

A Study of Saudi English Foreign Language (EFL) Learners: Impact of Timed Reading on Learners' Reading Speed and Level of Comprehension

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Abstract

Within the language learning and teaching domain, the reading process appears to be the most momentous and controversial topic. There has been extensive research about the reading process in the mother tongue (L1) and in a foreign language (L2); the linkages of such processes; the variables that impact on reading; and, in the context of L1 and L2, the qualities associated with good and poor readers. The progressive actions, made within the L1 reading domain, have led to the questions regarding reading within the L2 domain. Further, there have been countless theories which have attempted to justify the linkage between L1 and L2 reading. The principle concern has been the fluency of reading and its importance in both L1 and L2 has been paramount. Nevertheless, further investigation is required on the issue of fluency in L2 since this appears to be a more complex issue as opposed to reading fluency in L1. Hence, this study investigates the effect of timed reading practices on Saudi EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners' speed of reading and their level of comprehension. Accordingly, this study's sample comprising 50 students who were split randomly into an experimental group (35 students) and a control group (15 students). Only the experimental group was given timed reading activities. The researcher conducted a pre-test in week 1 and a post-test in week 8. The test results indicate that timed reading intervention has a positive effect on the EFL learners' reading speed and level of comprehension. Based on the findings, this study highlights the implications of reading being taught to English Foreign Language (EFL) learners.

Keywords: Saudi EFL Context; Reading fluency; reading in a foreign language; timed reading.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, many countries regard the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to be of considerable importance. In this respect, the teaching of a language is not a simple task because all languages have four primary skills (i.e. listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and several sub-skills (i.e. vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation). Reading is one of these primary language skills and is regarded as being among the most powerful language skills. Currently, there is colossal

amount of information available in each specific study domain. Hence, reading becomes even more important.

In order to improve reading fluency in a variety of learning contexts, several studies examined the effectiveness of timed reading. Nonetheless, there have been as yet no conclusive results on whether or not, as a constituent element of timed reading practices, speed affects the level of the reader's comprehension [12].

Bearing in mind that reading is one of the most basic skills of learning a foreign language [13], studies on EFL reading comprehension have explored the practicable ways of improving reading comprehension. In this regard, genre-based instruction is an approach and an activity that is arguably effective in improving reading comprehension. Meanwhile, the activity of timed reading is expected to improve the learners' reading comprehension. Indeed, while it is important to improve all the language skills (i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing), it is particularly important to improve the reading skill so that the learner learns successfully. For this reason, in the various teaching contexts, reading has been regarded as a core skill.

In countless countries worldwide, reading skills in a foreign language and, more especially, in the context of the English language, have been deemed always to be crucial to academic studies, professional success and personal development (Alderson, 1984). Indeed, the English language has been a medium used in large amounts of professional, technical and scientific literature. Therefore, it is important to identify an effective technique in order to improve the language learners' skill in reading and the level of comprehension.

There have been few studies that have determined if the increase in speed transfers to other reading types and if the speed impacts on other language skills. In this regard, Tran and Nation in [14] attempted to examine the associations between the speed of EFL reading, reading comprehension and memory span. For this purpose, by examining the scores of comprehension and results of language memory span, they concluded that an improvement in the speed of reading transferred to other reading types and this transfer had no negative impact on learners' comprehension. Such outcomes show, also, a significant expansion in the treated groups' memory span ($p < .05$). The authors reported, also, a strong linkage between the increases in speed in the course of speed

reading, and in other types of reading and development of memory span.

Alemohammad and Alavi in [15] attempted to ascertain if there were linkages between reading and writing fluency results and, also, between the level of reading comprehension and writing fluency. For the purpose of their study, the authors split 42 private school intermediate male students into two groups of 21. Then, the authors provided one of the groups (the experimental group) with 20 passages for speed reading. In this regard, each passage was followed by a 5-minute exercise comprising of free writing. The tasks took 7 weeks. Accordingly, the authors correlated the rates of reading with the word per minute (wpm) rates attained from the students' free writing. The authors correlated, also, the levels of reading comprehension with wpm writing rates. In this respect, the authors wanted to determine if better reading comprehension could generate faster writing. As can be seen from the results, there are positive associations between writing fluency and reading fluency. In addition, the authors found positive associations between writing fluency and the scores obtained in reading comprehension.

