

## Critique of a Research Study:

*Does Reading-While-Listening Enhance Students' Reading Fluency?  
Preliminary Results from School Experiments in Rural Uganda*

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### Abstract

This paper's purpose is to critique the article: *Does Reading-While-Listening Enhance Students' Reading Fluency? Preliminary Results from School Experiments in Rural Uganda*. The aforementioned article is based on a study which examines the value of RWL via audiobooks' impact on increasing reading fluency. The 30-day study conducted in a grade three classrooms at Hadassa Primary School in rural Mbale, Uganda, reported gains for both the control and treatment groups, with the treatment showing a higher increase.

The following paper critiques the article, *Does Reading-While-Listening Enhance Students' Reading Fluency? Preliminary Results from School Experiments in Rural Uganda* (Friedland et al., 2017). To avoid confusion, the article/study will often be referred to as Friedland et al. The framework for this critique will proceed under the following headings: scholarly importance, inquiry, literature review, research question, method, findings, and conclusion.

### Scholarly Importance

Reading While Listening (RWL) or audio-assisted reading is a type of

listening support that matches spoken form with written form and helps develop auditory discrimination and word recognition (Osada, 2001; Vandergrift, 2007). From the position of an EFL teacher in Japan, when considering research which suggests that Japanese students do not often have the opportunity to use English outside of the classroom (Matsuoka & Evans, 2004; Olagboyega, 2013), RWL has several benefits. It can allow Japanese students to hear English daily, develop listening practice, and help manage the mental burden of decoding. As stated by Pierce, “learning cannot proceed without exposure and practice...the more exposure and practice, the more proficient the learner will become” (1995, p. 7). For the practitioner who sees the curriculum enrichment value of RWL, the resources, and materials found in Friedland et al., provide a source of introduction and reinforcement for RWL classroom implementation.

### **Inquiry**

Friedland et al. draw on research, which posits that a lack of interest and incentive to read extends to students from all social backgrounds. Additionally, many students in developing countries lack the educational resources to nurture and maintain reading skills (OCED, 2012 as cited in Friedland et al., 2017). In sync with the present need to technologically enhance education, the study incorporated the RWL app, SiMBi. Research by Bird and Williams (2007), validates improved learning outcomes when using technology to facilitate listening while reading, and further supports “how the simultaneous approach of RWL strengthens memory and provides English language learners with access to proper pronunciation” (as cited in Friedland, 2017, p. 86).

### **Background**

Friedland et al. describe Ugandan’s education system, the effects of poverty on education, the government’s commitment to increasing literacy rates, and

its intent to address groups whose literary skills suffer due to gender and race discrimination. The study also provides an extensive list of challenges that constrain the Ugandan primary education system, some of which include: teacher and student absenteeism, lack of school administrative infrastructure, lack of midday meals for pupils, and misuse of grants.

### **Review of Related Literature**

In a three-part literature review, Friedland et al. gathered resources that bring further relevance to RWL's role in reading fluency. The study compares research by Ehri, 1992; Woodall, 2008; and Wren, 2006 (as cited in Friedland et al., 2017, p. 84) to draw on Vygotsky's zone of proximal development to explain how "audio recordings of a text [act like a mentor] to help the reader decode to achieve a higher level of reading fluency" (2017, p. 84). Section two on fluency cites two authors to explain the three essential elements of fluency and how increased fluency helps decrease decoding issues. Part three, the second longest of the literature review sections, uses only one reference as it details the importance of Dolch's Sight words as a tool for learning high-frequency English vocabulary and how the process contributes to increasing reading fluency.

The review's first section provides both comparison and contrast of RWL articles which will be helpful to the practitioner who wants to know more about RWL research and its benefits. Sections two and three lack the breadth and depth of a comprehensive literature review when considering the vital role of fluency and sight word acquisition in developing reading skills. Also, some incongruencies exist between in-text resources in the literature review and the reference section. i.e., Jong rather than De Jong, Chang (2011) is not listed in the reference section, and some authors in the reference section are not cited in the study.

**Research question**

The following is the research question pursued by Friedland et al.: To what extent do the reading fluency scores differ between the groups who participate in Reading While Listening (RWL) to audiobooks program and control groups after the program?

