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**English-language Improved Reading courses at the  
Free University of Berlin 2001/02.  
Report and Evaluation**

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Date of completion: 27.11.2002.  
**Summary of the report**

## **Abstract**

In collaboration with the university's Career Service, Improved Reading has been offering courses in English and German at the university since December 2001. Klaus Nathaus M.A., an employee of the Centre for Communication History and Intercultural Media Studies, which is part of the faculty chaired by Professor Bernd Soesemann, conducted a scientific study to evaluate the performance and results of the 87 students who participated in the first eight courses (December 2001 - July 2002). In November 2002, he submitted a detailed evaluation report.

The report covers the following aspects:

1. Results achieved in the course
2. Assessments made by course participants
3. Results of follow-up tests
  - a) involving course participants 2-9 months after the course
  - b) involving control subjects who had not attended the course

The study shows that reading efficiency is measurably, significantly and permanently improved as a result of the Improved Reading course.

Progress during the course that is documented by the participants themselves shows that reading efficiency improves considerably in terms of Effective Reading Rate (ERR), which relates to both speed and comprehension. After each of the courses, the participants' ERR was between 2.6 and 4.1 times higher - which corresponds to an average improvement factor of 3.4. The ERR rates of between 327 and 470 that were achieved in each course are 3-4 times higher than the ERR of your average German citizen.

Overall, the participants assessed the core elements of the course as 'very good'. 85% of them also said that they would definitely recommend the course to other people.

A comparison of the ERR rates of people who have attended Improved Reading courses and people who haven't is extremely important when evaluating the course. This comparison shows that course participants can read German texts of various degrees of difficulty between 1.5 and 2.0 times more efficiently than people who haven't attended the courses.

Although it is impossible to measure the methods used in the course to help the participants optimise their reading strategies, concentration and retention in follow-up tests, these methods are associated with additional improvement effects.

The continuation of these courses at more frequent intervals is therefore to be recommended.

Bernd Soesemann

Klaus Nathaus

The following detailed report includes

- 1) An overview of the English language 'Improved Reading' courses implemented at the Free University of Berlin between the end of 2001 and July 2002.
- 2) An overview of course results.
- 3) An evaluation of the assessments made by course participants.
- 4) The findings of the scientific study.

ad 1) The overview of participants shows that the course was attended by students in all faculties of both the Free University and other universities. Although the participants did not perceive the course language of English to be an obstacle, they would have preferred a course in German.

ad 2) All course results document an improvement in the participants' Effective Reading Rate (which is the product of speed and comprehension) to double and in some cases three times their rate at the beginning of the course. With only one exception, all course participants' Effective Reading Rate improved.

ad 3) The implementation of the course and its content were evaluated very positively by the participants. 85% of respondents said they would recommend the course to other people.

ad 4) The findings of the scientific study show that:

- 1) After completing the course, participants were able to read the same texts considerably more efficiently, on average, than a) a control group of persons with advanced academic qualifications and b) a control group of undergraduates in early semesters. The Effective Reading Rate of course participants when reading the text with simple grammatical structures was 1.5 times higher than that of the two control groups. When reading the text with complex grammatical structures, the Effective Reading Rate of most course participants was 1.5 times higher. (Please refer to Section 4.4.)
- 2) The course participants were able to apply the reading techniques that they learned in the English language course to German texts.
- 3) Most were also able to apply the reading techniques they had learned to German texts with more complex grammatical structures.
- 4) The course participants were still able to effectively use the reading techniques that they had learned in the course several months after the course.
- 5) The participants were not able to match the results that they had achieved at the end of the course in a follow-up English test. In view of the excellent results achieved in the German test, this can be primarily attributed to the foreign language content of the course.

A comprehensive evaluation of the course must take into account that these tests only serve to assess the *reading techniques* that have been learned. They do not enable an assessment of the effectiveness of the *reading strategies* taught in the same course. An evaluation of all aspects of the course must give consideration to reading strategies as additional course content to which considerable time and weighting are accorded.