Using Saudi EFL 10th grade male students as a sample, Alshumaimeri [11] studied the relative impacts of different methods of reading on the performance of comprehension. Comparisons were made to the scores obtained by the participants who read three equivalent passages in three manners, namely, oral, silent and subvocalizing. Consequently, the author found a considerable difference between oral reading and sub vocalization and between oral reading and silent reading. Furthermore, among the three examined methods of reading, the author reported that oral reading had the biggest impact on the performance of comprehension. Also, all groups stated that oral reading was their most preferred method of reading and most respondents considered that this was the best method in supporting comprehension.

However, while some previous studies (e.g., [1]) did not specify the association between timed reading and reading comprehension, these demonstrated clearly the enhancement of the students' reading speed arising from activities of timed reading. Therefore, based on all these works including [16-18] it can be reported that there is a positive linkage between reading speed and reading comprehension and that timed reading improves reading comprehension.

1.1 Research Questions

It cannot be denied that fluency is an important factor in improving reading proficiency. However, there continues to be few studies that have explored the efficacy of the practices to improve reading speed and comprehension as vital constituents of fluency. Taking into account the inadequate number of studies that have investigated the efficacy of fluency based reading instructions in the context of teaching L2 reading, there needs to be more studies that explore the impact of such practices. Therefore, this study is undeniably a valuable addition to the literature on the improvement of the designs associated with L2 reading lessons. Consequently,

this study investigated the impact of the activities of timed reading on the L2 learners' reading speed and levels of comprehension levels. Accordingly, this study attempted to answer the following research questions below:

1. Did the EFL students, who receive timed reading intervention, improve their reading speed?
2. What was the increase in the wpm of the EFL students who received timed reading intervention?
3. Did EFL students, who did not receive a timed reading intervention during the study, improve their reading speed?
4. To what extent did EFL students, who received a timed reading intervention, improve their levels of comprehension?
5. Did EFL students, who did not receive a timed reading intervention during the study, improve their levels of comprehension?
6. In comparing the two groups, which group showed the greater improvement in terms of reading speed and level of comprehension?

2. METHOD AND MATERIALS

This study employed as participants 50 randomly picked intermediate English learners. These participants were students of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA)'s, Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University's, and all had identical educational backgrounds. The researcher split the participants into groups, where one group was the experimental group and the other was the control group. The participants were all female students between 18 and 23 years of age. However, in line with the purpose of this study, gender and age were not regarded as variables.

For pre-test and post-test purposes, this study employed three intermediate level reading passages of 400 words, 800- words and 1400 words respectively along with questions relating to the level of comprehension. The reading passages of 400 and 800 words were obtained from Cover to Cover Reading Comprehension and Fluency 2 (Day and Harsch in [19]). The reading passage of 1400 words was obtained from Allsworth Anne's book by entitled "The Thames Murderer." For the collection of data, this study employed Cover to Cover Reading Comprehension and Fluency 2. Over the six weeks of the study period, the participants were given three passages from the book and, in total, they received 15 reading items.

2.1 Procedures

The researcher conducted the pre-test and post-test in weeks 1 and 8 respectively. Then, during the final week of the intervention, the researcher gave the participants the shortest passage. In this regard, he asked the participants to record their reading time by computing the number of words read per minute. Once they had completed the reading, the participants were instructed to return the text. Then, the researcher asked the participants questions pertaining to the passage in order to establish their levels of comprehension. When responding to the questions, the participants were prohibited from revising

the passage. After the participants had answered the questions, the researcher gave them the second reading passage. The researcher employed the same procedure for the second and the third reading passages. Bearing in mind that multiple choice questions were used mostly in books on fluency enhancement by way of timed reading, the researcher used the same format of questions for this study's timed reading activities.

Following the pre-test procedures in week 1, in the next six weeks, the researcher supplied the experimental group with three 500 word reading passages and the participants were allowed 3 minutes to read each text. The researcher based the 3 minute duration on the presumed average reading rate of L2 learners and L1 readers [12, 20-22]. The participants began and ended their reading at the same time. Then, they returned the reading passage and, next, the researcher asked the participants comprehension questions regarding the read text. In answering the questions, the participants were allowed as much time as they required. Once they had answered the questions, they were given the second text and the researcher repeated the same procedure for the third text. Thereafter, the researcher discussed their answers to the questions with the participants. Overall, the researcher gave the participants 3 texts each week for six weeks.

