



Exploring Differences in Korean EFL Students' English Reading Fluency from Their L2 Learning and Reading Experiences

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ABSTRACT

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Fluent reading, characterized by accuracy, speed, and a natural rhythm in learners' oral reading, represents the ultimate objective of reading instruction in a second language (L2) context. Achieving this fluency necessitates automatic word recognition as well as the seamless construction of meaning. Although such efficiency is typically developed through extensive reading experiences, the processes by which individual learners develop reading fluency remain underexplored. This study aims to seek to understand the ways in which learners' reading experiences influence their fluency development. To achieve this, the semi-structured interview was conducted for 22 Korean EFL high school students along with the reading fluency measurement. The qualitative analysis of the interview revealed how the involvement in L2 reading, steadiness of learning L2 linguistic knowledge, and motivation in learning and reading in L2 influenced students' reading fluency development. By incorporating appropriately leveled books into fluency-focused reading classes, educators can facilitate learners' progression toward becoming fluent L2 readers.

KEYWORDS

L2 reading fluency, reading experiences, involvement in reading, linguistic knowledge, reading motivation, reading material

1. Introduction

Oral reading fluency (ORF), defined as the ability to read with speed, accuracy, and expressiveness, is considered as one of the essential skills in developing reading ability. Being able to read fluently suggests the underlying automatic process of lower-level skill, which ensure the transition of the cognitive resources to higher-level comprehension processes (LaBerge and Samuels 1974, Logan 1997, Stanovich 1980). Such reading ability is known to develop when learners have been exposed to text continuously and repeatedly, a critical objective in both first language (L1) and second language (L2) reading education (Gorsuch and Taguchi 2010, Jeon and Day 2016, Stanovich 1986).

So far, numerous previous studies in the L1 context have been conducted to provide insight into the different aspects of reading fluency, such as its constructs (Kim 2020, Kuhn et al. 2010) and related skills to be developed for fluent reading (Georgiou et al. 2016, Kim et al. 2018, Wolf and Katzir-Cohen 2001). For example, in the Direct and Indirect Effects of Reading model, Kim (2020) postulated that reading fluency is a key 'proximal component' for successful reading comprehension. Founded on listening comprehension and word reading skills, it directly impacts reading comprehension. As well as its conceptual validity, the studies on reading fluency had also broadly explored its values in the educational context. For instance, efforts to develop test batteries or assessment tools have been extensive and multifaceted. These include establishing norms for ORF (Hasbrouck and Tindal 1992, 2006, 2017), measuring different arrays of its subskills (Good III and Kaminski 2002, Wiederhold and Bryant 2012) and facilitating the measurements and the storage of the assessment data (Shinn et al. 2002). These all helps educators assess multiple aspects of reading fluency, track student progress over time and make data-driven decisions to improve educational outcomes.

Like in the L1 context, there has been increasing attention to reading fluency among L2 scholars. Thanks to them, reading fluency is regarded as a legitimate and essential skill to be obtained for successful reading comprehension (Hansen et al. 2024, Kang 2020). However, the research on L2 reading fluency is not only scarce but also how fluently L2 readers can read in English is not researched extensively (Hwang and Lee 2023, Jeon 2012, Ryu and Lee 2021). According to a study that examined Korean L2 students' reading fluency (Ryu and Lee, 2021), there is a substantial gap between students' actual English reading fluency and the proficiency levels expected for the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT). The researchers found that approximately 40% of the 11th-grade participants demonstrated independent reading abilities equivalent to those required for 2nd- or 3rd-grade L1 readers, despite the expectation that students will be able to comprehend texts at or above the 9th-grade level by the time they graduate from high school. Moreover, the findings revealed that a significant portion of the students experienced difficulties in core reading processes, including decoding, word recognition, and comprehension, placing them at or near their frustration level when engaging even with texts that are developmentally appropriate for low elementary students. The authors also argued that given that the average readability of CSAT passages is higher than grade 9, texts of CSAT could not be a valid assessment tools for measuring high school graduates' reading comprehension ability. Especially, in the Korean context where English continues to serve as a gatekeeper for university admission, achieving reading fluency in English is not only a prerequisite for higher education but also a significant determinant of academic and professional opportunities in Korea (Kwon et al. 2015). Therefore, the lack of understanding about students' actual reading fluency in English can lead teachers, test developers, and policymakers to make misguided decisions in English education. This disparity may result in inappropriate instructional strategies, flawed assessment tools, and ineffective educational policies, ultimately hindering students' academic progress and language development.

Hence, it is imperative to undertake research to ascertain the fluency with which L2 learners read and to examine

the factors associated with its development. This research seeks to understand the various dimensions contributing to students' reading fluency, including cognitive, environmental, and instructional components. Therefore, the following research questions is formulated:

How do L2 reading experiences (e.g., involvement in L2 reading, amount of time devoted to accumulating L2 linguistic knowledge, and motivation for L2 learning and reading) contribute to shape fluent reading skills?

The investigation employs two methodologies: quantitative assessments of reading fluency and qualitative semi-structured interviews. Through this approach, the study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the factors interrelated with reading fluency, thereby offering critical insights that can inform and refine educational practices and policies aimed at promoting students' literacy development.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Reading Comprehension Process

Fluent reading necessitates a progression from laborious and deliberate phonological decoding to swift and automatic sight word recognition (Chall 1996, Ehri 1995, Marsh et al. 1981). This means that the relative contributions of various cognitive skills contribute to reading comprehension process (Kim 2020, Kim et al. 2018, Moll et al. 2014, Vaessen and Blomert 2010). In fact, the reading comprehension process is considered to be interactive, where knowledge and fluency components influence each other (Kintsch 1988, 1998, LaBerge and Samuels 1974, Perfetti 1999). Both the knowledge and the fluency with which this knowledge is accessed and processed are crucial for reading comprehension in both L1 and L2 (Koda 1996, Perfetti and Stafura 2013, Segalowitz 2003, Van Gelderen et al. 2007). Insufficient fluency impedes a reader's ability to allocate sufficient working memory resources to construct a mental representation of the text, which is necessary for successful comprehension (Kintsch 1988, 1998). In the same vein, it is without sufficient linguistic sources that it is unlikely that successful reading comprehension occurs.

