

The Efficacy of Fluency-Based Instruction Model in the Teaching of Reading Comprehension: Evidence from Early English Readers

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Abstract

Fluency-based instruction has re-emerged as a central response to a persistent literacy problem in English learning contexts: many learners can decode but cannot read in a way that reliably supports meaning-making. Therefore, this study investigated the efficacy of a fluency-based instructional model in supporting early English readers' reading fluency and reading comprehension in a real classroom context. The study focused on how core fluency routines such as repeated reading and oral reading with feedback were enacted, how learners' observable reading behaviors changed over time, and which comprehension difficulties persisted during and after fluency practice. Data were collected through non-participant classroom observations using structured checklists and narrative field notes, complemented by semi-structured interviews with the classroom teacher and learners. Analysis followed an iterative qualitative framework of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification, supported by triangulation across data sources. Findings indicate strong evidence of improvement in oral reading accuracy and reading rate, reflected in fewer decoding breakdowns, reduced hesitation, increased self-correction, and smoother sentence-level progression during repeated reading cycles. Moderate improvement was observed in prosody, particularly when teacher modeling and feedback emphasized phrasing and punctuation as cues for meaning. Comprehension gains were more selective: learners demonstrated modest growth in literal comprehension, especially on texts with familiar vocabulary and clear structure, while higher-level comprehension such as inference-making and cross-sentence integration remained limited. Persistent barriers included restricted academic vocabulary, weak morphological awareness, difficulties parsing complex syntax, weak cohesion and reference tracking, background knowledge gaps, and limited comprehension monitoring strategies. Overall, the study suggests that fluency-based instruction effectively strengthens oral reading fluency but supports comprehension most consistently when integrated with explicit vocabulary development, sentence-level unpacking, cohesion instruction, schema activation, and strategy training for monitoring and repair.

Keywords: Fluency-based instruction; Repeated reading; Reading comprehension; Oral reading fluency

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INTRODUCTION

Fluency-based instruction has re-emerged as a central response to a persistent literacy problem in English learning contexts: many learners can *decode* but cannot read in a way that reliably supports meaning-making. Fluency is therefore framed as a bridge between lower-level word recognition and higher-level comprehension, combining speed, accuracy, and expression (prosody) rather than treating reading as mere pronunciation practice (Hudson et al., 2020). For developing readers, slow and effortful decoding

consumes working memory and attention, leaving too little capacity to build coherence across sentences and paragraphs; fluency-oriented instruction aims to reduce that cognitive cost by strengthening automaticity in word recognition so that readers can allocate resources to monitoring meaning, integrating ideas, and making inferences (Guérin & Murphy, 2015; Hindin & Steiner, 2022). This framing is important in research because it shifts the instructional goal from “finishing the text” to “processing the text efficiently enough to understand it.”

In other words, fluency is not a cosmetic feature of reading performance but an enabling condition for comprehension that can be taught, practiced, and assessed (Hindin & Steiner, 2022). Yet, the research context also shows a tension: fluency practices are often associated with younger learners and oral reading routines, while many academic settings expect silent reading competence. This tension motivates closer inquiry into how fluency-based principles can be adapted for older learners who still exhibit early-stage English reading behaviors. A core mechanism in fluency-based instruction is repeated reading, typically implemented through rereading the same passage or closely related texts with feedback. Repetition matters because it reduces decoding demands and stabilizes recognition patterns, supporting orthographic mapping and the transition from word-by-word processing toward phrase-level “chunking,” which is more aligned with comprehension (Hudson et al., 2020).

In a synthesis of oral reading fluency interventions, repeated reading appears as a dominant feature, suggesting that it functions as the instructional engine through which gains in fluency—and sometimes comprehension—are achieved (Hudson et al., 2020). Importantly, repeated reading is most defensible as a comprehension-oriented practice when it is paired with instruction on phrasing, punctuation cues, and expressive reading that reflects meaning, rather than treated as a race to increase rate. Studies caution that emphasizing speed alone may produce “fast but hollow” reading—higher words-per-minute without stable understanding—because rate can rise even when readers misidentify words, ignore syntax, or fail to integrate ideas (Calet et al., 2019; Hindin & Steiner, 2022). This is why prosody is not an “extra” but a diagnostic signal of comprehension-related processing: appropriate phrasing and intonation often indicate that the reader is parsing structure and constructing meaning rather than merely decoding (Trofimovich et al., 2017; Jungjohann et al., 2023; Godde et al., 2021).

