

## Instructional Strategies' Impacts on EFL Learners Reading Fluency: A Review

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### Abstract

Reading fluency is a skill, which is closely linked to reading comprehension. Learners' struggle with fluency in reading can be a significant hurdle to proficiency in their overall reading comprehension and competency. This paper, based on the thematic analysis approach, presents some theoretically pedagogical strategies discovered for developing reading fluency using repeated listening, readers' theater and rhyming poetry. These three strategies generate favorable results on reading growth in fluency and comprehension; however, many readers have difficulty in moving to a level of automaticity and fluency which enables them to engage in a successful practice. Readers' abilities to efficiently comprehend texts are prominently affected by their automatic and accurate word recognition and prosody. This study can contribute towards addressing the gap in literature concerning different issues relating to oral reading fluency and would therefore give an insight for curriculum designers to consider these issues as comprehensively as possible in order to incorporate reading fluency in their programs.

**Keywords:** reading strategies, repeated listening, reader's theater, rhyming poetry, EFL reading fluency

### Introduction

Reading, a complex process, has been an essential skill for a better comprehension underlined by Tindal et al. (2016) and Rasinski (2014). They know that comprehension as the goal of reading can be fed by fluency. It has been discovered that 90% of comprehension problems are the result of insufficiency in oral fluency according to Disalle and Rasinski (2017). Reading fluency as a prerequisite to decoding words and comprehension was a surprise to many researchers as it had been traditionally ignored in reading programs (Rasinski, 2016). Fluent readers have the ability to recognize words automatically and effortlessly. They do not need to concentrate on decoding every single word they encounter (Rasinski, 2014).

As learners' knowledge of familiar words grows larger, fluency improves, and comprehension is nurtured. On the other hand, those who lack sufficient practice are unlikely to develop automaticity in word recognition; therefore, they cannot recognize a substantial number of words. As a result, their reading becomes slow and laborious, and the motivation will start diminishing (Rasinski, 2014;

Samuels, 2007). Therefore, students who struggle with reading fluency initially in their academic studies will probably have problems in later stages. As a result, it is highly significant to shape and improve this skill in their primary stages of learning (Rasinski, 2014).

Studying reading fluency pedagogically and through the literature is necessary for introducing instructions and implications. In response, a description of some of the highly effective reading strategies that involves the reading-aloud approach used in classes has been provided in this paper. These strategies have shown a positive impact on students' oral reading fluency. However, it would be fair to say that a comprehensive model that supports oral reading fluency has not been suggested in other studies (Aldhanhani & Abu-Ayyash, 2020). Hence, this paper merely focuses on these two objectives:

1. To identify theories underlying oral reading strategies
2. To identify effective reading fluency strategies

## **Background**

To many foreign language learners, reading fluency as part of the reading process which includes decoding and automatic word recognition has been a slow and strenuous skill (Rasinski, 2014). This may point to motivational problems in L2 and EFL contexts; therefore, the best approach needs to be pursued in order to enhance their fluency and comprehension. Oral reading fluency involves establishing different aspects in a fixed time, such as number of correct words, pauses, repetition of words and phrases (Rasinski, 2014). However, based on current research, reading fluency is the ability to read aloud a text accurately and with natural speed (Disalle & Rasinski, 2017). Therefore, it is essential to emphasize that fluency is thought to consist of 3 main components of accuracy, automaticity and prosody (Disalle & Rasinski, 2017; Rasinski, 2009; Samuels, 2007). Describing these three elements is essential to understand how reading fluency should be addressed. Accuracy is precise word recognition. Therefore, fluent readers must be able to identify words accurately and spontaneously. This requires them to learn alphabets, letters and sounds. In addition, decoding words including sight words (high-frequency words) is highly important (Rasinski, 2014). It is believed that the more errors students make in accuracy, the less information they grasp (Lahmann et al., 2017). Automaticity has to do with recognizing and decoding words easily. Once students master accuracy, their reading tends to become automatic. Hence, automaticity and accuracy are exactly related, and both can enhance reading comprehension. However, automaticity and accuracy alone are not enough to resolve students' oral reading fluency difficulties (Rasinski, 2014). For instance, learners might be able to read separate words accurately and with speed, but when they read a text, they might find it difficult to adopt the same level of speed and accuracy.