Knowledge and speed components can be directed toward both lower-and higher-level text processing. Lower-level processes refer to letter and word recognition required for lexical access. This involves the ability to transform written code into a phonetic code using the alphabetic principle (Perfetti 1985), converting letters and letter combinations into the corresponding phonemes (Stanovich 1986). As well as recognizing words accurately and speedily, readers should parse the sentence structures to construct meaning propositions. Since these lower-level processes are executed in now-or-never mechanism in working memory (Grabe and Yamashita 2022), they should be performed automatically and with minimal cognitive effort. This ensures that sufficient cognitive capacity remains available for higher-order processes involved in constructing a mental representation of the text, known as the situation model (Kintsch 1998).

2.2 Reading Processing Experiences

Automaticity develops through extensive processing experience, with the degree of exposure to print material serving as a critical learner-specific factor in attaining this ability. This proposition is supported by various reading models that emphasize the essential role of repeated exposure in the development of reading fluency (Logan 1997,

Stanovich 1980). According to Logan's (1997) "power law" of automaticity, memory traces are strengthened through repeated encounters with words, which increase the probability and speed of recognition. Similarly, Stanovich (1980) underscored that reading fluency and engagement are mutually reinforcing: learners who read more extensively develop greater fluency, while those with limited fluency read less, leading to what he later termed the *Matthew effects* (Stanovich 1986)—a cumulative advantage for proficient readers and disadvantage for less fluent ones.

When transferred to the Korean EFL context, however, these L1-based fluency mechanisms encounter important constraints. Given the late onset of English learning and the predominance of exam-driven instruction, learners' exposure to authentic print input is typically limited to test-oriented materials emphasizing accuracy over processing efficiency. Such restricted input reduces opportunities for the automatization process described in L1 models. Consequently, while the theoretical premise of automaticity remains valid, its developmental trajectory is often delayed or fragmented in the Korean EFL setting. As Koda (1996, 2007) notes, L2 processing experience, rather than mere formal instruction, plays a decisive role in developing word recognition skills. Supporting evidence from word recognition studies (Favreau and Segalowitz 1982, Haynes and Carr 1990, Segalowitz and Segalowitz 1993) indicates that increased experience enhances processing speed and reduces error rates. These findings collectively suggest that achieving fluency in the Korean EFL context requires sustained engagement with meaningful L2 print materials to counteract the cumulative disadvantages predicted by the Matthew effects.

2.3 L2 Linguistic Knowledge

While fluent word recognition is essential for efficient higher order text processing, it is not sufficient on its own for constructing comprehensive text representations (Gough and Tunmer 1986, Hoover and Gough 1990). Beyond efficient lower-level processing skills, the significance of L2 linguistic knowledge in L2 reading was well-captured in Alderson's (1984) famous question: "Is second language reading a reading problem or a language problem?" In the well-known language threshold hypothesis, he posits that L1 literacy can be transferred to L2 reading only if learners possess a certain level of L2 linguistic knowledge, emphasizing L2 linguistic knowledge over L1 reading skill.

Subsequent empirical research has consistently demonstrated that L2 reading proficiency is more strongly predicted by L2 linguistic knowledge than by L1 reading ability, particularly among learners at lower proficiency levels (Bernhardt and Kamil 1995, Brisbois 1995, Carrell 1991, Lee and Schallert 1997, Schoonen et al. 1998, Yamashita 2004). Bernhardt (2005) synthesized these findings into a compensatory model of L2 reading, arguing that both L1 literacy and L2 language knowledge contribute to comprehension, but that the quantity and quality of L2 linguistic knowledge, especially in vocabulary depth and syntactic parsing, account for a larger proportion of variance. Similarly, Carlisle and Beaman (2000) demonstrated that bilingual children's vocabulary knowledge within the same language was a robust predictor of reading comprehension, suggesting that lexical competence directly facilitates access to meaning and supports syntactic integration during reading.

Within this framework, L2 linguistic knowledge functions as a constraining precursor to fluency development. Insufficient lexical repertoire and weak syntactic awareness impede automatic word recognition, limit sentence-level integration, and slow down the transition to fluent text processing. Therefore, fluency growth in L2 contexts cannot be fully explained by exposure or practice alone. It depends fundamentally on the accumulation and refinement of linguistic knowledge that enable efficient lexical retrieval and syntactic processing. Consequently, in the early stages of L2 reading development, particularly in the Korean EFL context where exposure is limited, the consolidation of lexical and syntactic competence emerges as a decisive condition for achieving higher-order

fluency and comprehension.

2.4 Reading Motivation

The process of reading is influenced by both cognitive functioning and affective factors, such as readers' motivation (Chapman and Tunmer 1995). Reading motivation can significantly affect the development of reading rate and accuracy, thereby impacting reading comprehension (Guthrie et al. 2007, Guthrie and Wigfield 1999, Katzir et al. 2009, Wigfield et al. 2016). Numerous studies have investigated the relationship between reading motivation and reading performance (Dhanapala 2008, Grabe 2009, Ismail et al. 2012, Wigfield and Guthrie 1997). For example, Grabe (2009) determined that motivation can influence reading comprehension and facilitate it across different proficiency levels. Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) also found that children's motivation to read serves as a predictor for the amount of reading they do outside of school, explaining a substantial portion of the variance in reading amounts among third and fifth-grade students. Ismail et al. (2012) identified that students who utilize strategies to support their comprehension and read for pleasure exhibit high levels of motivation. They posited that a positive correlation exists between motivation and reading, suggesting that learners with higher motivation are likely to engage in more extensive reading.

Furthermore, Quirk et al. (2009) found a significant correlation between higher scores on reading fluency tests and a positive self-concept as a reader in second graders. These studies suggest that reading motivation can evolve as reading fluency develops and that there is a significant relationship between reading fluency and reading comprehension during the early stages of reading acquisition. Moreover, motivated readers tend to select more challenging reading materials, persist through difficult texts, process reading materials more deeply, and achieve better comprehension (Anderson et al. 1988, Hidi 1990, Schiefele 1991, Taylor et al. 1990, Wigfield 1997).

2.5 Home Literacy Environment in L2

Aside from specific linguistic and individual differences, a number of environmental factors affect students' learning (Grabe and Stoller 2013). Especially, home literacy environments such as parental intervention, accessibility to the reading material are known to contribute to literacy development (Evans et al. 2000, Snow et al. 1998). Although most of the studies on the home environmental factors have been conducted in the L1 reading context, their results indicated that these factors all contribute to L2 literacy development, by directly or indirectly affecting the opportunities for extensive L2 reading practice or providing motivation toward learning to read in the L2 (Grabe 2009). Previous studies concerned with Korean context also back up the argument that supportive home literacy environment strongly is correlated with children's literacy development (Han 2007, Kim and Yim 2024).