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## Introduction

Eight Improved Reading courses took place at the Free University of Berlin between December 2001 and July 2002. The course language was English and the courses were attended by a total of 87 participants. The following evaluation report has three objectives:

1. To provide an overview of the development of reading skills, which were measured at regular intervals during the course (Section 2). This overview is based on the Course Progress Record Cards (see Appendix), which the participants use to record the results of their comprehension tests.
2. To summarise the individual assessments made by course participants (Section 3). The assessments are made on the basis of Evaluation Sheets (see Appendix), which request the course participants to assess the various elements of the course immediately after it has finished.
3. Thirdly, the learning effect of the course is examined on the basis of a comprehension test that participants take several months (two to nine months ) after the course. This test is also used to ascertain whether the skills learned during the course can also be applied to German texts and more complex texts (Section 4).

A description of the participants is provided below (Section 1) before the results are presented.

### 1. Description of participants

A description of participants is necessary to evaluate the development of reading skills taking educational level into consideration. The relevant information is obtained on the basis of a questionnaire (see Appendix) in which participants provide information relating to

- the university that they attend
- their participation in other courses that are offered
- their assessment of their reading skills
- their proficiency in the English language
- their previous knowledge of 'reading techniques'

The questionnaire includes 10 questions and is distributed by the instructor to participants at the end of the course. The respondents filled in the questionnaire by selecting answers to the questions on a multiple choice basis. A total of 55 questionnaires were filled out.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> No questionnaires were distributed at the courses on 14/15 December (five participants) and on 25/26 May (ten participants).

## 1.1 Details of university attended

The questions covered

- whether the participant attended a university
- their status at the university

**Table 1:** University attendance

Relationship to university	Student	University employee	Alumni of a Berlin university and non-university employee	No university affiliation
No. of persons	42	3	2	7

The students also provided information about

- their university
- their degree course
- the number of university semesters already completed

**Table 2:** Universities attended by course participants

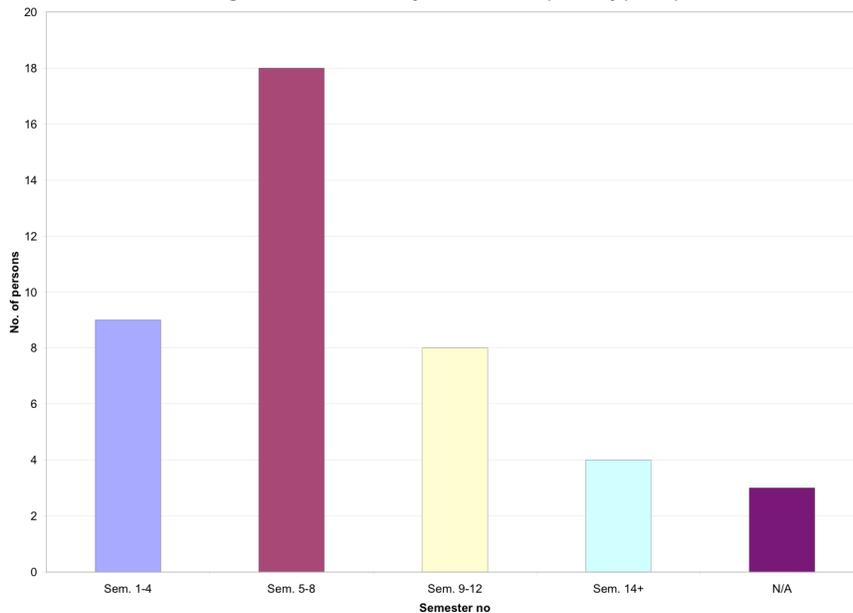
University	Free University of Berlin	Humboldt University of Berlin	Technical University of Berlin	Student of both the FU and the HU	Other universities
No. of persons	24	5	6	3	4

Other universities: International University of Bremen, University of Potsdam, Berlin University of Applied Sciences (FHTW), University of Applied Science for Administration and Legal Affairs (FHVR).

**Table 3:** Degree courses attended by student participants

Degree course	Natural sciences and mathematics	Law	Business studies	Humanities and social sciences	Teaching and psychology
No. of persons	6	6	6	18	6

**Diagram 1:** No. of university semesters completed by participants



**Table 4:** Breakdown of students in terms of completed semesters

Semester no.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	14	15	17	23	N/A
No. of persons	-	1	5	3	3	5	2	8	1	3	1	3	1	1	1	1	3

## 1.2 Participation in other courses that are offered

The students were asked to state how frequently they participate in courses within and outside the university. Multiple choice answers were possible in the categories of 'Regular participation in courses outside the university' and 'Regular attendance of courses offered by the FU Berlin'.