The researcher supplied the control group with the same texts and comprehension questions. In answering the comprehension questions, the group was prohibited, also, from re-reading the texts. However, unlike the experimental group, the researcher did not restrict the time that the control group that they had to read the texts. Hence, the element of time was the difference between the experimental group and the control group. This clarified the impact of time pressure on the learner's reading speed and the level of comprehension. During week 8, the researcher conducted the post-test. Finally, the researcher made statistical comparisons between the time given to the learners and their levels of comprehension.

2.2 Data Analysis

The researcher transformed reading speed in seconds into wpm. For the purpose of this study, he employed the following formula. He divided the text's total number of words by the reader's reading time in seconds multiplied by 60. Then, in order to attain the average reading speed, the researcher converted the reading speeds of the 3 passages to average wpm. In addition, the researcher computed the scores of reading comprehension through the summation of the overall numbers of correct answers for the levels of comprehension of the 3 passages. He awarded each correct answer with 1 point. In this study, the highest possible overall score was 23 and the lowest possible score was 0.

3. RESULTS

The three major outcomes from this study are as follows: outcomes of reading speed; outcomes of reading comprehension; and comparisons between the experimental and control groups. The outcomes for the experimental and

control groups related to reading speed and levels comprehension within the groups. In addition, group comparison measures the different outcomes of both groups' reading speeds and levels of comprehension.

3.1 Reading Speed Results

Table 1 displays the results of the pre-test and post-test for both the experimental and control groups. In particular, the Table presents the means and standard deviations of each group's reading speed prior to and following the intervention. As shown in the Table, the experimental group students produced a mean post-test reading speed of 190.65 wpm whereas the control group students produced a reading speed of 147.07 wpm.

Table 1: Means and standard deviations of reading speed for the experimental and control groups at two different time periods

	Experimental (N=35)			Control (n=15)		
	Mean (wpm)	SD	Range	Mean	SD	Range
Pre-test	128.33	26.23	77.33 – 184.66	100.98	19.12	70.22- 136
Post-test	190.65	38.94	98.99 – 278.23	136.65	28.89	83.43 -202
Gains	48.56%				35.32%	

As mentioned previously, this study attempted to answer several research questions. The findings are detailed below.

RQ1: Did EFL students, who received timed reading intervention, improve their reading speed?

Repeated reading practices over the 6 week duration improved the experimental group students' speed of reading. As shown in Table 1, the experimental group students gained a 48.56% increase in their reading speed from 128.33 wpm in the pre-test to 190.65 wpm in the post-test.

RQ2: What was the increase in the wpm of the EFL students who received timed reading intervention?

Table 1 illustrates the 48.56% increase of the experimental group students' reading speed. There is a 62.23wpm increase in the number of wpm. In other words, after the interventions, the experimental group students' reading speed increased by 62.23 wpm. From the result of the paired sample t-test, the difference between this group's pre-test and post-test shows statistical significance ($t = -7.44, p = 0.00 < 0.05$).

RQ3: Did EFL students, who did not receive a timed reading intervention during the study, improve their reading speed?

Table 1 shows that the control group students, who did not receive any intervention, scored 100.98 wpm in the pre-test and 136.35 wpm in the post-test. This demonstrated a 35.32% or 35.37 wpm increase of in reading speed after 6 weeks of

reading assignments. Based on this analysis, the pre-test and post-test difference shows, also, statistical significance ($t = -7.44$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$).

3.2 Reading Comprehension Results

RQ4: To what extent did EFL students, who received a timed reading intervention, improve their levels comprehension?

As illustrated in Table 2, the experimental group students produced a mean score of 16.11 in the pre-test of reading comprehension. In the post-test, this score rose to 18.22. This increase is equivalent to a 2.11 increase by or 13% following the timed reading intervention. From the analysis, the result of timed reading intervention shows statistical significance ($t = -3.3$, $p = 0.006 < 0.05$). This suggests that the intervention made a significant difference to the students' levels of comprehension.

