DOI: https://doi.org/10.33193/JALHSS.83.2022.726
ISSN online: 2414 - 3383
ISSN print: 2616- 3810
مجلة الفنون والأدب وعلوم الإنسانيات والاجتماع
Journal of Arts, Literature, Humanities and Social Sciences
www.jalhss.com
Volume (83) September 2022 العدد (83) سبتمبر 2022

# Assessing English Oral Reading Fluency of Kurdish EFL Students at University of Duhok

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify the overall oral reading fluency level of the Kurdish EFL first- and second-year students at the English Language Department, College of Basic Education, the University of Duhok, over two years of their first and second years of study, 2020 – 2021. Besides, it aims to find out the significant difference between the Kurdish EFL first- and second-year students in the level of oral reading fluency according to MDFS dimensions. This paper also aims to determine the significant difference in the level of oral reading fluency between the first -and second-year students according to the gender variable. Seventy-four Kurdish EFL students participated in the study. Cover-to-Cover 1& 2 textbooks were used to train students based on a modeling technique. Then, the level of students' oral reading fluency was measured based on the four dimensions of the MDFS model; Expression and volume, phrasing, smoothness, and pacing. The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS 24). Results have revealed that students achieved a low overall oral reading fluency level; however, the level of second-year students has improved in pacing, smoothness, phrasing, expression and volume dimensions, respectively. It is recommended that teachers should expose their students to as many extensive and intensive reading passages as possible.

**Keywords:** EFL Oral Reading Fluency, Modeling Technique, MDFS Model.

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## Introduction

According to Grabe (2010), defining oral reading fluency has been a debated subject since fluency itself is a complex concept; scholars struggle to agree on one fixed definition. He defines reading fluency as "the ability to read rapidly with ease and accuracy, and to read with appropriate expression and phrasing. It involves a long incremental process and text comprehension is the expected outcome" (p. 72). The work of Nation (2014) presents a more inclusive definition of fluency; it is "making the best use of what is already known … fluency can be described as the ability to process language receptively and productively at a reasonable speed" (p.11). For English native speakers, a fluent reader is someone who is able to accurately read 250 – 300 words per minute out loud, maintaining expression and phrasing (Grabe, 2010; Nation, 2005). As for non-native speakers of the English language, Nation (2005) believes that they should be able to read 150 words per minute and aim to read 250 when reading easy texts. Bailly, Godde, Piat-Marchand, and Bosse (2022). describe the expert reader as "someone who reads as he/she talks, that is not only decoding the text accurately, smoothly and at a conversational rate, but also using melody, rhythm, and intensity variations to capture the listener's attention and ease his/her comprehension of the text" (p. 67).

Reading speed or reading rate is not the only important aspect of oral reading fluency that is worth investigating; it includes other significant areas, such as expression and volume, phrasing, smoothness, pacing, prosody, and comprehension. For this purpose, researchers and scholars use several scales and models to measure and promote oral reading fluency. The three most popular scales or models all over the world are the following: (1) the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) which measures rate, accuracy, and fluency; (2) the Multidimensional Fluency Scale (MDFS) which measures expression and volume, phrasing, smoothness, and pacing); and (3) the Comprehensive Oral Reading Fluency Scale (CORFS) that measures rate, accuracy, and prosody (Morrison & Wilcox, 2020).

The importance of oral reading fluency is indisputable as many scholars highlighted the reading skills that learners obtain through. There is a consensus among scholars that oral reading fluency is the cornerstone of promoting all other language skills. It helps learners achieve more fluency by accessing a range of different vocabulary. Besides, it boosts learners' motivation to read further and become autonomous in their learning process. Also, it enables learners to read and understand larger and various types of texts (Waring, 2014 & Grabe, 2009).

Turning to Nation (2014), one finds that fluency development is an essential aspect to have in a well-balanced language course and that "one quarter of the total time in a language course should be spent on fluency activities" (p. 11). The advantages of oral reading vastly outweigh the advantages that can be obtained in silent reading as most of the reading children do to learn is oral, and most of the learning children and adults do is based on what they have already learned at their youngest ages (Morrison & Wilcox, 2020; Nation, 2014).

