of 300 words per minute (wpm). The panel allows the readers to open a new reading box (n), play/pause (p), restart (r), adjust reading speeding by 25 words wpm (+/-), or manually operate the presentation of texts (right/left arrows). It also allows them to change the default settings and select their own speed (the number of words to appear in each flash), font size, font color, background color, and alignment of the text. To do that, they need to click on "settings" or press "s" on their keyboards, and a drop-down list appears where they can set their preferences (see Figure 4). It should be noted that readers need to "save" their preferences for them to take effect.
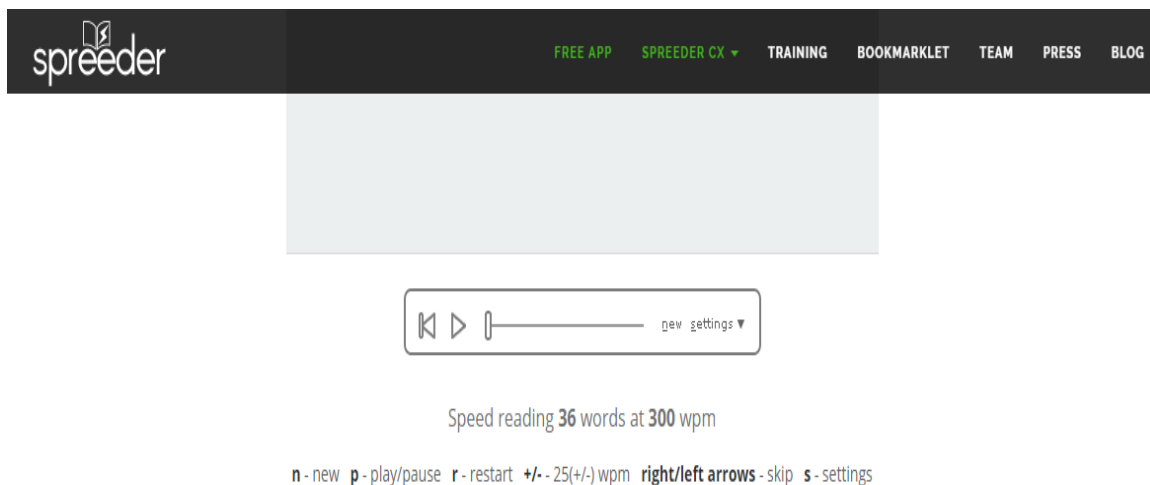

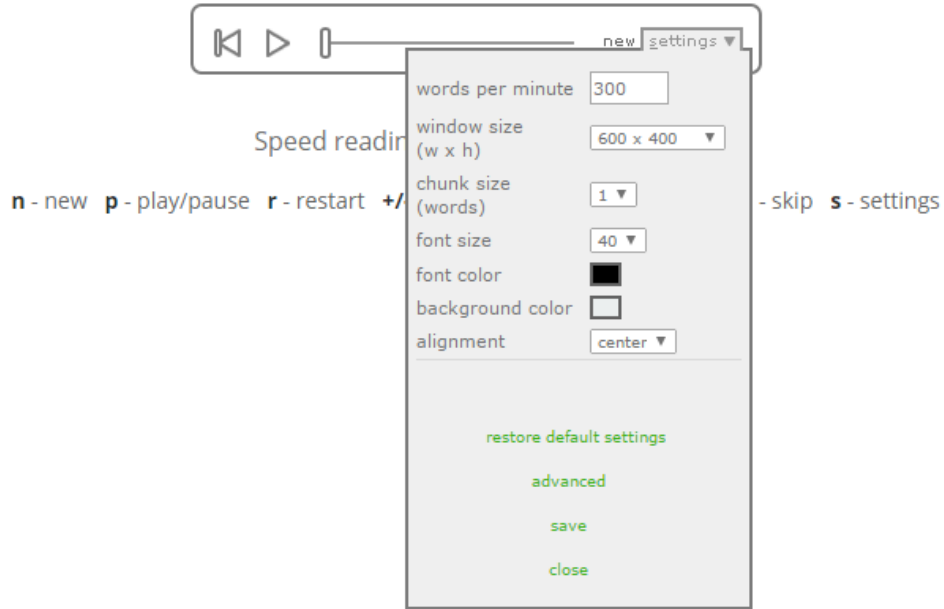**Figure 3.** Spreeder control panel buttons

