

# The Difficulties That EFL Learners Have with Reading Text on the Web

Min-chen Tseng  
jane0412(at)mail.cgu.edu.tw  
Chang Gung University (Taoyuan, Taiwan)

The purpose of this article was to investigate the difficulties of reading text on the web for EFL learners. The major difficulties students experienced when reading text on the web were: they experienced eyestrain, they skipped lines, and they could not take notes or underline any words or text on computer screens.

## Introduction

With the advent of technology, computers have become an indispensable part of daily life. Students access the Internet at home and at school on a regular basis. They browse different web pages, check emails and chat with friends. While browsing different web pages they take part in a lot of reading activities. The Internet provides new text formats, new ways to interact with the information on the web pages. The new methods of interacting with information could overwhelm some EFL learners in Taiwan, who are taught to read from traditional text printed on paper.

Reading traditional text in the field of ESL/EFL has been well studied over the past few decades. When reading printed text, readers start from the top left-hand corner and finish at the bottom right-hand corner. Readers' eyes move in a straight line, making the reading experience a linear activity. However, the process of reading hypertext is uniquely different (Barnes, 1994). When reading web pages, readers click a hyperlink and then they are led to a different web page. The web pages on the Internet consist of graphics, sounds, pictures, text, animation, and clips of films. Readers read information in scattered bits and pieces not in a textual whole. Their eyes move in a circular motion. According to Ojala (2000), online reading is a non-linear activity. Reading hypertext is different from reading printed text.

## Background

Since reading printed text is different from reading text on the web, the purpose of the study was to find the difficulties that EFL learners experienced and provide pedagogical suggestions accordingly. Students were asked to do reading comprehension exercises on the Internet, and then they were interviewed regarding the reading difficulties they encountered.

## The Influential Factors of Reading Text on the Web

Students were asked the influential factors for reading text on the web. The answers were divided into five types.

1. **Eyestrain and eyes-blurred:** thirty students (36%) mentioned that their eyes were strained after staring at the computer screens for a period of time. They also felt their eyes blurred and could not read text clearly.
2. **Others:** Sixteen students (18%) pointed out different factors. Three students mentioned they could not think on computer screens, five of them said it was because of habit, four of them said when they read online, they wanted to browse other irrelevant websites, two of them said the radiation of computers affected reading on computer screens, and two of them said the speed of downloading was a critical point.
3. **Background color:** fourteen students (16%) pointed out that the background color was a crucial factor that affected reading on computer screens. They did not like a bright background that made their eyes feel uncomfortable.
4. **Lines:** thirteen students (15%) said that it was easy to skip lines when reading on computer screens. They sometimes got lost between lines, and had to look for the line they intend to read.
5. **Font size:** thirteen students (15%) stated that the words on computer screens were too small. It increased the difficulty in reading.

The biggest factor of reading text on the web was eyestrain. When students' eyes felt tired, they just skipped the questions. Since their eyes felt uncomfortable, it was tiring to go backwards and forwards among web pages. The second influential factor was the background. Students did not like a bright background.

The third influential factor is lines and font size. On paper, there are 38 lines on one page using a single space format. A participant can read the questions and find answers from the passage. When the length of the text is not long, some students might still remember where, in the upper, middle or bottom of the page or even which line they saw that particular words or phrases. But on a web page, there could be unlimited lines. When students tried to find a certain word or line, they had to go from the top of the page and look for the answers. They might just get lost in between lines as they mentioned. Therefore, it affected the way the students read in this study. Also, students felt that the words on the web pages were too small. It was fairly tiring for them to read every word on the computer. One particular influential factor listed in "others" was that students thought there were too many websites on the Internet; they would feel like going to other websites and this distracted their attention from the test.

## The Advantages and Disadvantages of Reading Text on the Web

Students were asked the advantages and disadvantages for reading text on web pages. Their answers were categorized as follows:

### Advantages: (Excerpts from Students)

- It was convenient for searching for information.
- There were many animated pictures.

### Disadvantages: (Excerpts from Students)

- My eyes got tired easily sitting in front of a computer screen.
- There were too many words.
- We could not write anything on computer screens.
- It was not convenient to carry a computer everywhere.
- All the words and pictures were on the computer. It was not real.
- It was more difficult to locate a certain word or line on computer screens.
- I did not get used to reading on computer screens.
- There was radiation.
- I felt tense reading on computers.
- I could not focus my mind on computer screens.
- It wasted electric power.
- It was not convenient to find something on computers because it took time turning on computers and waiting for downloading.

While reading the text on the computer screens, students pointed out many disadvantages. For instance, they felt tired physically reading words in front of a computer. Also, that it was not convenient to take the computer everywhere, and that they could not focus their attention on the computer screens.

