

Speed-Reading Techniques

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Abstract

This article provides language-learning strategies for teachers who may instruct speed-reading classes to private, university, or company students. The paper emphasizes insights on the effects of speed-reading and draws comparisons between English and other languages. Some helpful web sites providing relevant information have also been included.

Introduction

If you're like me, you may be one of those people who are never quite satisfied with the amount of reading material you're able to cover in a day, be it at work, school or home. How many times have you come across a situation where you have to start a new class in a few minutes and wish to make the best impression on your students? Where you've been too busy to study for a test, yet need to cover, comprehend and memorize as much information as possible in the little time allotted? Where you've been asked to attend a meeting in five minutes with a potential client whose product requires basic knowledge and you want to leave a positive impression? How can you acquire satisfactory knowledge of something in a few minutes that otherwise might take hours or days to cover?

Over the years, I have sampled different speed-reading techniques only to find that the majority either re-hash conventional methods or are simply ineffective. Many traditional speed-reading courses advise readers to run their fingers across the page to speed up eye movement, enhancing a "physical-mental" procedure in order to best absorb information at a reasonably efficient rate. More recent techniques advise readers to skim pages using a slanted, block style format, either moving their eyes from the right to the left, visa versa, or in an "S" pattern. The bottom line is, you need to find whatever method works best for you, and although the only way to do this may be through trial and error, depending upon the characters of a language--pictographic symbols (Chinese Kanji) versus phonetic (English

letters), the aforementioned styles may actually impede your maximum output. With English, drudging through long, tedious sentences in order to grasp the author's meaning is often required; hence, application of effective imagery skills which make better use of the creative right side of your brain in synchronization with the analytical left can help you acquire a higher reading speed without losing your current comprehension level.

Characteristics of speed-reading?

Several interesting points including the shortcomings among phonetic language readers were published by Dr. Ed Strachar (*Reading Genius*) and the Division of Student Affairs Department of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (VPISU):

- 1) Although the average human being holds up to 80% of unused mental capacity, most people have never learned to access this.
- 2) The average person reads less than one whole book a year! 95% of all books purchased don't get read past the first or second chapter!
- 3) People who actually finish reading an entire book usually do it in several days to several weeks, but retain only 10-15% of the content!
- 4) The single greatest problem that most people encounter while reading is that instead of being 100% focused on the words and information before them, they are thinking about 5-10 different things at the same time. Most people all too often reach the bottom of the page, or the end of a paragraph or chapter, only to realize that they need to return to the beginning and read it again because they were not focused on the content.
- 5) The average college student reads between 250 and 350 words per minute (wpm) on fiction and non-technical materials. Although a respectable reading speed is considered to be between 500 to 700 wpm, most people have the capacity to read at least a thousand words or more. An editorial by Daniel S. Pena Sr., from the Reading Genius home page, noted "After learning the latest speed-reading techniques, I went from reading 225 wpm with 70% comprehension to 3,000 wpm with the same comprehension!"

By paying attention to the following factors, it is possible for language instructors to achieve their ideal wpm goal and pass those speed-reading techniques on to their students.

Factors involved in speed-reading

According to VPISU, there are essentially three basic factors underlying the improvement of speed-reading:

- 1) The desire to improve
- 2) The willingness to adjust and apply the latest and most advanced methods

3) The motivation to practice

For the average student, learning to read rapidly with a high level of comprehension presupposes that he or she has the necessary vocabulary and comprehension skills in that given language. When students have advanced their reading comprehension to high school and/or university level material, they should have little problem in preparing their speed-reading practice.

Extensive research at VPISU has shown that students need to understand the importance of speed and comprehension in the reading process. An increase in speed-reading has been paralleled by an increase in comprehension, and where the reading speed has been reduced, comprehension has also decreased. According to a related case study conducted by the university, participants who read at a slow rate found that their comprehension level considerably decreased respectively. When the same participants increased their reading speed, however, they noted that their comprehension ratio either remained the same or in fact increased. It is important to note that the method used to acquire an increased reading rate is significant, and simply reading faster without actually improving basic reading habits could result in lower comprehension

Factors that can reduce reading speed and comprehension

In the VPISU study, it was noted that several factors which reduce speed-reading and comprehension rates included those found in table 1.