***Independent and Dependent Variable***

Using Words Correct Per Minute (WCPM) as a measurement device, Friedland et al. developed baseline data and conducted tests at the beginning and the end of a 30-day study. The results of post-test scores represent the dependent variable. The independent variables are the treatment and control group, which provide measurable observations through operationalizing fluency by giving the control group text only and the treatment group SiMBi.

**Method*****School setting, participants, and materials***

The participants included forty-six grade three students between the ages of 8–13 enrolled in Hadassa Primary School in rural Mbale, Uganda. As “the school has limited resources and limited exposure to scholastic material, including pencils” (Friedland et al., 2017, p. 85), the study provided ten iPads and 25 sets of headphones to facilitate SiMBi. SiMBi’s audio and reading material originated from the public domain and were recorded by Canadian high school student volunteers. PDF copies of the reading materials were also made available. The 30-day program, based on 10 minutes of reading per day plus time to study Dolch’s sight words, randomly divided the class into two groups. Volunteers and teachers at the Ugandan school were trained to conduct

Word Correct Per Minute (WCPM) testing.

To identify potential variables that can impact WCPM, based on Chan's work on a correlation between socioeconomic factors and reading achievement (1997, as cited in Friedland et al. 2017, p. 87), prior to the study Friedland et al. issued a questionnaire. The questions were based on student age, grade, gender, and potential variables that can impact WCPM, i.e.: how frequently they read, the last book they read, and their favorite books. The questionnaire also explored motivational characteristics and variables, including walking distance and daily nutrition.

### ***Procedure***

Step one: Test students using leveled reading selections from *Florida's Assessments for Instruction in Reading: Ongoing progress Monitoring Oral Reading Fluency (OPM)*, to determine appropriate instruction material.

Step 2 Pretest: Using OPM materials and WCPM, students read for three consecutive minutes and were timed at the end of each minute.

Step 3: Students were divided into a control and treatment group. Both groups read for ten minutes daily and studied Dolch's Sight Word lists.

Step 4 Post-test: After 30 days, both groups were tested using WCPM with the same reading passages used in the pre-test.

### **Limitations**

The article's list of limitations included: only enough research staff to cover one school; a need for a larger sample, and WIFI issues. Also, if school fees were neglected, students were forbidden to attend class, thus resulting in absences during the study. There was also a lack of student computer experience; lack of a common technological language; and communication problems between Ugandan English speakers and the English used by the

researchers. And it seems likely this study may have encountered other communication issues. In the study's record of local languages used by the participants, the following are listed as local languages: "Mayris, Lungi, Bagiso, Ganda, Echar, and Liguse" (Friedland et al., 2107, p. 88). A quick Google search only retrieves the Friedland et al. study. In a telephone interview with Professor Vick Lukwago Ssali, a Ugandan and specialist in Ugandan ethnicity, he could only confirm "Ganda," also called "Luganda," spoken by his own tribe, the Baganda, as one of the existing local languages. Dr. Ssali noted further that "Lungi" and "Bagiso" could be a mistaken reference to "Lango" and "Lugisu" or "Lugishu," spoken, respectively, by the Langi of Northern Uganda, and the Bagisu or Bagishu of Eastern Uganda. He had no idea what "Mayris" and "Echar" could be referring to. This lack of communication raises questions about the working relationship between the study's authors and the Hadassa primary school leaders, as it seems odd that the study did not ascertain what local languages students spoke at home.

## **Findings**

In the face of several challenges, the study found both groups increased in word count, with the treatment group showing a higher increase, thus indicating a difference between the participant's use of text only and RWL via audiobooks.

## **Conclusion**

Friedland et al. conclude that SiMBi "is a promising tool to potentially improve both reading comprehension and fluency of the English language" (2017, p. 90). Also, the authors voice the intention to conduct further studies in North America and Uganda. The conclusion's focus on the prospects of SiMBi,

as a resource for increasing reading fluency and comprehension, aligns with Egbert and Sanden’s notion that, “a study can provide evidence for a certain pattern or outcome, [and can be the inspiration for] other studies using different methods and paradigms (or even replication studies) that might uncover different evidence” (2019, p. 92).

### References

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