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Original Research

Assessing and Overcoming Reading Difficulties: Students' Views on Reading Short Passages

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate how students can maximize and develop their skills for reading short passages. It also aims to explain and evaluate students' views of and experiences with reading such passages. To meet these objectives, the study adopts a quantitative approach. Data are collected from 540 students studying English in the second semester through an online questionnaire. The study indicates that most participants are intensely interested in developing their reading skills in short passages. It also shows that although most participants can understand the meaning of 'some' words in the selected passages, they cannot pronounce/read them accurately. Therefore, the current paper attempts to understand whether these students can shift from a weaker to a stronger level of short passage reading. Based on these findings, we make two recommendations: to adapt short passages to low-ability students and to engage these students with different follow-up systematic reading techniques and practices – which differ from those used with students of higher ability. However, despite the importance of our study findings, further research is still required in this area.

Keywords: low ability students, reading practices, reading skills, short passages

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Introduction

Reading is an important learning activity that a learner should practice and improve constantly. However, performing this activity might be easy for some students but might not be so for others. The difference in reading performance depends on several criteria, such as the nature of the text itself, the students' educational level, and their background knowledge, to name but a few. Significantly, when a student reads and understands a text, it stands to reason that they do not face much trouble. Conversely, reading is not effortless because it involves coordinating different operations, including word recognition, understanding, and fluency. To best read and understand a text, the learner should engage with language in print form, decode unfamiliar words and connect meanings from these words.

In most Moroccan higher education institutes, students are required to study English as a separate module to validate through an end-term final exam. They may also study it as a separate element -- within a module composed of two or three different elements. In this context, the provision of selected and relevant passages is practically mandatory for an effective reading comprehension course. With this in mind, the authenticity and relevance of the reading material addressed to these students imply involving them, as much as possible, in a range of dynamic reading practices. Therefore, regarding English for Specific Purposes (ESP), a language that students need in the workplace, selecting and adapting the short passages (passages of 200 or 250 words at most) would help them excel gradually in such activity.

Learning to read a passage in English can be effective if the process of reading is performed accurately and appropriately. Unlike high-achieving students who can read a passage and understand it without much difficulty, students with lower reading abilities may find the same task very challenging. To read a short passage accurately and understand it easily, students must perform various reading tasks. However, the number of these reading tasks differs from one category of students to another. For example, high-ability students might perform a lower number of these tasks than low-ability students who might perform a higher number of such tasks.

It is important to note that reading long passages often constitutes a real challenge for low-ability students, mainly at the beginning of the reading process. On the one hand, this may be the outcome of the inability to read such passages accurately as the

latter may contain words and phrases with which students are unfamiliar. According to Segalowitz (1986), readers rely more strongly on contextual information to understand the word meaning because of linguistic deficits. However, due to a lack of command of syntactic and textual structures, the quality of this contextual information may be insufficient (as cited in Lutjeharms, 1997, p. 4). On the other hand, when students are required to read a long passage, this gives the impression that this task seems challenging, especially at the beginning of the reading, as mentioned so far. In this context, students' readiness for reading is lessened to a lower degree. Similarly, Klingner et al. (2015) argue that students who read by decoding too many words or with reduced accuracy demonstrate difficulties keeping up with class expectations in reading and learning (p. 8). According to Collet (2021), accuracy is typically calculated after an oral reading and reported as words correct per minute (wcpm). The number of words read correctly (accuracy) is divided by the total number of words read (rate) and is often expressed as a percentage (p. 27). This calculation reveals that the students' reading accuracy can be measured through the total number of words they can read (per minute) correctly.

Our focus on the reading phase does not devalue the importance and utility of the two other reading stages (pre-reading and post-reading) in the process as a whole. The reading stage places an interest in how weak university students can develop their actual reading of short passages in English. In particular, this phase is meant to measure and simultaneously ensure the potential ways of making such a process easier and more successful for this category of learners.

Literature Review

Prior studies on the possibility of empowering low-ability students' reading skills in class did not attach much importance to the crucial role of short passages in a learner's overall reading process. They suggest that students, particularly in their reading process, often encounter multiple difficulties, namely unfamiliar vocabulary, limited time to cognitively process the text they are provided with (Qrquez & Ab Rashid, 2017), and tasks requiring the manipulation of individual sounds or phonemes (Snowling et al., 1997, as cited in Parrila et al., 2007). A similar study indicates that struggling readers need reinforcement in terms of their reading comprehension abilities (Alghonaim, 2020; Ancheta, 2018). Put simply, this group of students can learn the

skills they lack so that they can become competent and fluent in reading. This strategy, therefore, involves engaging them with a reading mediation program (i.e., a program that instructors can design to help weak readers minimize their reading barriers) designed for such purpose (Ancheta, 2018).