(TABLE 1)

Negative factors to speed-reading and comprehension
(a) Limited perceptual span i.e., word-by-word reading
(b) Slow perceptual reaction time, i.e., slowness of recognition and response to the material
(c) Vocalization, including the need to vocalize in order to achieve comprehension
(d) Faulty eye movements, including inaccuracy in placement of the page, in return sweep, in rhythm and regularity of movement, etc.
(e) Faulty attention and concentration habits, beginning with simple mind wandering during the reading act and faulty processes of retention
(f) Lack of practice in reading
(g) Fear of losing comprehension, leading that person to suppress his/her rate deliberately with the firm belief that comprehension is improved if he/she spends more time on individual words
(h) Poor evaluation of important versus unimportant aspects in the reading material
(l) Faulty habits of trying to remember everything rather than remember selectively

Factors that can increase reading speed and comprehension

The same study also revealed several factors that can improve reading rates without decreasing comprehension as indicated in table 2.

(TABLE 2)

Positive factors to speed-reading and comprehension
<p>(a) Before embarking on a speed-reading program, make sure that any correctable eye defects have been taken care of, i. e. renewing eye glasses, etc.</p>
<p>(b) Eliminate the habit of pronouncing words as you read. Sounding out words or even whispering them means you will only read as fast as you speak. You should be able to read most materials at least two or three times faster silently than orally. If you have a habit of "hearing" words as you read, try to eliminate this by concentrating on key words and meaningful ideas as you force yourself to read faster.</p>
<p>(c) Avoid re-reading. The average student in the VPISU case study read 250 words per minute, and regressed or re-read about 20 times per page. Obviously re-reading words and phrases is a habit that can slow your reading speed down. It is often unnecessary to re-read words since ideas are explained and elaborated more fully in later contexts. Furthermore, the slowest reader tends to let his or her mind wander, so their re-reading reflects both their inability to concentrate and their lack of confidence in comprehension skills.</p>
<p>(d) Develop a wider eye-span. This will help you read more than one word or sentence at a glance. Since written material is less meaningful if read word by word, this may help you learn to read by phrases or thought units.</p>

Rate Adjustment

VPISU also reported that rate adjustments played important roles in their research study. *Overall or "external" rate adjustment* establishes the basic speed at which an entire article can be read, while internal adjustment involves the necessary variations in rate for each varied part of the material. Overall rate adjustment should be based on your reading plan, your purpose, and the nature and difficulty of the material. The reading plan itself should specify the general rate to be used. This is based on the total "size up", in order to understand information, skim or scan at a rapid rate. To determine the value of material or to read for enjoyment, read rapidly or slowly according to your feeling. To read analytically, read at a moderate pace to permit interrelating ideas. The nature and difficulty of the material requires an adjustment of the rate in conformity with your ability to handle that type of material.

"Internal" rate adjustment involves selecting differing rates for parts of a given article. In general, decrease speed when you find unfamiliar terminology not clear in context. Try to understand it in context at that point; otherwise, read on and return to it later. Decrease

speed when you find a difficult sentence or paragraph structure; slow down enough to enable yourself to decipher them and get accurate context for the passage. Also, take enough time to understand detailed, technical material. In general, increase speed when you come across (a) simple material with few ideas which are new to you and spend most of your time on the unfamiliar ideas and (b) unnecessary examples and illustrations. Since these are included to clarify ideas, move over them rapidly when they are not needed; (c) detailed explanation and idea elaboration that you do not need; (d) broad, generalized ideas that are restatements of previous ones.

Maintain a flexible reading rate by adjusting its sensitivity from article to article. It is suggested to practice these techniques until a flexible reading rate becomes second nature to you.

Improved Learning, Memory and Recall Techniques

In this section, I will point out some very significant factors that may improve students' learning, memory and recall techniques.