Read-aloud practice, when implemented sensitively, adds value by making miscues observable and enabling targeted feedback on pronunciation, phrasing, and intonation; home- and school-based repeated reading with texts aligned to instructional level has been associated with gains in both fluency and comprehension (Hindin & Steiner, 2022). However, instructional design must also manage affective and contextual constraints, including performance anxiety in public reading and the risk of substituting oral performance for sustained silent reading development (Stone et al., 2015; Hudson et al., 2020; Guérin & Murphy, 2015). Motivation becomes a structural condition for success rather than a side issue: repeated reading can only function as productive practice when learners remain engaged, which strengthens the case for culturally relevant and interesting texts that support effort, identity, and persistence (Agler et al., 2020; Barrozo & Esparrago, 2025).

This rationale becomes especially urgent when considering early English readers at the university level, a group whose cognitive maturity contrasts sharply with their limited English reading resources. In many EFL contexts, undergraduates are expected to learn through English-medium materials, yet a subset enters university with restricted academic vocabulary and limited control of morphological patterns (e.g., prefixes and suffixes), reducing their ability to infer meanings of unfamiliar words that are frequent in

academic discourse (Cueva et al., 2022; Vettori et al., 2023; Choi, 2015). These lexical and morphological constraints interact with syntactic difficulty: long noun phrases, embedded clauses, and dense informational packaging require efficient parsing, but L2 readers may spend disproportionate cognitive resources untangling sentence form, leaving less capacity to track argument flow and build a coherent text representation (Busby & Dahl, 2021; Shibasaki et al., 2015; Vettori et al., 2023).

Additionally, comprehension is further weakened by difficulties in tracking cohesive devices and reference (e.g., pronouns, connectives, substitution), which increases cognitive load and disrupts integration across sentences (Cueva et al., 2022; Vettori et al., 2023). Compared to reading in a first language, these learners often experience lower lexical coverage and slower word recognition, which overloads working memory and contributes to surface-level reading that fails to connect claims, evidence, and implications across paragraphs (Xiao, 2019; Choi et al., 2016; Alonso, 2019; Bi & Tan, 2024). As a coping strategy, students may translate word-by-word or rely on guesswork, but these tactics are costly and often block deeper comprehension processes such as inference-making and critical evaluation, feeding the perception that they are “weak readers” even when their reasoning ability is intact (Busby & Dahl, 2021; Yapp et al., 2021; Tong et al., 2017; Kuperman, 2025).

Background knowledge gaps compound the challenges: comprehension depends not only on decoding but also on connecting textual information with prior knowledge to form an adequate mental model, and limited exposure to academic registers in English can restrict this connection-making (Tong et al., 2017; Alonso, 2019; Al-Harthi, 2023; Ai-ping et al., 2025). Finally, the comparative dimension matters for research design: learners’ reading outcomes vary by linguistic distance between English and the first language, with closer typological relationships and cognate availability sometimes easing vocabulary recognition and structural processing, while greater distance can magnify decoding and parsing demands (Deng et al., 2019; Haim, 2015). This variability suggests that university-level fluency interventions must be sensitive to language background rather than assuming a uniform learner profile.

Against this backdrop, the efficacy of a fluency-based instructional model for university EFL readers is both promising and under-examined. Evidence across learner populations indicates that fluency-oriented interventions—repeated reading, assisted reading, and paired reading—can improve rate and accuracy and may support comprehension by freeing attention for monitoring meaning and integrating ideas (Bell & Bogan, 2015; Hudson et al., 2020; Sabatini et al., 2018; Allor & Chard, 2017; Rafanan & Raymundo, 2024). Yet research also warns that fluency growth does not automatically translate into comprehension improvement when instruction focuses narrowly on speed without building vocabulary, background knowledge, and meaning-making routines (Bell & Bogan, 2015; Sabatini et al., 2018; Allor & Chard, 2017).

For university learners, the instructional challenge is therefore not whether fluency matters, but how to engineer fluency practice so it *serves* academic comprehension: text difficulty must be calibrated to prevent rehearsing errors, feedback must include prosody and phrasing as meaning cues, and rereading cycles should culminate in comprehension tasks that require synthesis and interpretation rather than recall (Cypert & Petro, 2019; Fite et al., 2021; Trofimovich et al., 2017). Technology may further expand feasibility through digital tools that model fluent reading, enable assisted practice, and support repeated exposure to academic vocabulary and structures (Alahmadi, 2024; Allor & Chard, 2017). This study is situated within that applied gap: while fluency-based instruction is well established in earlier grades, less is known about its adapted effectiveness for *university students who remain early English readers*, particularly when

instruction uses discipline-relevant academic texts and integrates comprehension-oriented outcomes.

