

From Decoding to Understanding: Applying Automaticity Theory to Develop Fluent University-Level EFL Readers

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ABSTRACT: University-level reading comprehension is frequently impeded not by intellectual deficits, but by a "cognitive bottleneck." Many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students struggle with complex academic texts because their finite cognitive capacity is disproportionately consumed by lower-level linguistic decoding. When word recognition lacks automaticity, attentional resources are monopolized by surface mechanics rather than deep semantic integration. Grounded in Automaticity Theory (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974), this paper evaluates Repeated Reading (RR) as a pedagogical intervention to alleviate these constraints. An experimental study involving second-year students at the École Normale Supérieure (ENS) of Constantine demonstrates that RR significantly enhances automatic word recognition. By minimizing the cognitive "cost" of decoding, RR frees mental resources for higher-level comprehension, suggesting that fluency instruction is a vital prerequisite for advanced academic proficiency in EFL curricula.

KEYWORDS: Automaticity Theory, Cognitive Bottleneck, EFL Learners, Reading Fluency, Repeated Reading.

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1. Introduction

The ultimate objective of reading within any academic context is the construction of meaning from print. However, to achieve deep comprehension, a reader must move beyond the accurate recognition of words to a level where decoding is nearly error-free and automatic (Bouguebs, 2007). This level of expertise, defined as reading fluency, serves as the critical "bridge" that connects word recognition to comprehension (Rasinski, 2004). Within the Algerian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, particularly at the École Normale Supérieure (ENS) of Constantine, a significant paradox exists: students often possess the prerequisite vocabulary and grammatical knowledge for advanced study, yet they remain "word-bound" readers who lack the skill to read texts with appropriate speed and fewer errors (Bouguebs, 2007, 2023).

This lack of fluency creates a "cognitive bottleneck." According to the Automaticity Theory advanced by LaBerge and Samuels (1974), human attention is a finite resource. In a non-fluent reader, the mental energy required for lower-level linguistic decoding is so substantial that it disproportionately consumes the reader's limited attentional capacity (Samuels, 2006). When word recognition lacks automaticity, the "cognitive cost" of decoding leaves insufficient mental bandwidth for high-level semantic integration. Consequently, comprehension diminishes not due to a lack of intellectual ability, but due to a processing constraint that prioritizes mechanics over meaning (Wolf, 2003).

To resolve this bottleneck, the implementation of Repeated Reading (RR), as formalized by Samuels (1979), serves as a pedagogical bridge between these two layers of decoding and comprehension. By requiring students to engage with the same passage multiple times until a specific criterion of fluency is met, RR facilitates the shift of word recognition from effortful, controlled processing to unconscious, automatic processing. This paper argues that integrating RR into university-level EFL curricula is an essential intervention to transition students from laborious decoders to fluent, independent comprehenders.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Cognitive Architecture of Reading

Reading is a complex process that involves multiple sub-processes, including phonemic awareness, letter-to-sound correspondence, and syntactic processing (National Reading Panel, 2000). The ultimate goal of these operations is to construct meaning. However, achieving this goal requires the reader to move beyond simple accuracy to a level of expertise where decoding is both effortless and fluid (Samuels, 1979). This state is defined as reading fluency, often described as the essential "bridge" between word recognition and comprehension.

2.2 Theoretical Framework: Automaticity Theory

LaBerge and Samuels (1974) advanced the theory of automaticity, arguing that efficient reading depends on the automatic processing of lower-level skills, particularly word recognition and phrasing, so that cognitive resources can be allocated to comprehension. Their model provides a strong theoretical foundation for the development of reading fluency.

From this perspective, comprehension is unlikely to occur unless beginning readers achieve automaticity in identifying letters and words (Logan, 1988). When decoding remains effortful, it consumes the reader's limited attentional capacity, leaving insufficient resources for meaning construction (Wolf, 2003). Fluent word recognition is therefore a prerequisite for effective comprehension.