As such, a diverse array of experiential factors plays a crucial role in influencing reading development in the process of acquiring reading skills in L2. Consequently, it is essential to thoroughly examine the dynamic interactions between reading fluency development and these related factors. Such an investigation can yield more precise empirical evidence regarding the fluency levels of L2 readers, identify the specific challenges they encounter in their reading processes, and elucidate how various reading-related factors impact the development of reading fluency. This comprehensive analysis will contribute to a deeper understanding of L2 reading development.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

A total of 22 participants from four high schools in Gyeonggi Province took part in this study. One of the high schools (School A) was located in Yeosu-si, while the other three schools (Schools B, C, and D) were situated in different districts of Seongnam-si. As the participants volunteered to participate in this study, the number of participants from each school and the gender were not considered. Out of the 22 participants, 9 participants were from school A, 4 from school B, 5 from school C, and 4 from school D, respectively. Among 22 participants, 11 were male and 11 were female. All participants in the study were Korean and were 16 years old at the time of the research. They were in their second year of high school, which is equivalent to the eleventh grade in the United States. They had studied English as a foreign language for approximately nine years, primarily through formal education. This aligns with the standard curriculum in Korea, where English is a mandatory subject starting from the third grade. They had four hours of English classes per week as a school subject at the time of data collection.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

3.2.1 Reading measure

To obtain valid data on participants' reading fluency levels, ORF was measured using grade-leveled passages from the Informal Reading Inventory (IRI; Roe and Burns 2010). ORF was selected over silent reading fluency (SRF) due to its advantages as a direct, observable, and multi-componential measure of reading development. Specifically, ORF enables the assessment of three core components of fluency—accuracy (e.g., misread words and error types), rate (words read per minute), and prosody (intonation, expression, and phrasing)—which have been shown to be strongly predictive of reading comprehension outcomes (Fuchs et al. 2001, Rasinski 2012). These components are readily observable and quantifiable in real time, allowing for consistent and reliable scoring. In contrast, SRF involves internal cognitive processing that is less accessible without specialized tools such as eye-tracking or timed comprehension probes (Kim et al. 2011), making ORF a more practical and valid option for the purposes of this study. In addition, although prosody was recognized as a component of ORF, it was not analyzed in the present study due to the lack of an L2-appropriate rubric that integrates quantitative measures such as reading speed and accuracy with qualitative prosodic features. Existing L1-based rubrics, including the *Comprehensive Oral Reading Fluency Scale* (Benjamin et al. 2013), which incorporate L1 norms (Hasbrouck and Tindal 2006) to assess reading fluency, were considered unsuitable for L2 learners. Also, in light of L2 findings suggesting that words correct per minute (WCPM) adequately represents reading fluency when both accuracy and comprehension are ensured (Jiang 2016, Shin and McMaster 2019), reading speed and accuracy were therefore adopted as the primary indicators of fluency in this study.

Reading fluency was assessed using grade-leveled narrative texts (Grades 1-12) adapted from the IRI (Roe and Burns 2010). Each student read several passages aloud while being recorded which were to be analyzed for their reading rate (WCPM) and accuracy (the percentage of words read correctly). Reading comprehension was measured through literal and inferential questions aligned with each passage, also adapted from the IRI. Using the word recognition accuracy score and the reading comprehension (Betts 1946), each student's reading levels (i.e., independent, instructional, and frustration) were identified. Among the three levels, the present study focused on identifying students' independent reading level, defined as achieving over 98% word reading accuracy and at least

85% reading comprehension for a given text according to the previous research (Betts 1946, Roe and Burns 2010, Ryu and Lee 2021). This level is considered a key indicator of overall reading proficiency, as a higher independent reading level typically reflects stronger reading ability. Also, to assess reading rate within each student's independent reading level, the following formula was applied: 60 multiplied by the number of words read correctly in a passage, which is divided by the number of second. Two raters independently assessed the reading measures, and inter-rater reliability, calculated using Cohen's Kappa, indicated high agreement: reading comprehension ($\kappa = .92$), word reading accuracy ($\kappa = .96$), and reading rate ($\kappa = .94$). Table 1 shows the student profile which includes the results of reading fluency results.

Table 1. Interview Participants' Background Information

Student	City	School	Gender	Reading level (grade)	Reading Rate (WCPM)
A	Yeoju	A	F	8	114
B	Yeoju	A	F	6	110
C	Seongnam	C	M	7	157
D	Seongnam	D	M	7	153
E	Seongnam	C	F	6	147
F	Seongnam	C	M	2	146
G	Seongnam	B	M	PP	115
H	Yeoju	A	M	2	141
I	Seongnam	B	M	2	115
J	Yeoju	A	F	P	85.4
K	Seongnam	B	M	5	107
L	Yeoju	A	F	P	115
M	Yeoju	A	F	7	115
N	Yeoju	A	M	2	120
O	Seongnam	B	M	2	117
P	Seongnam	D	M	2	118
Q	Seongnam	D	F	3	117
R	Seongnam	D	F	3	120
S	Seongnam	C	F	4	135
T	Yeoju	A	F	4	115
U	Seongnam	C	M	p	98
V	Yeoju	A	F	p	109

Note. WCPM = words correct per minute; PP = Pre-primer; P = primer

3.2.2 Semi-structured interview

Semi-structured oral interviews were conducted to gather detailed information on the individual and experiential factors contributing to both successful and delayed development of L2 reading fluency. In order to elicit the maximum amount of information about participants' reading and learning experiences, several questions were selected and paraphrased carefully in advance (Adams 2015) based on the previous studies. The following are some of the questions used in the interview.

1. Have you ever read books in English? Do you enjoy reading books in English?
2. How many English books have you read so far in your life?
3. How many English books do you have at home? Have your parents read books to you or encouraged you to read books in English?

4. When did you start to read or learn English? How many hours do you study English a week?
5. Do you like learning English?

