



# **The Impact of Repeated Reading Intervention on Improving Reading Fluency and Comprehension of Emirati Students with Learning Disabilities**

Hala Elhoweris <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor in Special Education, PhD. Master's Program Coordinator, at the College of Education at United Arab Emirates University. Address of correspondence : Department of Special Education, Faculty of Education, UAEU, Al-Ain City, UAE, P. O. Box 15551, e-mail: [halae@uaeu.ac.ae](mailto:halae@uaeu.ac.ae)

## **Abstract**

*Reading is a major problem for most students with learning disabilities in the United Arab Emirates. The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of repeated reading intervention strategy on improving oral reading fluency and reading comprehension of 47 United Arab Emirates students with learning disabilities. All participants were assigned to a reading strategy condition. Participants completed pretest and posttest on reading skills. Data was analyzed using t-test measures. A statistical significant difference was found in the pretest scores and posttest scores. In other words, the results of this study indicated that repeated reading strategy is an excellent instructional intervention to teach reading to children with learning disabilities.*

**Keywords:** learning disabilities, intervention strategy, repeated reading, elementary education, UAE

## **Introduction**

Reading is a crucial skill that allows children to achieve at high levels and become reflective and lifelong learners. Although a fluent reader is a prerequisite for success in any academic area and for success in life (Benner, 2007), reading skill is a significant concern of students with learning disabilities (Mastropieri & Scruggs & Graetz, 2003). In fact, 90% of students with learning disabilities demonstrate significant difficulties learning to read (Vaughn, Levy, Coleman, & Bos, 2002). Students with learning disabilities not only struggle with basic reading skills at a young age, but they exhibit some problems in analyzing, interpreting, or comprehending the text. The relationship between the difficulty in comprehension and reading fluency is also well documented in research. Indeed, previous research has documented that there is a positive correlation between oral reading fluency and reading comprehension (e.g., Fuchs, Fuchs, Hosp, & Jenkins, 2001). The National Reading Panel defined fluency as “the ability to read quickly, accurately, and with proper expression” (NICHD, 2000, p 1-3; cited in Pikulski and Chard, 2005). Reading fluency is critical for success in reading comprehension. Indeed, fluency has been viewed as a bridge that readers must cross to get from word recognition to comprehension (Carnine, Silbert, Kameenui, & Tarver, 2004; Welsch, 2007). Reading comprehension has been defined as “a process of constructing and extracting meaning from written texts, based on a complex coordination of a number of interrelated sources of information” (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1997, p.67).

Research indicates that among children identified with learning disabilities (LD), an estimated 80-90% is referred for special education services because of their reading problems (Kavale & Forness, 2000; Shapiro, Church & Lewis, 2002). For these reasons, improving students with disabilities in reading has become a major focus of research (National Reading Panel, 2000). Notably, failure to decipher the written code and to read properly is the major reason for retention and placement in special education programs ((Meese, 2001; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). The major difference between proficient and poor reader is that proficient readers typically use one or more metacognitive strategies as they read. For instance, they may use self-questioning techniques to monitor their understanding of the material or to reread the section many times to locate important information (Alsheikh, 2011; Alsheikh & Mokhtari, 2011; Swanson & De La Paz, 1998).

Over the past years, a bundle of research on reading has long-established that when students with learning disabilities are taught how to utilize metacognitive strategies, their comprehension levels increase (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1997). Additionally, Swanson's (1999) findings from an extensive meta-analysis study showed that effect sizes for measures of reading comprehension instruction strategies were higher when cognitive and direct instruction were implemented. In improving student reading skills, several reading strategies were used including repeated reading, guidance and feedback, reading time, and reinforcement (e.g., Benner, 2007; Huang, Nelson, & Nelson, 2008).

When using repeated reading, learners practice reading one passage, at an appropriate instructional level, until some predetermined level of fluency is attained. Repeated reading is an intervention strategy originally developed by Dahl and Samuels (1974). According to Roundy and Roundy (2009), repeated reading method consists of a non-fluent student orally reading a passage several times. With this method, students are instructed not to read the next passage until the target level of fluency is achieved. The reading passages provided to students are chosen so that they are at the students' reading level and are, approximately, 100 to 200 words in length. Repeated reading intervention strategy has been found to be effective in increasing students with disabilities' reading speed and oral reading fluency (e.g., Alber-Morgan, Ramp & Anderson, 2007; Antoniou & Souvignier, 2007; Benner, 2007; Schimer & Schaffer & Therrien & Schimer, 2009; Tam, Heward, & Heng, 2006; Vandenberg, Boon, Fore & Bender, 2008; Welsch, 2007). Research into repeated reading has established the efficacy of this approach in increasing students' reading comprehension skills. For example, Huang et al., (2008) found that the student-direct repeated reading strategy and feedback improved significantly second graders students with reading difficulties' sight word vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. Also, Landa and Barbetta (2009) examined the impact of repeated readings of English language learners (ELL) with specific learning disabilities' reading fluency, accuracy and reading comprehension. Results of this study indicate gains in fluency, accuracy and reading comprehension to literal comprehension questions.

