DEVELOPING EFL LEARNERS' READING COMPETENCE THROUGH SHORT-FORM DIGITAL TEXTS IN UPPER-SECONDARY EDUCATION

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Annotation and Keywords

Digital communication has sharply increased upper-secondary EFL learners' exposure to short online texts, yet reading instruction continues to rely mainly on extended printed passages. This thesis reviews research on digital reading, online reading strategies, and digital-versus-print comparisons, and argues that text type — not medium alone — is the more decisive factor in reading outcomes. On this basis, it suggests to examine short-form digital texts (news snippets, reviews, advertisements, blog excerpts, captions) as a different, genre-bound instructional resource for developing upper-secondary EFL learners' reading competence, and outlines research questions and a mixed-methods design for testing this.

Keywords: EFL reading competence, digital reading, short-form texts, genre awareness, upper-secondary education, reading strategies.

Introduction

Problem: Upper-secondary EFL learners now encounter English predominantly through short digital texts — news items, advertisements, reviews, blog excerpts, and social-media posts — yet classroom reading instruction has not adapted to this shift, continuing to privilege extended printed materials. This creates a gap between how learners are taught to read and how they read outside the classroom.

Relevance: Systematic reviews comparing digital and printed reading consistently report small, inconsistent effects of medium, pointing instead to text type and task as the more decisive variables. Short form digital texts, despite being the dominant form learners encounter, remain understudied as a deliberate instructional category. Addressing this gap is directly relevant to ongoing efforts to align Uzbekistan's foreign-language curriculum with learners' real communicative environment.

Aim: To determine the extent to which structured instruction built on short-form digital texts develops upper-secondary EFL learners' reading competence, and to characterize how learners' reading strategies and genre awareness differ between short-form and longer digital texts.

Literature Review

Reiber-Kuijpers, Kral, and Meijer (2021) reviewed studies on digital reading in second- and foreign-language contexts and concluded that digital reading is a complex literacy activity shaped by the interaction of environment, task, and reader, rather than conventional reading simply transferred to a screen.

Huang, Chern, and Lin (2009) found that EFL learners' frequent use of support strategies did not by itself predict better comprehension of more difficult online texts, showing that successful online reading requires coordinated strategy use. Zhang and Duke (2008) similarly found that strategy patterns shift according to reading purposes.

Delgado et al. (2018) and Clinton (2019) each reported only a small, condition-dependent advantage for paper over digital reading; broader reviews by Hare et al. (2024, 88 studies) and Peras et al. (2023, 23 studies) reached the same conclusion — outcomes depend on age and text type, not medium as such.

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Murphy and Arciuli (2024), reviewing 53 studies (~7,702 EAL learners), found that higher-quality studies reported smaller effects and that multiple-strategy instruction was the norm — underscoring the need for more precisely targeted instructional resources such as short-form texts.

Methodology

Design: A mixed-method, quasi-experimental design conducted over one academic term.

- Participants: intact upper-secondary EFL classes at intermediate proficiency, divided into an experimental group (structured short-form-text instruction) and a comparison group (standard mixed-length materials).
- Instrument: pre- and post-intervention comprehension tests targeting four sub-skills — main-idea identification, detail location, vocabulary-in-context inference, and understanding relationships between ideas — scored separately per sub-skill.
- Qualitative data: think-aloud protocols and semi-structured interviews with a subset of participants, addressing strategy use and genre awareness.
- Materials control short-form texts classified and balanced by genre (review, news snippet, advertisement, etc.) rather than treated as one uniform category.
- Analysis: statistical comparison (e.g., t-test/ANOVA) of pre/post scores between groups per sub-skill; thematic analysis of think-aloud and interview transcripts.

Expected Results

- The experimental group is expected to show measurable gains over the comparison group on at least some sub-skills (most plausibly vocabulary-in-context inference and detail location, based on patterns in prior EFL digital-reading studies), rather than uniform gains across all four.
- Genre classification of materials is expected to reveal that gains vary by text genre (e.g., news snippets vs. reviews), consistent with Blom's (2018) finding that internal text organization affects comprehension more than medium alone.
- Think-aloud data are expected to show that learners apply a narrower, more targeted set of strategies to short-form texts than to longer digital passages, reflecting the fragment-like, purpose-bound nature of short-form reading (Leu et al., 2015).

Discussion

If the anticipated pattern holds, it will support the central premise: that short-form digital texts function differently from digital texts in general, and that their genre conventions — not their brevity alone — are what drive any instructional benefit. This would extend Delgado et al. (2018) and Hare et al. (2024) by showing that within the digital category itself, genre-specific instruction can be isolated as a variable, rather than treating 'digital reading' as monolithic.

Limitations to anticipate: a single-term design cannot establish long-term retention; intact classes limit randomization; and audio or multimodal confounds (as seen in Sidabutar et al., 2022) must be explicitly excluded from materials to keep the short-form-text effect interpretable.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Short-form digital texts highlight an under-examined but ecologically relevant instructional resource for upper-secondary EFL reading competence. This thesis has argued, based on existing research, that text type rather than medium is the productive variable to isolate, and has proposed a mixed-methods design to test this directly.

Recommendations:

- For curriculum designers: incorporate genre-classified short-form digital texts into reading materials rather than treating 'digital text' as a single undifferentiated resource.

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- For teachers: pair short-form text instruction with explicit genre-awareness activities, since genre conventions appear to matter as much as text length.
- For future research: extend this design across a full academic year and to other language skills (listening, writing) to test whether the short form/genre effect generalizes beyond reading.

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