**Table 5:** Participation in courses

Participation in courses	Regular participation in courses outside the university	Regular participation in courses offered by the FU Berlin	Participation in one course offered by a university	First-time participation in a course	N/A
No. of persons	13	6	5	28	5

## 1.3 Retrospective self-assessment of reading skills

The questions asked course participants to provide

- a general assessment of personal reading skills before attending the Improved Reading course. (Borderline assessments were admissible.)
- a list of aspects that they considered to be personal reading weaknesses. (Multiple answers were possible.)

**Diagram 2: General self-assessment of reading skills**

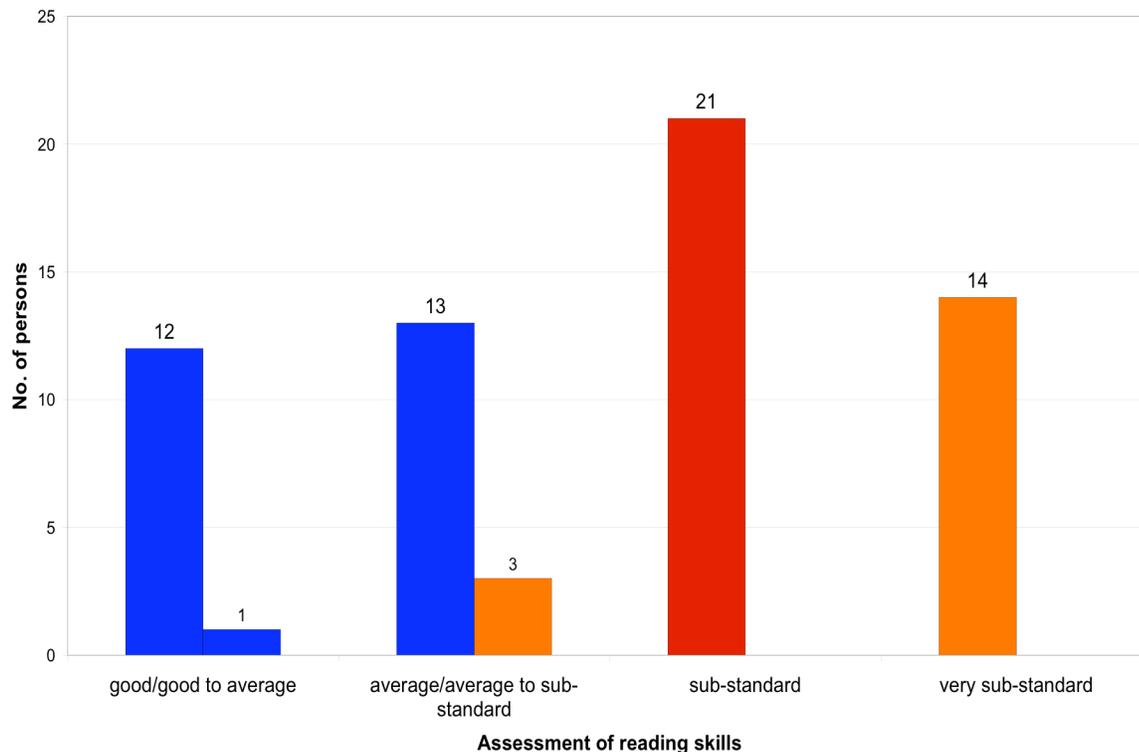
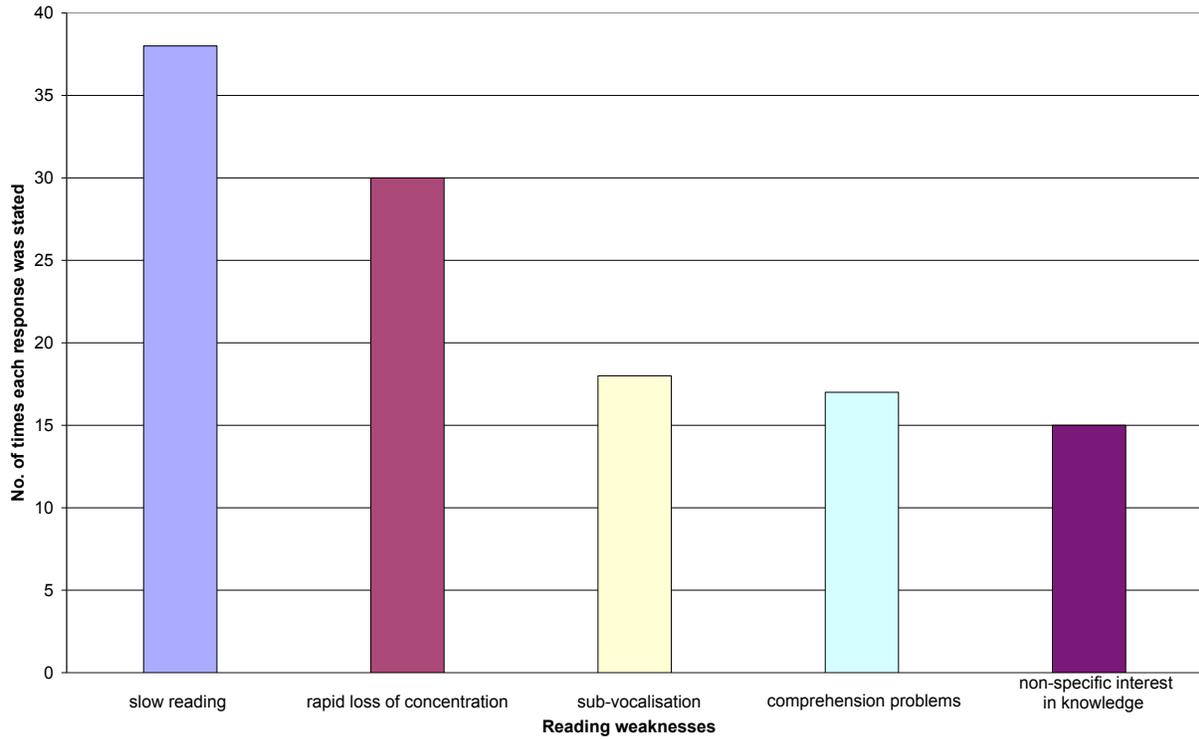