For many years, there has been a misconception about oral reading fluency; it was only associated with the contexts of (L1) native speakers. However, it is correctly

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argued that investigating reading fluency in non-native speakers' (L2) contexts is as significant as investigating it in native speakers' (L1) contexts (Grabe, 2010 & Nation, 2014). Both scholars highlight the fact that studies on oral reading fluency in ESL and EFL contexts are still insufficient. They also rightly point out that oral reading fluency is neglected to a great extent in most of L2 contexts. Therefore, this study aims at:

1. identifying the overall oral reading fluency level of the Kurdish EFL first- and second-year students at the English Language Department based on the MDFS dimensions.
2. Finding out the significant difference between the Kurdish EFL first- and second-year students at the English Language Department in the level of oral reading fluency according to the MDFS dimensions.
3. determining the significant difference in the level of oral reading fluency between the Kurdish EFL first -and second-year students at the English Language Department according to the gender variable.

## Literature Review

### Historical Background of Reading Fluency

The work of Morrison & Wilcox (2020) presents a historical overview of oral reading fluency starting from the 1600s and 1700s, when children were supposed to read the Bible expressively. In the mid-1800s, oral reading fluency was the focal interest of most of scholars, especially in USA schools. The focus on oral reading fluency shifted to silent reading at the beginning of the 1900s most of the reading that adults do is silent. Concentrating on silent reading and reading comprehension lasted for decades until the 1960s - 1970s, when scholars' attention returned to the urge and importance of oral reading fluency for its realistic role in increasing reading automaticity, accuracy, speed, and word recognition. In the 1970s, only two aspects of oral reading fluency were the center of researchers: reading rate and accuracy. In 2000, in the Report of the National Reading Panel, the aspect of prosody was added to rate and accuracy. Morrison & Wilcox (2020) define prosody as the "elements of speech that go beyond the ability to produce vowel and consonant sounds to the ability to use appropriate intonation, tone, stress, and rhythm when reading connected text" (p. 2). One of the issues in assessing prosody is that it is highly subjective and no absolute standards are available; expressive reading can be done in plenty possible ways. Above all, determining an expressive reader depends on the listener as well, not only the reader; thus, expressivity becomes a controversial subject matter (Bailly et al. 2022).

### Oral Reading Fluency in ESL / EFL Contexts

Nation (2005) explains some of the most significant factors that negatively affect the mental process of decoding written words into meaningful spoken forms. He asserts the fact that several elements create challenges for EFL learners while reading. One is when the direction of the L1 script is quite different from the script direction of L2. Second, when the shapes and symbols of letters used in L1 are totally distinct from

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Volume (83) September 2022 العدد (83) سبتمبر 2022

those used in L2. Finally, when certain overlaps or confusions occur among a number of common shapes used for different letters between L1 and L2. These issues make the word recognition process challenging and slow for EFL readers. He illustrates this issue through a comparison between the Thai language and English. He states that "Thai uses a different script from English, learning to read the English letters p b d g is quite difficult because although the letters have some similarities, there are important differences. Where is the circle part of the letter, at the bottom as in b or the top as in p, on the right of the stalk as in b or the left as in d" (p. 24-25).

Yorio (2006) reveals that four factors are to be taken into consideration in reading: (1) readers' awareness of the language; (2) their capability to predict and guess the correct choices; (3) their capability to remember the former cues; and (4) their capability of making the required associations among various selected cues. He also clarifies that reading fluency in ESL or EFL contexts is quite different from reading fluency in L1. He points out five factors that negatively affect the reading fluency of EFL learners: (1) their knowledge of the foreign language is not similar to that of their native peers possess; (2) their ability to guess and predict the correct cues is negatively affected by their lack of knowledge of the foreign language; (3) their chances of making the correct associations are minor; (4) their memory span of the foreign language is short; and (5) the existence of the negative influence of their mother tongue is indisputable.

