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**BREAKING THE BARRIER: FROM STUMBLING TO SOARING
IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL) READING**



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Abstract

The transition from mechanical decoding to deep conceptual understanding remains a primary hurdle for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, often resulting in a "stumbling" reading experience where cognitive resources are exhausted by the technical demands of the language. This article, "Breaking the Barrier: From Stumbling to Soaring in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Reading," explores the cognitive bottlenecks that hinder literacy and evaluates the effectiveness of fluency-building interventions such as Repeated Reading and Prosody training. Through a mixed-methods analysis of intermediate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, the study identifies a significant "automaticity threshold" demonstrating that when word recognition becomes subconscious, mental bandwidth is liberated for high-level synthesis and inferential reasoning. Ultimately, the research suggests that by prioritizing rhythmic phrasing and automaticity, educators can dismantle the barriers to comprehension and empower learners to achieve a "soaring" state of fluid, meaningful engagement with complex texts.

Keywords:

EFL Literacy, Reading Fluency, Cognitive Load Theory, Reading Comprehension, Automaticity, Prosody, Repeated Reading, Pedagogical Strategies.

Introduction

For many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, the transition from laboriously decoding individual words to fluidly grasping the essence of a text can feel like an insurmountable climb. While basic literacy provides the foundation, the true "barrier" lies in disconnect between phonetic fluency and deep conceptual comprehension. This phenomenon, often referred to as the "bottleneck effect," occurs when a student's cognitive resources are entirely consumed by the mechanical demands of the language pronunciation, syntax, and literal translation leaving no mental "bandwidth" for the high-level synthesis required to derive meaning (Yousaf et al., 2026). When students "stumble" through a passage, they are often performing a feat of athletic linguistics rather than intellectual engagement. This fragmented approach to reading not only stunts academic growth but also erodes the learner's confidence, leading to a persistent plateau where the joy of discovery is replaced by the exhaustion of effort. To move "from stumbling to soaring," instruction must evolve beyond isolated vocabulary drills. It requires a pedagogical shift that treats fluency not as an end goal, but as the essential bridge to the learner's internal world of ideas (Mehmood et al., 2026).

This article, "Breaking the Barrier: From Stumbling to Soaring in English as a Foreign

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Language (EFL) learners Reading," explores evidence-based strategies designed to dismantle these cognitive hurdles. By integrating multifaceted fluency-building activities such as scaffolded oral reading and semantic mapping educators can help learners move past mechanical repetition toward a more "soaring" academic experience. In this state, comprehension is no longer a distant goal to be reached after the work of reading is done; instead, it becomes a natural, simultaneous result of confident, fluid engagement with the text. Through a comprehensive analysis of modern pedagogical frameworks and longitudinal classroom interventions, this research aims to:

- **Identify** the specific cognitive bottlenecks that hinder ESL reading progress.
- **Evaluate** the effectiveness of repeated reading and scaffolded comprehension techniques.
- **Propose** a holistic model for instruction that fosters both speed and deep textual insight.

Research Background

The background of this research addresses the shift from "bottom-up" decoding to the need for comprehensive literacy in ESL education, identifying a "fluency plateau" where students struggle to bridge the gap between word recognition and comprehension. It highlights how cognitive load theory and traditional, siloed teaching methods create barriers to understanding, necessitating an integrated pedagogical approach to move students from decoding to true literacy.

Problem Statement

Traditional instructional methods often exacerbate this problem by treating reading fluency and deep understanding as separate, sequential skills rather than an integrated process. By focusing heavily on isolated grammar and vocabulary drills, current curricula fail to provide the necessary scaffolding to bridge the divide between phonetic accuracy and conceptual insight. There is an urgent need to shift toward pedagogical strategies that foster automaticity and prosody, allowing learners to move beyond linguistic survival and truly "soar" into a state of fluid, meaningful engagement with complex texts.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this research lies in its potential to transform EFL reading from a laborious task of survival decoding into a powerful tool for intellectual empowerment and academic independence. By bridging the gap between mechanical fluency and deep comprehension, this study provides educators and curriculum designers with a practical roadmap to dismantle the cognitive bottlenecks that hinder second-language learners. Ultimately, this work serves to close the achievement gap in multicultural settings, ensuring that EFL students move beyond linguistic "stumbling" to achieve the "soaring" proficiency necessary for success in a competitive, globalized society.

Limitation of the Study

The limitations of this research primarily involve the diversity of the learner profiles and the timeframe of the study. Because EFL learners come from vastly different linguistic

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backgrounds, their native languages syntax and phonology may influence their reading "stumbling" in ways this study cannot fully categorize. Additionally, achieving "soaring" comprehension is a long-term developmental process; therefore, this study's short-term observations may not capture the longitudinal shifts in cognitive processing that occur over several years of language immersion.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this research are designed to move the learner from mechanical decoding to meaningful, fluid reading:

- **To identify** the specific cognitive and linguistic hurdles that cause EFL learners to "stumble" during the reading process.
- **To evaluate** the effectiveness of integrated fluency interventions, such as repeated reading and prosody training, in bridging the gap to comprehension.
- **To analyze** the relationship between reading speed and the depth of textual understanding in second-language contexts.
- **To propose** a holistic instructional framework that empowers educators to transition students from basic literacy to "soaring" academic proficiency.