Prosody is known as the last component of fluency, which means reading a text smoothly with expression and intonation that displays meaning and comprehension of said text (Rasinski et al., 2009). This involves chunking words and emphasizing certain phrases (Padak & Rasinski, 2008). A number

of researchers have proven that reading with expression can contribute to learners' comprehension. However, no valid method has been created to measure students' prosody (Haskins & Aleccia, 2014). On the other hand, to assess accuracy and automaticity some reliable measures have been invented (Rasinski, 2004)

### **Automaticity Theory**

Automaticity Theory (AT) is a main theory in developing reading fluency, which highly emphasizes word recognition (Samuels, 2007). Accordingly, learners have the ability to decode and comprehend a text simultaneously. According to Tracey and Morrow (2012), reading includes sub-skills such as word recognition, associating sounds with letters, blending, segmenting, chunking, skimming and scanning. Also, readers go through three processes while reading a text, which are decoding, comprehension and attention (Samuels, 2007; Tracey & Morrow, 2012). The last process, attention, shows how much energy and focus a reader gives to a text to comprehend it. LaBerge and Samuels (1974) viewed automaticity as a bottom-up reading process, which means that readers should recognize letters in the early stages of reading through repeated reading. Then, the focus on the sounds of letters can be developed at the synthesis stage. Although AT contributes to reading speed, it does not illustrate how prosody can be developed (Samuels, 1979). Finally, this method focuses on a lot of practice and drilling in the classroom to ensure students' success.

### **Behaviorism**

Behaviorism is based on behavior changing during a particular period. Studies on behaviorism claim that information is acquired and passed on from teacher to learner, in other words, from a person with great knowledge to a less knowledgeable one (Zuriff, 1985). Teachers can use behaviorism in education to communicate literacy instructions in a meaningful way, using individual strategies and evaluative methods. Behaviorism is a crucial theory related to direct guides and innuendos, which helps students to develop their reading skills (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). There are three main Behaviorism Theories: 1) Classical Conditioning, 2) Connectionism and 3) Operant Conditioning. These theories aim to separate reading tasks into smaller components. It is claimed that reading components are grouped into five categories: visual discrimination, auditory discrimination, left-to-right progression during reading, vocabulary and, finally, comprehension. In each of these components, there are sub-skills. For instance, auditory discrimination includes phonics, sight words and blending. According to Tracey and Morrow (2012), each sub-skill from reading components requires a response and feedback. To clarify, in the classroom the teacher asks a student to pronounce a word. If the student pronounces it in a correct way, the teacher has to give quick feedback. However, if the pronunciation is incorrect, the teacher should correct the learner. There are several mechanisms in which the teacher can correct the student; one of them being repeatedly pronouncing the word until the learner has mastered it. The latter is heavily associated with oral reading fluency by means of which feedback is necessary for the

improvement of students' reading fluency (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). In Al-Kharusi's (2014) studies, the argument presented is that the use and practice of direct instruction considerably enhanced students' potential reading fluency. It should be noted that the teacher's knowledge is a reasonable key to shape students' reading skills. Moreover, teachers should place feasible goals to assess students using behaviorism.

Despite the fact that behaviorism is important because of its associations with instructions and implications on reading, it is severely criticized. This theory perceives learners or readers as passive information receivers; student's knowledge and experience are not taken into account, only responding to stimuli. Therefore, behaviorists focus on the output or the result of the learning process. The main criticism against Behaviorism is regarding the explanation on how information is processed in the mind.

## **Method**

This paper covers thematic analysis, a perspective that focuses on the process of collecting and analyzing non-numerical data (Braun & Clark, 2006). Additionally, the method this paper focuses on is the analysis of instructional strategies and their effect on improving learners' reading fluency. Considering this, it is a literature review paper targeting specific keywords: "repeated reading," "reading theater" and "rhyming poetry." The databases used in this literature review include books, publications, Google Scholar, EBSCOHost and other academic search engines. Among several strategies developed to improve reading fluency, three main ones are going to be analyzed as follows.

### **Reading Fluency Strategies**

#### **1. Repeated listening**

The repeated listing method employed in current studies has not been easily found in the literature according to Jablonski (2019). It involves listening to stories for a number of times without the aid of a printed text. Using audio as a method to develop reading is exciting for young learners as their communicative language from listening to speech (Horowitz-Kraus et al., 2013). In a study conducted by Horowitz-Kraus et al. (2013), five audio stories were used with 16 children to find out the relationship between children's auditory narrative comprehension at age five with their reading comprehension at age 11. The result showed that the children's comprehension at age 11 is positively correlated with their auditory narrative comprehension at age five. In another study investigating hearing metaphors which can activate specific brain regions, it was found that listening to phrases that contain textual words such as 'rough day', or 'slimy person' can activate sensory areas of the brain (Lacey et al., 2012). Besides, the human brain can register more activity when hearing direct speech sentences (Yao et al., 2012). This all indicates that listening to words and stories is an active cognitive activity, which is closely related to reading and comprehension.

