

EFL Online Reading for Adult Learners

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ABSTRACT

Choosing appropriate materials and various teaching techniques are of the utmost importance in online learning, where many sources of distraction may exist in a student's environment. This study aims to examine the learning effectiveness of an online English reading course with particular materials and teaching techniques for Korean adult learners. The overall findings of the study based on a questionnaire showed that the selection of appropriate text materials and the use of effective teaching techniques served to inspire and motivate students in a significant way, which in turn contributed to the improvement of their reading skills. The results indicate that the journal articles for counseling and advice on ethical issues featured in the columns of "Dear Abby" and "The Ethicist" can serve as alternative texts in EFL reading classes for adult learners. Various teaching techniques utilized online can also help motivate students to stay in class and take a greater interest in their learning. To conclude, pedagogical suggestions for L2 online reading will be discussed.

Key words: online language learning, EFL adult learners, reading skills

Introduction

Online educational environments continue to develop rapidly and enthusiastically. It has become a fact of life in Korea where over 90% of the population now has high speed Internet access. The development of increasingly sophisticated communication technologies has led to the evolution of a wide range of online courses. More classes and materials are appearing daily. The interaction between students and teachers and between students themselves has increased dramatically in online settings. The pace of change is accelerating and new approaches are being tried almost everyday. Universities, colleges, and other institutions struggle to define the possibilities, as well as the limitations, of online teaching and learning. It now depends more on the ability of educators to tutor and support learners online than on the technology itself.

E-language learning that takes place in front of a computer may not successfully replace classroom based instruction. It may not fully meet the students' academic, social and emotional needs since the interaction in e-learning is limited to posting questions, exchanging e-mails and sharing documents on the web. However, E-learning allows students to learn on their own time, at their own pace, regardless of their age and without having to attend lectures on the premises of a university. It can better serve a large population of non-traditional students, not to mention the advantage of the re-usability of teaching and learning content. It provides an alternative, complementary learning space for lifelong learning opportunities. It should be noted that, throughout this paper, the use of the term "online learning or e-learning" refers to the online learning environments that provide bulletin boards, discussion forums, any form of instant or email-based messaging, and other equivalent textual communication means. Traditional text-only based online environments that do not typically offer any multi-media presentations and environments that cater to real-time audio and/or video conferencing are not taken into consideration. Thus, the course delivery of this study is based on asynchronous online education where the instructor and students participate in learning activities at the different times. Even though there are not real-time interaction and quick feedback as in synchronous online environments where the instructor and students participate in learning activities at the same time, it has its own advantages such as flexible access to teaching materials, time to reflect rather than react, integrating

ideas with the work environment, and cost effective technology.

The ability to read is a critical academic skill. It is decidedly helpful for adult learners of English in EFL settings to develop English reading ability first because a majority of information is available in English, including textbooks. Moreover, in EFL contexts, where there are relatively few chances to be exposed to spoken English, the text input can be a great resource for language learning. However, its importance has received less attention due to current demands to improve both speaking and other communication skills. The situation is no different at Seoul Cyber University (SCU), which was the research site of the present study. The present study was motivated by the recognition of the importance of English reading ability and the identification of certain problems in the current presentation of English reading courses at SCU. The preliminary survey and the 'classroom' experience of this researcher showed that the students at SCU had low interest in the English reading courses. Using difficult and uninteresting textbooks along with the vocabulary-and-grammar centered assessment were considered the main problems. This study therefore attempted to look for an alternative approach to English reading instruction designed especially for mature adult e-learners in a formal college setting.

With the recent emphasis on communicative language teaching in English, many college English instructors are under great pressure to improve their instructional practice beyond many of the latest teaching approaches and methods. Unfortunately, in the case of online teaching there are great limitations in applying those approaches and methods. In addition, there have been few studies to date on college language instruction for adult learners delivered entirely online and how course design for online learning takes place in practice. Even though many publications and materials are available for EFL instruction, there are not many which are designed for mature adult learners in a formal online college classroom. A majority of textbooks are designed mainly for young students attending tertiary institutions. A considerable proportion of the topics treated are considered unsuitable for adult learners in an EFL context. If instructional materials are not designed for online education at their cognitive level, they run the risk of lacking the necessary clarity and exhaustiveness in the provision of relevant information (Strambi & Bouvet 2003).

Unlike face-to-face settings, it is not easy to maintain learners' attention for long

periods of time in online settings. Much of the content is dry and sometimes boring and not sufficient to maintain the adult beginner's interest and attention. Special care needs to be taken to minimize boredom during class sessions. This is true especially for working adult learners who are resuming their studies after many years. A majority of students having full-time jobs; they need to balance family, work, and social commitments. Besides, since the effort required to master a foreign language is considerable, while the outcome in terms of proficiency is often modest, it is particularly difficult for these students to maintain a high level of concentration. The instructors thus need to focus on engaging and helping the students overcome difficulties in order to provide them with valuable language learning.

