
Increasing Reading Fluency in Young Adult Readers Using Audiobooks

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Abstract

This paper investigates ways in which we can facilitate the reading process and increase reading fluency in foreign language learners, with the support of audiobooks. By listening to audiobooks, the importance of prosody and phonological awareness in the native language as well as in a foreign language can lead to effective use of the reader's 'inner speech' or inner voice to facilitate reading fluency. The focal point of the case study in this report was to increase reading fluency in one English-German bilingual student by concentrating on the *listening while reading* process. The audiobook provides support and scaffolds the reading process as the student develops into a more competent reader. The student was given the opportunity to choose her book, and selected *The School of Good and Evil*, by Soman Chainani and read by Polly Lee, which is a fantasy trilogy based on traditional fairy tales and legends. The student then went on to read the three books in the series.

Key Words: audiobooks, extensive reading, reading motivation, young adult fiction, teenager readers

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Introduction

This paper will start by outlining the reading process and then highlight the possibilities of using audiobooks to support reading fluency in English language teaching (ELT). The case study examines the idea that auditory input helps increase reading fluency and leads to more extensive reading. In light of the increased importance of inclusion in ELT in Germany (Werning, 2014), the development of a new generation of learners, Generation ‘P’, which stands for participatory (Kalantzis, Cope, Chan & Dalley-Trim, 2016, p. 8) and the emergence of a new ‘digital citizen’ (Becker, 2019, p. 183), it is important to find ways to encourage these learners to read more extensively and thus improve reading fluency. *Reading while listening* is just one of the tools available to Generation ‘P’, the new digitally savvy generation of learners who are able to readily use multimodal input. This case study looks specifically at one tool, that is, the use of audiobooks, defined as a ‘dual modality’ (Rogowsky, Calhoun & Tallal, 2016, p. 1) or as ‘bimodal input’ (Isozaki, 2018, p. 189) to explore how a challenged young adult reader with dyslexia can overcome self-doubt and develop an understanding of the written word, which can lead to a *joy of reading*.

Theoretical Rationale – The Reading Process

Reading is a very individual and subjective process whereby the reader and the writer engage in a dialogic interaction as the reader fills the gaps in the text to create meaning (Iser, 1994, p. 23). The reader attempts to decipher the meaning in the text by using what they already know, ‘what is going on behind the eyes – in the reader’s mind...’ (Smith, 2006, p. 5), plus the clues in the text that enable the reader to create meaning. Reading can only get better with time and practice as Grabe (1991) concluded in his study: ‘they learn reading by reading’ (p. 396). Therefore, if the student is not motivated to pick up the next book, then the reading skill will never develop properly and the language learner will plateau and never achieve a higher level of reading proficiency. If the initial interaction between the reader and the text cannot occur, the potential of the reading task is not maximized and the performative act of reading does not lead to a pleasurable encounter (Bredella, 2008, p. 22). The *joy* that comes from the storytelling process

of reading (the visualization or understanding in the mind's eye) is not complete and the reader is frustrated and not motivated to continue reading.

For extensive reading to be effective, the learner must have a certain basic level of language proficiency. The student must feel capable of reading basic texts and use the tools available to them from their first language (L1). The threshold hypothesis describes a basic proficiency level which enables access to strategic knowledge from the L1 (Lee & Schallert, 1997; Cummins, 1992). By using strategies already present in the L1, the degree to which the student is able to read efficiently in the second language (L2) can be increased (Carell, 1991; Roberts, 1994, Yamashita, 2002). For example, the learner can focus on key elements in the materials which will enable them to analyze the text and also better understand the written or the *heard* word (McLaughlin, 1990; Roberts, 1994; Royer & Carlo, 1991; Taillefer, 1996). Block (1986) describes two different types of readers: first, integrators, who are able to connect new content with familiar content while reading, and nonintegrators, who have a personal connection to the text. The reader needs to possess elements of both in order to facilitate reading comprehension and to generate a *joy of reading*

