

## **ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE READING FLUENCY ANALYSIS: A PILOT STUDY**

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### **Abstract**

Within the context of reading in English, fluency plays an important role with regards to readers' reading comprehension performance. Deficit in reading fluency may affect the efficiency of phonological processing, which in turn affects reading comprehension performance. Within the realm of English as foreign language (EFL) reading, the role of reading fluency is of similar importance. Considering the significance of reading fluency within the context of EFL reading comprehension performance, the current pilot study attempted to analyze reading fluency performance in a non-rich target language environment for the purpose of informing EFL reading comprehension instruction with regards to reading fluency. The participant was a middle school aged, EFL reader who received EFL reading comprehension instruction for the period of seven years at the time the study was conducted but had never received phonics instruction. The data in this study were acquired within the period of two months. The data collection was spread within the period of two months in order to acquire standardized performance and to avoid contamination. Two reading fluency diagnosis instruments were used to evaluate the participant's fluency: Fluency rate per minute for grade-level and non-grade level texts and miscue analysis. The texts used in this study were the ones provided in Leslie and Caldwell's Qualitative Reading Inventory IV. The findings show that although the participant in this study had never received any phonics instruction, he was not able to read at the grade-level and above grade-level fluency rates. The findings from the miscue analysis show that the participant was not able to meet the required grade-level accuracy. The findings are discussed within the realm of reading instruction in the foreign language reading context and with regards to their implications in EFL reading comprehension instruction.

**Keywords:** Fluency, EFL foreign language, reading, miscue analysis

### **1 BACKGROUND**

Within the context of reading in English as a first language, reading fluency has been given a significant emphasis due to its role in affecting reading comprehension performance (e.g., Sidek, 2008). On the

contrary, reading fluency has not been given much attention, which results in an unsatisfactory level of reading fluency when reading in a second or foreign language (e.g., Coyne & Harn, 2006; Elliot, Lee, & Tollefson, 2001; Watson, 2005; Fien, 2005; Beach, 2005). Such emphasis is due to fluency that has been set aside (Allington, 1983) because more focus has been attributed to reading comprehension. Within the Malaysian setting, many teachers believe that most of the instructional time should be spent on reading comprehension because it may contribute to better English as a foreign language (EFL) reading performance and academic advancement (Sidek, 2009; 2012a; 2012b; 2014; Sidek et al., 2014)). Due to this, element such as fluency has been neglected unintentionally. Many EFL practitioners are more concerned with word knowledge and accuracy rather than fluency (Nathan & Stanovich, 1991). Besides the many teaching constraints, lack of fluency practice is also a reflection of teachers' beliefs and understanding of what constitutes effective reading in EFL (e.g., Sidek, 2010a; 2010b). Due to this, fluency instruction receives lack of appropriate allocation of classroom time and may cause students to not have the required fluency level, which factor may have impact on reading comprehension. Considering the importance of fluency when reading in the foreign language and the phenomenon of lacking of phonics instruction in the EFL reading instruction, it is important to find out if EFL readers, particularly at the secondary level have any issue in EFL reading fluency, which issue should have been addressed at the elementary level. Therefore, the current study attempted to analyze an EFL reader's reading fluency by examining the fluency and accuracy rates when reading texts in EFL.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The purposes of the study were to find out the reading fluency performance of an English as a foreign language reader when reading in the English language. The following research questions were pursued in the study:

RQ1: What is the EFL reader's reading fluency level when reading English language texts at different grade levels?

RQ2: What is the EFL reader's level of accuracy when reading English language texts at different grade levels?

### **2.1 Research Approach**

The current study employed a single-subject approach for the purpose of a pilot study that serves as a launching point of a larger scale study. A single-subject pilot study was chosen considering that the tests involved in this study for a single subject had to be spread over a period of two months.