Based on this research background, the present study attempted to investigate whether particular materials in a certain context could be utilized, and whether certain online teaching techniques could help students stay focused in class and take a greater interest in their learning. This study, therefore, was intended to help adult beginners of English develop effective reading skills, upon which they will build subsequent learning levels. It is also hoped that this study will help meet the needs of faculty who find themselves teaching in this new environment and provide suggestions regarding effective course design and implementation.

For these considerations, the main concern of the study was to examine how well the students adjust to this alternative approach of online learning and determine what they think of it as a way of learning to read English. To this end, two main research questions were posed as follows:

1. What are the students' perceptions of online reading with particular materials and teaching techniques?
2. How can the online reading class be made more effective, thereby maximizing the efforts of beginning level adult students?

Literature Review

Reading is one of the essential skills for second language learners. They should learn to read because for them, "reading may be both a means to the end of acquiring the language, as a major source of comprehensible input, and an end in itself, as the skill

that many serious learners most need to employ” (Eskey, 2005, p563). Efforts to understand both the dynamics of reading and how to learn to read effectively have yielded a great amount of research on reading: reading processes, reading and vocabulary, reading and grammar, reading and background knowledge, reading and reading strategies, and so on (Eskey, 2005; Goodman, 1968; Pressley, 2000, Sadoski & Paivio, 2004)).

Despite the wealth of literature on English reading as a second/other language (hereafter L2 as ESOL), L2 in-class reading has suffered a lack of systematic, organized teaching approaches based on well-known theories and strong empirical evidence (Bernhardt, 1991; Diaz-Rico, 2004; Grabe & Stoller, 2002). L2 reading was not handled in a way that stimulates interest and builds overall proficiency, and most L2 teachers were forced to engage in the practices of L2 reading in which word-decoding skills and translation were the primary focus (Schulz, 1983; Young, 1989).

It is no wonder that there exists a close relationship between reading instruction and reading attitude or reading comprehension. The way in which students are taught reading plays a crucial role in forming their concepts of reading and affecting reading process and thus becomes an important variable influencing successful attainment of reading proficiency (Bernhardt, 1991; Suh, 2009; Im & Huh, 2005). Some studies have looked at the current Korean classroom methodology and evaluated textbook design (Lassche, 2004; Kwok, 2004; Kim, 2004). As Lassche (2004) noted in her survey, L2 classroom work in many Korean high schools is controlled by the teacher or the textbook. Students have little choice about what texts to read, what questions to answer, or how questions can be answered. Courses are completely lecture-based and teachers rely exclusively on mid-term and final examinations for grading. Textbooks include reading exercises that do not challenge students beyond finding right or wrong answers to a word or phrase level question. Many studies have written on the need to change this practice. (Song, 2003; Brown, 2003; Day & Park, 2005).

Many ways to improve reading fluency have been mentioned since the 1970s: repeated reading (Samuels, 1979), easy extensive reading (Nation and Wang, 1999; Jeon, 2008), and carefully organized speed reading courses. Along with repeated reading, easy extensive reading of a specific genre in textual form is also an effective way of increasing reading proficiency. This is because students meet the same words

and grammatical structures in repetition. Thus, it is easier for certain types of readers to become familiar with and confident in English (Nation, 2005; Nation and Wang, 1999).

Increasingly the detailed specifications of what the lower level and upper level processes might include have emerged over the last thirty years (Weil, 2008). Some research has sought to contrast how competent readers differ from less competent readers. Another key line of research in L2 reading includes the fluency/accuracy model (Joh, 2004; Lassche, 2004). These investigators addressed the notion that the fluency-based model of reading comprehension tended to increase the student's interest and motivation. This fluency-related work is compared to an accuracy-based approach which requires students to analyze and comprehend idiosyncratic surface or text-level features. The fluency-related work refers to student-led interpretation of text, and requires an imagined appreciation of the situation surrounding the text. Answers are assessed in terms of their appropriateness to context by the text. On the other hand, an accuracy-based intensive reading approach is assumed to de-emphasize the role of readers in the reading process and focus on the detailed analysis of structure and translation-focused reading activity.

However, most novice-level students may not be ready for full-fledged fluency work. The idea is to begin the process and gradually increase the fluency load proportion over the course of both the lesson and the language program. At the beginning, therefore, students probably need a mostly accuracy-based approach, with corresponding exercises having a pedagogical, pre-communicative orientation, as Widdowson (1979) has long recommended. As time goes on, however, teachers should increase the fluency demands on their students, with greater attention to authentic practice and a communicative, meaning-based orientation.