It is possible to note that there is a scarcity of scholarly work on the potential ways that can help our student population overcome their frustration with reading short passages in English. In this regard, this paper aims to fill this gap with particular reference to the reading phase, as mentioned earlier. Therefore, being convinced that weak university students have the potential to empower their reading capacities of long passages or texts in English, short passage reading, among other language learning practices, can help these students achieve their reading objectives. To this end, providing this group of learners with selected and adapted reading material (short passages) enables them to practice and develop this very skill on a gradual basis. In this context, the selection and adaptation of this type of passage for the reading class appear to be a powerful incentive for weak readers to improve their reading abilities of short passages. In this way, the path will be paved for them to read and comprehend longer and more difficult passages on their own. More importantly, these readers need to be intrinsically motivated to develop their autonomous and engaging habits (Jinghblad & Jinghblad, 2017, as cited in Alghonaim, 2020). In this regard, forming efficient reading habits requires a relatively long period of time. Additionally, the factors of desire, will, and motivation need to be emphasized. However, the two first factors, such as desire and will, must be strengthened by the third, motivation (Mualimah & Usmaedi, 2018). Indeed, short passage reading can benefit weak students a great deal in the sense that it might become possible for them to develop their reading habits, which in turn should be taken into account in association with desire, will, and motivation, as emphasized so far.

Schwanenflugel and Knapp (2016) assert that reading is a language-based activity (p. 2), which is, in Russell's (1949) view, a complex operation that requires substantially different skills in different contexts (as cited in Manzo & Manzo, 1990, p. 26). According to Cunningham et al. (2002), for students with an adequate ability to decode a text, independent reading helps further develop and enhance not only decoding skills but also vocabulary and comprehension (as cited in Rasinski et al., 2012, pp. 63- 64). Associating reading with decoding has also been the interest of other

scholars like Perfetti (1985, as cited in Urquhart & Weir, 2013). More specifically, decoding refers to the unlocking and construction of meaning from a coded message by means of using four acquired skills: symbol decoding (or sounding out words), vocabulary, comprehension, and reflection ... Why would one student decode a page accurately and comprehend 95% of information while another student decodes accurately the exact same page but understand only 60%? To help the second student achieve better comprehension, it is only logical then that we consider what the first student does in more detail (Manzo & Manzo, 1990, p. 22). To illustrate, the reading strategies that a student uses to decode and understand a text are especially different from those that another student uses to perform the same reading activity. This difference in reading strategies impacts the way(s) in which a student interprets a text. The second category of learners (those who understand only 60% of text information) might be introduced to other reading skills (skills that are different from or more important than the skills that students are already good at) to help them decode and understand such a text. Certainly, in reading a short passage, combining several reading skills is thus more likely to be fruitful for students.

According to Michel (1972), the process of reading is conceived of as extracting meaning from visual, linguistic symbols. For Goodman (1967), this operation also incorporates syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic knowledge (as cited in Urquhart & Weir, 2013, p. 17). Following the same line of thought, reading involves multiple linguistic and cognitive challenges and the ability to read a text effortlessly, quickly, and accurately (Hasbrouck & Tindal, 2006, pp. 642- 643). Put simply, reading a text can be approached from two different yet interrelated perspectives. Firstly, reading a text implies the ability to decode it in an effortless, quick, and accurate manner. Secondly, reading a text involves the capacity to understand it in association with its linguistic, semantic, and pragmatic constituents. Both perspectives should thus be taken into account for a fruitful reading of a text.

To illustrate students' reading disorder, Logsdon (2021) highlights five reasons: word recognition, difficulty understanding the important ideas in reading, frustration with reading tasks, trouble reading aloud, and the problem of remembering significant details. Manzo and Manzo (1990) point out that frustration occurs when the reading material is too difficult for a student even with the guidance of his/her teacher (p. 32). The student reaches this level when she or he can no longer decode with at least 90% to

95% accuracy, and their comprehension falls below 50%. At this level, it is assumed that instruction may not be successfully provided because the student is too overwhelmed by the task. This implies that accurate, quick, and fluent reading of a text is not effortless.

A study conducted by Cont-Ramsden and Botting (1999) relating to the teaching of reading demonstrates that at the age of 16, 49% of students who have a history of speech, language, and communication needs would be expected to experience problems with the accuracy of reading (decoding). However, 74% will experience difficulties with the comprehension of a text, and this may be less immediately obvious than the difficulties associated with decoding (as cited in Guy, 2015, p. 6). In the same vein, Manzo and Manzo (1990) believe that in the case of materials that a student reads with 99% to 100% decoding accuracy and 90% to 100% comprehension, the student is said to be operating at an independent level (p. 32). At this level, the student is no longer distracted by words and literal comprehension and, therefore, can read and learn from the material without the guidance of the teacher(s).

Graf et al. (1993) state that reading a word or sentence requires a combination of sensory-perceptual and conceptual analysis processes as their involvement has the same effect as the practice of the skill (as cited in Lutjeharms, 1997, p. 5). It increases fluency and efficiency with which such processes can be carried out subsequently. In this, Paris et al. (1991) assert that reports on how good readers understand and learn from the reading material suggest that they coordinate many highly complex and well-developed set of skills and strategies before, during, and after reading that help them understand what they read (as cited in Klingner et al., 2015, p. 3). Therefore, it should be noted that understanding a reading text involves coordinating a variety of reading abilities like those pointed out so far.