### **2.2 Participant**

The participant in this study was a thirteen-year-old Asian male who volunteered to participate in the pilot study. The participant was in Form 1, the first level of lower secondary school in Malaysia, or in 7<sup>th</sup> Grade according to the American schooling system. The participant's native language is Malay while English is a foreign language to him. At the time the study was conducted, the participant has received English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction for seven years beginning from 1<sup>st</sup> Grade. The participant had never received phonics instruction. The participant in this study had never been diagnosed for his EFL reading fluency and accuracy prior to the pilot study. Therefore, the participant's fluency in reading in English as a foreign language is yet to be determined.

### **2.3 Research Setting**

The research setting was the Form 1 of Malaysian lower secondary school since the participant in this study was part of the respective schooling system. The schooling system does not provide phonics instruction for the teaching of EFL reading. EFL reading is taught using the top-down approach, primarily in the form of non-interactive whole class approach. The composite of students in the school where the participant was in were Malay Malaysians of mixed gender with Malay as the native language.

### **2.4 Instruments**

In order to collect data for the current study, the instruments used were 10 reading passages of various grade levels of mixed genres provided in the Leslie and Caldwell's (2004) Qualitative Reading Inventory IV, 2 passages from the Internet and 1 passage from a trade book. All passages met the criteria for the intended grade level based on Leslie and Caldwell's (2004) Qualitative Reading Inventory IV grade-level passage criteria as presented in Table 1. Two of the passages were at the participant's grade-level, 3 passages were above the participant's grade-level while 8 passages were below the participant's current grade-level as

indicated in Table 2.

**Table 1: Passage Length Criteria**

Level	Range of words in the selected passage
Elementary (1 <sup>st</sup> -6 <sup>th</sup> Grades)	200 – 300
Lower secondary (7 <sup>th</sup> -8 <sup>th</sup> Grades)	320 – 450
Upper secondary (9 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> Grades)	470 – 550
Post secondary	> 550

## 2.5 Data Collection

The descriptions of data collection in this section are presented according to the research questions of the study. The data were collected within the period of 2 months to adjust to the participant's availability and also to avoid contamination such as exhaustion or boredom, which factors might affect the participant's reading fluency and accuracy for the tests administered to him. Such contamination may yield inaccurate findings of the participant's actual performance. The researcher discussed the meetings schedule with the participant with an informed consent from his parent for his participation in the study since the participant was a minor. The researcher who conducted the test also built rapport with the participant in order to ensure that the participant was comfortable enough to read aloud in front of the researcher since discomfort may adversely affect the reading aloud procedure. Therefore, the first several meetings were used to nurture the rapport between the researcher and the participant. The data collection for research questions 1 and 2 was conducted in 10 meetings with the participant. For each grade level, the passages were selected randomly from the respective sources.

### 2.5.1 Data Collection Procedure for Reading Fluency

RQ1: What is the EFL reader's reading fluency level when reading English language texts at different grade-levels?

To obtain data on the participant's reading fluency, the researcher began the fluency tests with passages, which were three grades below the participant's current grade-level that was the 4<sup>th</sup> grade-level texts. The reason for commencing the fluency tests using below grade-level texts was to gauge the participant's fluency rate in a developmental manner. In addition, if the fluency test was given right away using the texts at the participant's grade level, in the case of the participant not being able to read at grade level, such situation might demotivate the participant to continue participating in the study. Hence, administering below grade-level passages safeguarded the possibility of demotivation on the participant's part. If the participant was able to handle below grade-level texts, then only higher grade-level texts would be given for the subsequent fluency tests. The participant was instructed to read each passage aloud once and the fluency rates were recorded at the one-minute duration. The fluency rate tests were administered on different days for each passage.

Two 4<sup>th</sup> Grade level texts were used to acquire the participant's fluency rate for three below grade-level texts. Upon the completion of three grades below grade-level passages fluency tests, reading fluency data for two grades below grade-level passages was conducted using one 5<sup>th</sup> Grade level text. Subsequently, one 6<sup>th</sup> Grade level texts were administered followed by one 7<sup>th</sup> Grade level texts, which were the participant's current grade level. One 8<sup>th</sup> Grade level text was administered followed by one 9<sup>th</sup> Grade level text. The texts used for fluency test are as shown in Table 2. During the reading aloud, when the time reached one minute, the last word that the participant read was marked. The number of words that the participant had read within one minute for each passage was counted and recorded.