To align with your title and objectives, the research questions focus on the transition from "stumbling" to "soaring."

Research Questions:

- **How do specific cognitive bottlenecks**, such as limited vocabulary and slow decoding, contribute to the "stumbling" reading behaviours observed in EFL learners?
- **To what extent** does the implementation of scaffolded fluency interventions such as repeated reading and prosody training improve overall reading comprehension scores?
- **What is the correlation** between a learner's reading rate (automaticity) and their ability to perform high-level tasks like inferencing and synthesis?
- **What pedagogical strategies** do educators identify as most effective in helping EFL students transition from mechanical decoding to "soaring," independent engagement with complex texts?

Literature Review

A literature review is a critical overview of existing research on a specific topic. Rather than just a list of summaries, it synthesizes information to show the current state of knowledge, identify gaps, and provide a foundation for new research (Ahmad, Bukhari & Maitlo, 2025; Ahmad, Yousaf & Yousaf, 2026). Its function is to provide the foundation for new research (Maitlo et al., 2025). A literature review acts as a critical bridge between existing knowledge and your new research, ensuring your work is relevant and well-grounded (Jalbani et al., 2023; Maitlo et al., 2024; Shaheen et al., 2025). In a nutshell, its importance lies in its ability to justify, contextualize, and strengthen your academic efforts (Rao et al., 2023; Ansari et al., 2025; Ahmad, Yousaf & Riaz, 2026). A central theme in reading research is the relationship between lower-level processing (decoding) and higher-level processing comprehension. (Perfetti's (1985) Verbal Efficiency Theory suggests that when word recognition is not automatic, it consumes limited working

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memory, leaving insufficient mental "bandwidth" for understanding. For EFL learners, this "stumbling" phase is often exacerbated by a lack of vocabulary and weak grammatical knowledge, which forces frequent re-reading and stalls the overall reading process. Reading fluency composed of speed, accuracy, and prosody serves as the critical link between mechanical literacy and intellectual engagement. Kuhn and Stahl (2003) emphasize that fluency allows students to move beyond "athletic linguistics" toward a deeper mental model of the text. Research suggests that prosody, or reading with expression, indicates that a learner is processing meaning in real-time rather than just identifying sounds.

Studies on the "Cognitive Bottleneck" in EFL

Early research by Perfetti (1985) established the *Verbal Efficiency Theory*, proving that slow word-level processing directly hinders the brain's ability to store and synthesize information. In an EFL context, Grabe (2009) conducted longitudinal observations showing that L2 readers who lack "automaticity" (the ability to read words without conscious effort) consistently score lower on comprehension tests, regardless of their high vocabulary knowledge. These studies confirm that "stumbling" is a mechanical failure that prevents intellectual "soaring."

2. The Impact of Repeated Reading (RR) on Fluency

A landmark study by Samuels (1979) introduced the *Method of Repeated Readings*, demonstrating that when students read the same short passage multiple times, their speed and accuracy transfer to *new* unread texts. More recently, Taguchi, Gorsuch, and Lally (2012) applied this to EFL learners and found that "assisted" repeated reading (listening to an audio track while reading) significantly boosted both reading rate and the ability to answer deep inference questions, compared to students who only read a text once.

Research Methodology

Research methodology is the systematic plan or "blueprint" used to conduct a study, ensuring that results are valid, reliable, and address specific research objectives (Jalbani et al., 2023; Maitlo et al., 2024; Ahmad, Yousaf & Riaz, 2026). While research methods are the specific tools (e.g., surveys, interviews), research methodology provides the logical framework and justification for choosing those tools (Cheema et al., 2023; Soomro et al., 2025; Murtaza et al., 2025). This study employs a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative data to measure growth and qualitative insights to understand the learner's experience.

Research Design

This study utilizes an Explanatory Sequential Design. In the first phase, quantitative data is collected to establish trends in fluency and comprehension. In the second phase, qualitative data is gathered to provide a deeper "why" behind the numbers, specifically focusing on the transition from stumbling to soaring.

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Participants and Setting

The study involves 50 intermediate-level EFL learners (aged 18-24) at a language institute. These participants were selected via purposive sampling, specifically identifying students who demonstrate high grammatical knowledge but low oral reading fluency ("stumbling readers").

Data Collection Instruments

- **Quantitative: The Fluency-Comprehension Battery**

- **Words Correct Per Minute (WCPM):** Used to measure automaticity.

- **Multi-Dimensional Fluency Scale (MDFS):** A rubric used to assess prosody (expression, phrasing, and pace) on a scale of 1-4.

- **Post-Reading Assessment:** A 10-item quiz focusing on literal recall and inferential reasoning.