The students' degree of concentration in reading short passages determines the extent to which they are skillful or not at such a process. Thus, the longer the concentration span in reading, the better students can perform. As stated by Lutjeharms (1997), being a good reader requires the automatic activation of related knowledge, and when reading a text, all the learner's attention can be concentrated on understanding the text's content (p. 2). Similarly, students with low levels of concentration will certainly experience difficulties with the process of reading comprehension (Guy, 2015).

Likewise, Loukina et al. (2018) suggest that since the complexity of a passage is known to impact reading comprehension, it seems reasonable to assume that it would also impact other aspects of reading skills, including oral reading fluency (p. 2143). Relatedly, providing students with difficult reading passages does not help them perform their reading tasks easily. Rather, this type of passage is likely to block such reading tasks.

Other scholars (Rayner & McConkie, 1976; Rayner & Pollatsek, 1981) relate students' difficulty in reading to their eye movements and argue that readers' eye behaviour consists of two components, fixations, and saccades, that are assumed to be governed by relatively independent mental mechanisms (as cited in Kennedy et al., 2000, p. 66). These scholars believe that the visual intake of information happens in the course of eye fixations in reading and that saccades bring new information to foveal vision of scrutiny (i.e., the normal vision in daylight). The mechanism that governs the duration of fixations decides when to end a fixation to move forward through the text, while where the mechanism that controls the saccadic amplitude guides the eye to a specific location in the text. Guy (2015) asserts that students must be able to coordinate their eye movements and focus both eyes on the same part of a word, follow a line of print without losing their pace, maintain clear focus whilst reading, make quick focusing ... in addition to being able to process what they are seeing. If students have problems with any of these aspects of vision, they will experience difficulty with reading (p. 5). Clearly, reading a text may constitute a real challenge for some students, especially those with difficulties with eye fixations during the reading operation.

Strang (1961) argues that getting meaning from the printed page is a biopsychological process that is influenced by a wide range of interrelated components such as the individual's ability, his experiences, his needs, his attitudes, and his values. Each student interacts with the total reading situation in accordance with his or her unique pattern of characteristics. His or her memory of each experience with reading further influences his or her perception of and response to each new situation (as cited in Afflerbach, 2016, p. 3). Further, Ponniah and Vankatesan (2018) find that evidence from biology reveals that negative emotions such as stress and anxiety are detrimental, through the genetic process, to any learning, providing support to the claim that a reading problem is indeed a 'psychological problem' (p. 3). For Ponniah and Vankatesan, creating a positive attitude towards reading is necessary because it

influences students' reading behaviors and beliefs about reading and compels them to engage in the text content while reading.

Reading short passages in English can be very beneficial for students, particularly those who struggle with reading this type of text. Most importantly, this activity motivates them to practice oral reading on a progressive basis. This practice allows them to deal with a small number of words, phrases, and sentences within a short paragraph. According to Snow et al. (1998), teachers are required to provide instruction that systematically presents daily opportunities for students to learn to read words accurately (as cited in Hasbrouck, 2010). Relatedly, Kuhn and Schwanenflugel (2008) conducted a study on children's oral behavior and found that oral reading enables children to process information in the text that they read and that the relative effectiveness of oral as compared to silent reading may depend on the children's reading skills (p. 10). It is believed that reading aloud differs from reading silently (Smith, 2012); however, this activity of oral reading may benefit less skilled readers. There is a tendency for low-skilled readers to understand what they are reading better with oral reading than with silent reading (Fuchs et al., 1988). Results are mixed for other learners. Also, some studies (McCallum & George, 2004; Mullikin et al., 1996; Salaso, 1986) suggest that perhaps it does not matter, whereas others find that comprehension during oral reading is better (as cited in Kuhn & Schwanenflugel, 2008, p. 10). In a word, to enhance their reading competencies, students with reading difficulties should be accorded frequent opportunities. On this basis, involving these students in oral and/or silent reading activities can help them improve their reading skills.

For Hardyck and Petrinovich (1970), adults seem to resort to switching to the oral reading mode when they encounter difficulty understanding what they are reading during the silent reading of texts (as cited in Kuhn & Schwanenflugel, 2008, p. 10). In a similar vein, Guy (2015) claims that if a student's knowledge is limited or poor, there will be occasions when texts make little sense. No matter how a student's decoding is, if they are unfamiliar with the subject matter, their comprehension will be inconsistent (p. 11). However, Payner and Pollastek (1989) confirm that reading aloud is only about half the speed of silent reading, which suggests that studying reading aloud is likely to tell us at least as much about speaking as it will tell us about how meaning is extracted from print (p. 181). That is student familiarity with the texts they are provided with

appears to be a driving force for them to better read this text, either orally or silently. More efforts should thus be made on the part of weak readers to achieve better results in their reading performance.