Additionally, by making the students aware of what they need to look at while reading, they are more capable of understanding and comprehending what they are doing during the reading process (Davis, 1989). If this is facilitated by providing auditory input, this will enable the student to be more at ease with encountering new structures or words and facilitates the comprehension process (Chang, 2011; Kartal & Simsek, 2017; Wolfson, 2008). They are then better able to use what they know, connect to the text and expand their already good knowledge of the language. Since there is a reciprocal relationship between text and the knowledge we already possess (Smith, 1971), it follows that the more the reader knows about *how to read and understand the text*, the easier the task will become. The learners project what they know from their L1 onto the L2 and this facilitates reading in general, but what happens in the case of challenged readers? How can teachers encourage extensive reading, the application of strategies and also facilitate the *joy of reading* in a learner with dyslexia?

Effective Reading for Challenged Readers

Ganschow and Sparks (1991) introduced the Linguistic Coding Differences Hypothesis (LCDH) in order to better understand poor reading and writing skills in the L1. Readers experienced difficulties with the structure (phonological/orthographic and syntactic), but not with the elements of meaning (semantic) of the texts. Ganschow, Sparks and Javorsky (1998) applied these ideas to foreign language learners. The three factors which impact on reading comprehension emerging from these studies were structural aspects (phonological/orthographic and syntactic in nature), L2 aptitude (linked to L1 aptitude) and cognition/semantics. Thus, all of the lower-level skills were also essential in the process of oral and written language learning. A knowledge of strategies and skills plus the importance of being able to read in the L1 as well as a good command of decoding strategies necessary for word recognition were also part of the essential building blocks for mastering reading and writing in a foreign language (Ganschow, Sparks & Javorsky, 1998).

Another factor that influences the reading process is prosody. This is an area of phonology which has received a lot of attention in the past when looking at reading comprehension. The *Oxford Dictionary* (2020) defines prosody as ‘the patterns of stress and intonation in a language’. Whalley and Hansen (2006, p. 288) define phonological awareness as the ‘ability to recognize and manipulate the sound segments in words’. Prosody is a subsystem of phonology which includes tempo, rhythm and the stress of a language. Wood and Terrell (1989) found that poor readers were not very aware of prosodic cues at the phrasal level. In their study, Whalley and Hansen (2006) also showed that teaching children about prosody prior to reading can facilitate the reading process, since the flow of the language and the stress and intonation are practiced prior to longer reading tasks, which in turn facilitates word retrieval from the mental lexicon. This led them to the conclusion (p. 290), ‘prosody is thus critical to language acquisition’.

Prosody is important for reading development for various reasons. When people read, there is an ‘inner speech’ or an inner spoken voice which reads the text to them (Huey, 1968, pp. 319-321). Advanced readers do not read aloud as such but read to themselves silently.

Ashby's (2006, p. 331) study with L1 speakers of English suggest that 'developing prosodic sensitivity in young readers may prove to be an important piece of reading instruction, as our studies suggest that the ability to form elaborate, prosodic representations is a characteristic of skilled adult reading' and could facilitate the reading process.

Reading is a process where the reader assigns meaning to the text by relying on background knowledge (*top-down processing*), by focusing on the information provided in the text (*bottom-up processing*) or by using both processes simultaneously (*interactive processing*) (Padberg, 1997). Consequently, the reader's ability to decode the words in the text facilitates the reader's ability to understand the intended message in the text. The decoding process has been linked to the reader's prosodic exposure. Goswami (2002) has shown that sensitivity to the rhythmic properties of speech may contribute to word-level reading skills by supporting the development of accurate phonological representations underlying phonological awareness. While Goswami looked at younger readers' poor reading skills and what they lacked, Whalley and Hansen (2006) focused on what younger readers heavily relied on to decipher words. Both came to the conclusion that prosodic sensitivity was an essential skill which facilitated the reading process.