2.2.1 The Limited Capacity of Attention

The theory posits that humans have a limited capacity for attention; while multiple processes may occur simultaneously, individuals can consciously attend to only one demanding task at a time (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974). Samuels (1994) distinguishes between external and internal attention, noting that for the beginning or struggling reader, the internal process is focused entirely on word recognition. This creates a state where the "pool" of attention is exhausted by decoding, leaving little or no room for the construction of meaning (Samuels, 2006).

2.2.2 Characteristics of Automaticity

To transition from a "word-bound" state to fluent reading, a student must move from controlled to automatic processing. As defined by Logan (1997), automatic processing is characterized by four core features: it is fast, effortless, autonomous, and non-conscious. These characteristics emerge progressively through sustained practice, enabling a shift from controlled to automatic processing. In reading, this transition is achieved when the reader develops visual (orthographic) memory, allowing them to recognize words as whole units by sight rather than sounding them out letter-by-letter (Samuels, 2006).

2.3 Assumptions of Automaticity in Reading

Automaticity theory rests on several key assumptions (Samuels, 2012). First, the human mind has limited capacity for demanding cognitive tasks. Second, processes such as word recognition and comprehension initially consume a substantial portion of this capacity. Third, with continuous practice, the cognitive effort required for these processes gradually decreases. Finally, once effort is sufficiently reduced, individuals can perform multiple processes simultaneously. In reading, this transition explains how fluent readers are able to decode and comprehend text in parallel.

2.4 The Central Role of Attention

Attention is central to LaBerge and Samuels's model. Effective reading depends on the efficient allocation of attention across component processes. To achieve comprehension, some aspects of reading, particularly decoding, must require minimal attention.

Samuels (1994) distinguishes between external and internal attention, with the latter being most relevant to reading. Internal attention is characterized by three features: alertness (readiness to process information), selectivity (the ability to focus on relevant input while ignoring distractions), and limited capacity (a finite ability to handle demanding tasks). For example, a beginning reader must devote most of their attention to decoding, whereas a skilled reader can distribute attention more flexibly, focusing primarily on meaning.

This distinction can be illustrated through a comparison with other skills: a novice driver must concentrate fully on operating the vehicle, while an experienced driver can perform additional tasks simultaneously. Similarly, in reading, beginners struggle because decoding and comprehension compete for limited attentional resources.

2.5 From Controlled to Automatic Reading

In early reading stages, attention is largely devoted to decoding. As a result, readers often alternate their focus between decoding and comprehension, a process that is slow, effortful, and cognitively demanding (Samuels, 1994). This constant shifting creates a bottleneck that hinders meaning construction.

With practice, however, decoding becomes automatic. Once this occurs, attentional resources are freed and can be directed almost entirely toward comprehension. At this stage, decoding and comprehension operate simultaneously and efficiently, characterizing fluent reading.

2.6 Developmental Stages of Automatic Word Recognition

The development of automaticity in reading occurs progressively through identifiable stages (Samuels, 1979; Han & Chen, 2010):

- **Non-accurate stage:** At this initial stage, readers struggle to recognize words, even with sufficient time, and comprehension is minimal.
- **Accuracy stage:** Readers achieve accurate word recognition but with considerable cognitive effort. Reading remains slow, laborious, and often lacks expression, which limits comprehension. This stage is particularly crucial for instructional intervention.
- **Automatic stage:** Word recognition becomes rapid, accurate, and effortless. Readers demonstrate fluent, expressive reading, and comprehension becomes smooth and efficient.

Progression across these stages reflects a gradual reduction in cognitive effort. At the accuracy stage, repeated exposure to text plays a critical role in strengthening word recognition. Strategies such as rereading are especially effective at this level, enabling learners to transition toward automaticity. Ultimately, fluent readers decode words without conscious effort, allowing them to focus fully on meaning (Eskey, 1988).

In essence, as practice reduces the cognitive demands of decoding, readers are able to perform multiple processes simultaneously. This coordination of decoding and comprehension signals the attainment of reading fluency and illustrates the core principle of automaticity theory.