In sum, reading relates not only to linguistics but also to cognitive challenges and the ability to read a text effortlessly, quickly, and accurately (Goodman, 1967, as cited in Urquhart & Weir, 2013). Indeed, weak students often struggle to read a text because of many reasons, including unfamiliar vocabulary, limited time for processing a text, and tasks that need manipulation of individual sounds (Qrqiz & Ab Rashid, 2017). Also, students encounter problems with reading when they cannot recognize words, understand ideas, read aloud, remember details, and when they experience feeling of frustration (Logsdon, 2021). Furthermore, students' reading difficulties might also be the outcome of a lack of concentration (Lutjeharms, 1997). In addition to these factors that impede students' reading capacities, eye movements might also affect the students' reading performance (Payner & Pollastek, 1989).

Based on such factors that impact students' reading skills, these students need reinforcement in terms of their reading comprehension activities (Ancheta, 2018; Alghonaim, 2020). Within this framework, they also need to be motivated to develop their autonomous habits (Jinghblad & Jinghblad, 2017, as cited in Alghonaim, 2020). In addition, students with decoding difficulties might be capable of developing their reading skills, vocabulary, and comprehension chiefly through independent reading (Cunningham et al., 2002, as cited in Rasinski et al., 2012). Relatedly, coordinating a set of reading skills allows these students to improve their reading skills (Strang, 1961, as cited in Afflerbach, 2016). To achieve this goal, they need to be provided with daily opportunities to learn to read accurately (Snow et al., 1998). For example, oral reading would encourage them to process textual information (Kuhn & Schwanenflugel, 1998). Hence, there is a tendency for low-skilled learners to understand what they read better when they read a text orally (Fuchs et al., 1988). Although oral reading is seen as a speaking activity (Payner & Pollastek, 1989), this strategy might benefit students when they face difficulty understanding what they read silently (Hardyck & Petrinovich, 1970, as cited in Kuhn & Schwanenflugel, 2008). Reading a passage, by and large, involves the ability to combine a wide range of skills on the part of low-skilled students.

Methodology

In this study, a quantitative approach is adopted. Conceptually, a quantitative method can be defined as a process that explains phenomena through the collection of numerical data that are analyzed using mathematically based methods such as statistics (Aliaga & Gunderson, 2000). The questionnaire, a tool used to gather information in a survey project using paper-based or Web-based modes of delivery (Thomas, 2004), allows us to collect data from respondents (p. 1). As such, the questionnaire encompasses both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The respondents choose from a list of provided responses in the former category of questions. In the latter category, respondents answer in their own words (Blair et al., 2014, p. 29). The questionnaire, which relates to the purpose of this paper, is decided upon for two major reasons. One is to better understand the students' perceptions of and experiences with short passage reading in class. The second reason is to ensure a high response rate.

The choice of the questionnaire is motivated by a range of criteria, including 1) low cost in time, 2) analysis of responses is relatively straightforward, 3) respondents can complete the questionnaire when it suits them, 4) less pressure for an immediate response, 5) respondent anonymity and 6) easy to get information (Gilham, 2011). Further, the type of information we need to collect from respondents and how best to elicit information are two key decisions that must be made (Blair et al., 2014). Therefore, the question items were carefully chosen depending on the objective of the current study. These question items include age, gender, students' educational level, and their area of specialization; closed-ended questions, a five Likert item method, and open-ended questions. A total of 540 students took part in the current study. These students were recruited based on their weak reading performance, a student learning aspect that has been observed and noted by their teachers in classrooms within a period of three months (from the beginning of March 2021 until the end of May 2021). Being enrolled within different departments, the participants were all low-ability first-year students from different Moroccan universities, including Cadi Ayyad university (Marrakesh), Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdillah university (Fès), Moulay Ismail University (Meknès), and Abdelmaledk Essaâdi University (Tanger).

As mentioned earlier, the Google Forms questionnaire is used to collect data from 540 first-year students. Of all the students, 44.4% are female, and 55.6% are male;

75.9% of them are aged 18-20, and 24.1% of students are over the age of 20 years. The questionnaire consists of 11 questions, most of which are explored for analytical purposes. The question items were written in French in order to help students understand the questionnaire and provide appropriate responses that would serve the purpose of our study.

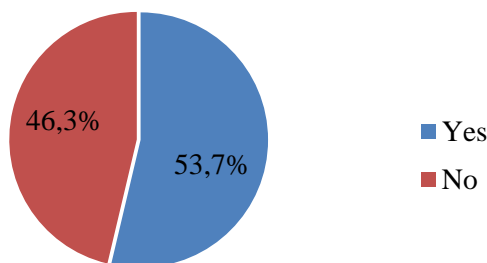
Results and Discussion

Data are analyzed on the basis of the students' responses to the questionnaires addressed to them. Displayed in pie-charts and graphs, the percentages are used to analyze the data obtained. It should be noted that the interpretations of the data are supported by some extracts from the students' completed questionnaires.