Building learners' understanding of word meanings and enhancing their lexical competence are critically important in learning a foreign language. Students must learn and experience the words of the new language in meaningful context. They should experience them as native speakers of the language would naturally use them (Pawley & Snyder 1983). After a period of time, during which vocabulary learning and teaching was relatively ignored and down-played, the importance of vocabulary knowledge in language learning has come to be appreciated anew from a different perspective by teachers and researchers alike. Consequently, much effort has recently been made to

explore the nature of vocabulary knowledge (Laufer & Goldstein, 2004; Laufer, Elder, Hill, & Congdon, 2004). Since vocabulary knowledge plays a critical role in L2 reading and comprehension (Laufer, 1991; Qian, 2002), it is the opinion of this writer that vocabulary should be emphasized by assigning it as a pre-reading activity.

Numerous studies have proven that factors such as direct instruction of vocabulary or grammar and language practice may contribute to the development of reading ability. They have noted the importance of paying special attention to the grammatical elements and syntactic knowledge while reading a text in order to help understand the text easily (Lee, 2008; Joh, 2004, Kim, 2007). Lee (2008), for example, in her recent study with low level college students, investigated whether differences exist between color-coding (grammatical knowledge) and changes in reading performance. She found that focusing on the important grammatical elements in a sentence helped L2 learners improve their English reading performance by raising grammatical consciousness. The majority of studies (VanPatten, 2002; Robinson, 2003; etc.) showed a clear advantage for learners receiving explicit grammar instruction. It is assumed that it helps L2 learners identify surface level features of the text and develop their inter-language at a more rapid pace. With appropriate comprehension questions and exercises concerning the reading, they can be gradually challenged to exercise greater and greater fluency.

Teachers of reading are challenged to improve their pedagogic competence so that both the text materials and the methodologies of teaching and learning are enjoyable enough to hold the attention of a working adult learner during class. This is especially true if the classes are offered online, since there are many sources of distraction in a student's environment. Teachers need to know learners' favorite topics as well as their interests to provide the best instruction, which in turn will increase motivation to read and spark their curiosity. The text materials should be relevant to them, and the intellectual and cognitive level of the material should be appropriate and stimulating to learners (Wright, 1990; Kim, 2006). The role of appropriate text material in lower level classes for adult learners is especially important. The content of the reading should be appropriate for academic use so as to help students not only develop their language, but also to acquire new and helpful knowledge.

Regarding materials design, many books and papers have sought to clarify and expand the information categories which reading comprehension can explore. However,

there are quite a few that have discussion of exactly what information needs practicing. McDonough and Shaw's (2003) book on materials design provides a brief discussion of reading comprehension, mentions rhetorical structure and vocabulary coverage, and gives excerpts of questions from various textbooks on the market. Nuttall (2000) provides much more detail on information categories, but then does not apply these suggestions with specific examples. Aebersold and Lee-Field (2001) provide an excellent rationale for teaching reading in their core chapters, but do not clarify specific text features.

In sum, the previous studies regarding the important themes in relation to the course design of this study were briefly reviewed.

Method

Participants

The participants for this study were online university students in Korea enrolled in an elective beginning-level English reading course entitled "Basic English Reading." According to background information gathered at the beginning of the study, most subjects achieved a TOEIC score under 400, which indicated that their English proficiency seemed to range between the beginning or low intermediate levels. Initially, many of the students were unable to comprehend either an authentic text or natural speech. The general goal of the course was to maximize students' opportunities to use basic reading skills such as reading for general comprehension and for details. Upon completing the course, students should have been able to apply these skills to authentic and simplified articles.

As non-English majors, they were mostly freshmen and sophomores. The age of the participants was heterogeneous, ranging from the early 20s to the 50s. They came from a variety of disciplines and all had previously received six years of formal English instruction in middle and high school. As adult learners resuming their studies after many years, 79% of the participants said that they'd had between a two and five year absence from English study while only 21% had less than a one year absence. Some were returning to further their education with direct career or professional outcomes in

mind, while others were adults who had not had the opportunity to attend conventional universities. Most of the participants were employed full time. As mature adults, most of the students had numerous work, family, and social obligations. With the goal of working towards a better life and career, some of them had taken up their studies as continuing education. The increasing importance of English as an international language has motivated most of the students to resume their English learning after many years of being stagnant. They regarded English learning as a personal investment in the future, encouraging personal growth and developing potential, possibly ensuring continued employment.

Regarding their previous experiences, they'd had few that involved English reading online. The exception appeared to be limited exposure to some short passages for the preparation of English tests like TOEIC. A majority of the students reported that they had not had an online reading classroom experience, and only a small number of participants (23%) answered that they'd had less than one year online experience.

Data collection and analysis

The results of the research were based on the answers to a survey conducted online at the end of the semester. Data in the study were analyzed quantitatively. After the questionnaire was piloted on a small sample of students, several modifications were carried out by expert validation. Respondents were required to rate their agreement to each statement on a Likert-type scale. For data analysis, each item was given a numerical score (i.e., strongly disagree=1, disagree=2, neutral=3, agree=4, and strongly agree=5).