2.7 Repeated Reading: The Pedagogical Bridge

To facilitate the transition from the accuracy stage to the automatic stage, targeted instructional strategies are essential. Repeated Reading (RR), originally developed by Samuels (1979), operationalizes Automaticity Theory by prioritizing the depth of processing through repetition rather than exposure to vast quantities of new, unmastered text. This method is grounded in the premise that multiple exposures to the same orthographic patterns enable readers to shift their cognitive focus from the mechanics of decoding to the construction of meaning.

2.7.1 The Mechanism of Repetition

The core principle of RR is that repetition reduces the "cognitive cost" associated with decoding. The method draws a clear parallel between acquiring reading fluency and mastering other complex skills, such as music or athletics. As noted by Bouguebs (2023), proficiency develops through deliberate practice: just as a musician rehearses a single piece until the performance becomes effortless, a reader engages with the same text multiple times until they achieve a satisfactory level of automaticity. This analogy highlights the central role of repetition in moving a skill from controlled, conscious effort to a transparent, non-conscious operation.

2.7.2 Instructional Procedures and Implementation

In its original implementation, RR involves structured and guided practice using short, manageable passages (approximately 150 to 200 words). The protocol typically follows a three-step sequence:

- a. **Modeling:** The teacher first models fluent reading, providing an auditory example of appropriate rate, accuracy, and prosodic expression.
- b. **Guided Practice:** Students practice reading the passage aloud while the teacher monitors performance, recording the reading rate in words per minute (WPM) and noting decoding errors.
- c. **Criterion Achievement:** Learners reread the same passage until they reach a predetermined fluency threshold (e.g., 85–90 WPM). Once this criterion is achieved, they move to a new text, ensuring individualized progression.

2.7.3 Frequency and Optimal Repetition

A critical consideration in the application of RR is the optimal number of repetitions required to trigger automaticity. While early implementations were flexible, empirical studies by O'Shea et al. (1985) suggest that approximately four repetitions are often sufficient to yield substantial fluency gains. Beyond this point, improvements in reading speed and accuracy tend to diminish. However, the effectiveness of the intervention depends more on consistent, meaningful engagement with the text than on a strictly fixed number of readings. By systematically reducing the cognitive load of decoding, RR empowers the reader to bypass the attentional bottleneck, facilitating the advanced comprehension required in university-level EFL contexts.

2.8 Reading Fluency in the EFL Context

Repeated Reading has been widely validated in first language (L1) contexts and subsequently adapted to L2/EFL settings (Nation, 2001). Empirical research generally demonstrates that RR significantly improves reading rate and accuracy, particularly within practiced texts.

In L2 contexts, however, findings are more nuanced. For example, Taguchi and Gorsuch (2002) observed marked improvements in reading speed within practiced passages, though they noted that the transfer of these gains to new, unpracticed texts may be limited in short-term interventions. Conversely, longitudinal practice and Assisted Repeated Reading, incorporating auditory support, have been shown to enhance overall reading rates and facilitate stronger transfer effects (Taguchi, Gorsuch, & Takayasu, 2004).

These findings underscore the core tenet of Automaticity Theory: higher-level comprehension can only occur effectively when lower-level processes, such as word recognition, achieve a state of effortless execution. Consequently, in university-level EFL environments like that of ENS Constantine, developing reading fluency is not merely a supplementary exercise but a fundamental prerequisite for advanced academic literacy.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative quasi-experimental design using a pre-test/post-test control group framework. The primary objective was to isolate the effect of the RR variable to investigate its impact on reading fluency. By comparing an experimental group (receiving RR instruction) against a control group (receiving traditional non-repeated reading instruction), the design sought to measure the transition from controlled processing to automatic processing.

3.2 Population and Participants

The study involved 16 second-year EFL students from the English Department at the École Normale Supérieure (ENS) of Constantine. These participants, aged between 20 and 24, were pre-service English teachers with an average of six years of prior formal English instruction.