Of the total number of students, 53.7% studied at private schools while 46.3% studied at public schools. The results related to this question demonstrate that students' reading performance is not very much governed by such criterion. Therefore, studying at a private or public school does not affect students' reading abilities. Figure 1 below illustrates the results linked to the current question:

Figure 1

The Effect of Attending Public or Private Schools on Reading Short Passages



Students' Attitudes to Reading Short Passages

Students' attitude toward short passage reading plays an important part in developing their reading process of this type of text. Therefore, when students express a positive attitude toward reading, this implies a potential for them to develop this skill, especially if it is associated with short passages. Figures 2 and 3 below illustrate the results of the two questions in focus:

Figure 2

Students' Reading Potential (General)

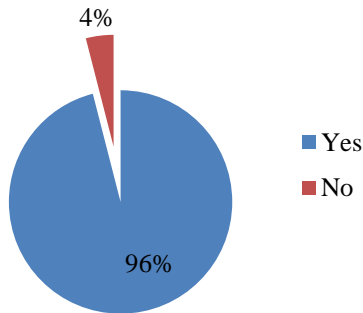
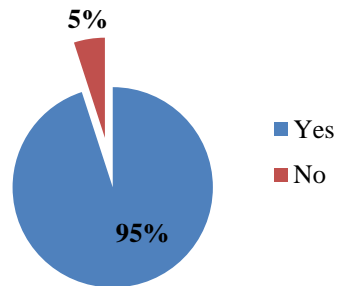


Figure 3

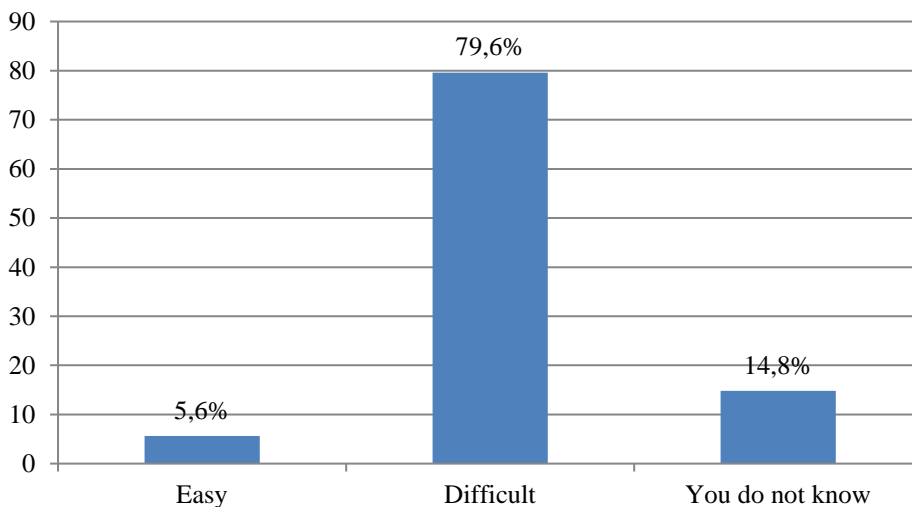
Students' Views on Reading English (Specific)



As can be seen from Figure 4 below, reading short passages in class -- in a normal stress-free atmosphere -- presents a major difficulty for a vast majority of students 79.6%. Roughly 6 % of them think the opposite, while the remaining 14.8% are neutral. This indicates that difficulty in reading a short passage in English can be a negative reading outcome because of three core reasons: (1) lack of skill in word recognition, (2) lack of self-confidence, and (3) fear of incorrect pronunciation.

Figure 4

How Do Students Perceive the Reading Activity?