In another experimental study carried out by Jablonski (2019) amongst 75 second grade students at a public elementary school in the Pacific Northwest. Students were randomly assigned to three groups to one of the reading conditions: Reading While Listening (RWL), Listening Only (LO) and Reading Only (RO). Over the seven-week course, students covered one story per week with a specific level appropriateness. The stories were in MP3 format both for RWL and LO groups and each RWL student also had a physical copy of the story to read along while listening. The students in the RO group were in control of who would be engaged with silent reading of a book of their choice under the guidance of their teacher. At the end of the course, all students were tested again both in the BIBELS for reading fluency and in the EasyCBM for reading comprehension which were designed as a pretest and a posttest respectively. The LO group got higher scores in oral reading fluency with an average improvement of 24 words per minute. The second higher scores were gained by RO with an average improvement of 19 words per minute. The RWL got lower scores with an average improvement of 18 words per minute. In terms of reading comprehension, RO had the highest scores with an average gain of 6.5%, which showed a higher number of correct answers on EasyCBM assessment. The LO group made the second largest gain with an average gain of 4%, and the RWL group had an average loss of 1% in comprehension. Considering comprehension, reading silently has given the learner the chance to read at her own speed, and even reread or review the events for understanding. The LO group did not have this opportunity to review, and the pace of the audio was not adjusted to the student's reading pace. Therefore, further research is recommended to figure out if clarification in the listening methodology can improve results.

## 2. Reader's theater

Another strategy, which has shown promising results in enhancing reading fluency among learners, is Reader's Theater (henceforth RT). This strategy encourages reading speed as well as other areas of fluency and gives the readers a legitimate reason to re-read the same text and provides purposeful repeated reading.

Lekwilai conducted two consecutive studies (2014) focusing on RT as an alternative tool to improve reading fluency of adult learners in Thai EFL contexts. In both of his studies, Lekwilai attempts to shed light on the importance of reading practice not in its traditional form, which is silent reading, but rather in a more interactive form between the reader and the text by implementing RT. There are some steps and suggested guidelines for the application of RT in EFL classroom contexts (Lekwilai, 2014). They are as follows:

1. Text selection: the instructor chooses a script well suited to the students' interest and reading level. The material could be from the literature that the students are likely to be familiar with or adjusted to their needs.
2. Modeling fluency: explicit fluency instructions need to be provided by the instructor. He can read the script to demonstrate fluency or use an audio piece.

3. Discussion: in groups, they can discuss the plot, characters and settings from the script. This stage can also involve vocabulary lessons to ensure comprehension.
4. Assign roles: divide students into groups and assign them roles along with clear RT instructions.
5. Practice: students can practice both reading silently and aloud, in their groups or individually with the instructor's monitoring.
6. Feedback: after the practice, the instructor provides comments on reading rate, accuracy, phrasing and prosody for further improvement. The instructor should bear in mind that corrective feedback at this stage can be discouraging for some students; therefore, the instructor can provide a separate lesson, for example, on pronunciation or other areas based on the students' needs.
7. Performance: students stand in front of a small audience (their classmates) and perform the script.
8. Self-evaluation: during the performance, the instructor may record an audio or video for the students to reflect on later or provide a self-evaluation form for the students to rate their own performance.
9. Adaptation to other activities: RT activities can also lead to improvement on other skills such as speaking and writing by the different adaptations the instructor can apply. For instance, the instructor can ask the students to come up with their own script by providing them with a theme or scenario for script writing so that the students need to use the words and expressions from the original text, through communication and negotiation of meaning, and write a script in their groups. The teacher gives the final approval after thoroughly checking their script before starting to rehearse.

Following the guidelines mentioned in his first study, in the second one Lekwilai (2016) portrays an investigation of the effects of RT on reading fluency of 38 first-year university students. The selection of participants in this study was based on the students' level of proficiency in English, which was lower than B1 according to the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference). As well as the effect of RT on the students' reading fluency, he also shed light on the extent to which RT generates motivation to read in English among EFL learners. The script for this process was the adapted version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which was transformed into a play script. The students had to read the script, which was divided into two halves, and gave a performance for each half within a period of six weeks. The procedure is like a stage play excluding props and costumes during which students can even hold the script in their hands while reading without having to memorize the lines. However, in order to deliver a proper stage-like performance, they are required to re-read the script until fluency is achieved. To become fluent, students need to negotiate meaning for the text, share their interpretations and generate responses to the text through their performance (Liu, 2000). The findings of this study were both quantitative, using the modified version of Fluency Rubric from (Zutell & Rasinski, 1991) "Multidimensional Fluency Scale" and qualitative by using a self-reflection form so the participants

would provide their feedback on RT activities. The scores obtained from the rubric indicated a significant improvement considering the students' first performance (in Week 3) and their second performance (in Week 6). Among the four fluency areas on the rubric including expression and volume, phrasing, accuracy and pace, participants showed evident progress in phrasing with an average 1.02-point increase. Data from the self-reflection forms also revealed progress not only in all aspects of participants' oral reading fluency, but also their high motivation to practice the script outside the class and their unanimous positive attitude towards the above-mentioned RT activity.