## The Difficulties of Reading Text on the Web

Students were asked what the difficulties were for them reading on a computer screen. There were six types of answers.

- **Eyestrains:** Thirty-seven students (50%) had the biggest problem with eyestrain. They felt tired easily reading on computer screens. Therefore, they were not able to read for a long period of time.
- **Lines:** Eighteen students (25%) said that it was easy to skip lines or got lost on computer screens. Then it took longer

to relocate certain word or lines.

- **Notes:** Eight students (11%) pointed out they could not take notes or underline anything on computer screens.
- **Habits:** Five students (7%) brought up that it was difficult to overcome old habits. They got used to reading in books. They could not pay attention to computer screens.
- **No Difficulties:** Three students (4%) did not think there were any difficulties with reading on computer screens.
- **Portability:** Two students (3%) mentioned that they could not read on computer screens in bed or take it everywhere they went.

## Pedagogical Implications

The pedagogical implications for teachers are as follows.

### The Importance of Selecting Web Pages for EFL Students

There are too many different kinds of web pages on the Internet. They serve as good resources for leading students into a new topic or doing critical thinking. However, some of them have fancy backgrounds and pictures, but they are not designed for educational or language learning purposes. Teachers should screen or choose appropriate web sites, which provide clear instructions, and proper content. Thus, students do not need to waste time searching for websites, but instead focus on reading the content of the websites.

### The Importance of Adjusting the Setting of Computer Screens and Web Pages

From the study, students felt tired reading from computer screens. Students can be taught to adjust the brightness, width, and color contrast on the monitor, and enlarge the font size on the menu bar by themselves in order to find the most suitable screens for their eyes.

### Testing on Paper and Computers:

From the results, students performed better in doing tests on printed on paper than on tests done on a computer screen. When giving students tests on computers, it is important for teachers to notice that the difference of text presentation will affect students' performance. The familiarity of using computers is also a big factor when students do tests on the Internet.

### The Importance of Teaching Students How to Read Text on the Web

Students get used to reading on paper, but they are not familiar with reading text on the web. One reason is because it is different from their usual reading habit and the other is they do not know how to read text web pages. Therefore, schools could provide courses that train students how to look for information on the Internet and how to read through it.

Here are some tips for teachers:

- When **teaching prediction**, a lot of pictures and articles could be found on the Internet for teachers and students to preview a lesson. Teachers can recommend some websites for students to preview or make predictions with the new materials. Thus, it would arouse students' interest and motivation to read new articles.
- When **skimming the text**, it was found that students skipped lines. However, the nature of skimming is to skim over the text. They do not read word by word. Since there are many articles on the Internet, they are good sources to train students to skim an article and try to get the general idea of it.
- When **scanning an article**, students used their eyes, fingers, rulers, or a mouse to help them. Alternatively, they can be taught to choose "Edit" on the menu bar, and click "Find". It will be faster for students to locate a certain word or line, especially in a very long article.
- **Vocabulary** is important for students. There are many online dictionaries or concordances. Alternatively, they can be taught to make their own vocabulary cards by using Word, Excel and FrontPage.

- The **background color** of the web pages is also important for reading hypertext. When teachers are making their own materials, some Java Scripts can help teachers to change background color.

It is not advisable to use computers to teach for one or two hours as students developed eyestrain in this study. It is suggested to combine materials in textbooks and some activities on computer screens. The purpose is to let students' eyes take a rest. Also, the combination of two mediums will make the class more interesting. Alternatively, divide the class into three phases: *work-in*, *work-on*, and *work-out* periods. In the *work-in period*, provide relevant background information or vocabulary to lead students into the topic. In the *work-on period*, ask students to read articles on the computer. In the *work-out period*, some exercises can be designed to test students' comprehension, or ask students to have further discussions. All the exercises used in the three periods can be prepared either on paper or on the Internet. If all the exercises are made on the Internet, eyestrain will be the biggest problem as the results of this study show, and it will impede students' performance.

## Conclusion

The Internet is one of the major innovations of the twentieth century. It has had a profound impact on the teaching of foreign languages. Many publications, conferences and meetings are filled with papers and presentations that promote the advantages of teaching and learning with the Internet. However, the results of this study showed the difficulties of reading text of the web for some students. Teachers and researchers have to realize the difference and characteristics in the presentation on computer, and then develop programs or websites suitable for students in learning English. It is hoped the difference can be solved and learners can read text on the web as easily as they read on paper.

## References

- Barnes, S. (1994). Hypertext literacy. *Interpersonal Computing and Technology*, 2(4), 24-36.
- Ojala, M. (2000). Online reading as a nonlinear activity. *Econtent*, 23 (5), 6.