

Digital Reading Fluency and Text Presentation Medium Preference in EFL Context

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ABSTRACT

With the advent of digital literacy, fluency in reading from the screen has become a key category in shaping reading proficiency. Furthermore, research focusing on digital reading fluency, especially in the English as Foreign Language (EFL) context, is scarce. Therefore, this study first seeks to explore the differences in the participants' reading fluency in paper and digital reading environments, and second to examine the participants' attitude towards text presentation medium. To this end, the reading fluency of 30 students doing their Master's was examined in two reading environments. Then, by using a checklist, the participants self-assessed themselves for their preference for either type of the texts. The results revealed that not only were the EFL participants more fluent in the traditional paper texts than digital ones, but also the majority had a stronger preference for the former. The findings call for greater 'diversity adjustment' in scholarship on digital literacy.

Keywords: Digital Literacy, Digital Texts, English as Foreign Language (EFL), Reading Fluency, Text Presentation Medium, Traditional Paper-Based Texts

INTRODUCTION

Reading is an essential, and probably the most important skill for foreign language learners (Grabe, 1991). Reading, as Stauffer (1969) defines it, is a means to "get information from the printed page" (p.5). Yet, the definition needs to be adjusted to the demands of the new era,

where computer technology has impacted almost every aspect of learning in higher education (Caverly & Peterson, 2002, as cited in Shen, 2006), and information is no longer displayed just on paper, but on the computer screens as well. In addition, the inherent nature of computer technology has changed the scope of knowledge accessibility; that is, it has made it possible for

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people to have access to millions of sources. Although this seems to be an improvement and an advantage in its own right, it has also brought about a new challenge for language learners -- to develop digital literacy to benefit most. The skill which is directly associated with this goal, is reading fluency (Rasinski, 2004), which "bridges decoding skills with smooth reading, with no hesitation but with comprehension" (Harris & Hodges, 1995, p. 85).

Reading fluency is not a new concept in English Language Teaching (ELT). In fact, it has been researched a lot, especially in L_1 contexts (Torgesen & Hudson, 2006). However, the change in text presentation medium calls for the reconsideration of the concept.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is commonly believed that reading fluency fosters positive attitudes toward reading on the one hand, and a more positive self-concept in the readers themselves, on the other (Rasinski & Padak, 2000). For such reasons, this skill has long been a major concern in educational research, especially in L_1 , (Allington, 1984; Breznitz, 2006; Kuhn & Schwanenflugel, 2008; Kuhn & Stahl, 2000; Samuels, 2002; Samuels & Farstrup, 2006; Rasinski, Blachowicz, & Lems, 2006). Most studies sought methods of developing reading fluency in L_1 in the hope of improving reading comprehension. However, unlike its role in L_1 studies, reading fluency has attracted scant attention in ESL/EFL, perhaps due to the common belief that once reading skills develop, fluency will naturally follow (Taguchi, Gorsuch, Sasamoto, 2006).

Nevertheless, researchers such as Gebhard (1996) and Redfield (1999), highlighting the significance of reading fluency in L_2 , criticize treating such an important skill with this naivety, and ask for further attention to this knowledge acquisition tool for ESL/ EFL learners. They argue that slow readers do not read much, and therefore do not gain sufficient knowledge.

Admitting the importance of fluency in proficient reading, Allington (1984) suggests fluency to be instructed because it can help readers improve their reading performance. In the same vein, other researchers (e.g., Pinnell et al., 1995; McGlinchey and Hixon, 2004; and Silberglitt, Burns, Madyun, & Lail, 2006) showed that fluency was significantly associated with reading proficiency; that is, more fluent readers scored higher on reading assessment. Similarly, Day and Bamford (1998) go further and claim that it is only through this skill that EFL readers can acquire the complex linguistic, world, and topical knowledge needed to improve their reading skills (p. 19). Moreover, systematic research reviews (Chard, Vaughn, & Tyler, 2002; Kuhn & Stahl, 2000) indicate that reading fluency is certainly a critical component of learning, and that fluency instruction has to be incorporated into an effective reading program. Therefore, EFL researchers, for many theoretical and pedagogical reasons, emphasize the need for finding effective methods to develop reading fluency (Day & Bamford, 1998; Grabe, 1991, 2004; Silberstein, 1994).

Yet, it should be noted that in almost all studies, fluency is composed of three components: accuracy, automaticity, and prosody (Torgesen & Hudson, 2006), with prosody serving both as an indicator that a student is comprehending as he/she reads, and also an aid to comprehension (Rasinski, 2004). This rationale made the basis of the methods to assess reading proficiency. For instance, Rasinski (2004) suggested the method known both as Curriculum- Based Measurement (CBM) and Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) to measure all three components in a one-minute recording and compare it against the target norms.

In response to the call for adjustment of the definition to the current demands, Yamashita and Ishikawa (2010) characterized fluent reading as good comprehension at an appropriate rate. Agreeing with this definition, the researchers present the literature in the order of text pre-

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