By looking at skilled readers, it becomes apparent how important this exposure is. Even children who are exposed to the exaggerated prosody provided by their caregivers can link the sound to the word more easily (Stephens, 2011). Reading to children at an early age also strengthens this exposure to prosodic representation of words and helps them to facilitate the reading process in the L1. Stephens (2011) additionally claims that exposure to auditory input before beginning to learn how to read in the L2 can also facilitate the process. Stephen's studies looked specifically at Japanese students who learned English. She suggested that Japanese children could learn to read more efficiently if there was a more concentrated focus on listening comprehension and prosodic sensitivity at an early age due to the vast difference between the Japanese and the English language.

Based on the research into prosodic sensitivity, making audiobooks available to L2 readers presents interesting avenues for encouraging reading in the English language class.

Scaffolding the reading process with a model reader so the words on the page can be linked to the correct phonological utterance and prosodic code increases both reading proficiency and language proficiency on the whole.

Audiobooks

Educators around the world have discovered the benefits of introducing the written word together with auditory input. Audiobooks or ‘talking books’ were introduced in the 1930s by the American government in order to provide books to blind adults cost-free (Mohamed, 2018). The use of audiobooks spread slowly at first, but with the expansion of digital technology, i.e. once cassette tapes were replaced by CDs and then with the introduction of the internet, downloadable audiobooks became quite popular and are recently viewed as a ‘dominant literacy tool’ (Mohamed, 2018, p. 66).

Audiobooks have been successfully integrated in L1 language learning with young learners (Whalley & Hansen, 2006; Larson, 2015), adolescent readers (Beers, 1998; Wolfson, 2008) and adult readers (Rogowsky, Calhoun & Tallal, 2016). In the United States, an increase in the use of audiobooks has led to a rise in reading proficiency (Brown & Fisher, 2006), but the successful use of audiobooks does not guarantee an improvement in other language skills. However, the introduction of various tasks during the *listening-reading* process helps to establish the *reading-writing* connection, and by linking the spoken word to a written task, the reading scores may improve dramatically (Beers, 1998). Research on the use of audiobooks with language learners has highlighted various positive effects, such as improving listening comprehension (Kartal & Simsek, 2017) and vocabulary acquisition (Chang, 2011), improving reading comprehension and fluency (Chang & Millet, 2015), introducing literature using audiobooks (Isozaki, 2014), increased reading efficiency as well as enjoyment of the reading process (Woodall, 2010)

Chang’s (2011) study, looked at the *reading while listening* process with a focus on listening fluency. Although she only looked at seven students in this study, her conclusions, which included a ‘large quantity of aural input and the support of the written form’ (p. 53), were very helpful for further studies (Chang & Millet, 2015; Isozaki, 2014). Unlike Chang, the

present case study aimed to increase the reading fluency of the learner, thus the focus was on the *listening while reading* process. The audiobook was used to scaffold the reading process and to help the learner to develop into a more competent *reader* rather than a more competent *listener*. Isozaki (2014) employed a similar approach in her study of first- and second-year Japanese university students. By making audiobooks available to the students, she was able to increase L2 fluency over the course of the semester through extensive listening. Some of Isozaki's arguments were based on the fact that Japanese and English are very different languages. Besides, as oral fluency is not practised as much in the Japanese classroom, the exposure to auditory input increases the students' reading fluency on the whole and makes the reading process more pleasurable. In a more recent paper, Isozaki (2018) gives a very concise overview of the most relevant research into bimodal resources and mentions the importance of enjoying the reading process. She claims that by reading to the student, the joy of storytelling is rekindled and the 'zone of proximal *literacy* development' (p. 194) is activated.

The last crucial factor is the rate at which the text is read. The young reader's own rate of reading should be taken into consideration when choosing the audiobook as some children (especially at-risk children and dyslexic children) might have a more difficult time keeping up with the narration while others may feel the narration is too slow (Bergmann, 1999; Bédard, Laplante & Mercier, 2016). Today technology allows the speed of narration to be adjusted so students can choose a slower reading speed at the onset and increase it gradually. The tone and personality of the reader's voice may be just as important as what is being read. One child may prefer a British accent while another an American one, or a female voice rather than a male one. This should be considered prior to choosing an audiobook for an individual student.