Accordingly, the objectives of this research are: (1) to examine the effects of a fluency-based instructional model on university EFL students' reading fluency (speed, accuracy, and prosody) and reading comprehension, and (2) to identify the dominant comprehension difficulties that persist despite fluency practice, especially those linked to vocabulary, syntax, cohesion, and background knowledge. The study advances two research questions: **RQ1:** To what extent does a fluency-based instructional model improve university early English readers' reading fluency and reading comprehension? **RQ2:** What comprehension difficulties characterize university early English readers, and how do these difficulties relate to (or constrain) gains achieved through fluency-based instruction? The novelty of the study lies in repositioning fluency-based instruction from an early-grade technique to a university-level, academically situated intervention—linking fluency components to specific comprehension barriers and evaluating outcomes using discipline-relevant texts and comprehension tasks that reflect higher education literacy demands.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to investigate how a fluency-based instructional model is implemented in an authentic classroom setting and how its routines influence early English readers' developing comprehension. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate because the study is concerned with understanding how and why learning unfolds during instruction, rather than merely determining whether improvement occurs. In fluency-based teaching, the same instructional label can look very different across classrooms depending on teacher expertise, time allocation, text selection, feedback style, and student participation. A case study design therefore provides a practical framework for capturing the “instruction-in-action” dimension of fluency work—what teachers actually do during repeated reading, how students respond, and which classroom conditions support or limit meaningful reading development. By focusing on a bounded system (one class, one instructional cycle, and a defined group of learners), the research can generate a coherent explanation of the relationships between instructional decisions and learners' observable reading behaviors.

More specifically, the study aims to document how key fluency routines are enacted, such as repeated reading cycles, oral reading, teacher modeling, and corrective or supportive feedback. Observational data enable the researcher to examine micro-level reading behaviors that are often invisible in outcome-only studies, including hesitation patterns, miscues, self-corrections, attention to punctuation, phrasing into sense groups, and shifts from word-by-word reading toward more connected reading. At the same time, qualitative inquiry supports exploration of learners' comprehension behaviors and their meaning-making processes. These include whether students can retell key ideas, answer literal and inferential questions, link information across sentences, and monitor confusion when comprehension breaks down. Importantly, the design also allows the study to identify persistent comprehension difficulties that may remain even as fluency improves—such as limited vocabulary knowledge, weak morphological awareness, challenges with syntactic parsing, difficulty tracking cohesive devices, or insufficient background knowledge for constructing a coherent mental model of the text.

In relation to the research questions, a qualitative case study makes it possible to interpret “to what extent” improvement is evident through rich, contextual indicators rather than statistical comparison. Improvement can be evidenced through converging

patterns such as more accurate oral reading, increased self-regulation (self-correction and rereading), stronger prosody that reflects meaning, and more meaning-focused classroom talk. Crucially, the same design enables an in-depth explanation of why difficulties occur and how instructional moves—such as selecting culturally relevant texts, calibrating difficulty, structuring repetition cycles, and providing feedback on phrasing and expression—shape learners' comprehension during reading.

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 30 early English learners drawn from a Grade 1 classroom. All participants were beginning readers in English who had experienced approximately four to six months of formal English instruction at the time of data collection. Their age typically ranged from six to seven years old, reflecting the normal age distribution for first-grade students. In this context, English functioned as a foreign language, and most learners shared a common first-language background, such as Indonesian or a local language used in their home and community. This participant profile was selected to ensure that the study captured the learning processes of children who are still developing foundational English reading skills and whose fluency and comprehension are likely to be emergent rather than stabilized.

Participant selection followed purposive criterion sampling to ensure that all learners matched the specific characteristics needed to address the research objectives. Only students who were formally enrolled in the selected Grade 1 class were included, ensuring that the study remained bounded within one instructional setting. Participants also needed to have received four to six months of English instruction so that they had sufficient exposure to classroom English learning while still representing “early” English readers. Inclusion further required active participation in the fluency-based instructional routines implemented during the study, as the research focused on how these routines function in practice and how learners respond to them. Ethical participation was secured through parental or guardian consent, alongside child assent, recognizing that young learners must be protected and that participation must be voluntary and informed in developmentally appropriate ways.

Instruments and Data Collection Technique

This study employed two complementary qualitative instruments: semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. These instruments were selected to capture both the lived experiences of participants and the real-time instructional processes through which fluency-based routines were enacted. Interviews provided access to perceptions, intentions, and reflections that are not always visible in classroom behavior, while observations generated direct evidence of what occurred during instruction, including how learners responded to fluency practice and how comprehension was supported or constrained. Using both instruments strengthened the study by enabling triangulation between what participants reported and what was observed in practice.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with multiple participant groups to build a layered understanding of the instructional context. The classroom English teacher, and a teaching assistant when available, were interviewed to document instructional planning, text selection decisions, feedback strategies, and judgments about learners' progress and persistent difficulties. Learners participated in short, child-friendly interviews designed to elicit their experiences of reading practice, what they found helpful, and what they perceived as difficult when reading English texts. Because young children may express their thinking more effectively through concrete examples than abstract explanations, prompts were phrased in simple language and supported with follow-up questions that encouraged demonstration and storytelling, such as describing

moments when they felt confused or explaining what they did when they met an unfamiliar word.