From a baseline population of 54 students, 16 participants were randomly selected and subsequently assigned to two cohorts: the Experimental Group (EG, $n=8$) and the Control Group (CG, $n=8$). The sample was restricted to 16 participants to facilitate the intensive individual modeling and immediate corrective feedback necessitated by the RR protocol. This smaller cohort ensured the instructional integrity of the cognitive intervention and allowed for rigorous monitoring of individual progress (Bouguebs, 2007).

3.3 Research Instruments and Materials

To evaluate the shift toward automaticity, the study utilized instruments sensitive to incremental changes in reading behavior and processing speed.

- **Curriculum-Based Measurement (CBM):** Adapted from the framework established by Deno et al. (2002), CBM was prioritized over traditional Informal Reading Inventories (IRIs). This selection was predicated on CBM's superior reliability in providing direct, observable metrics of performance. In this study, Correct Words Per Minute (CWPM) served as the primary quantitative proxy for reading automaticity.
- **Reading Passages**
 - a. **Assessment Passages:** Six standardized academic passages were employed (three for the pre-test and three for the post-test) to ensure data reliability through median scoring.
 - b. **Instructional Passages:** Twelve passages, each approximately 200 words in length, were curated from the second-year English Department curriculum. Adhering to Sousa's (2004) pedagogical recommendations, these texts were selected at the participants' independent reading level (95% accuracy). This strategic calibration ensured that cognitive resources remained dedicated to fluency consolidation rather than being diverted by lexical or syntactic obstacles.
- **Recording and Verification Tools:** Digital recording equipment and high-precision stopwatches were utilized to monitor participant performance. This methodology facilitated an exacting verification of Word Recognition Errors (WRE) and CWPM, ensuring the high degree of data granularity required for rigorous statistical analysis.

3.4 Instructional Procedures

The intervention was conducted over a six-week period, consisting of 12 sessions, each 30 minutes in duration. The Experimental Group (EG) adhered to a scaffolded RR protocol designed to optimize cognitive processing through the following stages:

- **Modeling (Prosodic Scaffolding):** the instructor provided a fluent oral rendition of the text. Cognitively, this established a "prosodic map," allowing students to internalize appropriate phrasing, intonation, and temporal markers prior to their own performance. This initial scaffolding was designed to reduce immediate cognitive strain.
- **Repetition (Automaticity Consolidation):** Participants engaged in multiple successive readings of the same text. Drawing on the findings of O'Shea and Sindelar (1985), a threshold of four repetitions was implemented to facilitate automaticity. Each

subsequent iteration was intended to systematically diminish the cognitive effort required for lower-level decoding.

- **Corrective Feedback Loop:** The instructor provided immediate, targeted feedback regarding decoding inaccuracies. This real-time intervention prevented the "fossilization" or unintended automatization of incorrect orthographic patterns, thereby ensuring linguistic precision.
- **Graphing (Metacognitive Monitoring):** Students plotted their daily CWPM on individual fluency graphs. This served as a critical metacognitive instrument, enabling participants to visualize their trajectory toward automaticity. Furthermore, it fostered sustained motivation by providing empirical evidence of their own developmental growth (Bouguebs, 2007).

Note on the Control Group: To isolate the impact of repetition, the Control Group (CG) received identical modeling and corrective feedback but engaged with each passage only once. This design effectively controlled for instructional variables, ensuring that any significant gains in the EG could be attributed specifically to the repetitive nature of the RR protocol.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Pre-test Results

The primary objective of the pre-test was to establish the baseline reading fluency of the participants and to ensure the initial comparability between the two groups.

Table 1. Pre-test CWPM Scores

Group	N	Mean CWPM	Standard Deviation
Experimental Group	8	107.62	140.55
Control Group	8	103.87	103.90
Difference	—	3.75	—

As illustrated in Table 1, EG and the CG exhibited strikingly similar profiles in terms of their initial CWPM scores. The EG recorded a mean of 107.62 CWPM, while the CG averaged 103.87 CWPM, resulting in a negligible mean difference of only 3.75 CWPM.