Each student was interviewed immediately following the ORF assessment, with the interview duration ranging from 10 to 15 minutes. In all phases of the interviews, a semi-structured protocol composed of carefully pre-selected core questions and strategically designed subsidiary prompts was employed to ensure both consistency and depth of inquiry. The core questions focused on participants' reading experiences, instructional histories, and engagement with texts, while the subsidiary prompts were adapted in real time to probe learners' cognitive, emotional, and experiential dimensions of reading.

For example, students were first asked what kinds of books or reading materials they had recently read, followed by follow-up questions such as "How did you select those texts?" or "What reading strategies do you usually apply when you encounter difficult passages?" In addition, they were invited to discuss whether they had received explicit reading instruction outside formal education and how such experiences shaped their current reading habits. These progressively layered questions encouraged participants to narrate their reading histories in detail, articulate their attitudes toward reading, and recall specific classroom or out-of-school experiences. Through this design, the interviews generated rich and meaningful qualitative data within a short timeframe, offering insight into both the learners' perceived reading competence and the contextual factors influencing their literacy development.

For analysis and interpretation, all verbal reports were initially transcribed in Korean and subsequently translated into English. The data resulting from the interviews were analyzed thematically in order to reflect on the outcomes with more elaboration and discussion of the underlying principles of students' reading experiences. The extraction of the themes was performed by defining the codes that represent different aspects of the participants' reading experiences. Codes were defined through two processes of open coding and axial coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998). During the open coding phase, all interview transcripts were carefully examined and segmented into meaningful units, with key words and phrases that were relevant to explaining students' reading fluency being marked and highlighted for subsequent analysis. Each segment was labeled with descriptive codes that reflected key patterns in learners' responses. For instance, statements such as "*Our home had many English books when I was young*" and "*I tried to read English every day, even a little*" were coded as *home literacy environment* and *steadiness of L2 reading*, respectively. Comments like "*I studied English at an academy for two hours a day*" and "*I started English in the third grade of elementary school*" were coded as *average time for L2 learning* and *starting point of L2 learning*. Likewise, remarks such as "*English helps me get into a good university*" and "*I like learning English but reading is boring*" were coded as *goals of L2 learning* and *interest in L2 learning*. These codes represented the initial conceptual categories that captured learners' experiences related to L2 exposure, effort, and motivation.

Then the axial coding process was performed to rearrange the defined codes according to the commonality among them. Relevant codes were grouped under one category like 'home literacy environment', 'goals of L2 learning' and 'average time for L2 learning.' In addition, the categories pertaining to one topic were clustered under one theme like "Involvement in L2 reading." This theme represented an aspect of students' reading practice they have done to improve English reading fluency independently. To mitigate potential biases arising from the coding and thematic labeling process, cross-validation procedures were enacted (Braun and Clarke 2006). A graduate student proficient in qualitative research thoroughly reviewed the transcripts to discern categorical patterns. These identified categories were then compared with those initially delineated by the primary researcher to ascertain consistency. Inter-rater reliability analysis employing Cohen's Kappa coefficient was subsequently conducted to gauge the agreement level of the codes, yielding a robust agreement ($k = 0.897, p < .05$). Figure 1

illustrates how the codes are grouped under each theme to elicit the differences in L2 reading fluency. The final analysis indicated that *involvement in L2 reading* and *learning linguistic knowledge* emerged as distinct yet complementary contributors to the development of reading fluency. In addition, affective factors such as *reading motivation* also appeared to contribute meaningfully to the development of reading fluency, highlighting the interplay between cognitive, linguistic, and affective dimensions in students' reading experiences.

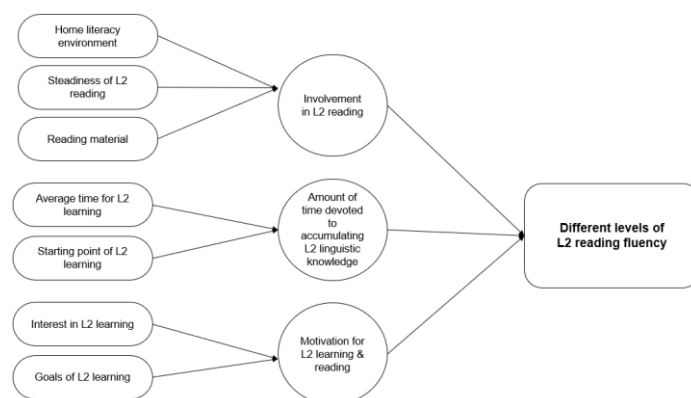


Figure 1. A Streamlined Codes-to-Theory Model for Eliciting the Differences in L2 Reading Fluency

4. Results and Discussion

The reading fluency measures indicated that the 22 participants' independent reading levels varied from pre-primer to the 8th-grade level, with their reading rates ranging significantly from 85.4 to 157 WCPM. Based on the data from semi-structured interview, various aspects of reading experiences that influence the participants' reading fluency were identified. These factors were intertwined with multiple facets of the language learning process and reading development, such as involvement in L2 reading, amount and steadiness of time devoted to L2 linguistic knowledge, and motivation for L2 reading. A key finding was the interrelation between the students' narrative accounts from the interviews and the identified reading fluency components (e.g., reading level and rate). Together, these elements elucidate the complex ways in which reading practices and experiences shape reading fluency and proficiency.

4.1 Involvement in L2 Reading

As the insight from the previous literature suggest, one of the key factors associated with the attainment of fluent reading skill appears to be the sheer volume of exposure to L2 print materials (Favreau and Segalowitz 1982, Haynes and Carr 1990, Koda 1996, 2007). Such exposure is likely related to increased familiarity with lexical and syntactic patterns, which may facilitate smoother word- and sentence-level processing during reading. L2 processing experiences, therefore, seem to contribute to enhanced reading fluency through learners' active engagement with diverse L2 texts.

Discrepancies in such engagements tend to be reflected in various facets, such as the consistency of L2 reading habits, the literacy environment within one's home, and the selection of reading materials by L2 learners. Subsequently, the variations in these reading practices appear to be associated with differing levels of L2 reading

fluency.