In addition to that, many studies on reading have been conducted with intent to improve the reading fluency of struggling learners revealed that repeated reading intervention strategy improves the student's motivation, self-confidence, and self-esteem. For instance, in Turkey, Yildirim, Ritz, Akyol, and Rasinski (2015) conducted a study with an elementary school struggling learner to improve his fluent reading skills by utilizing repeated reading intervention strategy. Results of this study indicated repeated reading intervention strategy improves the student's reading, comprehension, automaticity, accuracy skills, motivation, and self-confidence. Also, repeated reading intervention technique was also found to be effective with diverse learners. For instance, in a study that examined the effect of repeated reading on middle school students' fluency, reading speed, reading oriented self-esteem, and confidence. Roundy and Roundy (2009) found that, on average, the use of repeated reading strategies increased student's fluency, words per minutes (wpm) reading score, reading oriented self-esteem, and confidence.

Moreover, in a study that examined the effectiveness of the repeated readings instruction on both oral reading fluency and reading comprehension of practiced and unpracticed passages, Vandenberg, Boon, Fore, and Bender (2008) found that the use of the repeated reading strategy increased all participants' oral reading fluency rates and the number of comprehension questions accuracy of practiced and unpracticed passages. Another meta-analysis study conducted by

Therrien (2004) revealed that repeated reading can be used effectively with students with and without disabilities. According to Therrien, Wickstrom, and Jones (2006), students receiving combined repeated reading and question generation interventions made significant gains in oral reading fluency on independent passages. Recently, Landa and Barbetta (2017) have investigated the effects of repeated readings on reading fluency, errors, and comprehension of 4, third-to-fifth grade English language learners (ELLs) with specific learning disabilities (SLD). Results of this study revealed that repeated reading significantly affects the participants reading fluency, errors, and comprehension.

Literacy has been and remains a cornerstone for the educational, social, economic and personal fulfillment of United Arab Emirates (UAE) citizens and residents. Indeed, literate citizens in the UAE must be able to respond thoughtfully and articulately in oral and written forms in order to participate fully in economic, political, social, and educational dialogues. Currently, the UAE government declares 2016 “as year of reading” (<http://gulfnews.com/news/uae/government/uae-declares-2016-as-year-of-reading-1.1631695>).

Research on early intervention reading programs have been recommended by several researchers (e.g., Hurry & Sylva, 2007) in decreasing the number of students exhibiting reading difficulties in later elementary grades. If intervention is delayed, approximately 75% of children experiencing reading problems will continue to have such problems for the rest of their lives (Francis, Shaywitz, Stuebing, Shaywitz, & Fletcher, 1996). Therefore, it is critical that literacy problems be addressed in the early school years.

Despite the reading deficits experienced by UAE students with learning disabilities and the fact that research into repeated readings methods has consistently confirmed the efficacy of this approach with students with learning disabilities (e.g., Alber-Morgan, Ramp, & Anderson, 2007; Tam, Heward, & Heng, 2006; Vandenberg, Boon, Fore, & Bender, 2008; Welsch, 2007). No research to date has investigated approaches designed to improve the reading fluency and reading comprehension of UAE students with learning disabilities or determined whether repeated reading intervention has a parallel effect on the reading fluency and reading comprehension of UAE students with learning disabilities. Only one study has been found in the UAE that examined the effect of repeated reading strategy on the oral reading fluency of a fourth grader student with reading difficulties (Aljaffal, 2014). However, this study used single subject design which makes its generalization difficult to other students. In the area of reading, few studies were found that focused on the use of reading strategies among UAE students with disabilities (e.g., Al-Hilawani, 2003; Elhoweris & Alsheikh & Haq, 2011). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the impact of repeated reading intervention strategy on improving oral reading fluency and reading comprehension of 47 United Arab Emirates students with learning disabilities.