Mahendra and Marantika (2020) discovered that the phonological interference of the mother tongue language on EFL learners is quite strong, especially vowels. They realized that Japanese university leveled participants mispronounced 12 English vowels (/ɪ, aʊ, ɔː, e, ʌ, əʊ, aɪ, ɪə, ə, ɒ, eɪ, æ/) while reading English texts. In this regard, participants made three particular types of errors in vowels: sound addition, sound omission, and sound replacement.

They referred to the errors because the participants read the words as they were written. As for consonant sounds, their findings revealed that students had challenges in pronouncing 13 consonants (/ʒ, v, θ, ð, z, ʃ, f, g, k, d, ʧ, ŋ, j/).

A study by Van Dijk (2018) found that students with a better foundation of English literacy skills and phonics scored much higher in their reading fluency than those who did not receive any. Another study by Aldhanhany and Abu-Ayyash (2020) presents many factors that may negatively influence the reading fluency of EFL learners. Some factors can be managed by teachers, educators, and educational institutions, while other factors, such as "the socioeconomic status of the students, ethnicity, gender, and physical disabilities," cannot be controlled (p. 385).

Similarly, Rasinski (2014) emphasized that students' prior knowledge and experience of the English language sound system and word recognition can play a vital role in determining their level of oral reading fluency. Turning to Waring (2014), he states that "one foundation of reading fluency is the ability to process text quickly not only at the alphabetic, word, sentence, and discourse levels but also the lexico-grammatical level, and in tandem with background knowledge and so on" (p. 214).

Maintaining a prosodic reading is another challenge for EFL learners; prosody is defined as the "elements of speech that go beyond the ability to produce vowel and

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consonant sounds to the ability to use appropriate intonation, tone, stress, and rhythm when reading connected text" (Morrison & Wilcox, 2020, p. 2). This challenge is highlighted by Rahmawati et al. (2020) who believe that prosodic reading is one of the most challenging skills for EFL learners to achieve. Their study on 77 university-leveled students of the English language department showed that students faced severe challenges in handling complex syntactical structures. The findings of their study showed that four reasons were behind students' weak prosodic reading: (1) they could not recognize certain vocabulary, which increased the number and length of their pauses; (2) they did not have sufficient knowledge about the four types of English sentences which contributed in increasing the number of unnecessary pauses; (3) the length of the sentences; and (4) the length of the passage. Regarding the length of the texts, Yang (2021) stresses that text reading can be used to detect and diagnose low-level or weak readers.

Nation (2009) believes that some other factors also have a negative impact on EFL learners' reading speed, such as the "purpose of the reading, and the difficulty of the text. The difficulty of the text is affected by the vocabulary, grammatical constructions, discourse, and background knowledge" (p. 134).

Another study by Banitalebi et al. (2021) revealed that being a bilingual or monolingual learner can have a strong impact on learners' reading fluency in correct pausing. The study included 40 university-leveled EFL students, both monolingual whose L1 was Persian and those whose L1 was Turkish and L2 was Persian. Using Praat software for analyzing the recorded audios, the results indicated that bilingual students outperformed monolingual students in producing more correct patterns of pausing. The study of Maluch & Sachse (2020) also showed that adult learners who read fast in their L1 usually read fast in their L2 as well.

Turning to the work of Aldhanhany & Abu-Ayyash (2020), motivation (intrinsic or extrinsic) was another aspect that considerably impacted on ESL students' reading fluency. The motivation of their studied sample appeared to be negatively affected by the degree of the difficulty of the reading materials, the genre of the reading materials, the stressfulness that resulted from making mistakes, and the embarrassing comments they received from their classmates. Interestingly, the influence of the negatively affected seemed to have negative consequences on students' comprehension, not their fluency and speed.

There is a strong relationship between reading fluency and reading comprehension; researchers in the field of oral reading fluency have come to a consensus that the higher the learners' fluency is, the better level of comprehension they have, and vice versa (Nation, 2021; Nation, 2014; Nation, 2005; Park, 2018; Rahmawati et al. 2020; Pey et al., 2014; Saat & Özenç, 2022; Waring, 2014). Since reading comprehension is not in the scope of this study, then it will not be explained in further detail.