Interview data seem to corroborate the significant impact of L2 reading involvement on the development of reading fluency. For instance, Student A, whose independent reading level is equivalent to the 8th grade with a reading rate of 114 WCPM, recounted her reading journey, stating, 'I naturally began reading English books at an English academy (*Hagwon*), such as *Charles and the Chocolate Factory*. I attended the academy for four years and read numerous English books.' This narrative epitomizes the journey that the learner underwent in improving their English reading fluency. Similarly, when queried about his exposure to English literature, Student D, capable of independently reading 7th-grade texts at a rate of 157 WCPM, remarked, 'My mother taught me English when I was as young as a kindergartener... I naturally gravitated towards English books, and I enjoy reading both Korean and English literature.' What sets these two students apart from other participants appears to be their extensive engagement in reading over an extended period. Another proficient reader, student C, reading at a seventh-grade level with a rate of 157 WCPM, highlighted the influence of environmental exposure rather than personal motivation, stating, "I attended an English kindergarten and elementary school, which greatly aided in my English acquisition... Yes, we used English textbooks at school, but personally, I do not find pleasure in reading." Despite his limited intrinsic motivation, his sustained engagement with English print materials for approximately seven years, primarily through content subjects such as math and science taught in English, appears to have fostered substantial fluency gains. This case exemplifies the dynamic interaction between engagement and motivation. In particular, externally driven engagement in an English-rich environment can initially compensate for low personal motivation, leading to measurable improvements in reading fluency. Over time, such fluency development may reinforce a more positive reading self-concept and promote intrinsic motivation, reflecting a reciprocal, mutually reinforcing process. This developmental trajectory is consistent with the Matthew effects (Stanovich 1986), whereby early advantages in exposure and fluency produce cumulative cognitive and affective benefits, amplifying long-term L2 reading growth.

Meanwhile, such reading experiences, which seem to play a pivotal role in the development of reading fluency were not prevalent among the remaining interviewees. Students F and I, with reading levels equivalent to the 2nd grade and reading rates of 146 and 115 WCPM respectively, mentioned that they had only read one or two short English novels, with their reading largely confined to texts intended for test preparation. Similarly, Student G, whose reading level is at the lowest tier and reads pre-primer texts at a rate of 115 WCPM, expressed, 'I don't enjoy reading, and I have not read any English books whatsoever. My reading has been limited to English textbooks in the classroom and texts for CSAT preparation.' These revelations underscore the substantial impact of varying levels of engagement in reading activities on differences in reading fluency.

Furthermore, although a rich home literacy environment is typically associated with the cultivation of reading habits and the advancement of literacy skills in L1 (Evans et al. 2000, Snow et al. 1998), it is uncommon to find a well-established home literacy environment conducive to English reading in the EFL context. However, a few students with higher-level fluency reported that they had been exposed to English books since they were young. In fact, these students credited the presence of a rich home literacy environment as a significant contributing factor to the engagement of with L2 book. Student D and M, who attributed his English language learning to maternal guidance, highlighted the ample availability of English literature within his household. He noted that his mother frequently engaged with English books, often reading them in bed.

The study observed that, in addition to the extent of students' exposure to L2 reading, the types of reading materials utilized by students were discerned through interviews. As seen above, those students exhibiting comparatively higher levels of fluency had engaged with English literature or any genuine reading material for either educational or personal purposes. Conversely, other students (e.g., Students F, I, and G) indicated that their

reading materials consisted predominantly of English textbooks or materials geared towards CSAT preparation.

The utilization of these materials presents a notable issue, as prior research has demonstrated that they pose significant comprehension challenges for the majority of students (Ryu and Lee 2021). Specifically, when students' reading fluency is markedly lower than the proficiency required to naturally process CSAT texts, it creates substantial obstacles to effective reading practices.

Given that students with lower fluency levels struggle to grasp texts even at the grades Primer or Pre-primer, comprehending test-preparation materials appears exceedingly daunting. Student L at the primer grade level, remarked, 'the English teacher reads and provides interpretations during class... I listen and take notes.' In a similar vein, another student J with a primer reading level, admitted, 'I have not read texts independently and for personal enjoyment.' Besides, when queried about their typical reading practices, students occasionally conflated linguistic learning with the act of reading, wherein the teacher reads aloud and explains the content of the text instead of the students themselves. Even when students attempted independent reading, the complexity of CSAT texts often led to frustration or fostered inappropriate reading habits. This assertion finds substantiation in the student F' interview responses.

수능 영어 지문은 어느 정도만 이해하면 돼요. 보통은 다 이해하지 못하고 단어 몇 개만 가지고 대충 이해하려고 합니다... 40퍼센트 정도 이해하는 것 같아요... 글을 다 읽지는 않고 첫 문장과 마지막 문장만 읽고 정답을 찾는 경우도 많고... ["For the English section of the CSAT, I only need to understand to a certain extent. Usually, I don't fully understand everything and just try to grasp the meaning roughly with a few words... I think I understand about 40 percent... also read only the first and last sentences without reading the entire passage and try to find the answers..."]

The excerpt illuminates his reading approach and his level of comprehension regarding the textual content. While comprehension entails the construction of a mental representation, termed as the situation model, through the integration of textual information with existing knowledge (Kintsch 1988), his comments do not reflect a concerted effort towards establishing such comprehension. Discrepancies arise between his reading proficiency and the requisite level of comprehension, exacerbated by time constraints in test-taking scenarios, leading him to adopt a superficial reading strategy primarily focused on finding answers. Even worse is that he thinks he does not really need to read and comprehend the whole text.

The challenge of comprehending CSAT passages is further highlighted by findings from an interview with K, who reads at a grade 5 level with a rate of 107 WCPM. This student expressed a lack of enjoyment in reading, articulating 'To be honest, I don't enjoy reading. When I can read smoothly, it feels good. But usually, there are a lot of difficulties... many difficult words in the reading passage.' Moreover, many students confessed that they have eschewed simultaneous processing of the text — a natural aspect of authentic reading — opting instead for a linear approach of simply reading and interpreting the text, primarily due to difficulty of CSAT text.

To incapsulate, it was likely that substantial number of the participants had difficulty reading and understanding the reading materials that are most likely to be used in the English classroom, leading them to rely more heavily on translation rather than engaging directly with the text. Notably, it was found that some readers admitted to reading only a small portion of the text or just a few sentences to capture the gist of the paragraph and quickly locate the answer to the test item. These issues of the reading material should be of note, in the sense that reading fluency development could emerge as a matter of course for simultaneously processing multifaceted knowledge of language, thereby forming mental representations of the text's meaning. Therefore, it is legitimate to suggest that the readers need to attend to every word and practice reading with extended texts that have the appropriate

readability level (Grabe 2009, Rasinski et al. 2012).