The use of repeated reading intervention strategy is expected to improve not only reading fluency but reading comprehension as well, because by the end of the reading sessions the students reach the criterion of reading the passage fluently and in turn they may internalize what they are reading. The research questions of this study are as follows:

- 1) *Does the use of repeated reading intervention strategy improve Emirati students with learning disabilities' oral reading fluency?*

2) *Does the use of repeated reading intervention strategy improve Emirati students with learning disabilities' reading comprehension?*

According to the United Arab Emirates Ministry of Education's Guide (2010), "a specific learning disability means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using spoken or written language that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or perform mathematical calculations and/or mathematical reasoning" (p. 19).

In the UAE, when a student experiences learning or behavior difficulties, the student may be referred by a parent, school personnel or community organization for a comprehensive evaluation to determine his eligibility for special education programs and services (the Ministry of Education's Guide: General Rules for the Provision of Special Education Programs and Services, 2010). The following 6 steps should be followed to determine the student's eligibility for special education programs and services including pre-referral, referral, IEP preparation, IEP implementation, monitor review or revise IEP, and examination and certificates of grade completion. Typically, students with reading disabilities are diagnosed in the UAE schools when they perform below grade level in reading tests and score average or above average in the IQ test. Students are diagnosed by a team of professionals including general education teachers, special education teachers, school psychologist and social workers.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The participants in this study are third to fifth graders ( $n=47$ ) with learning disabilities; in term of gender there were male students ( $n=23$ ) and female student ( $n=24$ ). All the participants were identified by their schools as having learning disabilities in reading, difficulties with oral reading fluency and reading comprehension. With regard to the grade level, twenty one students were third graders (45 %), twenty students were in fourth graders (42 %), and six students were fifth graders (13%). The ranges of students' age were 8 to 11 years.

The study took place in the UAE elementary public schools. Since all the UAE public schools are segregated by gender, a stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure the representation of both gender in the sample. The participating schools include one males' school and one females' school. The two schools were located in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi.

The schools were chosen based on the following criteria: schools should a) have special education classrooms; b) include students with learning disabilities from third to fifth grade; c) include special education teachers; and d) be willing to participate in this research project. The criterion for participation was for the students to be diagnosed with reading disability by their school and to perform below their grade level in the school reading achievement test which include reading fluency and comprehension skills. This ensured that participants have difficulty in reading fluency and comprehension. All participants were diagnosed with reading disabilities and were receiving reading instruction in a special education resource room. Repeated reading intervention strategy was provided by special education teachers who were hired and trained in successive sessions by the researcher. The repeated reading intervention programs were

conducted in the schools special education resource rooms. To conduct this study consent form was signed by the participating school principals, parents, and the two special education teachers.

### *Materials*

Classroom teachers were asked to select reading passages at the students' instructional level. Only narrative passages to which the students did not have previous exposure were used. Previous researchers found that the amount of shared words among stories increased students with learning disabilities' reading speed (Rashotte & Torgesen, 1985). Therefore, in this study teachers were asked to select passages that have shared words among it. A total of 20 passages (10 passages for each instructional level) were used in the intervention sessions. Passage length was between 100-200 words. The passage topics were different include typical themes of children's literature. Ten questions accompanied each passage were used to assess the participants' reading comprehension including literal and inferential questions.

### *Design and Procedures*

A pre-post experimental design was used to examine the impact of the repeated reading intervention strategy on elementary Emirati students ( $n=47$ ) with reading disabilities. During the reading pretest, oral reading fluency rate and reading comprehension were established for all participants. More specifically, participants' reading fluency was established based on oral reading fluency pretest and for reading comprehension by means of a multiple-choice reading comprehension pretest that include literal and inferential questions for each narrative passage by the researcher in collaboration with the teachers. The pre and posttests are identical.

The study was conducted following several steps as follows: a) material for the intervention (20 narrative passages) was selected by school teachers based on the participants' instructional reading level. For all participants the instructional reading level was typical reading materials for their respective grade levels (3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>); b) teachers were trained by the researcher to conduct the repeated reading intervention strategy including working with the student individually, monitoring student's progress, and conducting observations, c) ten multiple choice comprehension test including literal and inferential questions were prepared for each narrative passage by the researcher in collaboration with the teachers and they were revised by the UAE Ministry of Education supervisors to ensure the content validity; d) participants' reading fluency was determined by the oral reading fluency pretest and for the comprehension levels a multiple-choice comprehension pretest was administered; and e) interventions were implemented by the class special education teachers until all the narrative passages were read.