From a statistical standpoint, this minimal variance suggests that both groups entered the intervention with a relatively homogenous level of reading proficiency. This baseline equivalence is a critical prerequisite for the validity of the experimental design, as it minimizes the risk of selection bias and "initial state" disparities. Consequently, any significant divergent growth in fluency observed during the post-test can be more confidently attributed to the pedagogical intervention, the RR method, rather than pre-existing differences in the students' decoding abilities.

Furthermore, the data regarding word recognition accuracy reinforces this equivalence. With the EG averaging 5.00 errors and the CG averaging 5.88 errors per passage, the participants demonstrated a shared struggle with the "Accuracy Stage" of word recognition (Samuels, 1979). This confirms that both groups were equally positioned within the "cognitive bottleneck," where the high mental cost of decoding was likely hindering their overall reading speed and potential for comprehension. By establishing this statistical parity at the outset, the

study provides a robust foundation for evaluating the efficacy of the RR method in fostering automaticity.

4.2 Post-test Results

Table 2. Post-test CWPM Scores

Group	N	Mean CWPM	SD	Gain from Pre-test
Experimental Group	8	130.37	133.54	+22.75
Control Group	8	109.25	55.94	+5.38
Between-Group Diff.	—	21.12	—	+17.37

The post-test results, as detailed in Table 2, reveal a significant divergence in reading fluency following the six-week instructional period. While both groups demonstrated some level of progress, the EG exhibited a substantial advancement in CWPM compared to the CG. Specifically, the EG achieved a mean gain of 22.75 CWPM, whereas the CG showed a marginal increase of only 5.38 CWPM. This resulted in a final between-group difference of 21.12 CWPM, representing an educationally meaningful disparity that underscores the efficacy of the RR intervention.

From a cognitive perspective, these gains suggest a fundamental shift in the students' processing of academic text. The EG's improvement was not limited to speed; it was accompanied by a notable reduction in word recognition errors, decreasing from a pre-test mean of 5.0 to 3.5. In contrast, the CG's accuracy remained relatively stagnant, moving only from 5.88 to 5.62 errors. This simultaneous increase in speed and accuracy indicates that the EG participants successfully moved toward the "Automatic Stage" of word recognition, where orthographic patterns are identified with minimal conscious effort.

4.3 Statistical Significance and Hypothesis Testing

To evaluate the efficacy of the Repeated Reading (RR) intervention, an independent samples t-test was conducted, comparing the post-test fluency gains of the Experimental Group (EG) and the Control Group (CG). The statistical results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Independent Samples T-Test Results for Post-Test Fluency Scores

Calculated t-value	Degrees of Freedom (df)	Critical t-value (one-tailed, $\alpha = .05$)	Significance Level
4.05	14	1.76*	$p < .05$

The statistical analysis indicates a significant difference between the two groups following the instructional period. The calculated t-value (4.05) exceeds the critical value (1.76) at $df=14, p<.05$, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis that Repeated Reading has no effect on reading fluency.

This finding demonstrates that the improvements observed in the EG's reading rate and accuracy are statistically significant and unlikely to be due to chance. The magnitude of the t -

value further suggests a strong treatment effect, providing empirical support for the effectiveness of the RR method in enhancing reading automaticity.

In line with Automaticity Theory (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974), these results provide empirical evidence that systematic repetition alters the "cognitive economy" of the reading act. By minimizing the mental "cost" associated with lower-level decoding, the RR method appears to have freed significant attentional resources. This liberation of mental bandwidth is a critical prerequisite for university-level EFL learners, as it allows the focus to shift from the mechanics of the print to deep semantic integration and comprehension.