- 1) Most, if not all, speed-reading analysts suggest using some sort of specialized music, i.e. classical or jazz (depending upon the reader), which by its tempo and harmony, correspond and adjust to the same frequencies of the brain needed to achieve a high level of concentration. This can allow students to acquire their optimum learning state, so that they may become more "in tune" with the harmony, allowing their thought process to flow easily and without effort (*Strachar 2001*).
- 2) The use of Mind Mapping and recall techniques. These are effective tools that utilize the entire brain (left side with right) and allow people to easily recall what they have read effectively, with only a small amount of effort (*Horikawa 2003*).
- 3) The use of physical exercises. For most people, reading is simply a secondary activity despite the fact that we know the brain and body can be stimulated by a variety of exercises used to unleash the creative and analytical brainpower we possess. Many health experts note that exercises such as aerobics, which force us to concentrate on rapid changes in movement, can help stimulate and, hence, speed up the electrical transfer of neurons responsible for our thought processes. These connections take place at synapses and are mediated by the release of neurotransmitter chemicals, which in turn alter the effective strength of the signals that pass between neurons. Since neurons normally transfer thought processes at speeds of roughly 100 meters per second (200 mph), this transfer and absorption process may be further stimulated by an increased amount of exercise while reading or concentrating on something. This process enhances new cell changes and their electrical states, which influence the speed of generating new pulses in neurons, and creates a more efficient rate of a movie sequence

of ideas and thoughts in our brains (*Catterall, Falcioni, Salgado, Krug, Suh, 1998*).

Although it took a little time to adjust to, I personally found that my reading, comprehension and retention rates slightly increased when I read while riding stationary bicycles or using step machines. However, most of us do not have the time, money or willpower to improve our speed-reading skills while working out, so for most individuals, less active approaches may be the only way.

How to make these techniques work?

1) The Genius State

Dr. Ed Strachar, founder of a speed-reading curriculum, insists that in order for people to read well, regardless of the speed, they must first be in a calm and internally quiet state. "When people achieve this calmness and internal peace, they can absorb information and knowledge like a sponge, and can again learn as fast as they did when they were children. Some experts call this special state, 'the Alpha state'. Strachar calls it the "Genius State". In order to achieve this, he has people vividly recall a time in their lives when they felt incredibly smart, and explains that "Just as if you recall a freezing day in winter and get the chills, the brain and body take on the biochemical conditions of that memory. Thus, if one recalls a time when all of his/her circuits were 'on' and performed to their maximum, they turn on. Readers can do this in such a way that allows them to use all of their senses." Strachar emphasizes that by opening up all of your senses, all of which significant research has proven to aid memory substantially, students' senses are then ready and waiting for images that can significantly help their recall after reading. He adds that by having students impress this image on their consciousness, it is bound to produce positive results.

2) Imagination State

Here, Strachar notes that "people remember in images, not in words, thus when their imagination creates images from the words, they understand and recall them much better. In addition, readers can enjoy the material much more, like having internal movie theaters within their heads." In order to realize this imaginary state, Strachar suggests students stare at the front cover of a book they are about to read. The instructor then asks them to imagine the book like a video of one of their favorite movies they are about to watch. If it is a science book the student is interested in, then make it a documentary about science. If it is a romance novel, adjust your romantic senses and enjoy this "movie". In other words, the students are asked to think and imagine various points, such as where the book takes place, what the surroundings would look like, and how they would feel if they were in the story. This includes imagining what the smells and sights would be like, how the "movie" would begin and end, etc. The students are also advised to add other elements, such as their favor-

ite actors, exciting scenes, dramatic music, seriousness or comedy, etc. Strachar emphasizes that the effects can be dramatic, especially with young students or children who have active imaginations.

After improving this imaginary state, Strachar adds that not only is the person's interest in reading material heightened dramatically, but also the right side of the brain is involved and activated as well as the left. Since the left side is dominant in the reading process because that is where our visual reception and speech originate, it becomes conditioned. On the contrary, as we get older, the right side of the brain can become more uninvolved in the reading process, thus leading to a significant loss in concentration that impedes a person's reading performance significantly. The real power of the right brain is that it enables us to "see" and "perceive" larger sections of the page we read, which means readers can more effectively and efficiently perceive the ideas, thoughts and images of the author while avoid being bogged down with grammar or sentence structure, which sometimes results in up to 90% of the total word count.