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**Techniques and Strategies for Promoting Oral Reading Fluency**

In order to control or reduce some of the challenges that students encounter in oral reading and to elevate ESL and EFL learners' oral reading fluency, many researchers, educators and practitioners have recommended many reading strategies, and techniques that have been used and found useful, such as timed reading, paired reading, repeated reading, modeling and intensive and extensive reading (Nation, 2021, Nation, 2014; Waring, 2014; Grabe, 2010; Grabe, 2014; Browning, 2003). In general, developing oral reading fluency is a sequential ordered process which starts with decoding, automaticity, meaningful group of words and eventually expressivity, respectively. However, promoting prosodic reading is more complicated because these four skills evolve in parallel and at the same time (Bailly et al. 2022).

Nation (2005, p. 26) proposes two possible and effective paths to fluency for both ESL and EFL learners. The first is called "the well-beneath path", in which learners repeat reading the same materials to improve their fluency. Repeated reading as a technique, for instance, is widely used to achieve fluency. And, the second path is called "the rich and varied map", through which learners are exposed to a wide range of different reading texts, such as extensive readings or stories that include similar vocabulary but different themes. Thus, learners are able to reproduce various associations using the same words they have already learned. Extensive reading has become one of the most popular and effective strategies in promoting oral reading fluency.

Although extensive reading has been defined by many scholars, Milliner (2021a) defines it as students' exposure to a large number of different types of reading passages that should be easy, interesting and authentic. He emphasizes the fact that implementing extensive reading as a strategy can promote ESL and EFL learners' fluency in several directions:

(1) it increases their word recognition level;
(2) it introduces them to a wide range of grammatical and syntactical structures;
(3) boosts their skills of listening and writing;
(4) it encourages them to read more and longer texts, especially outside the class;
(5) it uplifts their reading comprehension skills; and
(6) it increases their reading rate and speed.

In addition, Milliner (2021b) elaborates on the merits of using extensive, timed, and repeated reading with EFL learners. The findings of his study, which included 56 university-leveled EFL learners of Japanese L1, showed that those students who experienced the 12-week reading intervention scored higher on reading and listening tests, and their silent reading comprehension increased by 46 standard words per minute. Amin (2022) suggests that repeated reading and reading while listening can improve students' reading fluency and comprehension. Another example is Nation & Waring (2019), who encourage teachers to use timed reading in their classes for it can boost students' motivation. They also recommend that teachers keep records of their students timed readings in the class, and show their students such records and the progression they make from time to time.

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**Models of Assessing Oral Reading Fluency**

The area of determining errors in assessing oral reading fluency is considered to be as complicated as the oral reading fluency itself. However, it can be stated that scholars have reached a considerable consensus about how to measure oral reading fluency (Nation, 2014; Grabe, 2010; Waring, 2014). To measure reading fluency and accuracy, Nation (2005) says that "the typical measure for all kinds of fluency tasks is words per minute" (p. 33). He also argues that "reading too slowly at speeds of much less than 100 words per minute can have negative effects on comprehension" (p. 35). Moreover, he recommends that the physical nature of reading and its correlation with the reading speed should be comprehended to avoid many misconceptions regarding reading faster and the speed rates that readers are able to reach. To illustrate this significant matter, Nation states that "when people read, three types of action are involved – fixations on particular words, jumps (saccades) to the next item to focus on, and movements back to an item already looked at (regressions)" (p. 22). Furthermore, he diagnoses slow readers through three physical symptoms when they are "(1) fixating on units smaller than a word (word parts, letters, parts of letters) and thus making several fixations per word, (2) spending a long time on each fixation or some fixations, and (3) making many regressions to look back at what has already been read." (24).

Concerning weak readers and assessing their errors, a great deal of information can be concluded from the models and scales used by researchers worldwide. The work of Morrison & Wilcox (2020) compares three of the most popular and widely used scales of reading fluency among researchers: (1) the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP); (2) the Multidimensional Fluency Scale (MDFS); and (3) the Comprehensive Oral Reading Fluency Scale (CORFS).