One hundred seven (107) students out of 158 enrolled responded to the questionnaire, with an overall response rate of 67.7%. Originally, there were 112 students who answered, but incomplete questionnaires were eliminated to ensure the reliability of the survey, thus reducing the final number to 107. There were, perhaps, a number of reasons for the low response rate. The questionnaire was made available in mid-December, which coincided with the final examination weeks and the academic winter holiday.

Procedures

The study was conducted during one semester consisting of 15 weeks, from August to December, 2008. It aimed to discover the importance of both selecting text material and course designs that were appealing to the learner's reading appetites in learning English online. Its intent was to make decisions on teaching materials and practices in order to provide students with more suitable language knowledge and encouragement. As previously mentioned, a questionnaire was used to assess their overall course experience. It was completed online in class at the end of the semester. The questionnaire was anonymous, and students were asked to be as honest and objective as possible in their answers. It sought their general opinions regarding their experience of the course they had just taken.

Course Description

As a three-hour credit elective course in the Department of General Education, it was designed for non-English majors. It should be noted here that throughout this paper, the use of the terms "a class," "during class," etc. refer to any such time as a student interfaced with the online material provided by the instructor. Three online lectures were offered each week throughout the semester for a grand total of 39. It was designed so that approximately 50 minutes were devoted to going through the whole sequence during class.

With the growing popularity of communicative language teaching in the field of L2 learning, there has been a concerted effort to integrate the four language skills, i.e. listening, speaking, reading, and writing. On this view, while focusing on basic reading skills for adult learners, this course was also constructed to nurture the other language abilities; the basic grammar as explicit knowledge, vocabulary and listening skills. In designing the course, the researcher attempted to take into account the probable implications of contemporary theory and research concerning reading as highlighted in the previous section.

The course interface is divided into 5 frame segments: Vocabulary, Self Reading, Reading, Grammar Focus, Quiz and Cultural Notes. Among these Self Reading and Reading are shown in Figure 1 & 2.

Figure 1. Self Reading Interface

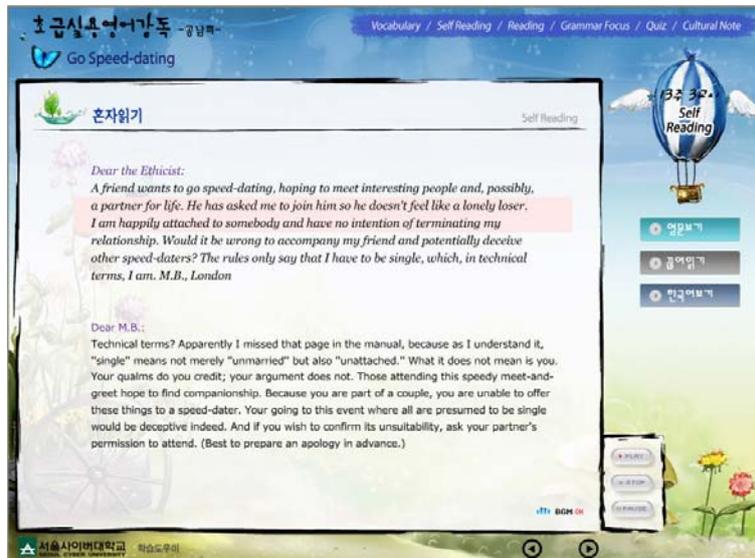


Figure 2. (Main) Reading Interface



The functions of each frame segment are as follows:

The segment menu is located on the top right hand side of the page. It displays links to the individual segments: Vocabulary, Self Reading, Reading, Grammar Focus, Quiz and Cultural Notes. Students were expected to work through these five or six segments methodically and at their own pace. They were encouraged to study in sequence, but this was not obligatory. Students could re-visit and review each segment as desired.

Vocabulary: Key words were displayed prior to the main text with some practice

activity. Students could click on words/expressions to obtain definitions in English or in Korean while hearing those words/expressions spoken by a native speaker. Students were asked to do it until they became familiar with the words given.

Self Reading: The whole text was given with a native speaker's pre-recorded audio. Students could listen to them before and after the Reading segment. It was designed for students to have exposure to spoken English.

Reading

- (1) The upper left quadrant displayed a pre-recorded video of the lecture. Important English structures were pointed out here and explained analytically.
- (2) The lower left quadrant (directly below video screen) indicated the learning path of this segment which allowed students to control the sequence and pace of learning. Students could review each stage of the video when necessary.
- (3) The upper right quadrant showed the parts of the main text for which the instructor gave an explanation by analyzing the structures and interpreting difficult words.
- (4) Glosses were supplied in the lower right quadrant for "unfamiliar" words or phrases. It was hoped that these would help limit the need for continual dictionary consultation that may have interrupted and hindered the reading comprehension process.