**Table 2: Passages Used in Reading Fluency Test**

TITLE OF TEXT	SOURCE	GRADE LEVEL
Where the Ashes Are- Part 1	QRI-4	9 <sup>th</sup>
Immigration-Part 1	QRI-4	8 <sup>th</sup>
Football	Internet <sup>1</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.abcteach.com/free/r/rc\\_football.pdf](http://www.abcteach.com/free/r/rc_football.pdf)

The Lifeline of the Nile	QRI-4	6 <sup>th</sup>
Pele	QRI-4	6 <sup>th</sup>
Margaret Mead	QRI-4	5 <sup>th</sup>
The Busy Beaver	QRI-4	4 <sup>th</sup>
Spiders	Internet <sup>2</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>

### 2.5.2 Data Collection Procedure for Reading Accuracy

To obtain data on the participant's reading accuracy, a set of passages in Table 3 were used, which were different from the passages used for the fluency test. The passages used were two 4<sup>th</sup> Grade level texts, one 5<sup>th</sup> Grade level text, one 6<sup>th</sup> Grade level texts, one 7<sup>th</sup> Grade level texts, one 8<sup>th</sup> Grade level texts and one 8<sup>th</sup> Grade level text.

**Table 3: Grade-Level Texts Used for Reading Accuracy Tests**

TITLE OF TEXT	SOURCE	GRADE LEVEL
"Malcom X"	QRI-4	8 <sup>th</sup>
Coney Island	Trade book <sup>3</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>
Abraham Lincoln	QRI-4	6 <sup>th</sup>
Margaret Mead	QRI-4	5 <sup>th</sup>
Johnny Appleseed	QRI-4	4 <sup>th</sup>
Amelia Earheart	QRI-4	4 <sup>th</sup>

The sequence of the passages given to the participant for accuracy test was a similar procedure and based on the same justifications as in the fluency procedure. The participant was instructed to read each passage aloud and while the participant was reading the selected text aloud, the researcher ticked above the word in the passage that was pronounced correctly and marked the words that were mispronounced by writing the exact mispronunciation above the mispronounced words. Any insertion, omission, substitution, self-correction, reversal of word position, punctuation error, and hesitation were also marked during the reading aloud for accuracy. The pronunciation standard is based on the phonics standard of the English Language. Every word is counted individually regardless of the grouping of the words such as proper nouns. For example, 'University of Bridgeport' is counted as three words. In specific, every word that appears in the text is considered as an individual word. This process is known as miscue analysis. Miscue analysis refers to any errors made by the reader during oral reading or reading aloud. The participant's word per minute (WPM) for each passage was also recorded.

## 2.6 Data Analysis

The descriptions of data analysis in this section are presented according to the research questions of the study.

### 2.6.1 Data Analysis for Reading Fluency

The grade level fluency rate was based on the revised word per minute according to Rasinski, Balchowicz and Lems' (2006) fluency rate as shown in Table 4. The participant's recorded words per minute obtained from the oral reading for fluency procedure for each selected passage was compared against the revised Rasinski et al.'s (2006) grade level fluency rates.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.abcteach.com/directory/reading\\_comprehension/](http://www.abcteach.com/directory/reading_comprehension/)

<sup>3</sup> PSSA (Pennsylvania State Student Assessment) 7<sup>th</sup> Grade Reading Assessment. This assessment is a state mandatory test for Reading, Mathematics and Science in America.

**Table 4: Grade-Level Reading Fluency Rates<sup>4</sup>**

Grade Level	Words Per Minute (WPM)
4	140
5	150
6	180
7	190
8	200
9	210

Since the grade-level texts used in this study were from 4<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> Grades, only grade-level fluency rates from 4<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> Grades were used as the baseline rates in analyzing the participant's fluency rates.

### 2.6.2 Data Analysis for Reading Accuracy

Miscue coding was used to analyze the participant's level of reading accuracy. Eight types of reading miscues were used to mark errors based on Leslie and Caldwell's (2006) miscues coding as presented in Table 5.