The NAEP scale measures three aspects of readers' fluency: reading rate, accuracy, and prosody. It divides readers into four levels (1-4); levels one and two are categorized as non-fluent, while levels three and four are categorized as fluent. This scale is known to be holistic and lacks objectivity (Morrison & Wilcox); therefore, it was not employed in this study.

The MDFS scale measures four aspects of reading fluency: expression and volume, phrasing, smoothness, and pacing. It also divides readers into four levels (1-4), focusing more on their features of prosody. Similarly, levels one and two are categorized as non-fluent while level three and four are categorized as fluent readers (See Table 1). Morrison & Wilcox (2020) correctly argue that the reliability of the MDFS ranges from 0.92 to 0.98, and it is more reliable than NAEP and CORFS since NEAP focuses more on accuracy and uses a holistic scale and thus lacks objectivity. As for CORFS, it appears to be new in the field and lacks being tested by many researchers. Accordingly, MDFS was selected to be used in this study.

The CORFS scale measures three aspects of reading fluency: accuracy, intonation, and pausing. It also divides readers into four categories. The first and second categories are non-fluent readers, while the third and fourth are fluent. The distinctive features of this scale are its concentration on the aspect of intonation and its categorization of reading accuracy— the word correct per minute (wcpm). The

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accuracy levels are categorized as the following: level one, which is the lowest category in the scale, is ranged between 1-78; Level two, which is the second lowest category, is ranged between 78-106; level three, which is the second highest in the scale, is ranged between 107-136; finally, level four which is the highest in the scale starts from 137 and on. Since this scale was designed in 2013, it has not been used by many researchers so far, and its results have not been evaluated yet. As a result, its reliability, strengths, and weaknesses are still unknown (Morrison & Wilcox, 2020). Therefore, it was not selected to be used in this study.

**Related Studies used MDFS Model**

The study of Sinambela (2017) used MDFS model to assess the oral reading fluency of adult ESL students in the Indonesian context. The participants were (N=10) Indonesian undergraduate students, (6) females and (4) males who have learned English in school for more than 12 years. The instruments used were observation, recording, and scoring. Text reading prosody was assessed by reading aloud five novel texts, and the students' reading was recorded on a recorder to measure text reading prosody based on the MDFS. Results revealed that nine students struggled when they did the reading aloud assignment; four students had a low score in four sections of MDFS dimensions. The other five participants were reading slightly better in phrasing and pace, but they did not show appropriate expression and did not read the short passage smoothly.

Another study by Rahmawati, Rosmalina, and Anggraini (2020) used MDFS by Rasinski (2004) to measure the level of reading prosody. The participants were (N=77) students in the second semester of the English Education Study Program of Sriwijaya University. Students' ability in prosodic reading was measured based on MDFS dimensions after obtaining their oral reading recordings. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including minimum and maximum scores, means, and standard deviation. Findings revealed that most students have a moderate level of prosodic reading, and among all the four dimensions of MDFS, students mainly had high scores on the smoothness dimension. Second, the reading skill of students as a whole was moderate, ranging from 'low' to 'good.'

Moreover, Bailly et al. (2022) adapted the MDFS model for French readers to assess the sample of children's recordings subjectively. Raters listen to the first minute of each recording and then have to rate the four items independently: expression and volume, phrasing, smoothness, and pace. Each item scores between 1 (no skills) and 4 (expert skills). The rating session involved several raters. They defined bad vs. good readers according to their average score over the four dimensions, respectively < 1.5 vs. > 3.5. Results of 6853 ratings assigned by 29 raters revealed that the average ratings are moderately correlated; the phrasing dimension is somewhat correlated with pace (0.85), smoothness (.79), and expression dimension (0.77). Besides, the pace dimension correlates with smoothness (.81) and expression (0.68). Additionally, the expression dimension is the least correlated with others, particularly the smoothness dimension (0.59). The study concluded that the pace dimension has significantly better reliability than other dimensions.