The interview guides were developed and adapted directly from the research objectives, ensuring that each section of the protocol elicited information relevant to fluency behaviors, comprehension challenges, learner engagement, and instructional supports or barriers. Teacher prompts focused on the “why” behind instructional choices, such as how texts were matched to learners’ levels and how corrective feedback was delivered without discouraging participation. Learner prompts were designed to capture both affective and cognitive dimensions, including motivation, confidence, and strategies used during reading. To enhance qualitative trustworthiness, the interview protocols underwent content validation through expert review by specialists in literacy education or TEFL, who evaluated alignment with the key constructs of fluency, comprehension, and classroom practice.

Classroom observations were conducted as non-participant observations using both structured tools and narrative field notes. The observations focused on how fluency-based instruction was enacted, including how often repeated reading cycles occurred and how the routines were organized across lessons. Particular attention was given to teacher modeling and feedback moves, such as accuracy corrections, cues for phrasing, prompts for prosody, and scaffolds that connected oral reading to meaning. Learner reading behaviors were documented in detail, including whether learners read word-by-word or in phrases, the types and frequency of miscues, self-corrections, hesitation patterns, and engagement during reading tasks. Because fluency is meaningful only insofar as it supports comprehension, the observations also captured comprehension indicators, such as the quality of learner retellings, responsiveness to literal and inferential questions, and observable breakdown points where learners lost track of meaning.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study followed a qualitative analytic framework that emphasizes three interconnected activities: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing with ongoing verification. This approach was chosen because the study generated rich, multi-source data in the form of interview transcripts and classroom observation records, and the analytic goal was to produce an evidence-based explanation of how fluency-based instruction shaped learners’ reading behaviors and comprehension. Rather than treating analysis as a single “end stage,” the process was iterative, with early interpretations continually refined as additional observations and interview data were examined. This ensured that the final findings were grounded in classroom realities and supported by systematic reasoning rather than impressionistic judgment.

Data condensation was the first major analytic activity and involved reducing and organizing raw data while preserving participants’ intended meanings and the instructional context in which behaviors occurred. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, with relevant features of child speech noted to capture hesitation, self-repair, or partial responses that could signal comprehension breakdown or strategy use. Observation notes were typed, dated, and organized by session so that instructional sequences could be traced across time. The researcher then conducted initial coding using descriptive and process-oriented labels that captured what was happening in the data, such as decoding hesitation, teacher phrasing prompts, word-by-word reading, translation attempts, or cohesion confusion. These codes served as analytic “handles” that made it possible to track recurring behaviors and instructional moves across learners and lessons. Through

focused coding, the initial code set was refined and consolidated into broader categories aligned with the research aims.

After condensation, data display was used to support systematic pattern recognition and transparent reasoning. Displays transformed condensed data into organized visual formats that allowed comparisons across learners and across instructional sessions. Matrices were developed to map students against dominant comprehension barriers, enabling identification of shared and divergent difficulty profiles, and to map instructional sessions against enacted routines so that the consistency and variation of implementation could be examined. The study also used thematic charts to represent relationships among instructional moves, observed reading behaviors, and comprehension indicators, helping the researcher move from isolated observations to explanatory links. Timelines were created to track change across the observation period, such as shifts from word-by-word reading toward phrased reading, increased self-correction, or improvements in retelling quality.

Conclusion drawing and verification occurred throughout the analytic process but became especially prominent after categories and displays stabilized. The researcher developed themes that directly addressed the research questions, such as the possibility that repeated reading improved phrasing and self-regulation while certain vocabulary limitations continued to restrict inference-making. Importantly, conclusions were not accepted at face value but were tested through verification strategies. Triangulation was used to compare observational evidence with teacher and learner interview accounts so that themes reflected converging data rather than a single perspective. Negative case analysis was also applied by actively searching for contradictory instances, such as learners who increased reading rate but showed limited comprehension growth, which helped refine and qualify interpretations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

RQ1: To what extent does a fluency-based instructional model improve university early English readers' reading fluency and reading comprehension?

Across the observation period, the fluency-based instructional model showed strong qualitative evidence of improvement in oral reading accuracy. Classroom observations documented fewer decoding breakdowns, reduced repeated miscues on high-frequency words, and more frequent self-corrections during rereading cycles. Learners who initially relied on hesitant, letter-by-letter decoding increasingly shifted to whole-word recognition, especially after teacher modeling and immediate corrective feedback. Interview responses also indicated that students became more confident in "getting the words right," and the teacher reported that accuracy gains were most visible when texts were kept at an instructional level and rereading was paired with brief correction and confirmation.