Another RT study was conducted by Ng (2011) at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. The study employed an adapted version of a drama script as an RT activity to address the perceptions of Chinese EFL learners of the use of RT to improve their performance in spoken English. The subjects of the study (four classes of 20 students) were young adults with the average age of 19 and their TOEFL scores ranged from 450 to 500. The RT activity was implemented in the following stages:

1. The instructor picked a graded reader activity that contained various dialogue samples for the students to practice reading aloud in groups of four or five. At this stage, the teacher emphasized the importance of reading pace and expression (tempo, volume and pitch to sound more natural).
2. Then a reading passage related to the students' needs was selected and they engaged in pre-reading activities to familiarize students with the story.
3. The students worked in their groups and wrote a script according to the scenario with which the teacher had provided them earlier.
4. The teacher proofread the scripts written by the students, followed by a rehearsal period.
5. The students performed the script in front of the class while the teacher recorded them for later peer feedback.

The data collected from this experiment was through a questionnaire including two types of survey questions. The first part of the survey consisted of 10 Likert-scale questions to elicit Chinese EFL students' perceptions on RT activity and the second part including students' comments were to examine whether RT had any effect on their oral performance. Immediately after the RT performance, the students filled in the questionnaire. In addition, the teacher's observation was used to triangulate the data. The results of part one displayed an overall positive attitude among Chinese EFL learners with 88% stating the English lessons were more interesting with RT and 95 % agreed that RT could be a good way to improve their spoken English. The students' positive statements on the second part of the questionnaire were also another validation for the effects of RT on their performance.

### **3. Rhyming poetry**

Rhyming Poetry (RP) is the most suitable approach for teaching phonics, according to Rasinski et al. (2016). Besides its effectiveness in developing accuracy, automaticity and expressiveness, it can also build knowledge on word recognition by analyzing analogous words—similar spelling and

orthographic forms. When using that approach, the main goal is to develop readers' capability to recognize common orthographic forms in words and make correlation with the pronunciation of the former. This analytical approach is well known and advocated by many scholars in reading (Adams, 1990; Cunningham, 2012; Ehri, 2005; Gaskins et al., 1996; Gunning, 1995; Snow et al., 1998).

Rasinski et al. (2016) argue that there is no doubt regarding the importance of students learning word families. When doing so, they can partially develop their knowledge on decoding many words that emerge from the word families alone. This approach is called Rhyming Poetry. Indeed, RP includes words with frequency patterns that allow the learner to focus their attention on the phonetic sound of that particular word family. The question, which must be answered, is how to teach both phonics and reading fluency using RP. There is a three-step sequence of instructions suggested for this inquiry. Usually, what lecturers do when presenting new word families is to demonstrate spelling and sound for learners, and then elicit from them words that belong in that family. In addition, step two is when RP comes in—word family instruction and practice of pronouncing words separately developing into textual words. The teacher then presents some poems, including the appropriate word family, as a practice for the students. Following that, it becomes easier for students to create their own piece. Using these three-step instructions in RP has many advantages. Learners develop their knowledge of word families in isolation and in readings. It tends to boost their confidence in speaking fluently through repeated and assisted readings. It helps to engage them in working with writing skills when building their own rhymes. Also, it fosters ludicrous activities when analyzing the natural rhythm in words in short poems (Rasinski et al., 2016).

In the study that Zavalas and Cuevas (2019) conducted, they focused on two instructional methods and their effect on reading fluency and grade level reading achievement—Rhyming Poetry and Repeated Listening. Their main objective was to determine whether students' reading skills would change after being exposed to the two methods and which of these two reading interventions would suit learners better. The study was conducted in a county in northeast Georgia, USA to 12 first grade (elementary) students. Students were divided in two groups to be assessed in the two instructional methods: either Repeated Listening (RL) or Rhyming Poetry (RP). In both groups, the same teacher provided short reading poem passages and instructed the learners. The short reading poem passages included a word family pattern. In the RL group, students were not made aware of the pattern on purpose, while in the RP one different activities were completed in order to explore the pattern. Zavalas and Cuevas (2019) noticed that "in the rhyming poetry intervention group, five out of six students increased their scaled score and only one saw a decrease in his or her score" (p. 73). This study reflects that the link between knowledge of phonics and reading fluency is prevailing. The results of the research suggest that low phonemic processing leads to low silent reading fluency, and better phonemic awareness is followed by fluency developments.