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## Methodology

### Research Design

In order to achieve the aims of the current study, the quasi-experimental design was used. The study includes two comparison groups, the first-year and second-year groups. Rogers and Revesz (2020) indicated that "quasi-experimental studies do not require a true control group, but may include a comparison group. A comparison group is an additional experimental group that receives a different experimental treatment." (p.134)

### Participants & Context

This study was conducted to assess the English oral reading fluency and improvement in the fluency of 74 Kurdish EFL first-through second-year students of the English language department, college of Basic Education, the University of Duhok, in 2020 and 2021. All students were Kurdish native speakers, including 23 males and 51 females aged between 18 – 21 years old.

### Data Collection

In this study, participants were first introduced to oral reading fluency, and the MDFS was used to assess the fluency level during the first semester of 2020. Accordingly, the dimensions of the MDFS were explained in detail, including aspects of expression and volume, pacing, phrasing & smoothness. Then, a modeling technique was utilized with the participants; they were given a text of 419 words from the Cover-to-Cover1 textbook by Day and Yamanaka (2007), the first in a three-level reading series. It is designed to include intensive and extensive reading passages to promote students' oral reading fluency and comprehension. Moreover, participants were also given the audio file (track) of the selected reading passage, which was read by an English native speaker (error free) in 3.23 minutes.

The participants were given two weeks to practice listening to the text's audio file and imitating the model. Then they were asked to video-record themselves while reading the selected passage. Participants were given a chance to have as many recording attempts as possible and to choose and submit their best attempt. Later, participants were trained for eight weeks to practice six other passages from their textbook similar to the given passage in terms of structure, length and difficulty. During the training periods, students were given feedback on their performance, common errors they made, and corrections to their errors. However, due to the Coronavirus pandemic and the lockdowns, it was impossible to continue their classroom training and have face-to-face interactions.

In 2021 and at the beginning of the first semester, the same participants were trained for two more weeks, and their oral reading fluency was tested using the abovementioned procedures. However, they were given a more challenging text of 525 words from the Cover-to-Cover2 textbook by Day and Harsch (2008), the second in a three-level reading series. It is also designed to include intensive and extensive reading for the same purposes. They were given the audio file (track) of the selected reading passage, which is read by an English native speaker (error free) in 4.20 minutes. Again, participants were given two weeks to practice by listening to the

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text's audio file and imitating the model. Then they were asked to video-record themselves while reading the selected passage. Eventually, participants were asked to submit their best reading attempts.

The reasons behind asking participants to provide video recordings instead of audio recordings were the following: (1) to guarantee that they are doing their recordings, not asking other people to do so on their behalf; (2) to see their facial expressions while reading; and (3) to see the way they produce sounds.

**Data Analysis**

After collecting all the video recordings of the participants, the MDFS by Rasinski (2004) was adopted to analyze the data (see table 1). The video recording of each participant was graded by two experienced university teachers at the English Language Department, College of Basic Education, focusing on the English language phonological rules. The Excel software program was used to analyze participants' two scores for oral reading fluency. Then their levels were categorized accordingly. Eventually, their outcomes were compared and contrasted with estimating their progress after one academic year in their reading expression and volume, phrasing, smoothness, and pacing dimensions.

**Table (1)**
**MDFS Model by Rasinski (2004)**

| Dimension | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Expression and Volume** | Reads with little expression or enthusiasm in voice. Reads words as if simply to get them out. Little sense of trying to make text sound like natural language. Tends to read in a quiet voice. | Some expression. Begins to make text sound like natural language in some areas of the text, but not others. Focus remains largely on saying the words. Still reads in a quiet voice. | Sounds like natural Language throughout the better part of the passage. Occasionally slips into expressionless reading. Voice volume is appropriate throughout the text. | Reads with good Enthusiasm throughout the text. Sounds like natural language. The reader is able to vary expression and volume to match his/her interpretation of the passage. |
| **Phrasing** | Monotonic with little sense of | Frequent two- and three-word phrases | Mixture of run-ons and mid-sentence pauses | Generally, well phrased, mostly in clause and |