During the intervention section the teachers provided the participants scaffold assistance. More specifically, if the participant made a mistake, the teachers immediately read the word aloud correctly and ask the participant to repeat the word aloud. Finally, students were post-tested using the oral reading fluency and reading comprehension tests. The pre and posttests of oral reading fluency and reading comprehension tests were prepared by the school teachers and reviewed by the UAE Ministry of Education supervisors to ensure the content validity. More specifically, the pre and posttests of oral reading fluency and reading comprehension tests were sent to two UAE Ministry of Education supervisors who are expert in Arabic language teaching to assess the content of the tests and see whether it measures what it supposed to measure. The two experts agreed that the tests are valid. The inter-rater reliability (90%) was excellent in this study.

To ensure the treatment fidelity, the researcher has trained the two participating teachers to implement the intervention based on the prepared lesson plan. Additionally, the researcher observed the two participating teachers in two practice sessions. The two participating teachers participated in approximately 4 hours of training. At the end of the training sessions, the two participating teachers were observed implementing the reading intervention program by the researcher and the research assistants. Additionally, teachers were observed while implementing the intervention program during the study. A checklist was used to see whether the teachers followed the lesson plan accurately. The two teachers met the fidelity criterion prior to implementing the repeated reading intervention program and during the implementation of the intervention program.

The repeated reading intervention strategy was used with each participant individually two to four times weekly over a period of six weeks. The passages for the pre-posttests and for the intervention sessions were selected to match the instructional reading level of each student as determined by their teachers. The participants read each passage until they achieve the reading fluency criterion level or read the passage four times. The participants received guidance and feedback while reading. After each reading, the teacher reported the number of words read correctly and incorrectly per minute and completed the observation notes.

When the students reach the reading fluency level, they will be able to move on to the next narrative passage. After each session, oral reading fluency and reading comprehension tests were administered. Then the teacher completed a report for each individual student to show their progress. The time for each reading session was about 15-20 minutes. After the six-week period, students were given final reading fluency and reading comprehension tests to determine fluency and comprehension and the progress that the students have made during the period of the six-week. The number of words read correctly per minute orally in reading passages served as the measure of fluency. A word read correctly is defined as a word that is verbally pronounced accurately, quickly, and with proper expression given the reading context. The word read incorrectly is defined as a word that is verbally pronounced inaccurately, slowly, and without proper expression given the reading context. At the end of the study, unstructured interviews were conducted with the teachers and students to know their point of views about the use of repeated reading intervention strategy.

## **Analysis and Results**

To find out the effect of the repeated reading intervention strategy on the independent variables pre-post data was analyzed using a dependent t-test. Pre- and post-test measures included word reading correct per session, word reading errors per session, reading time of each passage per session, and number of comprehension questions answered correctly.

In the following paragraphs, analysis of the two research questions will be discussed separately.

- 1) *Does the use of repeated reading intervention strategy improve Emirati students with learning disabilities' oral reading fluency?*

The results of the paired-sample t-tests for the pre-test scores and the final post test scores after the six week period of the intervention on oral reading fluency are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Pre-Post test Scores of the Intervention on Oral Reading Fluency (n=47)*

Pre Test		Post-Test		T- Test	Sig. Level
Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
20.12	6.93	36.78	8.80	16.69	.00

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare the students' scores in oral fluency before and after the intervention. As Table 1 shows, there was a statistical significant difference in the oral fluency pretest scores ( $M=20.12$ ,  $SD=6.93$ ) and posttest scores ( $M=36.78$ ,  $SD=8.80$ ) conditions;  $t(47)= 16.69$ ,  $p = .000$ .

*2. Does the use of repeated reading intervention strategy improve Emirati students with learning disabilities' reading comprehension?*

The results of the paired-sample t-tests for the pre-test scores and the final post test scores after the six week period of the intervention on reading comprehension are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. *Pre-Post test Scores of the Intervention Reading Comprehension (n=47)*

Pre Test		Post-Test		T- Test	Sig. Level
Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
23.63	8.29	39.38	8.98	20.28	.00

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare the students' scores in reading comprehension before and after the intervention. There was a statistical significant difference in the pretest scores ( $M= 23.63$ ,  $SD=8.29$ ) and posttest scores ( $M=39.38$ ,  $SD=8.98$ ) conditions;  $t(47)= 20.28$ ,  $p = .000$ .