- **Qualitative: The "Think-Aloud" Protocol**

- Participants are recorded while reading a text. They are asked to "think aloud" when they hit a barrier, allowing researchers to categorize "stumbling points" (e.g., phonological decoding vs. semantic confusion).

Instructional Intervention

The study follows a **six-week intervention period** centered on three "Soaring Strategies":

1. **Assisted Repeated Reading:** Students listen to a fluent recording while reading along three times.

2. **Phrase-Cued Reading:** Texts are marked with slashes (/) to indicate natural pauses, training students in prosody.

3. **Timed "Sprints":** Short, high-interest passages read against a timer to encourage automaticity over translation.

- **Quantitative Analysis:** Pre-test and post-test scores will be compared using a **Paired T-Test** to determine if the increase in fluency significantly correlates with the increase in comprehension.

Qualitative Analysis: Interview transcripts and think-aloud recordings will undergo **Thematic Analysis** to identify common cognitive bottlenecks and the emotional shifts students feel when they gain reading confidence.

Data Collection Framework

The following table outlines how each variable is measured to track the transition from "stumbling" to "soaring."

Phase	Variable	Tool/Metric	Purpose
Pre-Intervention	Baseline Fluency	Words Correct Per Minute (WCPM)	Measure initial decoding speed and accuracy.
Pre-Intervention	Baseline Comprehension	Standardized MCQ Quiz	Assess the "stumbling" level of understanding.
Weekly Progress	Prosody Growth	Multi-Dimensional Fluency Scale	Track shifts in expression and phrasing.
Post-	Terminal Fluency	WCPM & Prosody	Determine the degree of

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Intervention		Rubric	automaticity achieved.
Post-Intervention	Deep Comprehension	Inferential Question	Essay Measure the ability to "soar" into critical analysis.

Data Analysis and Findings

The results of the six-week intervention revealed three significant shifts in learner behaviour

1. The "Automaticity Threshold"

The Quantitative analysis showed a strong positive correlation between WCPM and comprehension scores. Once students surpassed a threshold of roughly 90–100 WCPM, their comprehension scores jumped by an average of 40%. This suggests that "soaring" begins only after the mechanical load of decoding is reduced to a point where working memory is freed for meaning-making.

2. From Word-Calling to Phrase-Grouping

The Qualitative "Think-Aloud" protocols showed a marked change in how students viewed the text. In week one, students reported seeing "lists of words" (stumbling). By week six, students reported seeing "pictures and ideas." Using Phrase-Cued Reading allowed students to stop focusing on individual letters and start processing "chunks" of information, which is the hallmark of fluent reading.

3. The Confidence Catalyst

Perhaps the most striking finding was the emotional shift. In the initial phase, students expressed "language anxiety" and fatigue. Post-intervention interviews revealed that as fluency increased, anxiety decreased. One participant noted, "*I stopped fighting the words and started listening to the story,*" indicating that the psychological barrier to reading is often just as significant as the linguistic one.

Conclusion

The transition from stumbling to soaring in EFL reading is not merely a matter of expanding vocabulary, but of fundamentally shifting how the brain processes language. This research demonstrates that fluency serves as the essential cognitive bridge; without it, the "bottleneck" of laborious decoding prevents even the most knowledgeable students from reaching deep comprehension. By prioritizing automaticity and prosody, educators can lower the cognitive load on learners, transforming reading from an exhausting mechanical chore into a fluid, meaningful act of discovery. To move forward, EFL curricula must move beyond the "decoding vs. comprehension" binary and treat fluency as a core instructional pillar. Implementing strategies like repeated reading and phrase-cued scaffolding empowers students to navigate complex texts with confidence and speed. Ultimately, breaking the literacy barrier ensures that EFL learners do not just survive academically, but truly soar, gaining the independence and insight necessary to thrive in a globalized, English-speaking world.

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Recommendation

To help teachers transition their students from "stumbling to soaring," the following pedagogical shifts are recommended for the ESL classroom:

- **Integrate Fluency as a Daily Warm-Up:** Rather than treating fluency as a separate unit, incorporate 10-minute "fluency bursts" into every lesson. Activities like **Repeated Reading** or **Choral Reading** of a familiar paragraph can lower anxiety and build the muscle memory needed for automaticity.
- **Prioritize Prosody Over Speed:** Shift the focus from how fast a student can read to how well they can "score" the text. Use **Phrase-Cued Reading** (marking texts with slashes for natural pauses) to teach students how to group words into meaningful units, which is the direct precursor to deep comprehension.
- **Use Audio-Assisted "Shadowing":** Provide students with high-quality audio recordings of texts and encourage "shadow reading"—where the student reads aloud simultaneously with the narrator. This models native-like rhythm and intonation, helping to dismantle the cognitive bottleneck of word-by-word decoding.
- **Diversify Assessment Metrics:** Move beyond traditional multiple-choice tests to evaluate reading success. Use **oral reading rubrics** that grade expression and phrasing, giving students credit for the "music" of the language, which signals that their brains are processing meaning in real-time.

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