Table 2: The experimental Group's Results for the Variable "Comprehension"

	N	\bar{X}
Pre-test	35	16.11
Post-test	35	18.22

RQ5: Did EFL students, who did not receive a timed reading intervention during the study, improve their levels of comprehension?

As illustrated in Table 3, the control group students produced a mean score of 16.37 in the pre-test of reading comprehension. In the post-test, the score rose to 17.43. Although this group did not receive the timed reading intervention, this increase is equivalent to 1.06 increase or 6.4%. From the analysis detailed in Table 3, the result of timed reading intervention does not show statistical significance ($t = -1.01$, $p = 0.308 < 0.05$). This suggests that, without the intervention, the post-test outcome of these students' levels of comprehension is not statistically significant.

Table 3: The Control Group's Results for the Variable "Comprehension"

	N	\bar{X}
Pre-test	15	16.37
Post-test	15	17.43

3.3 Comparison of the Groups' Speed Rate

RQ6: In comparing the two groups, which group showed the greater improvement in terms of reading speed and level of comprehension?

The experimental group students improved their reading speed following 6 weeks of repeated timed reading practices. This

group's pre-test reading speed mean is 128.33 wpm and the post-test reading speed is 190.65 wpm. Following the application of the interventions, this denotes a 48.51% increase of 62.23 wpm in reading speed. While the control group students improved, also, their reading speed after the 6-week course, their improvement was not as significant as that of the experimental group students. In particular, the control group students gained a 35.32% increase of 35.67 wpm in their reading speed from 100.98 wpm in the pre-test to 136.65 wpm in the post test. When both groups' outcomes are compared, it is evident that, unlike those students who did not, the students, who were given timed reading interventions over 6 weeks, improved their reading speed by more than 26.56 wpm.

4. CONCLUSION

This study's findings demonstrate the potential impacts of timed reading intervention on L2 learners' reading speed and levels of comprehension levels. As shown by the evidence from comparing the results of both groups, timed reading practices caused changes in the students' reading speeds and levels of comprehension levels. As illustrated, while each participating student improved both reading speed and fluency, the increase was considerably higher for the experimental group students. However, there was no statistical significance in terms of level of comprehension. On the contrary, there is a clear difference in descriptive analysis whereby the experimental group students gained a higher level of comprehension.

As the outcomes suggest, timed reading practices have a positive impact on the students' reading speed and level of comprehension. Such a finding indicates the feasibility of language teachers implementing reading instructions with fluency based practices among in order to generate a positive difference in L2 learners' reading skills. This study's findings support those previous studies concerned with the impacts of timed reading intervention on learners' reading speeds and levels of comprehension. Indeed, the previous studies reported the usefulness of timed reading intervention in overcoming the obstacles and improving reading speed and levels of comprehension. This study's results show that, following the intervention, the students improved significantly their reading speeds and levels of comprehension.

In the context of Saudi language schools, it is apparent that there is a significant lack of fluency-based activities in their L2 reading instructions. Ironically, their lessons aim to achieve some level of fluency. Based on this study's outcomes, it can be deduced that reading sessions with timed reading practices can increase quickly the learner's fluency and, more particularly, in terms of speed. Consequently, there is a need for further studies to be carried out and, more particularly, in terms of the impacts of timed reading practices on the learners' reading speeds and level of comprehension.

It is recommended that timed reading practices are incorporated in L2 reading instruction within reading classrooms because these can help learners to increase their reading fluency. Previous studies have demonstrated, also, the

usefulness of timed reading practices and, more particularly, in of reading speed. Nonetheless, it should be noted that such increases do not lead to relapses in the levels of comprehension but, actually, assist learners in improving their levels of comprehension of the reading material.

Finally, this study's limitations should be noted. The researcher used a small sample size sample size in this study which was restricted, also, in terms of implementation time and study setting. Therefore, the researcher recommends that future studies use larger sample sizes and have longer implementation times and settings in order to gain wider results and make them more generalizable. Notwithstanding, this study's results demonstrate the importance of reading fluency and the efficiency of fluency-based instruction among EFL teachers. Finally, the researcher recommends that more research studies be conducted on this subject so that new findings can be identified and compared with previous results.

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