Aim of the Study

The main objective of this single-case study is to facilitate the understanding of the written word by supporting the decoding process with audio input. By increasing learners' sensitivity to prosody (Whalley & Hansen, 2006; Wood, 2006), we can encourage challenged readers to go beyond their current reading level (Gosawami, 2002; Whalley & Hansen, 2006). It is important that this occurs during the *while reading process*, to maximize the benefits of the combination

of skills. Audio-visual stimulation in the form of a *listening while reading* approach develops not only the phonological skills necessary to decipher the written word but enables the readers to understand what they may not have been able to read without the help of the audio input (Chang, 2011; Sparks & Javorsky 1998; Kartal & Simsek 2017). The pronunciation of the word is also reinforced in the readers' minds because they know how the word is pronounced the next time it appears in the text. The readers begin to expand their vocabulary, improve their ability to read the written word (Chang & Millet, 2015; Woodall, 2010; Mohamed, 2018) and consequently to increase their overall language proficiency. This also enables the hesitant readers to be included in the post-reading/listening classroom discussion as they have a better understanding of the story. This again has a positive effect on motivation which, in turn, encourages the readers to continue reading, and has a positive influence on their reading skills in general.

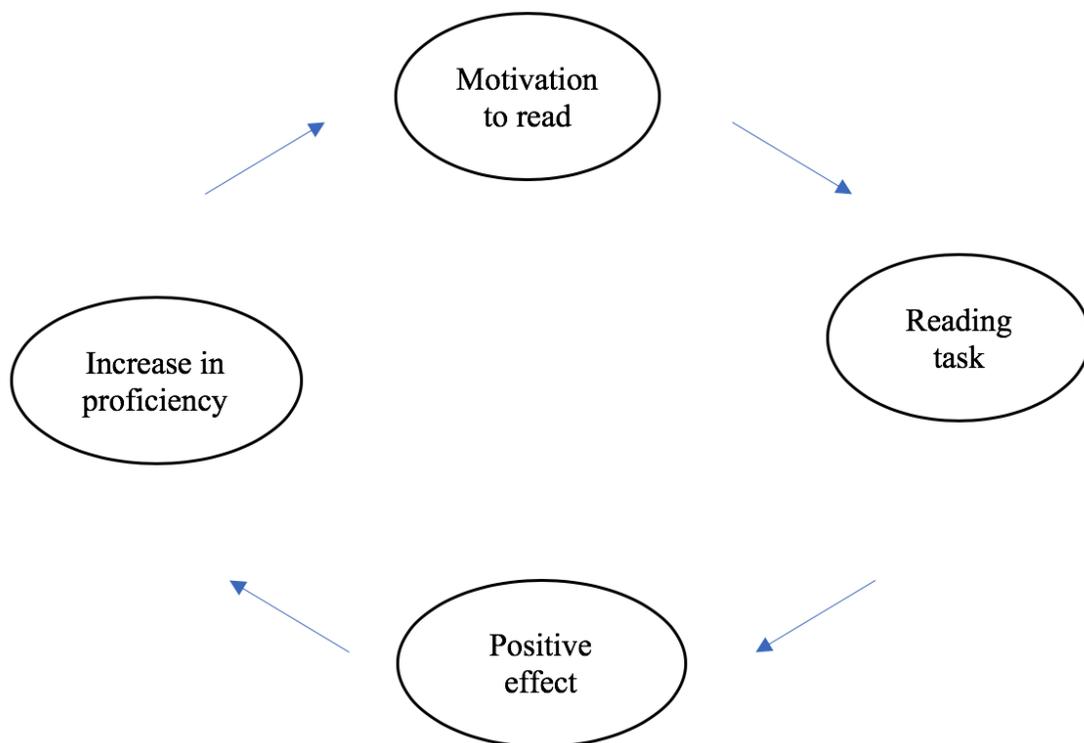


Figure 1: Cyclical path of reading

Through the act of reading, reading can be improved (Smith, 2006). However, the real objective is to encourage the students to continue on the cyclical path (see Figure 1) until the audiobook is no longer a necessary component in the reading process. Researchers have found that after an average of four months and 18 books, some students were ready to read the texts without the audiobooks; additionally, their attitudes about reading in general changed (Beers, 1998, Bergmann, 1999, Wolfson, 2008), but overall the ability to read the written text without the help of the audiobook became possible.