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| | phrase boundaries, frequent word-by-word reading | giving the impression of choppy reading; improper stress and intonation that fail to mark ends of sentences and clauses. | for breath, and possibly some choppiness; reasonable stress/intonation. | sentence units, with adequate attention to expression. |
| **Smoothness** | Frequent extended pauses, hesitations, false starts, sound-outs, repetitions, and/or multiple attempts. | Several "rough" spots in text where extended pauses, hesitations, etc., are more frequent and disruptive. | Occasional breaks in smoothness caused by difficulties with specific words and/or structures. | Generally smooth reading with some breaks, but word and structure difficulties are resolved quickly, usually through self-correction |
| **Pacing** | Slow and laborious. | Moderately slow. | Uneven mixture of fast and slow reading. | Consistently conversational |

**Ethical Issues**

Ethical issues were considered; participants' personal information and identity were kept confidential. Each was given a code as S1, S2, S3, and so on. They were introduced to their rights as participants, and their consent was already taken to willingly participate in this study without imposing any pressure (Robson, 2011).

**Results**

**Results Related to the First Aim**

To achieve the first aim which states identifying the overall oral reading fluency level of the Kurdish EFL first- and second-year students at the English Language Department based on the MDFS dimensions, the mean scores of each stage in each one of the four dimensions and the total score were calculated and compared with the hypothetical means using a one-sample t-test.

**1.The first-year students' level in ORF**

Results showed significant differences in the four MDFS dimensions and in the total score. So, comparing the differences of the four dimensions with the hypothetical

DOI: https://doi.org/10.33193/JALHSS.83.2022.726
ISSN online: 2414 - 3383
ISSN print: 2616- 3810
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means, results indicated that first-year students have a low level in oral reading fluency. As shown below in table (2):

**Table (2)**
**Differences Between Calculated Mean and Hypothetical Mean of the First-Year Students**

| Variable | N. | Calculated Mean | Std. Division | Hypothetical Mean | t-Value | Df | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Expression & Volume | 74 | 1.6892 | .73886 | 2.5 | -9.440 | 73 | .000 |
| Phrasing | 74 | 2.0676 | .74633 | 2.5 | -4.984 | 73 | .000 |
| Smoothness | 74 | 1.7027 | .73521 | 2.5 | -9.329 | 73 | .000 |
| Pacing | 74 | 1.9189 | .65703 | 2.5 | -7.608 | 73 | .000 |
| Total Score | 74 | 7.3784 | 2.62602 | 10 | -8.588 | 73 | .000 |

**2.The Second-Year Students' Level in ORF**

Results showed significant differences in the three MDFS dimensions and in the total score. So, comparing the differences of the four dimensions with the hypothetical means, results indicated a low level in ORF among second-year students in general and in MDFS dimensions. Although, there was no statistically significant difference at the significance level (0.05) between the achieved mean and the hypothetical mean of the fourth dimension (pacing), second-year students' fluency level in pacing dimension was average, as shown below in the table (3):

**Table (3)**
**Differences Between Calculated Mean and Hypothetical Mean of the Second-Year Students**

| Variable | N. | Calculated Mean | Std. Division | Hypothetical Mean | t-Value | Df | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Expression & Volume | 74 | 1.7568 | .71789 | 2.5 | -8.906 | 73 | .000 |
| Phrasing | 74 | 2.2973 | .71634 | 2.5 | -2.434 | 73 | .017 |
| Smoothness | 74 | 2.3108 | .72008 | 2.5 | -2.260 | 73 | .027 |
| Pacing | 74 | 2.5135 | .66710 | 2.5 | .174 | 73 | .862 |
| Total Score | 74 | 8.8784 | 2.61163 | 10 | -3.694 | 73 | .000 |

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**Results Related to the Second Aim**

To achieve the second aim which states finding out the significant difference between the Kurdish EFL first- and second-year students at the English Language Department in the level of oral reading fluency according to the MDFS dimensions, the same students of the first year were tested in the second year. Their mean scores were calculated based on the MDFS dimensions, then the total score of each student on both tests were found out. After that, the comparison was made using the t-test for two correlated samples.