Grammar Focus: The grammatical notes and explanations were given to enhance textual understanding in this section. It was designed for reviewing the important grammatical points from the text which were essential for comprehending the text material. These were given by the lecturer's pre-recorded audio alone.

Quiz: Three different kinds of questions, i.e. true/false comprehension check, vocabulary in context and grammatical knowledge were given. Students were asked to mark true/false according to the main text and find proper vocabulary in context. Key grammatical points were checked by choosing one for the blank.

Cultural Notes: During the third class each week, Cultural Notes were added to the list of segments in order to highlight some significant differences between Western and Eastern countries.

A well-organized course medium is the essential entry point for online students in

course delivery. Each courseware may have a different main menu and various functions; the important thing is organizing the course materials so that they are easy to locate and access. This course design was based on the belief that frequent sessions are generally more effective than longer, infrequent sessions because fatigue and other factors may lead to inattention, especially in online learning. Students could remain at each segment as long as they wanted, until they acquired a good grasp of each point presented. This resulted in more individual study time. Moreover, the students were in control of the entire class period, except for the 20 minute instruction segment in Reading. The digital versions for most practice and question types were designed for students to just click, fill in the blanks, and drag and drop with immediate feedback being provided whenever an on-screen check or hint button was clicked.

Assuming that competence in L2 vocabulary is a prerequisite for the development of L2 reading fluency, especially in the beginning stage, key vocabulary for the reading text was provided first. Students would then practice enough to become familiar with them just by clicking on the words. They were enabled to expand and deepen their vocabulary knowledge by reading the main text immediately after learning these new words. This allowed students to see their new vocabulary words used in context, thus re-enforcing the learning process.

In Self Reading, the native speaker's audio was provided along with the written text. A basic goal of this section was to improve students' listening ability by exposing them to as much spoken English as possible. At first, the students were instructed to listen carefully to the text material without viewing the written text. The second time through, they were told to refer to the text and try to recognize how the words or phrases were chunked in order to convey meaning. Assuming that L2 parsing skills can facilitate the achievement of L2 reading fluency, the students were encouraged to focus on meaningful units while listening. While focusing their attention on breath groups in a sentence, they were also asked to concentrate on prosodic features such as intonation, stress and duration. Additionally they were to make note of any portions (e.g. phrases, sentences, etc.) that were not clearly understood in hopes of receiving clarification during the next segment, i.e. Reading.

Well-chosen text materials are essential to online students, along with the medium used in course delivery. A total of 39 articles were thus carefully selected for the

Reading section. They were from the columns of “Dear Abby” and “The Ethicist” published in The New York Times Sunday Magazine and were appropriate for students’ current knowledge as well as their English performance level. Most of the articles were on moral and ethical issues in real-life situations. Some of the most intriguing and thought-provoking issues were chosen from among the articles made available during the past several years. These materials served to raise and preserve adult learners’ interest and motivation in class, stirring their curiosity about how the columnists would respond. The intention was to make the students “get involved emotionally and intellectually in interpreting the culture and real life fact” (Heusinkveld, 1985). These were introduced in ascending order of difficulty with regard to the words and structures. In the modality of instruction, the instructor did not participate in real time. Whenever any student logged on and interfaced with online course content, at no point did he or she interact with the instructor in real time. In this respect, the modality employed created a learning environment that was entirely unlike an offline (i.e. traditional) classroom setting.

Based on the previous research that explicit grammar instruction is effective especially during the initial stage in reading class (Norris & Ortega, 2000; Williams 2005), this section focused on the detailed analysis of structure. The students were instructed to notice the essential grammatical elements in a sentence (i.e., a verb and its subject) while reading, because doing so will help learners understand the structure of a sentence and grasp its gist. The instruction was thus designed for the students to raise their consciousness of the essential grammatical forms, resulting in comprehending the text effectively. The students were also trained to analyze the text by connecting lexical and grammatical points through the content for comprehension.

In Grammar Focus, important English structures were provided by the lecturer’s voice alone so that students were reminded of the key grammar points that they had just encountered in the main text. This section was also designed for reviewing the important grammatical points from the main text. Students thus had an opportunity to go over the grammatical points highlighted here while being trained to grasp meanings contained in the text material.

Provided on the Quiz were three different kinds of questions: checking comprehension, vocabulary in context, and grammatical knowledge. Students could

check these three items for themselves by clicking an expository comment.