3) The Curiosity State

A fundamental key to rapid learning is building a strong curiosity for what one is about to read. A heightened state of attention is accompanied by a hunger for each new passage; hence, the curiosity step is a straightforward process of scanning photos, graphs and illustrations as well as the index for clues and hints. Strachar suggests taking advantage of students' peak state of emotions, because this will not only raise their energy levels, but also strongly assist in helping them remember details after their reading exercises are completed. He adds that since our best memories in life are our most emotional ones, the same goes for reading material.

4) Having the Brain Lift Weights

Another unique method Strachar suggests to make the brain turn itself on and become stronger is to "lift weights with your brain!" He notes that just as walking barefoot on gravel toughens our feet or lifting weights strengthens our muscles, strengthening the brain by stimulating it with overwhelming thoughts and exercises can result in an increase in its function. In this exercise, after informing students not to be overly concerned with the successes or failures of their speed-reading results, they are asked to read any given book or article upside down using only one eye while turning the pages progressively faster and faster to a gentle musical rhythm. The student is then asked to recall what he/she has read by writing with both hands on two sheets of paper. This technique may sound overwhelming, but it can be quite interesting if done as a no-fail situation. As your students progress further

into the program, Strachar suggests having them read two books or articles at a time, this time using both eyes and then increasing this to four. The real challenge occurs when the students turn their reading materials right way up again and then reduce the amount from four upside down items to two and then recall the information. It may be like watching two TVs at the same time, but once the student reduces this to one book or article with both eyes open, the ease of being able to scan a page in a few seconds and understand the ideas comprehensively is accomplished without great difficulty, especially when the imagination exercise precedes it.

Comparing languages—English speed reading versus Japanese

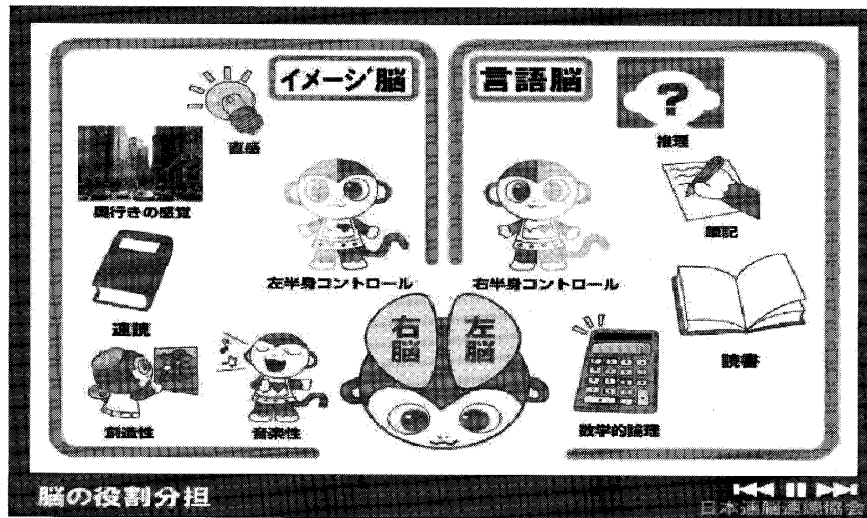
In this section of the paper, I will draw a comparison between languages (words versus symbolic characters) and their effects on speed-reading.

Today's major languages use either symbolic or pictographic characters, such as Kanji characters used in China, Japan and Korea (in addition to the mono-syllabic systems of Katakana and Hiragana in Japan or Hangul in Korea), while most if not all other writings are phonetic, Arabic or part of the Devanagari in South-East Asia. Almost all European alphabets are based on the Greek and Roman alphabets, with certain modifications and adaptations. Depending upon the individual, speed-reading in English, Chinese or Arabic will vary, but several speed-reading experts such as Naoto Horikawa, founder of Speed Reading Japan, and Imre Galambos, author of *Pictographs versus letters*, have noted that symbolic or pictographic characters, such as Chinese Kanji, can actually work to the advantage of a reader's speed, as opposed to phonetic words. In pictographic languages, because each character can represent an entire word and/or idea, writing and reading a single character (left brain) can mean the input of an entire phonetic word, sentence or phrase, hence, faster absorption and transfer to the imagination process (right brain). To emphasize this point, in English, the phrase "European Community" consists of 18 keystrokes, while in Chinese characters, it can be entered with three 欧共体.