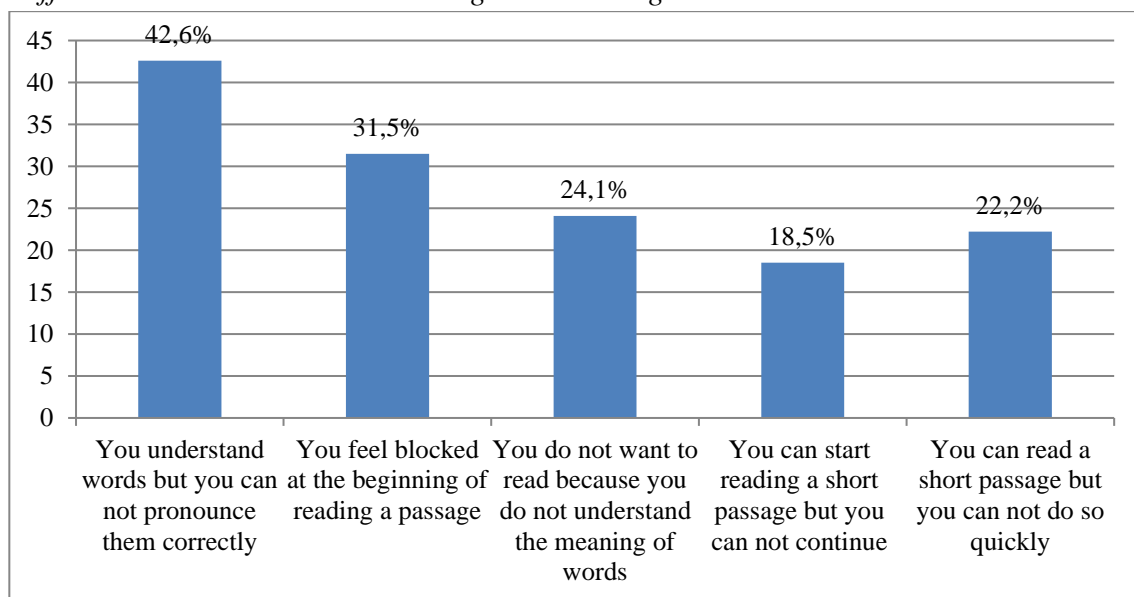


Students' Difficulties in Reading Short Passages in English

Difficulties in reading short passages in English vary from one low-ability student to another. Figure 5 below depicts these varying difficulties among this category of students:

Figure 5

Difficulties Students Face in Reading Short Passages



Results for this question reveal that 31.5% of students have a reading block, 42.6% of them understand words but cannot pronounce them accurately, 24.1% of them do not understand words and phrases embodied in a short passage. For this reason, they refuse to read; 18.5% of them can start reading a short passage but cannot continue their reading, and 22.2% of them can read short passages but cannot do so quickly.

In addition to the aforementioned reading failures, studies conducted by Logsdon (2021) and Cont-Ramsden and Botting (1999) reveal that the participants suffer from other kinds of difficulties that can be summed up under the following four main headings: 1) lack of or difficulty understanding a reading text (as cited in Guy, 2015), 2) reduced accuracy and/or inaccuracy in word pronunciation (Klingner et al., 2015, Manzo & Manzo, 1990), 3) unfamiliar vocabulary and word recognition and (Guy, 2015, Qrquez & Ab Rashid, 2017) and 4) lack of self-confidence with the reading

activity (Breznitz, 2006; Lei et al., 2010). These difficulties align more or less with our findings in the present study. Such difficulties are further examined in the course of our analysis.

The first difficulty that students face lies in their inability to understand what they read in English. As one of the participants makes the point clearly, ‘Je trouve la lecture en Anglais très difficile parceque je ne la comprends pas’ (I find reading in English very difficult because I do not understand it). Needless to say, this lack of understanding of the reading material constitutes a really troubling and demotivating factor. Therefore, to avoid discouraging students from reading, the reading material should be chosen on the basis of the students’ level of interest and understanding. This is the best way to engage students, particularly those lacking the mechanics of reading by means of which they can read and comprehend, in reading activities.

Without a doubt, Breznitz (2006) writes that reading fluently is essentially grounded on the quality and rate of identification and recognition of the symbols and sounds of single and multiletter units (p. 10). In this regard, the inaccurate pronunciation of certain English words constitutes the second stumbling block that students often encounter while reading short passages. Consider the following statement made by one of the participants: ‘J’ai un problème de comment les mots se prononcent correctement’ (I have a problem with how words are pronounced accurately). Another participant states: ‘J’ai tant de problèmes de prononciation qui m’empêchent de lire facilement’ (I have many pronunciation problems that made reading difficult for me). Indeed, pronunciation errors are very common among English learners. Relatedly, a study conducted by Raihan and Nezami (2012), demonstrates that students face spelling and pronunciation problems to a great extent (as cited in Qrquez & Ab Rashid, 2017). The students’ inability to pronounce words correctly implies that they have not previously been acquainted with such practice. Had they practiced this activity before their access to university, students would not have been weak in oral reading. Besides, when it comes to reading a short passage quickly and fluently, this type of reading activity needs much effort on the part of underachieving students. One of them writes: ‘Il me manque la technique à partir de laquelle je peux lire rapidement’ (I do not have the technique by means of which I can read quickly). Another student reports: ‘Je trouve des difficultés d’introduire phrase par phrase’ (I find it difficult to read sentence by sentence). Indeed, difficulty in reading, inaccuracy in word pronunciation and

decreased reading rate altogether present a real challenge to the participants, discouraging them from embarking upon a successful reading experience.

The third difficulty students confront is their lack of vocabulary or word recognition. That is, the students' weakness in reading a passage is, in large part, due to the absence or paucity of vocabulary. One of the participants states: 'Je n'ai pas un grand vocabulaire' (I do not have a good command of vocabulary). This paucity of words implies that, when they read, students fail to identify and recognize the words that are unfamiliar or unclear to them, which makes it difficult for them to comprehend the passage in which such words appear. Furthermore, attempts to guess the meaning(s) of these words while reading a passage would no doubt lessen fluency in the students' reading performance. In a similar vein, studies reveal that reading fluency is defined according to the process as a result of the quality of oral reading of words and connected text or as an outcome of the development of accuracy and automaticity in various linguistic components (Breznitz, 2006).