Other factors that must be considered in the class of adult learners were taken into account, such as being aware of their self-directing capacity, strengthening self-esteem and encouraging personal relationships. Class participation was required for their evaluation in this course by posting any questions or comments on the bulletin board during or after the class. Without interaction with classmates and feedback from instructors, e-learners might easily lose motivation and possibly fail the course because of feeling alone. Care was also taken in order that unfamiliar teaching patterns and innovative activities would not make them feel uncomfortable; that the intellectual and cognitive level of the material might be appropriate and stimulating to adult learners, with each student being appropriately challenged. Considering the fact that adult learners are easily discouraged, the tasks or exercises were carefully chosen so as to conform closely to their current proficiency level. Most importantly, the students were encouraged to cognitively process, synthesize and learn the course materials by themselves, with the instructor serving as a facilitator to help them succeed in their learning journey.

Instrument

The questionnaire was broken down into four sections (see Appendix): The first part of the questionnaire (Items 1 to 9) was to find out the participants' background information including their previous online experience of reading and readiness for online learning. The second part of the questionnaire (Items 10 to 20) asked the participants about their degree of satisfaction concerning each segment: overall content and structure. The third part of the questionnaire (Items 21 to 25) examined the participants' general opinions on course completion: class activities, resources, etc. The last section (Items 26 to 28) was about the students' perceptions of online reading courses compared to traditional (face-to-face) learning. Lastly, one open-ended question, Item 29, was for gathering other detailed comments regarding online reading courses in general.

Results & Discussion

Based on the findings in the questionnaire, the students' reactions to this class were very positive. Items in Table 1 survey the level of general satisfaction with the content and structure of this online reading course. The majority (62%) of the respondents reported that they were satisfied with the overall structure. Sixty-nine percent (69%) of the participants felt that they had made progress (Item 21). As for the length of time allotted for each class, most of the students (61%) believed that the amount of material per lesson was appropriate for them to digest (Item 15). Finding the correct measure in this regard does much to foster a sense of accomplishment for both students and teachers. It can be assessed that the amount of material to be covered in each class should be carefully considered for online classes.

Concerning the reading materials used in the study, most of them were regarded as interesting and realistic enough to keep them focused until they could achieve a thorough comprehension (Item 12, 22). It is assumed that this factor contributed to the improvement of their reading skills (Item 21). The important conclusion gleaned from this information is that the instructor needs to know the students' favorite topics as well as their interests in order to provide the best instruction. Attention to this fact will increase motivation to read.

Table 1. Student Responses upon Overall Course Design

Questionnaire Items	A	N	D	M	SD
10. I was satisfied with the overall structure of this course as an English reading course.	62	31	7	2.6	2.0
11. I was satisfied with the content of the course.	62	31	6	2.6	1.9
12. Learning was fun with the course text material and I fully engaged myself in classes until the very end.	63	29	8	2.6	2.0
15. I was satisfied with the length of time allotted for each class.	61	31	8	2.5	1.9
21. My reading ability improved greatly with this course taking.	69	24	7	2.6	2.0
22. The reading topic in each class was interesting enough to hold my attention throughout the class period.	62	34	4	2.6	1.9

Note: Numerical values represent percentages. Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number and thus may not add up to 100. A=collapsed scores for Strongly Agree and Agree; N=Neutral; D=collapsed scores for Disagree and Strongly Disagree; M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation

As shown below, the items in Table 2 examine the level of general satisfaction with its individual components. Overall, more than half of the respondents rated “agree” and “strongly agree” for the appropriateness of each segment. The majority of the students (69%) responded that the Vocabulary segment before main reading was helpful for the development of reading ability. The result (67%) of Item 14 indicated that the reading with a native-speaker audio was of great help in building listening skills. This kind of activity is recommended as a preliminary step for the development of adult learners’ spoken English proficiency in online reading courses.

By means of the instruction connecting lexical and grammatical points through the content, students were taught how to read analytically in the main Reading section. Since a considerable number of the students (88%) were in their late 20’s and 40’s, this cognitive style of learning was preferred. They were led through the process of incorporating general analytic skills with basic grammatical knowledge to comprehend a whole passage. The respondents in this study generally endorsed the concept of analytical reading for adult learners, especially at the beginning level of reading. In Item 16, 70% of the participants indicated that analytical reading enhanced their reading comprehension skills. Regarding the importance of grammatical knowledge and the appropriateness of the segment, Grammar Focus in this course (Item 17), the majority of the participants (75%) either strongly agreed or agreed. Knowledge of the target language structure can effectively facilitate understanding of the text material.