The Book Project

The present case study was linked to a 7th grade book project with 20 students conducted at a high school (*Gymnasium*) in Münster, Germany in 2017. The initial book project took place over a five-week period. During this time each student selected a book and answered questions on it. Motivation was an important factor in the project; hence, a self-selection process was implemented by the teacher, as students are better able to decide what type of books interest them. Choosing a book that interests them gives the students ownership, allows them to see the reading process through (Day & Bamford, 1998) and facilitates the extensive reading process in the long run (Carrell, 1989; Block, 1986). Students select books that suit their level of proficiency and their individual interests (Bland, 2018; Henseler & Surkamp, 2007; Kreft & Viebrock, 2014; Mason & Krashen, 2017). The students used a reading journal to keep track of their progress during the reading process and worked through a number of creative tasks, writing tasks, while-reading tasks and vocabulary tasks. The use of audiobooks was not part of the original book project.

The Case Study

The main aim of the case study was motivating one student (Student A) to increase her reading fluency by introducing an auditory component to support the reading process. Even though the student participated in the book project, the case study actually continued beyond the initial six-week time frame of the book project. Student A was a 13-year-old female bilingual speaker of English and German with dyslexia. She was born in, and had resided in Germany her entire life.

English and German were both spoken in the home (English by the mother, German by the father). Her language of preference was German, which was apparent in both her weaker oral skills in English as well as in her lack of fluency in reading English. Schooling had occurred solely in German. She had been given support for her dyslexia (only in German) at the *Lehrinstitute für Orthographie und Sprachkompetenz* (LOS) over a five-year period (two bi-weekly 90-minute sessions during the school year). Overall, Student A was not an avid reader either in German or in English. The main aim of this case study was to improve Student A's reading fluency in English, to enable her to read without auditory input, to increase her extensive reading and to instill a *joy of reading* in her. At the outset, due to the rather open self-selection process, Student A chose a book which ended up not suiting her; she thus lost a few days initially. The second book she chose was *The School of Good and Evil* (Figure 2) written by Soman Chainani and read by Polly Lee. The author uses well-known fairy tales as the basis for the adventures of the two protagonists. Each character in the story is linked to an older fairy tale which most students are familiar with, thus connecting their reading to prior knowledge of fairy tales from their L1 (Hearne, 2010; Bland, 2013).

The School of Good and Evil

The School of Good and Evil is about Sophie and Agatha, who live in Gavaldon (the *reader world*). Every three years two children are taken from the town to go to the School of Good and Evil (one for each school). The *Good* students have classes in Beautification, Animal Communication, Good Deeds, History of Heroism and Princess Etiquette while the *Evil* students take classes on Uglification, Curses & Death Traps, History of Villainy and Special Talents, to name a few. The only course they have together is Surviving Fairy Tales, for that is their challenge: after three years of schooling they must try to survive a quest. No one can get away since the school is surrounded by a forest, as is the town of Gavaldon. The children in Gavaldon are the *readers* of the fairy tales and they all anticipate the arrival of the new books in Mr. Deauville's Storybook Shop, so they can hear about the adventures of the children who have been taken. The book specifically describes Sophie and Agatha's adventures in the School of Good and Evil in their first year, and the subsequent books describe their adventures during the

following three years of schooling and their final quest. In *The School of Good and Evil*, Sophie's three roommates each have a link to the fairy tale world. For example, Hester is the daughter of the witch who 'killed' Hansel and Gretel. Dot is the daughter of the Sheriff of Nottingham, who 'killed' Robin Hood, and Anadil is the daughter of the witch in Sophie's favorite fairy tale (an imaginary tale created by the author, with elements from various older folktales). Thus, a knowledge of fairy tales in general is essential so that the reader can link the characters to the correct 'real' fairy tale.