**Table 5: Categories of Miscues**

Types of Miscue
Substitution
Omission
Insertion
Self-Correction
Reversal
Repetition
Punctuation
Hesitation

Each error was categorized according to the type of miscue committed by the participant while reading the passages. To get the correct word per minute (CWPM), the total number of miscues for each passage was subtracted from the participant's word per minute (WPM) as shown in the formula below:

a) Number of WPM – Number of errors = \_\_\_\_\_ Correct Word Per Minute (CWPM)

b) CWPM = Accuracy Rate

## 3. FINDINGS

The findings are presented according to the variables investigated in each research question.

### 3.1 EFL Reading Fluency

The findings of the participant's fluency rate are tabulated against the standard fluency rate as suggested by Rasinski et al. (2006).

<sup>4</sup> The revised fluency rates of Rasinski et al. (2006)

**Table 6: Findings on EFL Reading Fluency**

TITLE OF TEXT	GRADE LEVEL	BASELINE FLUENCY RATE (WPM)*	PARTICIPANT'S FLUENCY RATE (WPM)*	FLUENCY RATE ANALYSIS
Where the Ashes Are- Part 1	9 <sup>th</sup>	210	172	81.9
Immigration-Part 1	8 <sup>th</sup>	200	163	81.5
Football	7 <sup>th</sup>	190	182	95.8
The Lifeline of the Nile	6 <sup>th</sup>	180	157	87.2
Pele	6 <sup>th</sup>	180	185	103
Margaret Mead	5 <sup>th</sup>	150	159	106
The Busy Beaver	4 <sup>th</sup>	140	154	110
Spiders	4 <sup>th</sup>	140	186	133

\*WPM (Word Per Minute)

Table 6 shows that the participant was reading the 6<sup>th</sup> Grade passage, The Lifeline of the Nile, at 157 WPM, which is lower than the 180 WPM baseline. This passage is one grade level below the participant's current grade level. The participant was reading at 182 WPM for the 7<sup>th</sup> Grade passage, Football, which is lower than the 190 WPM baseline rate. The participant was reading much below the baseline fluency rates at 163 WPM and 172 WPM for the 8<sup>th</sup> (Immigration-Part 1) and 9<sup>th</sup> (Where the Ashes Are-Part 1) Grades passages respectively.

In terms of fluency rate analyses, the participant was reading on the average 21.5% higher than the baseline fluency rate for the 4<sup>th</sup> Grade texts. For the 5<sup>th</sup> Grade text, the participant was reading at 6% higher than the baseline fluency rate. However, the participant was reading one of the 6<sup>th</sup> Grade text (Pele) at 3% higher than the baseline fluency rate while for the other 6<sup>th</sup> Grade text (The Lifeline of the Nile), he was reading the text at 12.8% lower than the baseline fluency rate. For the grade-level text (7<sup>th</sup> Grade), the participant was reading 4.2% below the baseline fluency rate. He was reading 18.5% below the baseline fluency rate for the 8<sup>th</sup> Grade text and 18.1% below the baseline fluency rate for the 9<sup>th</sup> Grade text.

### 3.2 EFL Reading Accuracy

The data acquired from reading fluency and miscues were used to calculate the participant's reading accuracy.

**Table 7: Findings on EFL Reading Fluency Rates for Accuracy Test**

TITLE OF TEXT	GRADE LEVEL	BASELINE FLUENCY RATES	FLUENCY RATES	FLUENCY ANALYSIS (%)
"Malcom X"	8 <sup>th</sup>	200	167	83.5
Coney Island	7 <sup>th</sup>	190	167	87.9
Abraham Lincoln	6 <sup>th</sup>	180	177	98.3
Margaret Mead	5 <sup>th</sup>	150	159	106.0
Johnny Appleseed	4 <sup>th</sup>	140	141	100.7
Amelia Earheart	4 <sup>th</sup>	140	155	110.7

Table 7 shows the fluency rates against the baseline rates for the selected texts administered for the purpose of accuracy analysis. The participant was reading at 16.5% below the baseline for 8<sup>th</sup> Grade text (Malcom X). For the Coney Island text, which is at the participant grade level (7<sup>th</sup> Grade), he was reading at 12.1% below the baseline rate. He was reading at 1.7% below the baseline rate for the 6<sup>th</sup> Grade text (Abraham Lincoln). The participant was reading above the baseline rates for the 4<sup>th</sup> Grade text s and 5<sup>th</sup> Grade text. Other than the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Grades texts, the participant was not reading at the grade level for the

6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> Grades texts.