Diagram 3: Weak aspects (according to the self-assessment)

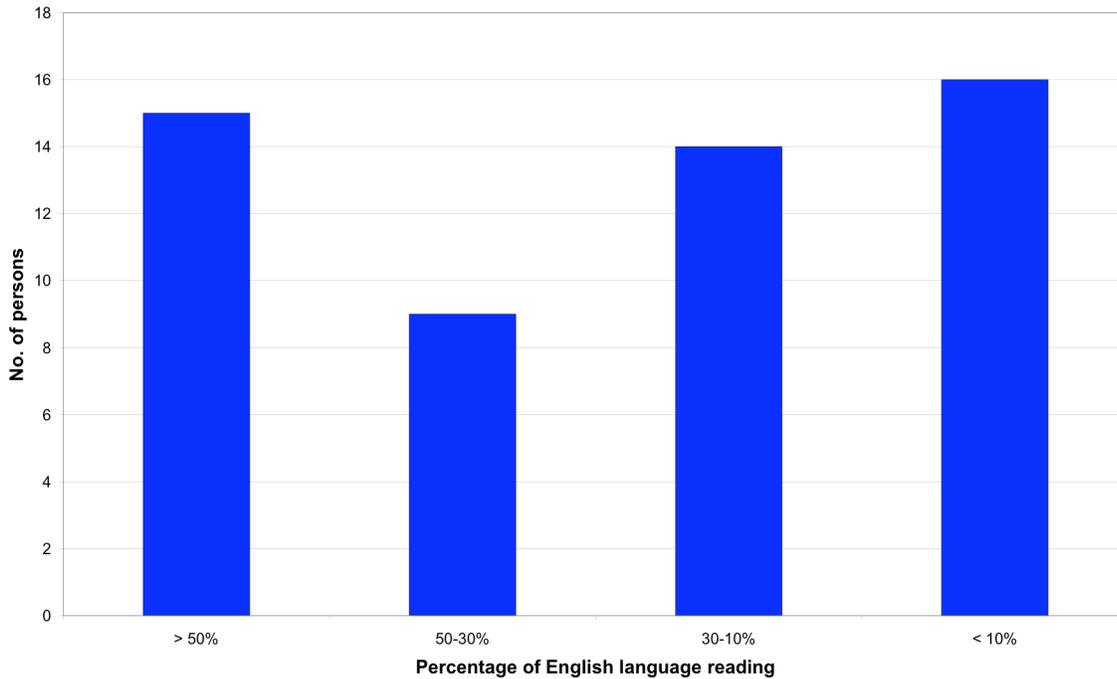


### 1.4 Familiarity with written English

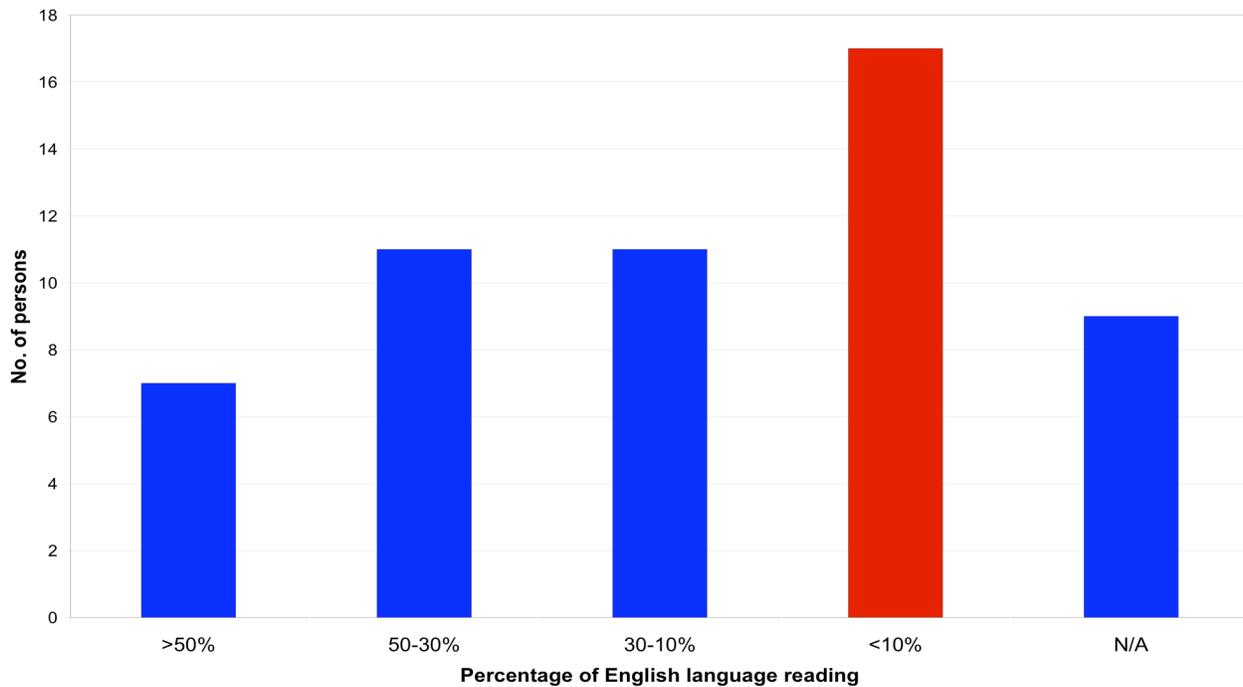
The questions covered

- the percentage of English language reading done at work
- the percentage of English language reading done at home
- course language preferences if a choice were available

Diagram 4: Percentage of English language reading done at work



**Diagram 5: Percentage of English language reading done at home**



The questionnaire shows that three-fifths of participants assessed their reading skills as below average. In the criterion of familiarity with the English language, the participants are divided into two groups: one group that often encounters English texts at work and another, larger group for whom English texts play a subordinate role, both at work and at home. This finding is reflected in the responses to the question about course language preferences, assuming that the course were also available in German. Around one-sixth of respondents would have attended the English language course anyway. Around half of the participants of the English language course would have preferred to attend a course in German.