4.2 Amount of Time Devoted to Accumulating L2 Linguistic Knowledge

Although learning linguistic knowledge is not the same as engaging in reading activities, the influence of L2 linguistic knowledge on reading development has been demonstrated by numerous studies (Bernhardt 2011, Grabe 2009, Jeon and Yamashita 2014, Laufer 1992, Qian and Schedl 2004). So far, it has been acknowledged that the mere accumulation of linguistic knowledge, including grammar and vocabulary, is insufficient on its own to foster reading fluency. However, it is nevertheless deemed a necessary yet constraining precursor to the development of reading skills (Jeon and Yamashita 2014). Consequently, the extent and consistency of one's English language learning endeavors appear to exert influence on the attainment of varied levels of reading fluency.

In the current study, this influence was particularly salient between students exhibiting relatively lower levels of reading fluency and those of higher levels of fluency. Common among the students with lower-level fluency is either a delayed commitment to accumulating linguistic knowledge compared to their peers or an inadequate investment of time in such pursuits. For instance, Student J, whose independent reading proficiency level is at the primer stage and reads at a rate equivalent to 85.4 WCPM, articulated, 'we all started to learn English from the third-grade elementary year but I can say I started to study English last year. I can't tell I know words much enough to read well...' Furthermore, another primer-level student, Student U, whose reading rate stands at 108 WCPM, delineated his approach to English language study during the interview, stating:

영어공부는 고1부터 시작했어요. 영어를 손도 못 대고 있었어요. 점수 20점 받고 그랬는데, 내신공부는 열심히 하니까 되는 것 같아요. 글 읽는 것은 아직 너무 힘들어요. 읽는 것도 얼마 전까지는 안됐었고... 평소에 공부하는 양은 학원에서 하는 수업 맞춰서 공부하고 있어요. 학원 숙제 말고는 혼자서 힘들니까 배운 걸 복습하는 식으로 공부해요. ["I started studying English since the first year of high school. I couldn't even touch English back then. I used to get around 20 points in tests, but when it came to studying for school exams, if I had to study hard, it seemed to work. But reading is still very difficult for me. Until recently, I couldn't even do that... I study about the same amount as the lessons at the academy. Since it's difficult for me to study on my own apart from academy homework, I tend to review what I've learned."]

The insights gleaned from the interviews with students J and U indicate that both individuals have commenced their dedication to English language learning relatively recently. They primarily depend on structured educational environments, including classroom instruction and private tutoring, for their English studies. Furthermore, they do not engage in supplementary English learning activities beyond these instructional contexts. Specifically, their allocated time for English study encompasses approximately 3-4 hours per week for classroom instruction and an additional 4-6 hours for private tutoring, culminating in a weekly commitment ranging from seven to ten hours.

Meanwhile, the students with relatively higher fluency than those mentioned above showed a different spectrum of learning profiles. The level-7 student, D, recalled his learning experiences when he was young as follows:

저는 어렸을 때부터 영어 학원을 어렸을 때부터 계속 다니기 시작했어요. 유치원때 엄마한테도 배우고, 초등학교때도 학원을 계속 다녔죠. 그때도 단어 외우고... 말하는 것도 배우고 그랬어요. 요즘도 학원을 계속 다니고 있어요... 저는 영어 문법이 재밌어요... 학원이랑 학교 수업 합쳐서 일주일에 20시간 정도 공부하는 것 같아요. ["I've been going to English academies since I was little. Even

in kindergarten, I learned from my mom, and in elementary school, I kept going to academies. Back then, I was into memorizing words and learning to speak. And even now, I'm still going to academies... I find English grammar fun... I guess I spend about 20 hours a week studying, including both academy and school classes.”]

Another student, E, with 6-grade reading level said ‘I started learning English when I was seven years old. Then, from second grade, I started going to an academy and kept at it. For English, I study English, practicing grammar and memorizing vocabulary... I put in around 15 to 20 hours of study time each week, including class hours.’

The interviews conducted with students D and E illuminate a discernible disparity in their trajectories of English language acquisition when juxtaposed with those of their peers. Specifically, these individuals embarked on their English language learning journeys at an earlier juncture than their counterparts, J and U. Furthermore, they presently allocate a substantially greater amount of time to their endeavors in learning English. Concerning the process of learning itself, they also appear to indicate a focus on acquiring grammar and vocabulary skills through either private tutoring or formal schooling. Despite the similarity in the content of their learning endeavors, the differential investment of time in linguistic learning seemed to influence reading fluency.

The findings from the interviews revealed that the extent of L2 learning appears to significantly influence the development of L2 reading fluency. This phenomenon resonates with Alderson’s (1984) central inquiry into whether difficulties in second language reading stem primarily from limitations in reading ability or from insufficient language knowledge. As noted in the interviews with readers exhibiting higher reading fluency, accumulated linguistic knowledge, such as grammar and vocabulary, appeared to have a significant impact on their L2 reading abilities. Compared to these readers, those with relatively lower fluency appeared to possess a smaller amount of linguistic knowledge, likely due to discontinuous L2 learning. This is likely to back up the findings that syntactic knowledge (Brimo et al. 2017) and vocabulary knowledge (Pulido and Hambrick 2008) explain variance in L2 reading comprehension ability and related literacy skills. This finding makes it plain that even though the accumulation of linguistic knowledge alone may not be sufficient for achieving fluent L2 reading skills, it is undeniably essential for reading success.

The results suggest that linguistic knowledge functions as a crucial enabling factor for fluent reading development, particularly at lower proficiency levels. While linguistic competence alone may not automatically yield fluency, its absence appears to impose a cognitive burden that hinders automatic word recognition and text integration. Therefore, the interplay between linguistic knowledge and fluency development should be understood as reciprocal. Greater linguistic knowledge facilitates reading fluency, which in turn provides further opportunities for language growth through reading engagement.

4.3 Motivation for L2 Learning & Reading

In the reading research, the motivations of learners encompass a spectrum of factors including interest in reading, the desire to engage with extensive texts, perseverance in reading endeavors, and the willingness to learn content from texts (Grabe and Yamashita 2022, Wigfield 1997). A prior investigation conducted by Kim (2011) showed that reading motivation of Korean students appear closely tied to students’ academic objectives or grades. Specifically, the study revealed that Korean students tend to engage in English reading activities primarily when such activities are directly linked to academic assessments or when they are compulsory components of their coursework.