**Table 8: Findings for EFL Reading Total Miscues**

TITLE OF TEXT	GRADE LEVEL	TOTAL MISCUES
"Malcom X"	8 <sup>th</sup>	5
Coney Island	7 <sup>th</sup>	1
Abraham Lincoln	6 <sup>th</sup>	1
Margaret Mead	5 <sup>th</sup>	0
Johnny Appleseed	4 <sup>th</sup>	3
Amelia Earheart	4 <sup>th</sup>	3
TOTAL MISCUES		13

Table 8 presents the number of total miscues of the words that were mispronounced. The participant made the most errors (5 miscues) for the 8<sup>th</sup> Grade text (Malcom X), which is one grade level higher than his current grade level. He committed 1 miscue for the 7<sup>th</sup> Grade text (Coney Island), which is his current grade level and also 1 miscue for the 6<sup>th</sup> grade level text Abraham Lincoln), which one grade level below his current grade level. He read the 5<sup>th</sup> Grade text (Margaret Mead), which text is two grade levels below his current grade level without any errors.

The recorded miscues are presented in Table 9. The participant mispronounced via substitution the word "pioneer" as "peoner". He mispronounced also via substitution the word "colony" as "colni". The word "distances" was mispronounced via an omission of inflection 's' as "distance". The word "roaring" was mispronounced as "roring". Words that were being read as another word or substitution were "ragged" as "rage", "over" as "out", "wanted" as "was", "at" as "as" and "thought" as "though". Word added to the text was such as '...new homes across the Pacific *ocean*'. The participant did not commit any miscue in the form of self-correction, reversal, repetition, punctuation and hesitation.

**Table 9: Examples of EFL Reading Miscues**

Actual Word	Types of Miscue	Samples of Miscue
pioneer	Substitution	peoner
colony	Omission	colni
roaring	Omission	roring
ragged	Substitution	rage
over	Substitution	out
wanted	Substitution	was
at	Substitution	as
thought	Substitution	though
distances	Omission	distance
'...new homes across the Pacific'	Insertion	'...new homes across the Pacific <i>ocean</i> '
NONE	Self-Correction	NONE
NONE	Reversal	NONE
NONE	Repetition	NONE
NONE	Punctuation	NONE
NONE	Hesitation	NONE

The outcomes of the calculations of the participant's EFL reading accuracy using the fluency rate and total

miscues for each selected text are demonstrated in Table 10. The participant was able to read aloud with high accuracy rates for the selected passages with no miscues when reading the 5<sup>th</sup> Grade text.

**Table 10: Findings on EFL Reading Grade-Level Accuracy**

TITLE OF TEXT	GRADE LEVEL	ACCURACY RATE (%)
"Malcom X"	8 <sup>th</sup>	99.4
Coney Island	7 <sup>th</sup>	99.6
Abraham Lincoln	6 <sup>th</sup>	99.7
Margaret Mead	5 <sup>th</sup>	100.0
Johnny Appleseed	4 <sup>th</sup>	99.0
Amelia Earheart	4 <sup>th</sup>	98.9

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The findings in the current pilot study on fluency rates analyses for the initial fluency tests and the fluency tests intended for EFL reading accuracy analysis show that the participant was not able to read at grade level and also one grade level below his current grade level. Nonetheless, he was able to read above the baseline fluency rates for the texts that are one and two and three grade levels below his current grade level with the exception for the 6<sup>th</sup> Grade text (The Lifeline of the Nile).