The data thus confirm that for the second-year students at ENS Constantine, fluency instruction served as a successful intervention to alleviate the cognitive bottleneck. These findings provide strong empirical support for the effectiveness of the RR intervention in enhancing reading fluency (Bouguebs, 2007). They are also consistent with Automaticity Theory, which posits that repeated exposure reduces decoding demands and facilitates more efficient processing.

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpretation of Findings

The empirical evidence gathered in this study supports the primary hypothesis: students subjected to the RR method demonstrate a statistically significant improvement in reading fluency. The EG exhibited marked gains in both CWPM and word recognition accuracy. Critically, the data suggests a successful transfer of fluency gains; participants were able to apply increased automaticity to novel, unpracticed passages during the post-test. This indicates that the intervention facilitated the proceduralization of reading mechanics rather than the mere rote memorization of specific stimulus texts.

5.2 Theoretical Integration: Validating Automaticity in an EFL Context

These findings provide robust empirical validation for Automaticity Theory (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974) within the Algerian university EFL environment.

- **The Shift in Cognitive Economy:** The data illustrates a fundamental transition in the "cost-benefit" ratio of reading. By systematically reducing the cognitive "cost" of decoding through repetition, students transitioned from effortful, controlled processing to fluid, automatic processing.
- **Attentional Resource Allocation:** The observed reduction in word recognition errors within the EG (from a mean of 5.0 to 3.5) indicates an increase in the efficiency of the orthographic processor. As decoding achieved a state of near-automaticity, the "attentional profit" available for meaning-making increased, as cognitive resources were no longer monopolized by lower-level phonological and lexical tasks (Samuels, 2006).
- **The Precondition for Comprehension:** Although reading comprehension was not the direct focus of this 2007 experimental phase, a limitation addressed in subsequent longitudinal research, the increase in fluency establishes the essential cognitive infrastructure for deep understanding. As noted in later studies (Bouguebs & Hamada, 2018), fluency serves as the bridge; without the automaticity demonstrated here, the mental bandwidth required for higher-level semantic integration remains inaccessible.

5.3 Pedagogical Implications

The study underscores that reading fluency is a discrete, trainable skill that must be explicitly addressed within EFL curricula, distinct from traditional intensive reading comprehension modules.

- **The Instructor as Fluency Coach:** These results suggest a shift in the pedagogical paradigm at the university level. Instructors should adopt the role of "fluency coaches," prioritizing modeling, immediate corrective feedback, and the continuous monitoring of student progress.
- **Curricular Integration and Motivation:** The implementation of RR, paired with progress-monitoring graphs, proved to be a high-motivation strategy for ENS Constantine students. Providing empirical evidence of their own growth allows students to engage with their linguistic development metacognitively.
- **A Synthetic Instructional Model:** While this study validates the efficacy of guided Repeated Reading, a comprehensive approach should eventually synthesize RR with Independent Silent Reading (ISR). This ensures that fluency is developed through both guided classroom intervention and independent, extensive exposure to diverse texts (Bouguebs, 2007).

6. Conclusions

This research has demonstrated that the "cognitive bottleneck" frequently observed in university-level EFL learners is not an intellectual deficit, but a processing constraint rooted in a lack of decoding automaticity. By applying the principles of Automaticity Theory through the Repeated Reading method, this study has shown that structured, modeled repetition significantly enhances both the speed and accuracy of reading among second-year students at ENS Constantine.

The findings confirm that when the "cognitive cost" of word recognition is lowered, the mental resources of the learner are liberated, establishing the necessary foundation for advanced academic comprehension. In the context of Algerian higher education, where students must navigate increasingly complex English-medium instruction (EMI) and academic literature, the inclusion of explicit fluency training is no longer optional—it is a prerequisite for academic success.

Future research should build upon these foundational results by exploring the long-term transfer effects of RR on specific comprehension metrics and investigating how digital tools can scale these fluency gains across larger EFL populations. Ultimately, by transforming "word-bound" decoders into fluent readers, we empower students to move beyond the surface mechanics of the print and engage fully with the global academic discourse.

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