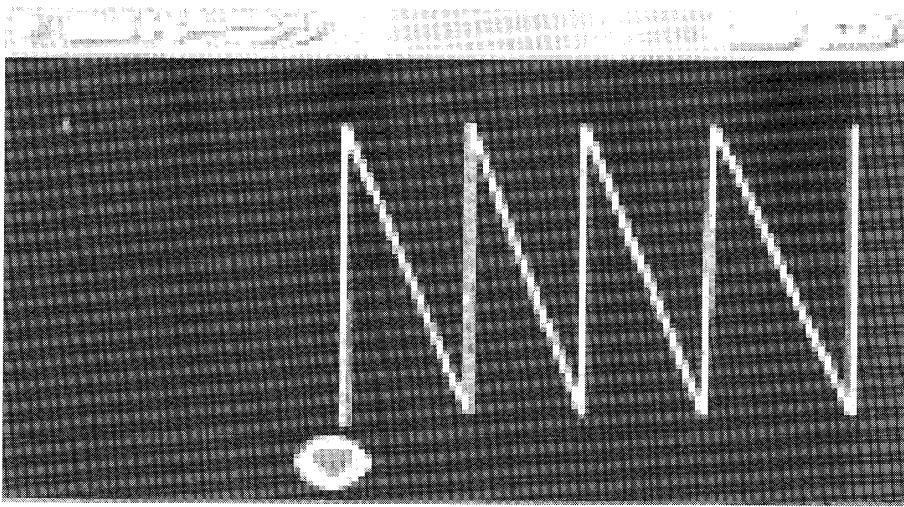
Until present, only a few multi-lingual readers have actually participated in such aforementioned studies. However, according to Speed Reading Japan Co., Ltd., a Tokyo-based franchise with over 18 offices and schools across the country, although reading full sentences may clearly be advantageous in grasping an author's meaning, Japanese, Korean and Chinese language readers appear to have an advantage when it comes to speed-reading because Kanji characters enhance image training upon visual contact. With Japanese, if the Hiragana and Katakana symbols were to disappear from a page entirely, as if all particles and prepositions vanished from a page written in English, leaving mostly nouns, verbs and

adjectives, Japanese readers would most likely have a better chance at effectively comprehending what the author was trying to say because phonetic readers normally have to rely on full sentences to thoroughly understand the content.

Speed Reading Japan uses several interesting and fun techniques in its latest CD packages and classroom exercises in order to help readers double, triple or even quadruple their reading rates in very short terms with little to no loss of comprehension. The company also reiterates some of Strachar's points on effectively making use of the left and right hemispheres of the brain as noted in the illustration below:

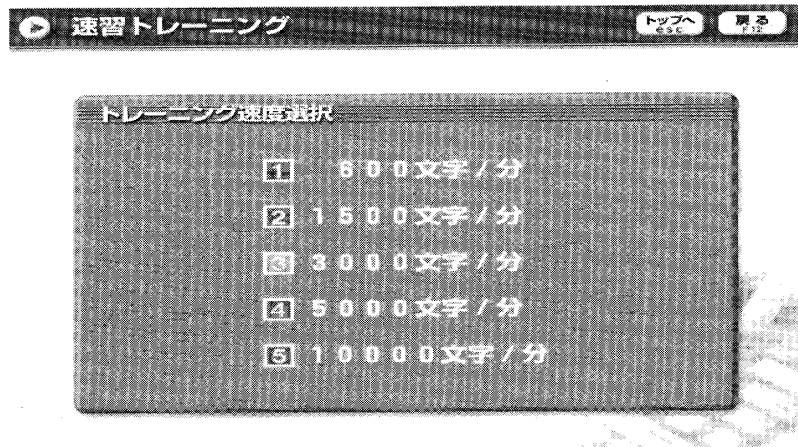


In the first exercise using the CD ROM, students are advised to "warm up" using various eye training exercises as shown below:

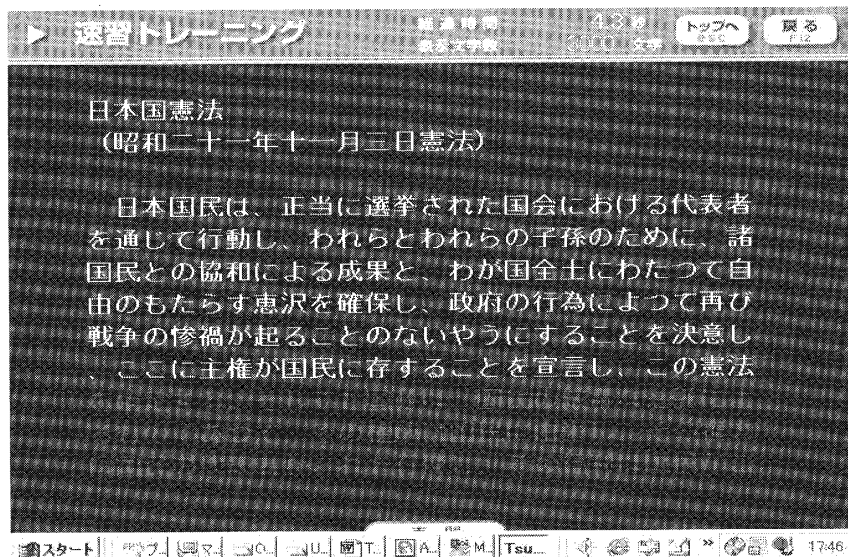


After completing these exercises, students are requested to choose the appropriate speed at which they wish to read before beginning further tests or exercises as noted below:

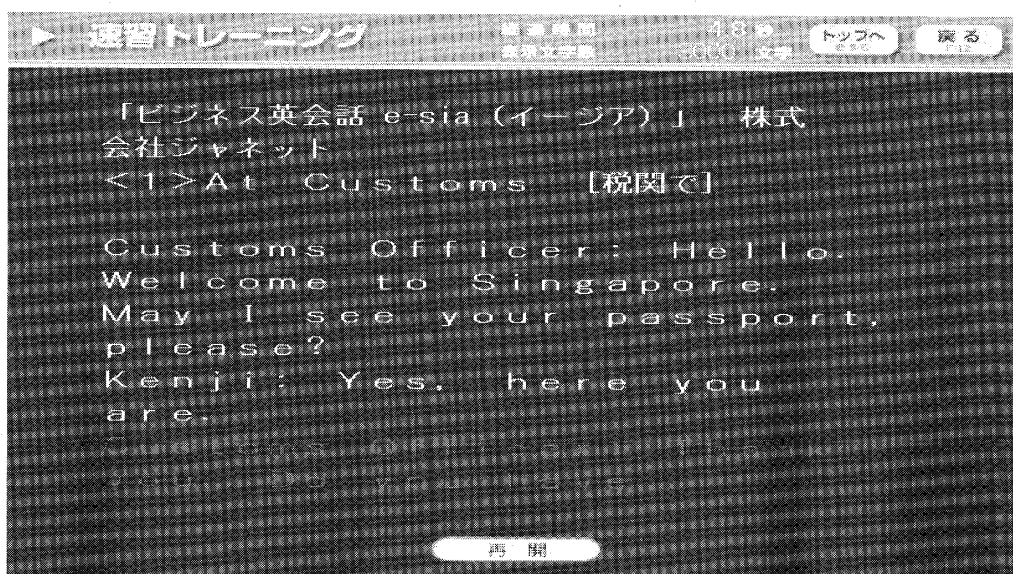
Sentence training exercise where the reader has chosen 3,000 characters per minute (cpm).