Figure 2: Audiobook cover

Considerations for Audiobooks

During the initial exposure to the text and the audiobook, it is important to contemplate how to use these two resources together effectively and efficiently. When selecting audiobooks, certain criteria need to be considered, such as, speed of reading, pacing, characterization and the storyline (Mediatore, 2003). Firstly, it is important to help students find their ideal speed by informing them that most audio-files are equipped with alterable speed functions that they can

adjust to fit their own rate of reading. Usually, this might be slower at the onset but may speed up as the reading progresses – this tends to change after the first few chapters (Bergmann, 1999).

The student's ability to comprehend certain information is usually much higher than their ability to produce language. However, if the student has a learning challenge, then they need even more support to perform the task of reading (Whalley & Hansen, 2006). *Reading while listening* will help the student overcome their phonological and prosodic challenges with the foreign text, as well as support them in understanding the correct way to pronounce the new terms they encounter (Ashby, 2006). Therefore, by facilitating understanding through oral input and by making the words more easily readable, the students are inspired to read beyond their proficiency level, hereby challenging themselves. This allows students to read texts that are more suitable for their age even if the language level is higher. The idea that they can read a text written for students that are similar in age is motivating as well. The interest in the reading process is heightened as a result of being able to access the content, to empathize with the characters (who are also 12-14 years of age) as well as being able to connect the story to their previous knowledge of legends and fairy tales (Block, 1986; Carrell, 1989; Matz & Stieger, 2018). Of course, the challenge of reading a more difficult text is facilitated by the use of audio input.

Pacing is the way the story unfolds and the speed at which the reader performs the passages. The reader in *The School of Good and Evil*, Polly Lee, adjusts the pacing depending on the scene and sets the stage for the story. The most interesting aspect in the audiobook is how the reader manages characterization. For example, Lee differentiates the various characters by the way she changes her voice, using different accents, pitches and tones to help the listener identify each character. The way in which Lee reads the text brings the storyline to life and entangles us in the complexity of the story.

Some books are not appropriate to use as audiobooks for listening only, since they contain visual elements embedded in the text that aid meaning-making. For example, in the *The School of Good and Evil*, there are small pictures at the onset of every chapter, as well as a map of the school grounds at the beginning of the book. Sometimes the text appears written in the

form of poster or as a table. In this case, the *listening while reading* approach, chosen for this case study, was enhanced by the pictures and the illustrations in the book. The audiobook was there to scaffold the reading process so as to help the individual develop into a more competent reader.

Tasks that Increase Reading Fluency

As mentioned above, in order to strengthen the *listening-reading* process it is important to establish the *reading-writing* connection (Beers, 1998). The book project facilitated this focus on various written tasks which support the interaction with the auditory input. Tasks during listening/reading help activate reading fluency. For example, students underline unknown words or phrases so they can look them up later or collect them in a glossary for the book or they mark passages that relate to various fairy tales, in order to refer to them again later, especially if there are fairy tales that may be unfamiliar to them. These activities connect the auditory output to the act of reading and facilitate the *reading-writing* connection.

A brainstorming task where the student had to describe the cover and try to guess what the book is about served as a prediction task which raised expectations and increased the student's interest at the outset (Padberg, 1997). If prior knowledge is lacking, it is important to provide the student with additional information: this could include discussing the genre of fairytales (Hallet, 2015). These scaffolding tasks facilitate the comprehension process and aid the students to anticipate what comes next (Thürmann, 2013, p. 3), which will facilitate the process of assigning meaning to the text. Most of the students may know about fairy tales in their L1, but they may need help with the various stories and characters in English, through translation or mediation tasks. These preliminary discussions are very important before delving into the story as they avoid a breakdown in comprehension.

