# Improving Students Reading Fluency through Audiobooks in Remote Learning

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**Abstract**: Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the teaching and learning process has become more challenging and stressful. Students are expected to do self-learning without being directly guided when attending the class is not possible, while the teachers must keep encouraging the students to learn independently. At the same time, the teachers also have to think about alternative methods and materials for remote learning. Especially for those teachers who teach EFL students, they have to figure out certain materials that meet students' needs and the most relaxing activities that fit students learning styles so that the students can learn independently without feeling bored. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the implementation of audiobooks to foster students' performance in English, especially in reading fluency during remote learning. This study represents Action Research that employs quantitative and qualitative types of data. It is done in the form of cycles adapted from the Action Research cyclical process (from Mertler, 2012b). The result of this study showed that audiobook has a favourable implication on the student's ability to be more fluent in reading and positively influences students' attitudes toward their experience with the audiobook.

## INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly, education is vital in our society since it provides people with knowledge, skills, techniques, and cultural norms and values that can help people improve their lives. However, it has become more challenging since the covid-19 pandemic comes. This condition is likely a never-ending story. Everywhere around the world, educators, institution heads, officials, and parents have to work hand-in-hand to figure out the most suitable alternative methods for students with their lessons when attending school is impossible. Some possible choices are considered, such as, it might be through delivering lessons using virtual classrooms or providing self-study materials and activities for students. Alternatively, students can independently find the most comfortable learning style that fits them.

Of course, it is not easy for students and teachers. Vast numbers of previously tech-shy students and educators must learn how to deal with online resources quickly. Moreover, it is hard to self-learn without a "live" guide. Therefore, it becomes something stressful for teachers to keep encouraging the students to be able to learn independently. Primarily, it becomes harder for teachers of EFL since they also have to struggle to prepare themselves to use technology and to prepare materials and activities that meet their students' needs and fit their learning style.

As it is known, English is very crucial for learners since it enables them to communicate with anyone around the world about any world issues or about a set of professional skills and to perform a particular job-related function. For these reasons, more people are trying to improve their skills in the English language for academic or professional purposes.

English is taught and assessed in terms of four skills: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Among the four skills, many researchers believe that reading is the essential skill to be learned (e.g., Celce-Murcia, 2001; Grabe & Stoller, 2011; and Amirian, 2013). Moats (2020: 4) notes down that every school has a responsibility to make their students be able to read. Reading can affect their academic achievements and social, economic, emotional, and physical health.

However, reading is not something simple but a complicated process. Most students also consider reading difficult, and they think struggling to read fluently as international students are challenging and painful. Common learner responses when they are assigned to read are typically like, "there are so many difficult words that I do not understand—I cannot read them, " I do not know how to pronounce—it is so hard to do", "I have to check certain words meaning and how they are pronounced again and again—this is boring", and more similar responses to reading activities is to happen quietly. Their problems made them unmotivated, unenthusiastic, and uninterested in reading. A slow word preparation rate can thwart readers' intuition during the understanding interaction and weight their working memory with their few endeavors attempting to sound out words, which lead to intruding on their agreement. As a result, they cannot become fluent in reading. Consequently, the lack of reading fluency undoubtedly impacts reading comprehension.

To be fluent in reading means to read rapidly, precisely, and, of course, with suitable expressions. In other words, fluent readers get what they read. Based on various sources, oral fluency appears to be necessary in defining a proper analysis; it becomes problematic when becoming a fluent and skilled reader. If words can be recognized swiftly, word's meaning can be quickly processed by the brain committed to morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, discourse analysis, and semiotics (Sandak, Mencl, Frost, and Kenneth, 2004).

Unfortunately, the goal of reading fluency in teaching and learning is neglected to achieve. It is supported by Allington (1983:556), who states that a poor reader is indicated by his/her poor performance in reading fluency. Unfortunately, this kind of problem is rarely well-treated by the school. It is proven that oral fluency infrequently comes out in learning objectives and teacher lesson plans.