Finally, a lack of self-confidence may also constitute a real barrier to the student's reading of a short passage. Students who have low self-confidence in school might be less motivated. Therefore, the practice of reading would help them build their self-confidence and achieve success later. Research demonstrates that self-confidence strongly influences reading achievement and other academic outcomes (Gao et al., 2020). Some of the participants affirm that they suffer from a lack of self-confidence. In order to develop their reading skills of a short passage, low-ability students are required to be dynamically involved in a range of reading activities under the guidance of their teacher(s). This active involvement on the part of those students having low self-esteem remains one of the best ways to foster their self-confidence and thus increase their reading competence.

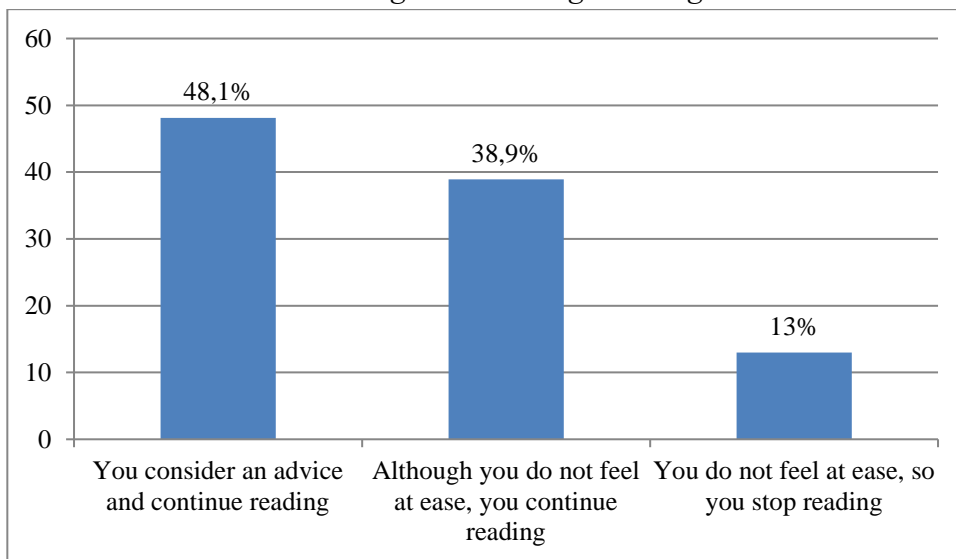
Students' Reactions to Reading Short Passages in English

When they are asked about their reaction to reading short passages in English, less than half the students, 48.1% express considerable interest in such activity. Indeed, this degree of interest allows them to make much progress in reading, especially when they put their teacher's correction(s) into use -- intonation of sentences, pronunciation of words, and the like. Although this very reaction is positive, it remains insufficient as there exist other necessary reading tactics for this category of students to consider and

put into use. Results related to this question also show that 38.9% of students do not feel at ease, particularly when reading a short passage; however, they continue doing so. Also, 13% of them prefer to stop reading the passage because they do not feel at ease while reading it.

Figure 6

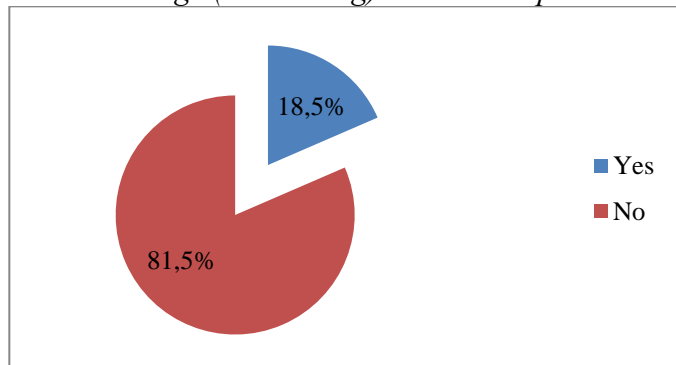
Students' Reactions to Reading Short Passages in English



The question of whether reading can be developed through short or long passages allows gauging students' opinions about which type of passage is more effective for them. The students' answers to such questions reveal that 81.5% of them opt for long passages. However, to develop reading, the latter should be short. What actually matters is the quality of the reading passage -at hand- not its length. Simply put, a short and clear passage about the effects of COVID-19 on Tourism, for example, can be useful for tourism management semester two students both in interest and information. Therefore, providing students with a concise and clear passage as part of their reading activities would help them develop their reading skills. However, the provision of a long text that deals with the same topic but embodies a style that is beyond the students' cognitive level or is not well structured may not be useful for them. In this case, the role of the instructor is to select the passage(s) that best fit(s) the students' interests and needs.