Table 2. Student Responses upon Each Course Segment

Questionnaire Items	A	N	D	M	SD
13. The vocabulary list provided at the beginning of each class hour was appropriate and helpful for my reading activity.	69	23	7	2.7	2.0
14. The “Self-Reading” segment was appropriate and helpful for my understanding of spoken English.	67	27	6	2.7	2.0
16. The “Reading” segment enhanced my ability to read analytically and helped improve my reading comprehension skills.	70	22	7	2.7	2.1
17. The “Grammar Focus” segment was appropriate and helpful for comprehending the text material.	75	22	3	2.8	2.1
18. True/False questions in “Quiz” segment were well-suited for checking comprehension.	62	34	4	2.6	1.9
19. The multiple choice questions (Section 2 & 3) in “Quiz” were helpful in identifying grammar structures in the reading.	64	32	5	2.6	2.0
20. Answer & Commentary in the Quiz section was helpful because it offered clear explanations concerning my incorrect answers.	56	30	14	2.4	1.9

Items in Table 3 indicate whether or not the learners view online language learning as different from traditional face-to-face learning. Only 21% of the respondents regarded it is ineffective compared to face-to-face learning, while 46% of them thought the opposite (Item 26). A further 33% of the participants neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement. As for the preference for online courses, most of the respondents (61%) answered that they liked online learning more with its easy accessibility, which permitted them to better balance work and family life while engaged in their studies (Item 27). The result of Item 28 (59%) indicates that most of the students were satisfied to the point of being open to further online language study. Based on the results of these three items, it can be determined that online reading courses offer an important formal study option at the college level.

Table 3. Preference for Online or Traditional (face-to-face) Learning

Questionnaire Items	A	N	D	M	SD
26. Online learning is not as effective as face-to-face learning.	21	33	46	1.7	1.5
27. I prefer online courses because of their accessibility.	61	22	19	2.5	1.9
28. I did not have any difficulty taking online classes and look forward to more of them in the future.	59	27	14	2.5	1.9

Although the students appeared satisfied overall with their experience in this course, several shortcomings were identified. Whether they made full use of the study resources provided, and participated actively or not was addressed by Item 23. Here, 30% of the respondents either strongly disagreed or disagreed, while only 45% reported differently. Responses indicate that many of the participants were not self-directed and independent enough to be successful in the online learning environment, and more teacher guidance and encouragement should have been provided to students, especially during the initial learning stage (Maor, 2003). They believed that they engaged in inadequate participation and felt stressed due to lack of time and other commitments. In terms of peer pressure, 48% of the participants answered that it was very helpful for their study to be aware of other students through interactions via the Bulletin Board, Study Q&A, etc. included in the e-learning platforms (Item 24).

Table 4. Resources & Interaction

Questionnaire Items	A	N	D	M	SD
23. I made full use of the resources provided in the Study Library and participated in class interaction through Study Q&A, Bulletin & Discussion Board activities.	45	25	30	2.3	1.8
24. The online activities and the “presence” of other learners were positive and motivating elements of the learning experience.	48	31	13	2.4	1.8
25. The learning environment was supportive.	51	29	20	2.4	1.9

Even if this kind of online learning does not lead directly to better results than conventional methods in face-to-face classes, it may still be a worthwhile approach since it can motivate students to stay in class and take a greater interest in their learning.

Most of the respondents answered that they felt they had made some progress and would continue their online studies (Item 21, 28). They showed their interest in a different culture and the Western way of thought along with language learning.

Finally, in Item 29, for other comments or suggestions, many participants emphasized that their personal diversity and needs should not be underestimated. Some of them reported that they experienced problems in structuring and organizing their studies. And the importance of peer learners for their feeling of satisfaction and social support was mentioned. Some students felt that there was a need for one or two additional face-to-face sessions, including one devoted to introducing themselves to the lecturer and peers. It was also noted that some of the participants were proud of themselves just to have completed the whole semester.

Conclusion and Implications

The present study investigated the experience of adult learners in a formal college-level English reading course taught online. This study assumed that form-focused instruction promoted low level adult learners' focal attention to the essential syntactic patterns in a sentence, resulting in comprehending the text effectively. It also assumed that the text materials should be relevant to them in order to create enough interest to maintain or increase their motivation for learning. More importantly, the format of the online presentation should be enjoyable for working adult learners.

Most of the participants in the study felt that they had benefited from taking this course. Based on the results of the study, it can be determined that the selection of appropriate text materials and the use of effective teaching techniques served to inspire and motivate students in a significant way. Particular journal articles effectively complemented EFL teaching materials and therefore can be used in an EFL reading course. Students experienced greater course satisfaction and learned more in less time with greater ease and confidence because reading materials were appealing to them and appropriate instructional strategies were employed.

Motivation and the ability to engage in self-regulated learning have an important role for success in e-language learning. Students, however, do not automatically have good study skills, discipline or motivation. Instructors need to create conditions that

promote learner autonomy. As shown in the findings of the study, if the online course is planned carefully and conducted appropriately, a boring classroom can be transformed into a supportive, low-anxiety, and collaborative one full of interest and enthusiasm.