Due to that problem, it needs to find out suitable implementations to help students to be able to read fluently as well as to improve their reading achievements. As an alternative, an audiobook can be used, and it might be an effective material for reading in this current situation since it provides a positive fluency model for the reader. The activity of reading while listening using an audiobook can be considered very interesting for students. With advances in technology, this is a medium to help develop English language ability in terms of pronunciation, reading fluency, comprehension, and knowledge acquisition (Vidal, 2011). Practically, it is advantageous for students to improve their skills in reading aloud and also elevate their ability to comprehend the texts through vocal techniques, tone, and verbal processing. The unenthusiastic students who have mainly poor performance of

fluency can take certain benefits from hearing a text read aloud simultaneously as following along in a printed version. By listening to the words and phrases, students can adjust the speed and intonation based on the reading task and accurately identify more words. In short, audiobook provides learners with opportunities to improve active listening, enhance their listening ability, and develop reading, writing, and critical thinking skills (Jacobs, 2006; Türker, 2010; Kartal & Şimşek, 2011).

Although there have been many studies on audiobooks, for this reason, it needs to conduct further research to investigate this phenomenon. Accordingly, the present study investigates how audiobooks can help Indonesian diploma students in the Informatics Engineering program at State Polytechnic of Ketapang, West Borneo, who are EFL learners, to read fluently during the remote learning pandemic situation. Based on the previous discussion, this study outlines how audiobooks can effectively be utilized to foster students reading fluency. These studies hopefully become alternative implementations to encourage students to be fluent in reading and improve their reading scores.

Additionally, it is expected that the study's results can give something new to enrich more related studies. Also, the study will be advantageous as it can be a stepping stone for them to conduct further research related to and similar to this study.

This research is limited only to the use of audiobooks to improve students' reading fluency in remote learning. This research is conducted through some cycles. The subject will be two classes for the first-semester learners of the Informatics Engineering Program at the State Polytechnic of Ketapang, where the researcher also teaches. Some reasons for selecting first-semester classes are (1) English in learned only in the first and second semester; (2) most students are slow readers; (students' reading scores are mainly categorized as poor; (3) students feel more anxious and not confident to read. Also, most of them are afraid of being laughed at by their classmates when they make mistakes. Therefore, activities focus on audiobooks to help them overcome their problems.

**METHOD**

The design of this study is Action Research. Action research is a systematized progressive investigation to help a teacher find specific strategies to solve identified problems in the teaching and learning process. Koshy (2010) explained that action research helps to improve practices if the solution relies on changing practices. In this present research, it will be done in the form of cycles that is adapted from the Action Research cycles by Mertler (2012b: 38). It is one kind of educational research that includes four primary stages such as plan, act, observe, and then reflect to continue through the cycles (Dickens & Watkins, 1999).

To begin with, finding the problem to determine what to explore and putting the research's limits are essential. Next, collecting information from any sources, such as sharing information with other teaching practitioners to get more insights into the problem. It is also important to review some related early research, such as articles or research journals, books, websites, or some other sources. These sources of information are significant for upgrading current research. What needs to do in the following step is to prepare a research plan, including a teaching schedule, research instrument, designing lesson plans, materials, and criteria for success.

Afterward, the action is conducted. This stage is done to implement a particular strategy that the teacher believes can solve the problem. For the data collection during the action, observation and interviews are done. At last, reflection is held to decide the future implementation based on the teacher-researcher reviews and the revisions.

In addition, the implementation is done in two classes of the Informatics Engineering program at Ketapang Politeknik Negeri Ketapang. As the research subject, 30 students are randomly chosen. It involves 15 males and 15 females. It was conducted once a week within 100 minutes meeting period for eight weeks.

## DISCUSSIONS

As mentioned, this research aims to ascertain how audiobooks impact reading fluency. The data included students' reading performance and their attitudes in pre-cycle, cycle 1, and cycle 2 of the Action Research. It also covers the discussions which reveal the analysis of the implementation of audiobooks.