Research studies that focus on the outcomes of rhyming poetry as a type of instructional method are few. However, there are other studies centered on phonological and phonemic awareness. O'Rourke

et al. (2016) stated that at risk readers need to work on materials that apply the letter-sound correspondence and decoding the skills they are taught. Using the Toe-by-Toe programme (systematic phonics program), learners read with meaning, and they focus on syntactic and semantic signals to cross-check and self-regulate. Their research shows that the program, which consisted of teaching students about letter sounds, combining these sounds to form words, leads struggling readers to the improvement of their reading skills.

The study by Eldredge (2005) explored the idea of phonics knowledge determining students' development in fluent reading. The study's results indicate that word recognition improvement has an impermanent impact on reading fluency. The study also found that phonics and word recognition require previous training for reading fluency and comprehension. Martens et al.'s (2013) study centers on phonemic awareness. The main objective of their research was to analyze the effects of reading fluency training in phoneme blending and reading benefits. Martens et al. (2013) are in congruence with the rhyming poetry method, in which Rasinski et al. (2016) discuss teaching reading fluency. Lastly, in the study that Ashby et al. (2013) carried out, the relationship between phonemic awareness and text reading fluency was the focus. Study findings suggested that low phonemic processing contributes to low silent reading fluency after second grade.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Concerning the proposed objectives of this paper, we can affirm that the instructional strategies analysed here indeed help to improve EFL learners' reading fluency due to positive and efficient results gained through teachers' observations and experiences in class using the approaches discussed above. Practical studies can also advocate the efficiency of said approaches in working with learners who present difficulty in reading (Caldwell et al., 2006; Nichols et al., 2016).

A recent study using Repeated Listening and Rhyming Poetry approaches carried out in a group of 12 first-grade students in Georgia (Zavala & Cuevas, 2019) showed that one quarter of the students who received Repeated Listening instructions displayed a prominent progress in reading fluency according to their scores gained through Early Literacy STAR test, developed as an instrument to measure their achievement. In addition, it has been indicated that more than half of the observed learners achieved higher scores under the guidance of the Rhyming Poetry approach. After focusing on learners at an Urban Equity Plus School, which consisted of a six-week study using the Reader's Theater approach followed by the Repeated Listening model, the researchers found that students displayed an increase in their word recognition automaticity as measured by WCPM more than they had done in their previous two years of education (Caldwell et al., 2006).

In a more extended study, it has been found that using poetry, song lyrics, readers theater scripts, and speeches results in progress not only in measures of reading fluency (accuracy, automaticity, and prosody), but also in reading comprehension (Crosby et al., 2014; Griffith & Rasinski, 2004; Iwasaki et al., 1999; Rasinski et al., 2014; Vasinda & McLeod, 2011; Wilfong, 2008; Young et

al., 2015; Young & Rasinski, 2009; Zimmerman et al., 2013). The learners were simply involved in repeated readings of poetry, scripts and other texts in order to perform for an audience. Further research has also discovered that the use of poetry in Choral Reading in the class can be an efficient approach to help students enhance their word recognition and reading fluency, which can be key goals of elementary programs.

A well-grounded proof provided by the studies above can reassure that the use of Repeated Listening, Rhyming Poetry, and Reader's Theater can indeed improve the reading fluency (word recognition accuracy, automaticity and prosody) of learners who struggle in reading achievement. However, future researchers should clarify how the use of these approaches can improve reading curricula and reading outcomes for students. The limitations of this study, such as controlling text's lexile, a student's lexile reading level, the reading pace of the narrator, and even the level of comfort using audio equipment can be taken into account in further studies. For instance, to improve reading fluency, an audiobook above student's reading level can be chosen and the speaking pace of the narrator should be considered. In second language studies, it has been found that confronting words above students' vocabulary level causes attention problems that can interfere with comprehension (Rost, 2016). To improve comprehension, examining a story's vocabulary, themes and concepts, or using a group practice reading, along with twice-listening might be effective.

Both educators and parents should be aware of the plentiful digital audiobooks available as free downloads on websites such as Project Gutenberg and Lit2Go, which can make language learning available as well as help resolve certain "linguistic incompatibility" (Geva et al., 2017).

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