

Adding Variety to Word Recognition Exercises

READING IS A COMPLEX PROCESS INVOLVING BOTH TOP-DOWN PROCESSES, SUCH AS prediction, and bottom-up processes, such as word recognition. For a number of years research and pedagogy in L2 reading focused primarily on top-down processes, but as interactive models of reading gain more favor in the field, a more balanced view has emerged.¹ Noting the importance of bottom-up processes, Grabe and Stoller (2002, 20) write that “[t]he most fundamental requirement for fluent reading comprehension is rapid and automatic word recognition.” They also provide a useful analogy to illustrate their point. They see word recognition as being like gasoline for a car, the car being general reading comprehension. Just as a car will not run without gasoline, reading comprehension cannot be achieved without word recognition.

Despite the emergence of a more balanced view of L2 reading, it is probably safe to say that few ESL/EFL teachers, especially those teaching intermediate and advanced learners, take specific steps to improve their learners' word recognition skills. Few reading textbooks on the market, for example, include word recognition exercises. Rosen and Stoller (1994) and Stoller and Rosen (2000) are notable exceptions, as both of these reading textbooks contain over forty pages of word recognition exercises. The absence of word recognition exercises in most reading textbooks does not mean, of course, that ESL/EFL learners do not learn to recognize English vocabulary. Simply interacting with English in both its spoken and written forms allows learners to develop word recognition skills. The question remains, though, whether this is sufficient.

Previous research has shown that even balanced bilinguals' L2 reading may be less fluent than L1 reading due to less efficient L2 word recognition skills (Segalowitz 2000). Linking these research findings to pedagogy, Paran (1996) argues for greater use of word recognition exercises in L2 reading instruction and claims that as learners become more proficient, they need to rely more on bottom-up processes than top-down processes. This claim may surprise some teachers, but if top-down processes such as guessing from context and prediction are seen as *compensatory*, then the thinking behind the claim becomes clear. In short, one can argue that more often than not, top-down processes are used as conscious *strategies* to compensate for insufficient language abilities. As learners' abilities improve, their need to rely on these kinds of strategies decreases.

Although Paran (1996) calls for greater use of word recognition exercises, it is important to note that he also acknowledges the importance of actual reading. Indeed, he states that extensive reading has an important role to play in L2 reading instruction. Clearly, reading extensively also improves learners' word recogni-

tion skills. However, there is a distinct possibility that word recognition exercises, because of their emphasis on speed, can help L2 learners develop more rapid and efficient word recognition skills, which in turn will lead to better reading fluency. Additionally, it is highly probable that doing these kinds of exercises will lead to greater metacognitive awareness of the importance of word recognition and its importance for fluent reading. For these reasons, I agree with Paran that word recognition exercises deserve a greater role in L2 reading pedagogy. In my opinion, reading programs at the intermediate and advanced levels need to encourage learners to do as much reading as possible, but also must give them the opportunity to improve their reading efficiency. This can be accomplished by increasing the number of activities that focus on bottom-up processes, including word recognition exercises.

Challenges of using more word recognition exercises

Two challenges must be overcome if word recognition exercises are to assume a greater role in the field of L2 reading instruction. The first is convincing learners of their educational value. Learners, especially at the intermediate and advanced levels, often react to the instruction "find the same word" (a common instruction in word recognition exercises) by saying that it is too easy. They need to understand that while finding the same word may be easy, what counts most is speed, and that increasing speed via the exercises can lead to improved reading fluency.

The second challenge is designing a variety of exercises so as to maintain learner interest. Practicing word recognition does not lend itself to a variety of activities in the same way as something such as practicing reading comprehension does. The majority of word recognition exercises in textbooks and articles related to L2 reading resemble the exercise shown in Figure 1.

fluent	fluid flaunt flute flutter fluent
reading	reeling raising rising reading reaping
requires	require requests requisite requires requiem
efficient	efficient effective effigy efficacious effectuate
word	ward word world work wordy
recognition	recognize recognizance recognition recognizable recondition

Figure 1
Sample of a standard word recognition exercise

In this exercise, learners look at a target word printed in bold on the left, search for its match on the right, and then circle it. There are different ways to create distractors for target words, such as using different morphological forms (e.g., try, tried, tries) or reordering the letters (Stoller 1993), but the basic exercise remains more or less the same. There is certainly nothing wrong with these kinds of exercises, but if learners do them every time they practice word recognition, they may lose interest. Paran (1996) writes that despite this lack of variety, word recognition exercises should be used as much as possible. I agree with his call for greater use of these kinds of exercises, but I also believe that there are ways to add variety. Although the nature of practicing word recognition does not allow for great divergence from the exercise shown in Figure 1, by making some small additions and changes, greater variety can be achieved. I propose three ways in which teachers can provide greater variety in word recognition practice.