The model also produced strong evidence of improvement in reading rate or speed, but the improvement was best interpreted as "more efficient processing" rather than simply faster reading. In observation notes, learners moved from long pauses and frequent restarts toward smoother progression through sentences, particularly on the second and third readings of the same passage. Many learners began to maintain momentum across a line of text without stopping at each word, suggesting reduced cognitive load during decoding. However, qualitative evidence also showed that when teachers emphasized pace without reinforcing meaning, some learners increased speed while still losing track of content, indicating that rate gains were most productive when paired with brief comprehension checks and meaning-focused prompts.

For prosody (phrasing and expression), the evidence suggested moderate improvement, with progress closely tied to teacher modeling and cues about punctuation and phrasing. Early observations typically showed monotone reading with limited attention to punctuation; later sessions recorded more appropriate pausing at commas and periods, improved intonation for questions, and occasional expressive emphasis on key words. These changes were not uniform across all learners: students with stronger decoding control adopted phrasing more quickly, while students still struggling with word recognition often remained flat or choppy. Teacher feedback that explicitly connected prosody to meaning (e.g., “pause here because the idea changes”) appeared to accelerate improvement more than feedback focused only on “sound better.”

Regarding literal reading comprehension, such as identifying main ideas and key details, the study found moderate improvement that was most visible after repeated reading cycles. Learners were increasingly able to answer who/what/where questions and to retell basic events in correct sequence, especially when the text structure was simple and vocabulary was familiar. Observations suggested that comprehension improved when rereading reduced decoding burden and allowed attention to shift toward meaning; learners could then notice details they had missed during the first reading. Still, literal comprehension remained sensitive to vocabulary gaps: when key content words were unknown, learners could read aloud more fluently yet provide incomplete or inaccurate answers.

For higher-level comprehension, including making inferences and integrating ideas across sentences and paragraphs, the evidence indicated limited to emerging improvement. While some learners began to justify answers using clues from the text (“because it says...”), inferential questions often triggered guessing, reliance on isolated words, or silence—particularly when inference depended on background knowledge or subtle cohesion cues. Observation data showed that repeated reading alone rarely produced consistent inference-making unless instruction also included explicit scaffolds (e.g., guided questioning, vocabulary and background knowledge activation, and modeling how to connect two sentences to form a conclusion).

The chart below summarizes the strength of improvement evidence drawn from triangulated observations and interviews, using an analytic scale where 0 indicates no clear change and 3 indicates strong, consistent improvement across data sources.

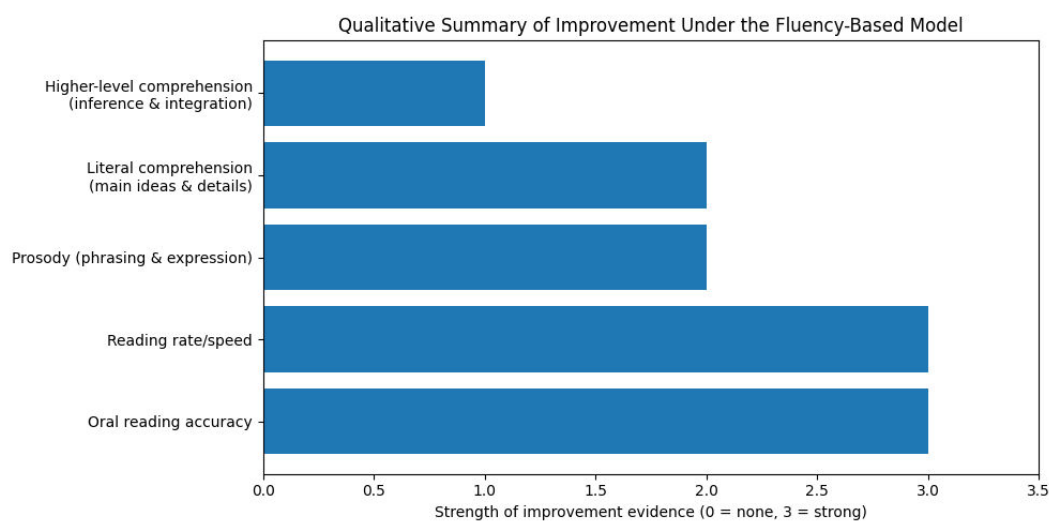


Figure 1. The Strength of Improvement Evidence Drawn from Triangulated Observations and Interviews

RQ2: What comprehension difficulties characterize university early English readers, and how do these difficulties relate to (or constrain) gains achieved through fluency-based instruction?

Vocabulary-related difficulties emerged as a dominant barrier for university early English readers, even when oral reading became smoother through repeated reading. Observation data showed that learners could pronounce many words more accurately on later readings but still failed to explain key terms that carried the main idea of the passage. In interviews, learners often described comprehension as “knowing the words,” and when they encountered unfamiliar academic vocabulary, they either paused, substituted a familiar-sounding word, or continued reading without meaning. Weak morphological awareness further constrained comprehension because learners struggled to use prefixes, suffixes, and word families to infer meaning; as a result, fluency gains tended to improve *delivery* of the text without consistently improving *access to meaning* when critical vocabulary remained unknown.