Figure 4. Drop-down list that appears after clicking the "settings" on the control panel

One interesting feature on the list is the "advanced" option. Pressing this button presents readers with the choices shown in Figure 5. These choices are very useful as they enable readers to read faster and with greater comprehension by giving longer phrases more screen time than the shorter ones, marking sentence or paragraph boundaries by slight pauses, and skipping over little function words, or "stopwords," that do not contribute to the meaning of the sentences. Readers can even specify which words they wish to skip. These features can make the reading process look more authentic to readers.
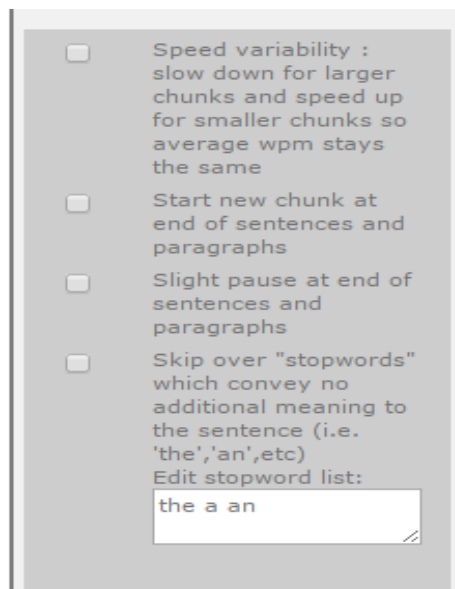

Figure 5. The options that appear after clicking the "advanced" button

Evaluation

Spreeder is a free, web-based, user-friendly tool that helps readers increase their reading speed by training them to avoid subvocalization (saying words in their head while reading), backtracking (going back to re-read words or sentences), and fixations, factors that slow readers down (Smith, 2004; Sutz, 2009). There are some empirical studies showing the positive impact of Spreeder on L2 learners' reading rate and comprehension. Cha (2013) demonstrated through a case study that the app helped her students overcome unproductive reading habits of subvocalization and backtracking, which in turn led them to read faster and with better comprehension. Similar results were obtained by McNabb (2013), who reported on how Spreeder helped his EFL students improve their reading efficiency.

Despite its merits, the Spreeder web app is not without its flaws and could benefit from a number of improvements. First, the app does not chunk the words into grammatical clusters and only shows individual or multiple words without taking their grammatical categories into account. Therefore, our example sentence would appear as "I was" "driving Lonnie" "Little Bird" "up to" "Billings for"… (supposing that the "chunk size" is set at 2). In other words, the app does not mark pauses where the grammar implies a pause. Similarly, punctuation calls for slight pauses in the text, but the app cannot perform that operation either. Second, Spreeder targets lower-order processing of texts and may reduce the process of active reading to passive reading where readers are spoon-fed the words. Third, the mobile version of the app is unavailable although its creators are said to be busy developing it. Finally, the app does not show how the readers' reading speed improves over time.

Conclusion

In a fast moving world where many of us are surrounded with so much to read, speed in reading is a determining factor of reading efficiency, and Spreeder can be the tool of choice for anyone looking to train his/her brains to read at a faster pace. Readers can enter any text they want to read faster in the text box, and the app flashes the text back to them at a configurable rate, helping them to unlearn old ways of reading. Despite the positive results reported by some studies, there are a few points that L2 teachers need to consider when working with Spreeder. First, they should realize many learners will initially find this technique of reading texts insanely fast, so teachers need to prepare and train their students in the use of the application by demonstrating (in a workshop, for instance) how the application works and how working with it will ultimately benefit them. Moreover, in the early stages, teachers had better select reading materials that are interesting to learners and are appropriate to their proficiency level so as to increase learners' motivation to try out the app. Second, teachers should understand that the application is a training tool that supplements, but does not replace, other approaches to teaching reading. Finally, teachers should note that reading speed should not come at the expense of reading comprehension. Therefore, they should encourage learners to find their base rate for reading with full comprehension and then gradually increase the chunk size while maintaining high comprehension.

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