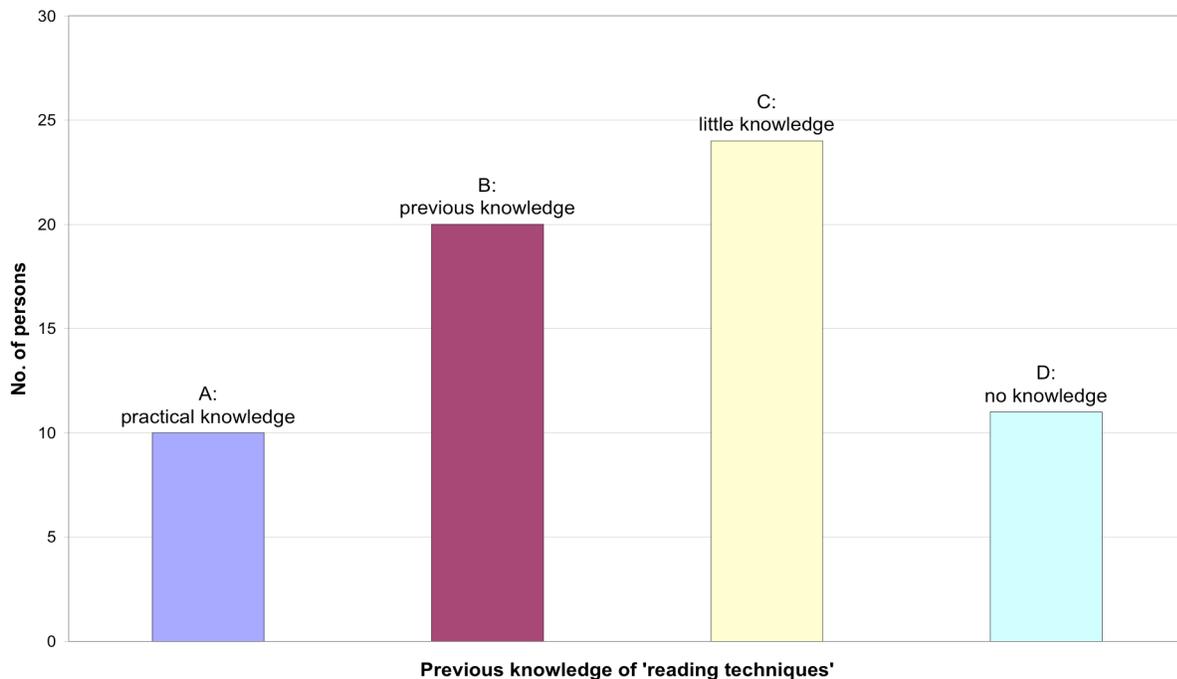
**Table 6:** Course language preferences

Preferred course language	German	English	No preference
No. of persons	29	9	28

## 1.5 Previous knowledge of 'reading techniques'

Participants were requested to state the extent of their previous knowledge and experience of using 'reading techniques'.

Diagram 6: Previous knowledge of 'reading techniques'



A. Participants with experience of using 'reading techniques' (through attending courses or home study<sup>2</sup>).

B. Participants with a previous interest in reading techniques who had not undertaken anything to improve their reading skills.

C. Participants with a low level of previous knowledge who had not considered any practical measures to improve their reading skills before attending the course.

D. Participants with no previous knowledge who did not know that they could improve their reading skills before attending the course.

## 1.6 Summary

The majority of people who attended the eight courses are students. This group of participants includes students in all semesters and faculties; the majority are students of the Free University, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, at a late stage of their degree course (5th to 8th semester).

The majority of participants are people who believed that their reading skills needed some or considerable improvement and that they were not proficient at reading English language texts. Just under half of the participants of the English language course would have chosen to attend a German course, had it been available; and only a few of them would have attended the English language course anyway.

Most participants had little or no previous knowledge of 'reading techniques'. Just under half of the people who completed the course stated that 'Improved Reading' is their first course, and less than one-quarter regularly participate in courses offered outside the university.

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<sup>2</sup> The participants in group A said that they had tried out the '*Ernst Ott*, *Optimales Lesen. Schneller lesen, mehr behalten*' method (a 25-day course), Reinbek bei Hamburg 1981 (four participants); *Stanley D. Frank*, *The Evelyn Wood Seven-Day Speed Reading and Learning Program* (Barnes&Noble) 1994 (one participant); *Wolfgang Zielke*, *Schneller lesen - besser lesen*, Munich 1966 (one respondent); "Speed reading" (Tony Buzan) (two respondents).