Syntax-related difficulties also characterized these readers and frequently disrupted meaning construction during and after fluency practice. Classroom observations indicated that learners could increase reading rate on repeated readings while still misparsing long sentences, especially those with embedded clauses, dense noun phrases, or abstract academic structures. Learners often read through complex sentences as a single stream without chunking them into meaningful units, producing prosodic patterns that did not match the sentence structure. When comprehension questions required identifying relationships (cause–effect, contrast, condition), learners struggled because they had not successfully built a clear proposition-level representation of the sentence. This pattern suggested that increased speed sometimes masked unresolved syntactic processing problems rather than eliminating them.

Cohesion and reference-tracking difficulties were evident in how learners integrated information across sentences. Even when reading accuracy improved, learners frequently lost track of pronoun referents, misunderstood connectives, or treated each sentence as an isolated piece of information. Observations of retelling tasks showed that some learners could recall scattered details but did not connect them coherently, indicating weak processing of lexical ties and discourse markers. When the teacher prompted students to explain “who ‘they’ refers to” or “what ‘however’ changes,” learners often reverted to guessing. This suggests that fluency practice supported smoother reading but did not automatically strengthen the cross-sentence linking processes needed for coherent comprehension.

Background-knowledge and schema-related gaps also constrained deeper comprehension, particularly on texts that assumed familiarity with academic topics or cultural references. In interviews, learners sometimes reported that they could “read it” but still “didn’t understand what it is about,” reflecting insufficient schema to interpret events, concepts, or arguments. Observations showed that repeated reading improved recognition of words and phrases, yet inference questions remained difficult when answers depended on prior knowledge or understanding implied relationships not explicitly stated. When brief pre-reading activation occurred, learners demonstrated more stable comprehension, implying that the limitation was not simply linguistic but also conceptual, affecting how meaning was constructed beyond the sentence level.

Strategy-use and comprehension-monitoring difficulties moderated the impact of fluency-based instruction across learners. A recurring pattern was overreliance on word-by-word translation or guessing, with limited self-questioning or repair strategies when meaning broke down. Some learners continued reading faster after repeated practice but did not slow down to re-check meaning, resulting in “fluent performance” with shallow comprehension. In contrast, learners who began to monitor comprehension—pausing to

reread a confusing line, asking for clarification, or using context to confirm meaning—showed more consistent comprehension growth. Overall, the qualitative evidence suggests that fluency-based instruction created favorable conditions for comprehension, but the degree of benefit depended strongly on learners' strategy repertoire and their ability to notice and respond to comprehension failures.

The chart below summarizes the relative strength of each difficulty as a constraint on comprehension, based on converging patterns from observations and interviews (0 = minimal constraint; 3 = major constraint).