From the results of this study, some pedagogical implications can be suggested. First of all, more attention should be given to local contextual conditions and the learner profile. Instructors are advised to try to match reading materials with student interests. And “modifications should be made towards a more learner-centered framework which would better match specific needs” (Inozu & Ilin, 2007). Thus, the course should be designed and developed for adult learners to become easily familiar with the patterns and culture that are related to the target language. The consideration of age appropriateness and cognitive abilities can provide working adult EFL learners with enjoyable learning experiences.

Next, the opinions of those who have used particular materials in a certain context should be valuable information for teachers in similar contexts. This study intends to provide EFL teachers with alternative teaching resources and suggests that specific journal articles can be a valuable option. These provide not only a high degree of vocabulary enlargement and exposure to common lexical phrases, but can also be used as oral material. Perhaps most of all, these intriguing and thought-provoking reading materials can be outstanding exemplars of real-life English. By using texts from popular media, (e.g. newspapers) EFL teachers may find that students not only learn a new language but also receive practical advice for daily lives. Even though it is difficult to draw clear conclusions about whether an online environment provides the better setting for language learning, a well designed course with level-appropriate text materials together with interactivity among students as well as between students and teachers makes the former more active participants and warrants assumptions of increased pedagogical effectiveness.

Although the findings of this study may appear to be somewhat positive, some limitations are duly acknowledged. First, the survey test tool fails to measure learners' comprehensive reading ability because the focus of assessment is confined to measure their level of satisfaction. Second, the questionnaire lacks a wide range of items regarding learners' individual differences. Further research is recommended based on this exploratory study to see whether it is in correlation to individual student's

demographic variations. Lastly, more studies are needed to find out whether other samples with different reading proficiency would benefit from this kind of online reading class.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

This questionnaire is designed to examine your perceptions of the online reading course you have just taken. Unless the answer items are given separately, please answer by marking the one that matches your idea most, according to the following scale: SA (strongly agree), A (agree), N (neutral), D (disagree), SD (strongly disagree). Please answer all of the questions as best as you can. Your answers will be kept confidential. Thank you for your cooperation.

Section I. Student Background Information

1. Age: 20s _____ 30s _____ 40s _____ 50s or above _____
2. Gender: Male _____ Female _____
3. Occupation:
None _____ Public or Private Business _____ Homemaker _____ Army and others _____ Part time job _____
4. To which proficiency level of English do you think you belong?
Beginners _____ Low Intermediate _____ Intermediate _____ Upper intermediate _____ Advanced _____
5. Prior to this course, when did you last study English?
6 months ago _____ 1 year ago _____ 2-4 years ago _____ 3-5 years ago _____ More than 5 years ago _____
6. English is very crucial in this world of globalization.
Strongly disagree _____ Disagree _____ Undecided _____ Agree _____ Strongly agree _____
7. Have you ever taken online English courses before? If yes, for how long?
None _____ Less than 1 year _____ 2-3 years _____ 4-5 years _____ More than 5 years _____
8. Have you ever taken English Reading classes online? If yes, for how long?
None _____ Less than 1 year _____ 2-3 years _____ 4-5 years _____ More than 5 years _____
9. I enjoy learning that is both interesting and challenging, and I am motivated in such situations to go beyond the minimum requirements.
Strongly disagree _____ Disagree _____ Undecided _____ Agree _____ Strongly agree _____

Section II. Students' Views regarding Online Language Learning Experience

10. I was satisfied with the overall structure of the English reading course.
11. I was satisfied with the content of the course.
12. Learning was fun with the text material and I fully engaged myself in classes until the very end.
13. The vocabulary list provided at the beginning of each class hour was appropriate and helpful for my reading activity.
14. The “Self-Reading” segment was appropriate and helpful for my understanding of spoken English.
15. I was satisfied with the length of time allotted for each class.
16. The “Reading” segment enhanced my ability to read analytically and helped improve my reading comprehension skills.
17. The “Grammar Focus” segment was appropriate and helpful for comprehending the text material.
18. True/False questions in “Quiz” segment were well-suited for checking comprehension.
19. The multiple choice questions (Section 2 & 3) in “Quiz” were helpful in identifying grammar structures in the reading.
20. Answer & Commentary in the Quiz section was helpful because it offered clear explanations concerning my incorrect answers.

Section III. Opinions on Course Completion

21. My reading ability improved greatly with this course taking.
22. The reading topic in each class was interesting enough to hold my attention throughout the class period.
23. I made full use of the resources provided in the Study Library and participated in class interaction through Study Q&A, Bulletin & Discussion Board activities.
24. The online activities and the “presence” of other learners were positive and motivating elements of the learning experience.
25. The learning environment was supportive.

Section IV. Preference for Online or Traditional (face-to-face) Learning.

26. Online learning is not as effective as face-to-face learning..
27. I prefer online courses because of their accessibility.
28. I did not have any difficulty taking online classes and look forward to more of them in the future.

Section V.

29. Please write any suggestions for improving this course.