From the survey in the pre-cycle, it was found that all participants were not enthusiastic about getting involved in the reading discussion even though they were all already aware of the advantages of being able to read fluently. They thought to be fluent in reading was not easy for them. There were many things to do in reading, from recognizing words to understanding the meaning of phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. Reading tasks became cognitively challenging and frustrating when they struggled with word recognition.

Also, students still struggled with decoding and speed. The lack of decoding ability made them unable to sound out written language, especially when they met unfamiliar terms; of course, they would feel unconfident and confused. Besides, speed was another complex issue in reading, especially for the slow reader. EFL students with slow reading processing were going to feel exhausted when they had to keep so much information in mind while also processing the text.

Consequently, when they were instructed to read texts in a limited time and answer some questions related to the topic, they started to feel confused and anxious, asked their friends for the answer, or just looked at the other works. As a result, they could not independently find information from what they had read and always needed extra time to complete tasks.

Some steps were done to know the initial students' reading fluency performance. First, it was started by selecting paragraphs from specific sources containing approximately 150 words. Then, students must read these paragraphs loudly and tape-record themselves. Reading should be in a usual way or speed, neither too fast nor too slow. It should also be marked if the students made any errors, including mispronunciations, substitutions, reversals, or omissions. Besides, marking the part from the selected paragraph has come after one minute of reading. The result can be found by dividing the number of words read correctly per minute by the total number of words read (including uncorrected errors). The result is presented in the form of percentages. The comparison of students' reading accuracy against the target norms is shown in Table Informal Reading Inventories (IRIs) since it has been considered a valid measure of reading proficiency level (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Deno, 1982).

**Table 1**. Levels of Performance for Word Decoding Accuracy

| Level | Percentage | Descriptions |
|---|---|---|
| Independent level | 97-100% | Students can read a given text and do the tasks correctly in provided time without assistance. |
| Instructional level | 90-96% | Students who can read a given text and do the tasks correctly with some assistance are usually provided by a teacher. |
| Frustration level | < 90% | Students find the given text too challenging to read and even feel difficult to do the tasks correctly, even with assistance. |

Additionally, to slightly check student reading comprehension, they had to answer three simple questions based on the passage they had read. The questions were "What is this passage about?", What is the most important information you find from the passage?", and "What do you learn from it?".

Unsurprisingly, the result showed that the student's performance levels for word decoding accuracy were mostly under 50% and slightly above 50%, which was poor. Only two students had a 70% of performance level. It meant that their reading performance was categorized as frustration level. Also, all students could not comprehend the passage since they only focused on the number of words to read on time. Consequently, they must re-read the passage to find the answers and finish the activity in a much longer time. The lack of fluency and a limited range of vocabulary affect students' ability to comprehend the passages, and it makes learning objectives could not be reached.

After the pre-cycle, Cycle 1 is held to implement audiobooks. An audiobook was introduced entitled Google Story by David A. Vise. It was distributed in two forms which were the e-book and audio. In teaching and learning, the teacher showed students how to read the book while listening to the audio. It seemed difficult for them the first time since they were not familiar with audiobooks. It became complicated when they had to listen to native English speakers without subtitles and only had a limited vocabulary range.

Besides showing how to use audiobooks, the teacher also showed how to use the internet or online (electronic) dictionaries to improve students' ability in pronunciation so they could pronounce words correctly. At the end of the meeting, students were assigned to practice using audiobooks for a week. Then, they could freely choose one topic from the book to read. The activity's goal was for students to read at least 150 words fluently per minute. To check students understanding of the passages they had read, they had to answer similar questions as what had been asked previously.

After a week, students were tested the same way as in the previous cycle; students had to read aloud the same passage and answer questions. Based on the test results, it showed moderate improvement. However, 29 students were still at a frustration level, and one of them improved to the instructional level. All students also were not able to reach 150 words per minute. In short, students' fluency increased, although it was considered less significant.