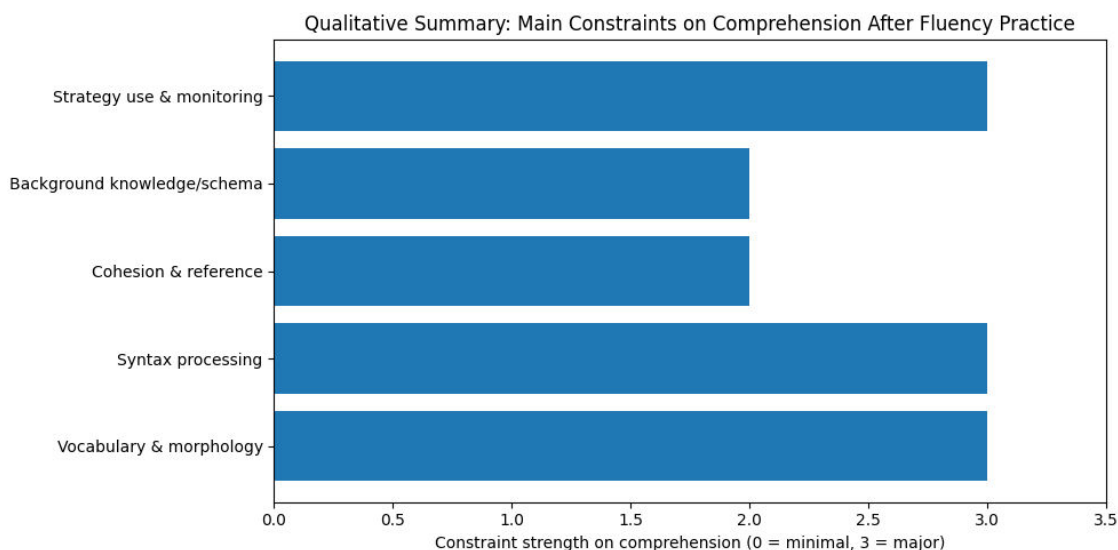


Figure 2. Strengths of Each Difficulty as a Constraint on Comprehension

Figure 2 showed that fluency practice reduced decoding burden, but comprehension remained constrained primarily by vocabulary/morphology, syntax processing, and weak monitoring strategies. Cohesion tracking and schema gaps also played meaningful roles, especially for integrating ideas and making inferences. In methodological terms, these conclusions rely on pattern matching across data sources: the same learners who read more accurately and faster on repeated readings still displayed breakdowns at unfamiliar academic words, complex sentence structures, and discourse links, and interviews confirmed that many lacked effective comprehension-repair habits. This implies that fluency-based instruction is most effective when paired with explicit supports for academic vocabulary, sentence unpacking, cohesion instruction, schema activation, and strategy training for monitoring and repair.

Discussion

This study provides qualitative evidence that a fluency based instruction model can meaningfully strengthen early English readers' oral reading performance, while also revealing why gains in comprehension, especially inferential and integrative comprehension, are often uneven. In the observed classrooms, learners showed clear progress in accuracy and rate, moderate gains in prosody, and modest improvement in literal comprehension, but higher level comprehension remained limited and strongly constrained by vocabulary, morphology, syntax, cohesion tracking, background knowledge, and weak comprehension monitoring strategies. These patterns align with a large body of fluency research that positions fluency as a bridge between decoding and comprehension rather than an end in itself.

First, the strong improvement in oral reading accuracy and the smoother movement through sentences reported in classroom observations confirm prior research

that repeated reading and modeled practice can reduce decoding effort and increase automaticity. Hudson et al. (2020) identify repeated reading as a dominant engine of many oral reading fluency interventions, especially for developing readers, and the present findings support that synthesis by showing fewer decoding breakdowns, fewer repeated miscues, and more self correction across rereading cycles. Similar patterns have also been documented for struggling readers when repeated reading is paired with feedback and appropriately leveled texts (Guérin & Murphy, 2015; Hindin & Steiner, 2022). What this study adds is a classroom grounded description of how “accuracy improvement” is not only a product outcome but also a process change, visible in reduced hesitation, more stable word recognition, and greater willingness to attempt unfamiliar words after teacher confirmation.

Second, improvements in reading rate were evident, but the study’s interpretation of rate as “more efficient processing” rather than speed alone is consistent with warnings in previous research that increased words per minute can occur without stable meaning making. Sabatini et al. (2018) show that oral reading performance relates to comprehension, yet the relationship is not deterministic, and gains in fluency do not guarantee comprehension growth for all learners. The present study illustrates this nuance: when instruction emphasized pace without meaning prompts, some learners read faster while “losing track of content,” suggesting a version of the “fast but hollow” pattern cautioned against in fluency scholarship (Calet et al., 2019; Hindin & Steiner, 2022). In this way, the findings extend prior work by emphasizing instructional contingency: rate gains appear most beneficial when linked to brief comprehension checks, meaning focused questioning, and feedback that treats reading as meaning construction rather than performance.

Third, the study reports moderate improvement in prosody, closely tied to teacher modeling and cues about punctuation and phrasing. This confirms research arguing that prosody is a meaningful indicator of syntactic parsing and comprehension related processing, not a decorative feature of oral reading (Godde et al., 2021; Jungjohann et al., 2023). Prosody oriented instruction has also been linked to comprehension improvement in intervention studies, particularly when students learn to phrase according to sense groups and punctuation cues (Cypert & Petro, 2019; Calet et al., 2019). The present findings refine that claim by showing that prosody growth was uneven: learners with stronger decoding control adopted phrasing more quickly, while those still managing word recognition remained flat and choppy. This suggests that prosody instruction is likely most effective after a threshold of decoding stability is achieved, supporting multi component models of fluency that treat accuracy as foundational for expressive reading.

In comprehension outcomes, the study found moderate improvement in literal comprehension after repeated reading cycles, particularly when vocabulary was familiar and text structure was simple. This pattern supports the theoretical account that fluency frees working memory resources for meaning integration by lowering the cognitive cost of decoding (Hudson et al., 2020; Guérin & Murphy, 2015). Yet the limited and emerging improvement in inferential comprehension and cross sentence integration points to a well documented boundary condition: fluency enables comprehension, but it does not substitute for the linguistic and cognitive resources required for inference making, cohesion processing, and building a coherent mental model. This aligns with systematic reviews emphasizing that L2 reading comprehension depends on vocabulary knowledge, syntactic skill, and higher order integration processes beyond decoding efficiency (Vettori et al., 2023). It also resonates with evidence that explicit strategy instruction improves academic reading comprehension, particularly for inference and monitoring, more reliably than practice alone (Yapp et al., 2021).