Case Study - Results

Student A chose a very slow speed at the outset of her reading process, since she was very hesitant about reading anything in English or in German. She increased the speed about eight chapters into the book after a four-day period (p. 125 of 488, as noted by her tutor). Student A

took notes on unknown fairy tales and discussed any difficult words with her tutor to clarify their meaning and motivate her to continue reading. The Legend of King Arthur was unknown to Student A, so additional information was provided. As King Arthur's son, Tedros, is the most beloved boy in the *School of Good*, knowledge of this story was key to understanding the book. Student A watched the movie *Excalibur* (Boorman, 1981) as an additional task and discussed it with her tutor to make Tedros' relevance more transparent. The genre of fairy tales was discussed and some of the made-up fairy tales were also explored individually using pictures, drawings and illustrations to highlight typical fairytale characteristics: *The Ever Never Handbook* (Chainani, 2017, illus. Blank) is a wonderful source of such material. A number of activities helped Student A connect the *reading-writing* process to the *listening-reading* process; for example, Student A wrote summaries of various chapters, which were corrected by the tutor and then rewritten by the student; a timeline was drawn up for the first book to help put the various different events into a chronological sequence.

After some initial hesitation, Student A engaged with the book and the project better than expected. Her initial reading task (*The School of Good and Evil*, pp. 1-488) took three weeks to achieve, with the support of the audiobook. She became so interested in reading more about the characters that she began the second book immediately (*The School of Good and Evil: A World without Princes*, pp. 1-433), also with the assistance of the audiobook. She finished the second book within two weeks. In the end, she managed to read both books within the initial five-week period, which had originally been designated for the first book alone. The teacher gave her maximum points to acknowledge the effort she had put into reading the first two books and to encourage her to continue with the series, which she did.

After having completed the first two books, Student A read the next book (*The School of Good and Evil: The Last Ever After*, pp. 1-655) without the assistance of an audiobook. She chose to read it on her own and also managed to complete this book within a four-week period. The unassisted reading took a bit longer, but Student A was determined to use her newfound fluency to read the entire series, which she accomplished over the course of the next few months. Her engagement with the books in this series is evidence of how she developed a *joy of reading*,

which was supported by the bimodal resource of the audio book and the process of *listening while reading*. By scaffolding the various processes that occurred simultaneously during the reading process, she was able to bring meaning to the text, she decoded the words as she developed prosodic sensitivity and continued to read, even though at some points the language was beyond her initial capabilities. She also continued to develop her own mental lexicon by actively searching for and looking up unknown words and discussing them with her tutor. Furthermore, she became intrigued by the twists in the plot and the development of the characters, and she continued to search for ways of identifying with the changing lives of the new heroes and heroines. Most importantly, she learned to use her inner voice and read the text to herself, and eventually move away from the assistance she had needed at the outset of this project. Her initial skepticism about being able to read such a long text in English was discarded and a love and a true *joy of reading* emerged and has remained to this day even in German. This was an unexpected positive dividend of the case study which neither she nor her tutor had expected.

Conclusion

This case study aimed to show that through the use of auditory input, in the form of audiobooks, reading fluency and the *joy of reading* could be developed in a hesitant, challenged reader. This was supported by previous research done on prosody and phonological awareness in readers in their L1 (Whalley & Hansen, 2006; Wood & Terrell, 1989) as well as in their L2 (Cutler & Butterfield, 1990, 1992). This case study went beyond the exclusive use of audiobooks and included another element which is necessary to improve reading: a *reading-writing* connection. In the L2 classroom, various studies (Chang, 2011; Chang & Millet, 2015; Isozaki, 2014; Woodall, 2010; Kartal & Simsek, 2017; Mohamed, 2018) have come to the conclusion that integrating auditory input improves various skills (specifically vocabulary acquisition, reading and listening comprehension) as well as motivation. While it is not possible to generalize the results of this case study, the observations do however substantiate the findings in the above studies conducted with larger groups.

With the help of auditory input, Student A was able to read even more books than originally planned and developed a *joy of reading* which also extended to reading in German. This was a side-effect which stemmed from her increased self-confidence. If she could read in English (which she never thought possible), then this could be transferred to reading in German. These findings could perhaps be useful for other teachers who are looking for ways to inspire even the most hesitant reader to read and to learn how to love to read. Audiobooks, if used correctly, can help to facilitate this process.

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