Therefore, it is a phenomenon if the participant's inability to meet the baseline fluency rates for his grade level texts is due to the absence of phonics instruction, which findings are in line with past studies that support the importance of fluency (e.g., Chall, 1996; Kuhn & Stall, 2003). Nonetheless, considering that the texts, which the participant read were in the English language, declarative and procedural knowledge of phonics is required for the phonological processing of the English language, which absence of knowledge of phonics might be the cause of the participant's below grade level fluency rate. This situation could be connected to the results for the EFL reading accuracy rates and the nature of the miscues that the participant committed although by looking at the percentage of accuracy rates across passages, the participant demonstrated the ability to read accurately. One plausible explanation of a low number of total miscues could be that the participant was reading more cautiously at a slower rate to allocate more time for phonological processing of each word, and thus, made fewer miscues. Hence, the below level fluency rates can be inferred as the result of a slower phonological processing process as well as the issue of lack of automaticity at the word level. Developing foreign language readers tend to have difficulty in automatic word recognition task (e.g., Taguchi, Takayasu-Maass & Gorsuch, 2004). Again, this can be related to the factor of lacking of phonics knowledge and unfamiliarity in phonics processing since the participant in this study had never received any phonics instruction. Lack of knowledge in the English language phonics can be traced from the majority of miscues are in the form of substitution. For example, when the participant substituted the word 'pioneer' with 'peoner', the substitution reflects the use of his first language phonological processing in which the letter 'i' is sounded as 'e' in his native Malay language. Such dependency on the first language phonological processing when reading in the English language was due to the absence of knowledge in English language phonics. The knowledge of phonics assists in decoding when reading in English (e.g., Cooper & Kiger, 2003). The findings of the study suggest that the lacking in the knowledge of the English language phonics had resulted in the participant spending more of his cognitive resources on phonological processing, which condition may hamper his EFL reading comprehension. Fuchs, Fuchs, Hosp, and Jenkins (2001) found that oral reading fluency was an indicator of overall reading competence. Hence, the participant's below grade level fluency issues need to be addressed considering its share in affecting the EFL reading comprehension. Rasinski (2000) differentiated between fluent readers and disfluent readers in terms of comprehension capability. This indicates fluency as an index for reading comprehension. As such, as fluency is emphasized as one of the competency indicators when reading in English as the first language, it should also receive an equal emphasis for EFL reading, which emphasize can be incorporated in EFL reading instruction.

#### 5. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the current study show that the participant does not have the required fluency level when reading in the English language but able to read with high accuracy, however, at the expense of fluency. Although the current pilot study only involved a single subject, the implications of the study on EFL reading



instruction are rather significant. Within the Malaysian context, which context is similar to many EFL contexts, EFL reading instruction at the elementary and secondary school levels focuses more in reading comprehension using the top-down approach. Although currently, EFL reading curriculum implemented at Malaysian public elementary schools does include the teaching of phonics, the inclusion is rather lacking in emphasis and substance in comparison to how phonics instruction is emphasized in the English as a native language settings. Since past studies (Fuchs, Fuchs, Hosp, & Jenkins 2001; Rasinski, 2000) have shown how fluency may impede reading comprehension, emphasis on phonics instruction need to be enhanced to the level that it is sufficient for EFL readers to meet the required fluency level for a better EFL reading comprehension processing. After all comprehension is the ultimatum of reading. EFL teachers need to have awareness of the importance of teaching phonics at the level where students are able to meet the required fluency level. Considering the lack of emphasis on fluency in EFL reading settings, fluency problem tends to be more apparent. Hence, this calls for more incorporation of fluency instruction in EFL reading classrooms.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The present study provides data on how the lack of phonics knowledge resulted in impeded fluency when reading in the English language. As mentioned earlier, inability to read in EFL at the required fluency rate at a reader's respective grade level may have significant implications on reading comprehension, which is the final goal of reading. Therefore, based on the findings of the pilot study, it is recommended for the Malaysian Ministry of Education to place more emphasis on phonics and a more thorough phonics content to be included in the existing EFL reading curriculum at the elementary school level.

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