Figure 7

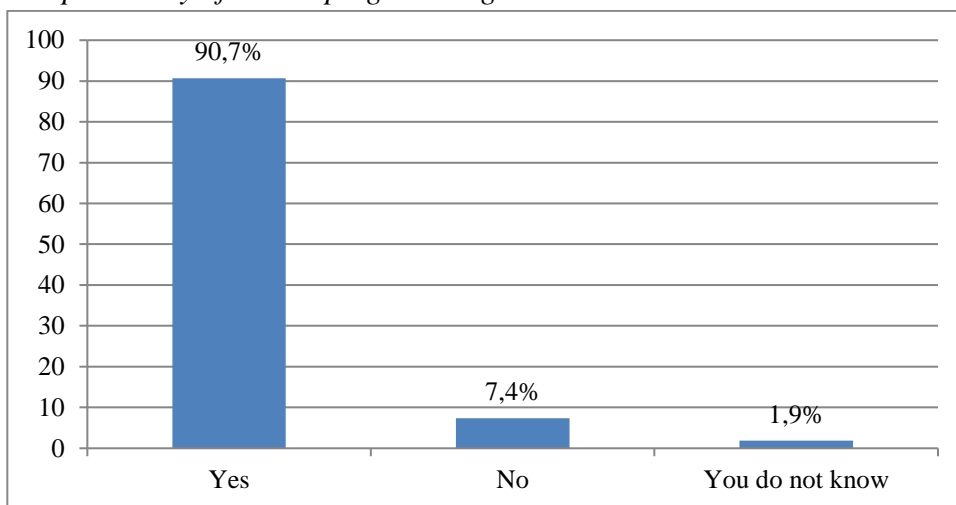
Which Passage (Short/Long) Can Develop Students' Reading Skills?



Possibility of Developing Students' Reading Skills of Short Passages

Regarding this question, students' ability to maximize their chances of developing their reading skills, 90.7% of them express their optimism for this matter. 7.4% express their disagreement, while approximately 2% of the population are neutral. The view that short and concise passages can be read easily can be supported by the fact that low-ability students may be able to get twice as many eye fixations as long passages. In this, short passages in English reduce the risk that the students stop reading and feel bored. This, in turn, increases their interest in reading and understanding such passages.

For some participants, the merits of reading short passages in English seem to outnumber those of reading long ones. For example, a student reports that: 'Lire des passages courts, c'est mieux' (it is better to read short passages), as this kind of passages assists them to a considerable degree to learn in a progressive manner. Another participant clearly states that: 'Je veux apprendre pas à pas avant de lire ce qu'est difficile' (I want to learn step-by-step before reading what is difficult). Thus, and as an alternative to reading long passages, this category of learners would rather opt for reading shorter and easier passages, being convinced that the latter constitute a powerful incentive for them to boost their reading skills in English. According to one of the participants, 'un passage court et facile est beaucoup mieux qu'un passage long' (a short and easy passage is rather appreciated), which demonstrates that low-ability students would be able to perform better when they are provided with shorter passages instead of longer ones.

Figure 8*The possibility of Developing Reading in the Future*

There can be no doubt that the old saying "practice makes perfect" applies well to the mastery of the four language skills. Therefore, students can become fluent and competent readers only by practicing often and regularly both inside and outside the classroom. One of the participants asserts: 'Je suis extrêmement intéressé par l'apprentissage d'Anglais, car apprendre à lire des passages en Anglais m'aidera à améliorer ma capacité de lecture' (I am extremely interested in learning reading because reading short passages in English will help me improve my capacity in such skill). This is to mean that the students' intense interest in and immense enthusiasm for reading can be enhanced by practicing the skill under study.

Another student seems to offer a similar view, mainly by insisting on the amount of time that should be allocated to free reading: 'Il faut consacrer plein de temps à la lecture libre' (it is necessary to devote much time to free reading), argues the student. Moreover, individual reading of different materials like novels, together with watching movies and serials in English, would also broaden the learner's learning experience. For a participant, and within the context of the learner's autonomy, such activity may be beneficial 'en pratiquant la langue individuellement, par exemple, en lisant des romans et en regardant des films et des séries en Anglais.' Therefore, the participants' comments reveal that the process of short passage reading, among other reading tasks, needs much practice on the part of the learner herself or himself.

Conclusion

Many low-ability students enrolled in different Moroccan universities still encounter a wide range of problems in reading of short passages in English, let alone long ones. These problems, according to this study, include a lack of self-confidence, paucity of vocabulary, poor pronunciation, and low speed. Other reading difficulties may need clarification, but such problems are apparently the most noticeable.

When low-ability students are provided with multiple opportunities to read short passages in English, they are more likely to excel in reading such passages and understand them better. The more they read these passages, the less difficult the process will be. Hence, they need time and effort in order to develop the skill in focus. Adapted short texts or passages can be useful for low-ability students because this type of passage facilitates the reading activity for this category of learners. In this context, they will be encouraged on a gradual basis to read them accurately and understand them easily.

Generally, students look to the reading activity of short passages with great optimism, which will evidently help them read long passages as well. To interpret a short passage in English, low-ability students need to decode the words and sentences embodied in such a passage, whatever their field of specialization. They also need to make connections between what they read and what they already know. To this end, they need to acquire various varied vocabulary items. Relatedly, attempts to develop their vocabulary allow them to read accurately and interpret what they read without much difficulty. Effective reading of a short passage does not involve one unique and simple process: reading for the sake of reading. Reading short passages in English acts as a powerful incentive for weak students to develop their reading skills.

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