This observation was partly confirmed by the interviews from the present study, where students’ motivation for reading is mostly confined to reading academic material. Even though their tendency for reading made it difficult

to distinguish motivation for L2 reading from L2 learning itself, the relation emerged between students' reading fluency and their motivation for reading. For instance, student A (8th reading grade with 114 WCPM) stated,

한국어책도 읽기는 하는데, 영어책 읽는 것이 더 재밌어요. 반복해서 읽다 보면 처음에는 잘 몰랐던 부분을 이해하게 되는 게 재밌어요. 전 평소에 영어 노래나 테드 같은 것도 찾아보고 유튜브에 있는 레시피도 영어로 보는 거 좋아해요. 근데 영어 수능에 나오는 문제들은 시간에 쫓겨서 정답을 찾아야 해서 좀 스트레스를 받아요. 재미없는 것도 많고... [I do read Korean books, but reading English books is more fun. It's interesting to understand parts after reading them repeatedly, which I didn't get at first. I usually enjoy looking up English songs, TED talks, and recipes on YouTube in English. However, the English questions on the college entrance exam are stressful because I have to find the correct answers under time pressure. Plus, a lot of them are boring...]

This student seemed to have higher motivation for learning English and reading English books, which might be related with her relatively higher reading fluency. On the contrary, some students who did not seem to have high motivation for English reading may wrestle with feelings of a diminished confidence and a lack of lower-level skills. Student U's experiences provide further illumination of this relationship. He stated 'I'm not good at English. First of all, I find vocabulary difficult, and next, I don't think I'm good at grammar either. Because it's important to be good at English, I go to private academies, but honestly, I think I'm not good at it because I'm not interested in English.' Similarly, student V said, 'I've been studying English since I was very young, probably since I was six years old. I studied with learning materials like *Hakseubji*, but it didn't help much... I used to get scolded all the time because I didn't like to do it. I don't read English books.' Their reflections highlight their lack of motivation for L2 reading and learning, each with their own personal reasons and history. This perspective also suggests an awareness of the definition of English reading. Even though they were asked whether they like to read English, their answers were often mixed with their affective reactions about learning and reading English.

One of the reasons seemed like their reading is mostly confined in instructional material or truncated forms, which aimed to accommodate limited timeframes for reading and subsequent skill and comprehension exercises. Student H's experiences provided further evidence and underscored the influential role of reading or learning motivation, especially in relation with the type of text or reading material. Student H with 2nd-grade reading level said:

영어 읽는 것은... 글썩요... 싫어하지는 않는데 그냥 해야 하니까 하는 겁니다. 사실 유튜브에서 수능문제가 *terrible*하다는 외국인의 반응을 가지고 반감을 더 가지게 되었어요. 영어는 경쟁을 하기 위해 배우니까... (영어시험 지문에) 실제로는 잘 쓰이지 않는 단어를 사용하는 거 같아요. [Reading English, well... I don't hate it, but I just do it because I have to. Actually, seeing foreigners on YouTube reacting to the college entrance exam questions as *terrible* made me dislike it even more. Because we learn English to compete... It feels like the passages (in the test) use words that aren't really used in real life.]

From the excerpts, it can be inferred that students H did not appear to resist reading or learning English itself even though a hint of hostility against the reading material he had to use was evident. This observation is similar to the sentiments expressed by the higher-fluency student A, who also demonstrated a similar antipathy toward the test passages predominantly used in current Korean English reading classes. As seen above, unlike her high interest in reading English books or learning English using any authentic material, she mentioned that she found reading

material to prepare for the college entrance exam are stressful and thus demotivating.

In summary, the affective aspects of reading seem to play a significant role in fostering reading fluency. Students' perceptions of the reading material were closely related to their motivation for reading, and consequently, their reading fluency. Therefore, to support students' development of fluent reading, it seems crucial for educators to provide authentic and appropriate reading materials tailored to each level of reading fluency. In doing so, they can promote more meaningful engagement and motivation, ultimately enhancing students' reading skills and overall fluency.

5. Conclusion

The current study aims to investigate the reading experiences of Korean EFL students and their relations with the development of reading fluency. To accomplish these objectives, a reading fluency assessment was conducted, and the results showed that their reading levels and rates are widely dispersed from pre-primer to 8th grade levels. Following the assessment, semi-structured interviews were carried out to explore the students' English reading and learning experiences within the EFL context. The analysis of the interview data revealed three main themes that appear to be related to the reading fluency development: involvement in L2 reading, amount and steadiness of time devoted to linguistic knowledge, and interest and motivation for L2 reading.

First and foremost, it was found that the extent of students' involvement in L2 reading significantly influences their reading levels. Specifically, those who have relatively higher reading fluency (e.g., reading levels 7th and 8th) reported that they have been engaged in L2 reading for an extended period, often through parental guidance or attendance at English institutes from a young age. Conversely, most participants with relatively lower reading fluency (e.g., reading at pre-primer or 2nd grade levels) were reported to have limited reading experiences, primarily restricted to CSAT test preparation or textbooks. The observed differences in cumulative L2 reading experience seem to result in disparities between more fluent and less fluent readers.

This finding suggests that the complexity and exam-driven nature of CSAT reading materials, which dominate much of Korean high school students' reading experience, may inadvertently hinder the development of genuine reading fluency. As several recent studies have also noted (Choi 2023, Kim 2025, Ryu and Lee 2021), excessive exposure to cognitively demanding test passages that prioritize accuracy and grammar over meaning and engagement tends to constrain students' ability to read effortlessly and automatically. This observation provides an important implication for the current Korean EFL context, where curriculum designers and educators should reconsider the balance between test preparation and fluency-oriented reading and ensure that learners have opportunities to engage with level-appropriate and meaningful texts that foster both comprehension and automaticity.

Previous research exploring the effects of extensive reading (ER) on fluency development shed light on these findings. For example, the meta-analysis conducted by Jeon and Day (2016) showed that ER has a small-to-medium positive effect on overall reading proficiency, with ER groups consistently outperforming those engaged in intensive or traditional reading approaches. In addition, longitudinal studies have demonstrated that sustained ER leads to notable improvements in reading rate, such as gains from 140 to over 230 wpm (He 2014) and significant progress among learners who read more than 200,000 words in a year (Beglar and Hunt 2014). Hence, the 'act of reading' is essential because fluent reading skills emerge as a result of implicit rather than explicit learning of linguistic knowledge (Grabe 2010). By fostering such reading practices, educators can cultivate an environment that supports the natural development of fluency through continuous exposure and engagement with

the language, thereby enabling students to build a robust foundation in fluent reading.

