Arabian Journal of Science

ISSN:2308-5703

Impact factor:13.5 *International Multidisciplinary Online Journal* November, 2026

READING FLUENCY AMONG ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS: COMPONENTS, ASSESSMENT, AND INSTRUCTIONAL IMPLICATIONS

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Doi: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24503832

Abstract: Reading fluency is a multidimensional construct involving accurate word recognition, automaticity, and prosodic reading. For English language learners (ELLs), fluency development may support the coordination of decoding and comprehension while also providing opportunities to attend to English phonological patterns, phrasing, and vocabulary. Nevertheless, reading rate and accuracy alone do not establish that a learner has understood a text. This article reviews key dimensions of reading fluency, describes practical approaches to assessing accuracy and rate, and outlines instructional strategies that integrate fluency practice with explicit vocabulary and comprehension support. It also highlights the need to interpret assessment results in relation to learners' proficiency, text difficulty, and the linguistic characteristics of the language being read.

Keywords: English language learners; reading fluency; reading accuracy; automaticity; prosody; reading comprehension; formative assessment

INTRODUCTION

Reading fluency is commonly understood as the ability to recognize and read words accurately, with sufficient automaticity and appropriate expression. It is important because effortful word identification can consume cognitive resources that readers would otherwise use to construct meaning. Fluency can therefore be understood as a link between word recognition and reading comprehension rather than as an independent objective detached from meaning. The relationship between fluency and comprehension is reciprocal. More efficient word recognition may allow readers to devote greater attention to meaning, while understanding a passage can help readers interpret phrasing and read with more appropriate expression. For English language learners (ELLs), fluency instruction is especially relevant when it is integrated with oral-language development, vocabulary learning, and comprehension strategies. Three dimensions are particularly relevant to fluency assessment: accuracy, automaticity, and prosody. Accuracy concerns the proportion of words read correctly. Automaticity refers to efficient word recognition, often estimated through reading rate. Prosody refers to the meaningful use of phrasing, stress, rhythm, and intonation. In oral reading, prosody is reflected in the way readers respond to punctuation and convey sentence structure and communicative intent. These dimensions should be considered together. A learner may read quickly but make frequent errors, or read accurately while producing fragmented phrasing that obscures sentence relationships. Similarly, apparently fluent oral reading does not necessarily demonstrate adequate comprehension. Assessment should therefore combine observable fluency measures with checks of understanding.

METHODOLOGY

Reading accuracy can help teachers select texts that provide an appropriate level of challenge. The source material distinguishes among independent, instructional, and frustration levels. Independent-level texts are described as those read with approximately 98–100% accuracy. Instructional-level texts are generally associated with 90–97% accuracy for Primer-level text and above, and 85–97% for Preprimary-level text. Texts below these accuracy ranges may be excessively difficult for independent student reading. These ranges should be interpreted cautiously rather than treated as universal benchmarks. The original guidance notes that they are based on English-language reading and should not automatically be applied to other languages. Even languages that share an alphabet can differ in spelling-to-sound regularity, syntax, and word length. Teachers should also consider the learner's age, English proficiency, familiarity with the topic, and ability to explain the text's meaning. In classroom practice, instructional-level material can provide a productive balance between challenge and support, whereas highly difficult texts may be better used for teacher modelling or supported comprehension work. A practical accuracy assessment can be conducted by asking a learner to read a short, appropriately selected passage aloud. The assessor records errors such as substitutions, omissions, reversals, and words supplied by the teacher. If the learner independently corrects an error, the corrected word may be counted as accurate, provided that the same scoring rule is applied consistently.

Reading accuracy can be calculated as follows: Accuracy (%) = (number of words read correctly ÷ total number of words in the passage) × 100. For example, if a learner reads a 200-word passage and makes 14 uncorrected errors, 186 words are read correctly; accuracy is therefore 186 ÷ 200 × 100 = 93%.

Automaticity is often estimated through words per minute (WPM). To calculate oral reading rate, record the time taken to read the passage and apply the formula: WPM = (number of words read ÷ reading time in seconds) × 60. For a 200-word passage completed in 152 seconds, the rate is approximately 79 WPM. Reading rate should not be interpreted in isolation: an appropriate interpretation also considers accuracy, prosody, and comprehension. Comparisons are most informative when passages and administration procedures are reasonably comparable.

ELLs may demonstrate relatively rapid or accurate word reading without fully understanding a passage. Comprehension draws on several interacting resources, including vocabulary knowledge, syntactic awareness, background knowledge, inference-making, and the ability to connect information across a text. These demands can be particularly significant when learners encounter subject-specific materials in science, mathematics, or social studies.

RESULTS

For this reason, fluency instruction should be paired with explicit comprehension teaching. Teachers can identify potentially unfamiliar vocabulary before reading, provide concise learner-friendly definitions, and model think-alouds to demonstrate how readers monitor understanding. When a sentence is unclear, a teacher might model rereading, checking the surrounding context, reading ahead, or reconsidering an initial interpretation. Such strategies make comprehension monitoring visible and give learners procedures they can gradually apply independently. Several classroom practices can integrate fluency development with meaning-focused reading. First, teachers can model expressive reading, drawing attention to punctuation, phrasing, stress, and intonation. Learners can then reread short passages with feedback focused on accuracy and meaningful expression rather than speed alone. Second, structured paired reading can provide opportunities for supported practice. Learners take turns reading and explaining their thinking, while partners listen for meaning and identify points that require clarification. Pairing decisions should be supportive and purposeful, and teachers should ensure that all learners participate actively. Third, graphic organisers can help learners distinguish a text's main idea

from its supporting details. After an initial reading, pairs can record key information, reread the passage, and revise their organisers. Learners may then generate questions for a partner, produce a brief summary, or compare interpretations with another group. These activities connect repeated reading with active processing and provide teachers with evidence of comprehension.

Finally, assessment should be ongoing and responsive. Teachers can use brief oral-reading observations, error records, reading-rate measures, prosody notes, and comprehension questions to identify strengths and learning needs. Instruction can then be adjusted through text selection, vocabulary pre-teaching, modelling, guided practice, and opportunities for independent application. Reading fluency among English language learners is best approached as a multidimensional ability involving accuracy, automaticity, and prosody in the service of comprehension. Measures of accuracy and rate can inform instructional decisions, but they do not provide a complete picture of reading proficiency. Effective instruction therefore combines appropriate text selection and repeated reading with vocabulary development, comprehension strategy instruction, teacher modelling, and collaborative tasks. Continued assessment of both fluency and understanding enables teachers to respond to individual learner needs and to avoid equating rapid reading with successful meaning construction.

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