The second research question clarifies why comprehension gains were constrained. Vocabulary and weak morphological awareness emerged as dominant barriers: learners could pronounce words more accurately over time but still could not explain key terms that carried the main idea. This mirrors findings that derivational morphological awareness supports L2 reading largely through its effect on vocabulary knowledge, enabling learners to infer meanings of unfamiliar words (Choi, 2015). It also fits broader accounts that lexical coverage is a critical bottleneck for comprehension in EFL contexts, particularly for expository and academic texts (Cueva et al., 2022; Vettori et al., 2023). Notably, this study extends earlier fluency focused research by illustrating a dissociation: oral fluency can improve while semantic access remains fragile, producing fluent delivery without proportional comprehension improvement when key vocabulary remains unknown.

Syntax related difficulties were also prominent, with learners sometimes reading complex sentences quickly yet mis parsing embedded clauses, dense noun phrases, or relationship markers such as cause and contrast. This is consistent with evidence that syntactic complexity and working memory demands can depress comprehension even when decoding is adequate (Shibasaki et al., 2015), and with observations that L2 readers may allocate disproportionate attention to form, leaving fewer resources for building global coherence (Busby & Dahl, 2021; Vettori et al., 2023). The current findings highlight an important practical risk: rate gains may mask unresolved syntactic processing problems, so teachers may overestimate comprehension if they rely on smoother oral reading as the main indicator of understanding.

Cohesion and reference tracking difficulties further limited comprehension, especially in retelling and integration tasks. Prior research similarly shows that misunderstanding pronoun reference and connectives disrupts cross sentence integration in EFL reading (Cueva et al., 2022; Vettori et al., 2023). The present study contributes by showing that repeated reading did not automatically improve these discourse level processes; learners often treated sentences as isolated units unless the teacher explicitly prompted reference tracking and connective interpretation. Background knowledge gaps also constrained inference making, again consistent with research emphasizing schema activation and prior knowledge as essential for constructing an adequate mental model of text meaning (Tong et al., 2017; Alonso, 2019). Finally, strategy use and comprehension monitoring moderated outcomes: learners who paused to reread, asked for clarification, or checked meaning grew more consistently than those who relied on word by word translation or guessing. This directly supports work showing that strategy use and affective factors shape L2 reading comprehension, and that explicit strategy instruction can strengthen monitoring and repair (Ai ping et al., 2025; Yapp et al., 2021).

Taken together, the findings support a constrained view of fluency based instruction: it is highly effective for stabilizing decoding and building oral reading efficiency, but comprehension benefits depend on whether instruction also develops vocabulary depth, morphological inference, syntactic parsing, cohesion awareness, and self regulated meaning monitoring. Theoretically, this reinforces models in which fluency is enabling rather than sufficient, and it provides qualitative evidence for why the fluency to comprehension pathway is stronger for literal comprehension than for inferential comprehension in early stage EFL readers (Sabatini et al., 2018; Vettori et al., 2023). Practically, it suggests that classrooms using repeated reading should embed brief but systematic meaning supports: pre teaching or recycling high utility vocabulary, morphology mini lessons, sentence unpacking routines, explicit work with connectives and pronouns, and comprehension monitoring prompts. These implications also align with content accessibility approaches that simplify access to meaning without reducing

cognitive rigor (Fite et al., 2021), and they open space for technology supported modeling and assisted practice, which has shown promise for reading aloud performance in L2 contexts (Alahmadi, 2024).

One discrepancy that should be addressed in interpreting the results is the study's framing of participants in different sections. The methods describe 30 Grade 1 learners aged about six to seven with four to six months of English instruction, while the results section labels the group as "university early English readers." This inconsistency does not negate the instructional insights, but it matters for generalization: university learners would likely show different motivational profiles, background knowledge, and cognitive strategies than first grade beginners. If the intended population is young beginners, the discussion should emphasize foundational literacy development; if the intended population is older EFL learners, future work should replicate the model with that population to test whether the same constraint pattern holds.

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DECLARATION OF USING AI TOOLS

This manuscript was prepared with the assistance of an artificial intelligence (AI) language model (ChatGPT) to support academic writing tasks. The AI tool was used to help generate and refine academic phrasing, organize sections of the manuscript (e.g., research design, data analysis, discussion framing), and improve clarity, coherence, and grammatical accuracy. The AI tool was also used to assist in formatting references in APA style and in drafting initial versions of the abstract and supplementary sections. All substantive decisions regarding the study's research design, data collection procedures, interpretation of findings, and conclusions were made by the author. The author reviewed, edited, and verified the AI-assisted text to ensure accuracy, originality, and alignment with the research context.

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