Second, the findings of this study indicate that the consistency and extent of linguistic knowledge learning are likely to impact various levels of reading fluency. The effect of linguistic knowledge was especially evident among relatively lower-fluency readers. Those with less linguistic knowledge may struggle more with fluency, as they lack the foundational skills necessary for efficient reading (Brimo et al. 2017, Pulido and Hambrick 2008, Yousefi and Biria 2018). To address this disparity, it is crucial to provide complementary classes or targeted interventions especially for students with lower levels of linguistic knowledge (Nation 2015, Park et al. 2018). It is of note that students with lower proficiency levels struggled to accurately read even frequently-used vocabulary found in pre-primer or primer-level texts. As emphasized by various reading models (Hoover and Gough 1990, Kim 2020), providing instructions for decoding seems essential for their reading development. Also, previous research suggests that the most effective approach to teaching students to read involves providing explicit and systematic instruction in foundational skills, ensuring that students engage with texts that reinforce their developing decoding abilities, and gradually exposing them to complex, content-rich literature (Foorman et al. 1998, National Reading Panel 2000, Snow et al. 1998). Such tailored support can foster a more equitable learning environment, allowing all students to build the necessary linguistic foundation to succeed in reading and beyond. These findings carry important pedagogical implications for L2 reading instruction in the Korean EFL context. Providing structured opportunities to consolidate linguistic knowledge can reduce the cognitive burden during reading and promote smoother decoding and comprehension processes. Teachers and curriculum developers are therefore encouraged to integrate systematic grammar and vocabulary instruction with fluency-oriented reading activities, ensuring that lower-level learners are equipped with the linguistic tools needed to progress toward more automatic and meaning-focused reading. Such integration can help bridge the gap between linguistic competence and reading performance and support a more sustainable pathway toward proficient L2 reading.

Lastly, students with different degree of motivation and interest in reading in English reacted differently to it, which results in different levels of reading fluency. Especially, the motivation for the learning and reading in English seemed to be influenced by the reading material and their learning in the class. Typically, their reading is mostly confined in instructional material or test-preparation text. There is seldom an expectation that reading materials serve as resources for acquiring new, intellectually stimulating content or for enhancing academic competencies and expertise. More concerning is the fact that the materials used in the Korean EFL learning context often prove too difficult or even overwhelming for most students to read and comprehend independently.

However, students' involvement in reading itself can be enhanced when they are reading texts that are interesting, relevant to their lives and readable (Buccella 2024, Shanahan 2019). Only through those materials, as previous studies showed (Reed and Schallert 1993), students' sense of immersion or absorption during reading and the investment of many hours reading books and materials can increase. Therefore, it is paramount to provide leveled, decodable, and readable text to Korean EFL students in reading classes to foster their reading motivation. In doing so, it is advisable to utilize IRIs (Paris 2002, Paris et al. 2002) or other standardized ORF measurements (Good III and Kaminski 2002, Wiederhold and Bryant 2012), which are specifically designed to assess the reading levels at which students can accurately decode words and comprehend the text. By having students read aloud from vocabulary lists or passages calibrated to reflect specific grade or developmental levels, educators can effectively identify texts that correspond to students' independent, instructional, and frustration levels and diagnose students' weakness and strength in reading.

As explored in this study, the reading experiences are intricately connected to L2 reading involvement, the consistency and extent of L2 learning, and the motivation and interest in reading in L2, all of which significantly influence students' L2 reading fluency development. The findings of this study underscore the importance of

continuous commitment and involvement in reading activities, thereby helping them practice and coordinate a complex array of sub-components and skills of reading. To incorporate reading practice and material into reading class for fluent reading, three key pedagogical strategies were proposed – that is, offering genuine reading activities, providing struggling readers with interventions on basic reading skills, and furnishing students with appropriately leveled and interesting texts. Incorporating these practices can help transform test-centered English classes into a more inclusive and dynamic learning environment. However, these efforts should not be viewed as an endpoint but rather as part of an ongoing, iterative process toward continuous improvement. Consequently, there remains much to explore and learn in this endeavor. With further research and practical application, it is possible to better understand and continue to address the complexities of L2 reading development, thus fostering a more enriching and empowering environment for language and reading education.

6. Limitations and Further Studies

While the present study provides valuable insights into the reading experiences of Korean EFL students and their relations with reading fluency development, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the relatively small and context-specific sample constrains the generalizability of the findings to larger populations. Future studies should therefore draw on larger and more diverse groups of learners across different educational settings, age ranges, and proficiency levels to enhance external validity and support the broader application of results to educational policy and practice.

Second, data on students' reading experiences and motivation were primarily collected through semi-structured interviews. Although this method offered rich, qualitative insights, it is inherently subject to self-report bias, memory limitations, and social desirability effects. Employing methodological triangulation including classroom observations, reading logs, digital analytics, and think-aloud protocols would allow for a more comprehensive and objective understanding of learners' reading behaviors.

Third, although the IRI was useful for diagnosing students' reading levels and fluency, it does not fully capture all dimensions of reading fluency, particularly prosodic features such as intonation, rhythm, and expression. Therefore, future studies should incorporate additional standardized assessment tools that more comprehensively evaluate prosodic aspects of reading, alongside comprehension tests and genre-based reading tasks, to provide a more holistic understanding of reading development.

Lastly, the cross-sectional design of this study restricts the ability to draw causal inferences about the relationship between reading experiences, motivation, and fluency. Longitudinal investigations would enable researchers to trace developmental trajectories over time and establish stronger causal links. In particular, such research could examine how consistent exposure to meaningful reading practices, targeted interventions in decoding and vocabulary, and motivational changes contribute to long-term fluency growth.

Taken together, these limitations highlight several promising avenues for future research. Expanding sample diversity, adopting mixed-methods approaches, broadening assessment tools, and conducting longitudinal studies will not only strengthen the empirical foundations of L2 reading research but also provide more practical, evidence-based guidance for pedagogy and curriculum design.

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Examples in: English

Applicable Languages: English

Applicable Level: Secondary