Although the improvement was not significant in reading fluency, they could pronounce words better since the number of words they could pronounce correctly increased. In addition, they also had better comprehension, which was proven by

their ability to answer questions related to the topic even though they still found many difficulties in it.

Since only one student could reach Instructional Level, the implementation of Cycle 1 was not entirely successful, so it needed to continue to Cycle 2 by doing some revisions and improvements in implementing the action. It was better to let students practice reading for a long time. Also, the teacher could help students who needed assistance. It was expected that the students would be more fluent in reading.

Fortunately, a more extended period of practice and assistance significantly increased students' reading fluency. Regarding reading fluency, there was one student who could achieve the highest score. The score was 96% and categorized at the Independent level. The remaining 28 students ably performed reading fluency categorized as Instructional Level. Unfortunately, one of the students could not move from the Frustration Level. He was considered an "outsider." It could be illustrated that in real class situations, there still would be one or two students who could not achieve learning goals and needed special treatment.

Based on the results, it can be said that reading should be done as a project as extensive reading, but not for regular class activity due to the time required. Nevertheless, students still felt anxious to share the information they had gotten from reading orally using their own words. So, of course, it needed a different treatment.

In addition, based on the questionnaires distributed at the end of the action research, most students agreed that audiobooks improved their reading fluency and comprehension. It increased their vocabulary knowledge too. The enhancement of students' reading scores also proved the results.

In brief, it can be stated that audiobooks promote an effective and enjoyable reading practice for students. It helped students to raise their reading fluency, improve vocabulary, and also their reading scores. Teachers or instructors should consider specific criteria for choosing a suitable audiobook to make it more effective. For instance, the audio quality should be clear, especially for non-native English students. It also has to be played at average speed, which means it is not too fast or too slow. If not so, the activity becomes more difficult for students and makes them feel bored and frustrated quickly. Also, the topic should be chosen based on students' needs and interests. Alternatively, teachers can let the students select issues they want to read.

Another point that needs to be noted from the audiobook is its word choices. Even though the result showed that audiobooks improved students' vocabulary knowledge, they struggled to understand the texts with too many unfamiliar words. Therefore, the number of unknown words in the book must be considered. Moreover, audiobooks in Indonesia still cost much money to buy, so the teacher hopefully can provide online library access to the audiobooks where they can search and download the audio freely.

Besides the quality and accessibility of the audiobooks, the activity must encourage students to be more interested in reading. Sharing information and experiences from reading an audiobook in group or class discussion might enrich and deepen their interpretation and understanding of its contents and, of course, enable them to explore the books from a different perspective. For the students who still have difficulties reading fluently, this kind of activity can motivate them to read more and arouse their curiosity about the books.

Hence, students tend to be more cooperative to actively participate in the teaching and learning process rather than only reading without sharing. Therefore, teachers might consider the inclusion of audiobooks as an extensive reading activity or project in class. This activity is supported by Serafini (2004) and Wolfson (2008), who stated that giving students more chances to share their experiences in reading using audiobooks with classmates deepens their understanding, interpretation, and analysis of literature.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, the involvement of audiobooks in ESP class reading activity successfully enhanced reading fluency and helped promote positive attitudes among the students of the Informatics Engineering program at the State Polytechnic of Ketapang. In addition, it could also be crucial to teachers of English as a foreign language in general, giving them new perceptions about incorporating audiobooks into reading activities during teaching and learning.

This study indeed requires further investigation due to the findings and the limitations. However, it can be initially started by investigating the influences of audiobooks on reading fluency with a more significant number of students over an extended period in a face-to-face meeting, not an online or virtual one. Another concern of a future study is the potency of the audiobook in enhancing students' ability to read and explore selected or given text and any literature. It also needs to collect more information on how audiobooks can be implemented for a different level of proficiency, such as for advanced-level students. Besides, the relationship between students' behavior while using audiobook and their reading fluency levels can be the next issue to discuss.

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