Proposal 1: Divide a standard word recognition exercise into two or three sets of words and put a different kind of exercise between them.

One way to add variety to word recognition exercises is to take a standard exercise like the one shown in Figure 1 and divide it into two or three sets of words. Between the sets, simply add a short and fairly simple exercise that provides further practice with the target words.

Kunz (2002) describes how word search puzzles can add variety and interest to vocab-

ulary and grammar study. They are also ideal for adding variety and interest to word recognition exercises. If, for example, the words in Figure 1 were the first set of words in an exercise, the word search puzzle in Figure 2 below could be placed underneath this set. In this puzzle, learners search for the six target words from Figure 1. After finding the words, they proceed to the next set and complete a standard word recognition exercise (which can then be followed by another word search puzzle). Teachers can make the puzzles by hand using graph paper, but this can be time-consuming. Those with Internet access can save a great deal of time by downloading freeware or shareware programs that create puzzles instantly from a list of words.² Additionally, there are sites that are completely web-based, making it possible to create puzzles without having to download and install any software.³

Having learners rearrange the letters of the target words is also an option. “Jumbles” can be an enjoyable way to do this. Figure 3 shows a sample jumble using the words from Figure 1. Here the learners look at the scrambled target words on the left side, figure out which ones they are, and write them in the blanks and boxes on the right. Finally, they take the letters from the boxes and make four 3-letter verbs in English (in this case *win*, *run*, *dig*, and *die*). Three-letter verbs are just one possibility for the last part of the exercise. Really, anything can be used, such as names of animals or names of famous people or places.

There are numerous other possibilities for adding a little something extra between word sets in a standard word recognition exercise. It is important to emphasize the importance of a *little* something extra here. Teachers will probably be able to think of many interesting ideas for exercises to put between word sets. However, they should be careful not to allow these additions to require much more time and effort than the word recognition exercises themselves, as this would defeat the purpose of the whole enterprise. With the word search puzzle, for example, some teachers may find that their learners take a long time to find all of the words. This problem can be remedied by simply saying that learners may proceed to the next set of words after they have found one or two of the words from the set.

Figure 2
Sample word
search puzzle



Figure 3
Sample jumble exercise

DIRECTIONS: Unscramble the words, then use the letters from the boxes to make four 3-letter verbs in English.

RWDO _ _

LFUTNE _ _ _ _

DEIGRNA _ _ _ _ _

SQREEIUR _ _ _ _ _ _

FTICIEEFN _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

TOOGNNIIERC _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

ENGLISH 3-LETTER VERBS: 1. 2.

 3. 4.

Proposal 2: Change the format of the exercise.

Typically, items in word recognition exercises resemble those in Figure 1, with the target word on the left and several choices on the right. However, there is no reason that different formats cannot be used. Using different formats can also add variety to word recognition exercises.

One option is to put the target words at the top of the page and the choices below, as shown in Figure 4. This makes for a slightly more challenging exercise because learners must scan through the distractors for all of the target words until they find what they are looking for. It is possible to make the exercise even more challenging by hiding the target words in a sea of distractors, as in Figure 5.

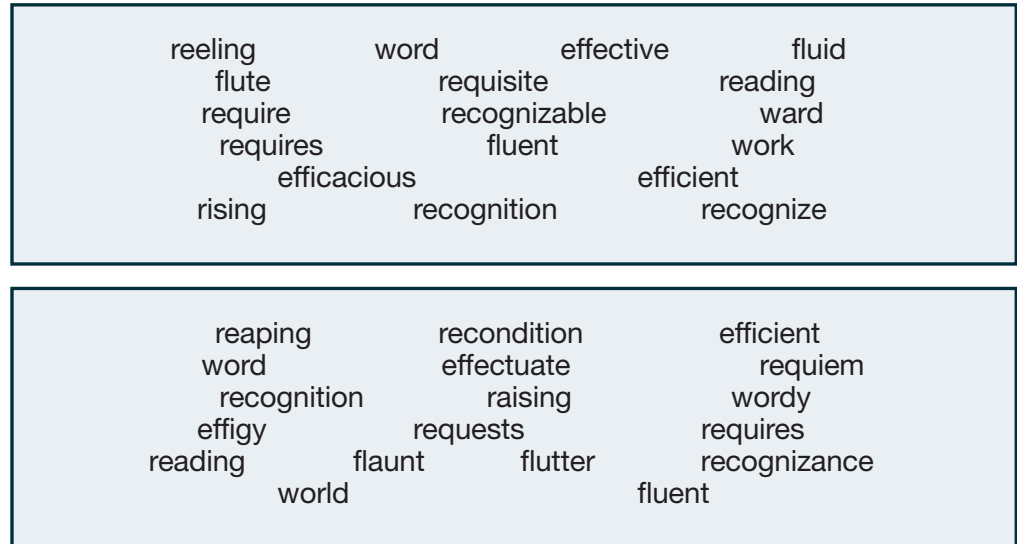
In this exercise, learners are told how many words to match between the top and the bottom. However, unlike the examples shown above, this exercise does not simply involve looking at a target word and then searching for its match. Since the target words and the distractors are mixed together, learners will also choose distractors and look for their matches (unsuccessfully, of course). This can make the exercise considerably more challenging. The degree of difficulty can be lessened, however, by changing the ratio of target words to distractors. A higher ratio of target words to distractors will result in fewer false leads and make the exercise easier.