Additionally, observations were completed during the six-week period by the two teachers. Teachers collected data by observing and listening to the students in the classroom while reading. Teachers' notes showed that the majority of students were more motivated at the final reading sessions of each passage. Also, teachers reported that the students showed more confidence and interest in the passage when they reach the criterion level. This was evident by the students' comments when two students asked the teacher whether they can read the passage "again and again". In addition to that, results of the unstructured interviews with teachers regarding the use of the repeated reading intervention strategy revealed that teachers like the strategy and they believe that it is an excellent approach to teach reading to students with learning disabilities. Also, teachers indicated that they like the strategy because it is clear and easy to be implemented.

In conclusion, the results suggest that repeated reading intervention strategy really does have an effect on Emirati third to fifth graders with learning disabilities and who experience reading difficulties in reading fluency and comprehension. Specifically, the findings of this study



suggested that repeated reading strategy is an effective approach to improve UAE elementary students with learning disabilities' reading and comprehension skills.

## **Discussion**

The primary purpose of this study was to broaden the experimental assessment research in oral reading fluency and reading comprehension of Emirati third to fifth graders with learning disabilities. The results of this study suggested that repeated reading intervention strategy does have a significant effect on Emirati third to fifth graders with learning disabilities and who experience reading difficulties in reading fluency and comprehension. Indeed, the use of repeated reading intervention strategy over time helped in ameliorating reading fluency and reading comprehension of Emirati third to fifth graders with learning disabilities. Findings of this study corroborated the results of previous studies (e.g., Alber-Morgan, Ramp & Anderson, 2007; Tam & Heward, & Heng, 2006; Vandenberg & Boon & Fore & Bender, 2008; Welsch, 2007) which indicated that repeated reading intervention strategy is an excellent approach to teach reading fluency for students with learning disabilities. For instance, Benner (2007) indicated that oral reading fluency skill of students with learning disabilities (LD) and emotional disturbance (ED) was improved through multiple readings of the text selection. Additionally, the repeated reading session of each specific passage improves the UAE students with learning disabilities' reading fluency not only in that specific passage, but it carries over to other different passages. This finding is confirmed by the theory of automatic information processing in reading (Laberge & Samuels, 1974) and Thieren's study in 2004.

In this study, the participants received guidance and feedback while reading. Actually, the use of repeated reading intervention strategy with feedback has been found to be one of the excellent approaches to improve reading fluency in students with reading difficulties (e.g., Huang et al., 2008). Also, teachers were asked to select passages that have shared words among it. This finding is consistent with Rashotte and Torgesen's (1985) study who found that the amount of shared words among stories improved students with learning disabilities' reading speed.

The teachers' observation notes in this study showed that the majority of students were more motivated at the final reading sessions of each passage and the students showed more confidence and interest in the passage when they reach the criterion which was evident by the students' comments when two students asked the teacher whether they can read the passage again and again. So, it seems like the repetition of passages give students with learning disabilities an opportunity to practice reading more and to feel more confident while reading and it motivates them to read more. This finding confirms the results of previous studies that indicated that the use of repeated reading strategies increased student's confidence level (see Roundy & Roundy, 2009) and motivation to reading (e.g., Huang et al., 2008).

Additionally, the use of repeated reading intervention strategy in this study significantly improves UAE elementary students with learning disabilities' reading comprehension ability. In fact, for comprehension, no direct or explicit intervention was used. Because the assumption of this study was based on the fact that the improvement in oral reading fluency will lead to improvement in reading comprehension and that there is a mutual relationship between oral reading fluency and reading comprehension. The result of this study has proven that fluency and reading comprehension have a reciprocal positive relationship. This finding corroborates the

findings of Vandenberg, Boon, Fore, & Bender (2008). So, in conclusion the results of this study indicated that Emirati third through fifth graders with learning disabilities can benefit from an intensive reading intervention programs.

The findings in this study have some implications for teaching and research. From an instructional perspective, this study revealed the repeated reading intervention strategy is an effective reading approach to teach reading to children with learning disabilities. Teachers, therefore, may need to be aware of the positive effect of repeated reading intervention as a viable means for improving reading fluency and comprehension skills among young Emirati learners with learning disabilities. For research, researchers must consider the use of repeated reading intervention strategy with the other types of mild disabilities. The use of the repeated reading intervention strategy was not the sole variable in this study that impact the participants 'oral reading fluency and reading comprehension. Other factors played an important role in the findings of this study including the use of the passages with shared words and the use of guidance and feedback while reading. There is a need for further study to see whether the use of passages with varying difficulty levels could lead to same results.

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