Below is an example of a reading exercise about the Japanese constitution with new sentences being shown consecutively at a rate of 3000 cpm:

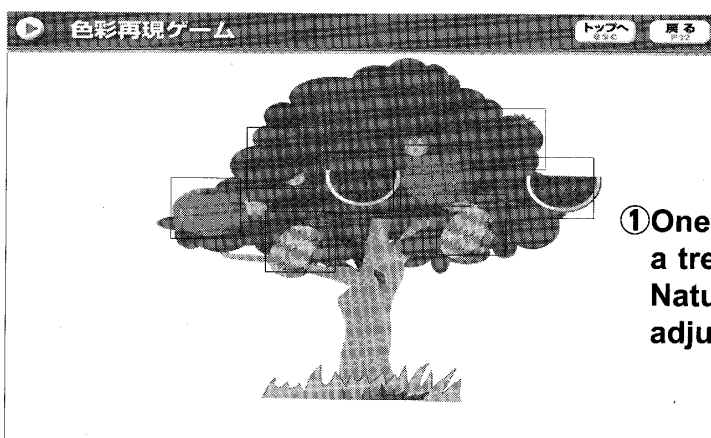


English reading exercises can also be found in the software, and below is another example of a 3,000 wpm test regarding a conversation with the customs agent at immigration:



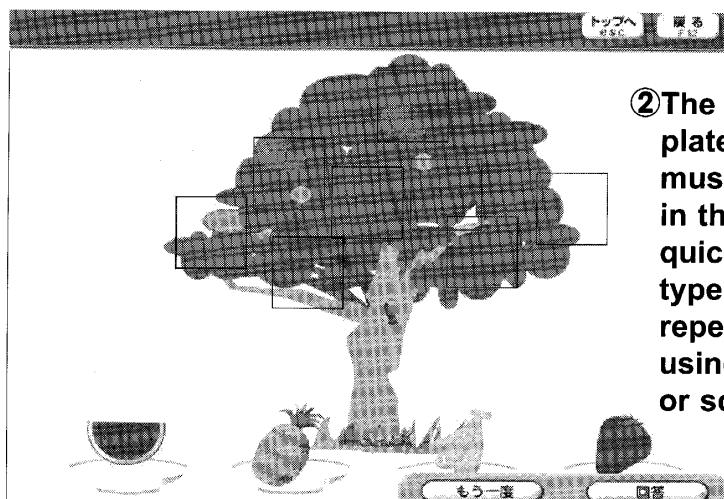
Warm-up exercises and games designed to enhance eye reading speed and memorization ability are also included in the package:

BEFORE



① One exercise shows fruit in a tree for about 5 seconds. Naturally this timing is adjustable.

AFTER



② The fruit then appear on plates below and the reader must return them to the tree in their original places as quickly as possible. This type of exercise can be repeated several times using different fruit, items or scenes.

Like most English speed-reading software packages, the Speed Reading Japan program is designed for Microsoft Windows 95/98/Me/2000 and XP Dos and Macintosh compatibility. Each package comes with both CD-ROM and 3.5-inch floppy discs and some lessons have voice supplementation, making them easy for classroom teaching and/or homework practice. Subject areas primarily include:

- Business related topics, with visual charts and illustrations for both student and adults
- General elementary, junior and senior high level programs with university entrance exam preparation exercises
- Family games, fiction, non-fiction, cartoon (*manga*) ranging from elementary to adult levels

Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to point out several techniques on how to improve instructors' and students' speed reading and comprehension levels. Since languages differ primarily based on phonetics versus symbols or pictographic scripts, they can significantly influence the rate and comprehension at which people of those languages cover, comprehend and absorb reading material. In pictographic languages, because each character stands for an entire phonetic word and/or phrase, it becomes easier and quicker for those language readers to pick up the symbol, absorb it (left brain) and transfer it to the imaginary state (right brain) than phonetic readers as noted in the text and shown in the subsequent diagrams.

I also noted several positive and negative points suggested by speed reading experts while drawing comparisons between English and Japanese in order to emphasize how they may affect instructional procedures. Although doubling or tripling one's current reading speed while maintaining present comprehension may seem unattainable, with a little effort, patience and consistency, it is nevertheless viable and rewarding.

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