Other formats are certainly possible for word recognition exercises. Making adjustments to the way the exercises are laid out on the page, as well as to the way learners search for target

Figure 4
Format option 1

fluent	reading	requires	efficient	word	recognition
requiem		flutter	effectuate		reaping
reeling	fluid	world	requisite		reading
effective		recognize	raising		word
efficacious		recognizable	flute		
rising		effigy	fluent		wordy
efficient		requests	flaunt		ward
recondition		work	requires		require
	recognize		recognition		

Figure 5
Format option 2



words, can lead to greater variety. By using their imaginations and keeping in mind the needs, interests, and levels of their learners, teachers should be able to create effective and appropriate exercises using a variety of formats.

Proposal 3: Add an element of competition.

A final way in which teachers can add variety to word recognition exercises is to add an element of competition. Given the fact that speed is of primary importance in these exercises, this can easily be accomplished. Learners can be put into competing teams. Additionally, individual learners can compete against each other to see who can finish an exercise in the shortest amount of time. By adding an element of competition, doing word recognition exercises can be made fun and exciting. Moreover, competing will give learners a chance to compare their own word recognition skills with those of their classmates. Students who find that they are slower than their classmates may feel motivated to try to improve their skills.

Standard word recognition exercises like the one shown in Figure 1 work well in team competitions. This is because in any one class there is unlikely to be great variation among learners in speed of learning (provided that the learners are at more or less the same level). Significantly slower learners would slow down the whole team, resulting in frustration. Fortunately, this is unlikely to happen with standard word recognition exercises.

One way to use these exercises competitive-

ly is to organize a relay race. Learners are divided into teams and given the exercises face down on their desks. When the teacher says “Go,” the first learner in each team turns over her paper and completes the exercise as quickly as possible. As soon as she finishes the exercise, she turns the paper back over. This is the signal for the next learner to turn over his paper and start the exercise. The activity proceeds in this fashion until all of the members of each team have finished. To determine a winning team, the teacher can watch carefully and note the order in which the teams finish. It can also be fun to have the last learners in the teams get up and run to put their papers on the teacher’s desk to determine the order. Finally, it is important to have learners check their answers. In the heat of competition, accuracy sometimes declines. Teams can check their own answers, or they can exchange papers and check each others’ answers. If mistakes are found, teachers can choose to disqualify the winning team for one to two errors or three to four errors, depending on how accurate they want their learners to be.

Although there is unlikely to be great variation in speed with standard word recognition exercises like the one in Figure 1, this is not necessarily the case with the variations on these exercises that I have proposed in this article. For this reason, an element of competition is best added to these exercises by organizing them as individual, rather than team, competitions. The exercises are completed individually, and first, second, and third place prizes are awarded to the

learners with the three fastest times. If teachers use the same exercises with different classes, it can also be fun to keep track of the completion times for all of the classes and name the fastest student as the school record holder.

Conclusion

Word recognition exercises deserve a more prominent place in the reading curriculum for intermediate and advanced students. One obstacle to increasing the use of these exercises is lack of variety, as they tend to be of only one format. To solve this problem, I proposed three ways to add variety to the exercises, namely putting different exercises between sets of word recognition questions, changing the format, and adding an element of competition. By modifying the exercises in these three ways, teachers can maintain learner interest and motivation. This is not to say that teachers should stop using standard word recognition exercises; clearly, the standard exercise still serves its purpose nicely. Rather, it is to suggest that judicious use of a combination of both standard word recognition exercises and the types of exercises proposed in this article is desirable. Such a combination can help learners develop more efficient reading skills and ensure that any potential gains are not hampered by every teacher's enemy—monotony.

Notes

1. Although interactive models offer a more balanced view of the reading process, they are not without their problems. Grabe and Stoller (2002) note the shortcomings of these models and describe a “modified

interactive model,” which they view as useful for understanding reading comprehension processes.

2. *Word search* is a freeware program available from Virtu Software. The program can be downloaded from the following website: <http://www.virtu-software.com/products/WordSearch.asp>.
3. Puzzlemaker (www.puzzlemaker.com) is a popular site with teachers. Word search puzzles can be made on the site, as can other types of puzzles such as cryptograms and mazes.

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