Regarding the first dimension (expression and volume), the mean of the first year is (1.6892), while the mean score of the second year is (1.7568). The t-value was found to be (-.820-); at the level of significance (.415) and a degree of freedom (73).

As for the second dimension (phrasing), the mean score of the first year is (2.0676), while the mean sore of the second year is (2.2973). The t-value was found to be (-2.700-); at the level of significance (.009) and degree of freedom (73).

Concerning the third dimension (smoothness), the mean score of the first year is (1.7027), while the mean sore of the second year is (2.3108). The t-value was found to be (-7.099-); at the level of significance (.000) and degree of freedom (73).

In regard to the fourth dimension (pacing), the mean score of the first year is (1.9189), while the mean sore of the second year is (2.5135). The t-value was found to be (-7.745-) at the level of significance (.000) and degree of freedom (73).

Also, the total score of both stages were found; the mean score of the first year is (M=7.3784), while for the second year is (M= 8.8784). The t-value was found to be (-5.376-) at the level of significance (.000) and degree of freedom (73).

Results showed statistically significant differences at the significance level (0.05) in the total score and the three scale dimensions (phrasing, smoothness, and pacing). As illustrated in table (4):

**Table (4)**

**Differences Between the Mean Scores of the First-and-Second year Students**

| Variable | Group | N. | Calculated Mean | Std. Division | t-Value | Df | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Expression & Volume | First | 74 | 1.6892 | .73886 | -.820- | 73 | .415 |
| | Second | 74 | 1.7568 | .71789 | | | |
| Phrasing | First | 74 | 2.0676 | .74633 | -2.700- | 73 | .009 |
| | Second | 74 | 2.2973 | .71634 | | | |
| Smoothness | First | 74 | 1.7027 | .73521 | -7.099- | 73 | .000 |
| | Second | 74 | 2.3108 | .72008 | | | |
| Pacing | First | 74 | 1.9189 | .65703 | -7.745- | 73 | .000 |
| | Second | 74 | 2.5135 | .66710 | | | |
| Total Score | First | 74 | 7.3784 | 2.62602 | -5.376- | 73 | .000 |
| | Second | 74 | 8.8784 | 2.61163 | | | |

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Thus, the ORF level of the second-year students was better. Whereas, there was no statistically significant difference between the first and second-year students' mean scores in the first dimension (expression & volume).

**Results Related to the Third Aim**

To achieve the third aim which states determining the significant difference in the level of oral reading fluency between the Kurdish EFL first -and second-year students at the English Language Department according to the gender variable, the data of each stage were calculated by using the mean scores and standard deviation for male and female scores on each MDFS dimension and in the total score, then comparing them by using the t-test for two independent samples, as follows:

1. **The Significant difference between Males and Females in the First Year**

Results indicated no statistically significant difference at the significance level (0.05) between males and females in the total score and the scale dimensions of oral reading fluency. This means that gender does not affect the oral reading fluency level of the first-year students, as illustrated in table (5):

**Table (5)**
**Differences Between the Mean Scores of Males and Females in the First year**

| Variable | Group | N. | Calculated Mean | Std. Division | t-Value | Df | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Expression & Volume | Male | 22 | 1.5455 | .80043 | -1.090 | 72 | .279 |
| | Female | 52 | 1.7500 | .71056 | | | |
| Phrasing | Male | 22 | 1.8182 | .85280 | -1.903 | 72 | .061 |
| | Female | 52 | 2.1731 | .67798 | | | |
| Smoothness | Male | 22 | 1.6364 | .78954 | -.502 | 72 | .617 |
| | Female | 52 | 1.7308 | .71717 | | | |
| Pacing | Male | 22 | 1.7273 | .76730 | -1.651 | 72 | .103 |
| | Female | 52 | 2.0000 | .59409 | | | |
| Total Score | Male | 22 | 6.7273 | 3.04227 | -1.396 | 72 | .167 |
| | Female | 52 | 7.6538 | 2.40819 | | | |

**2.The Significant Difference between Males and Females in the Second Year:**

Results indicated no statistically significant difference at the significance level (0.05) between males and females in the total score and the scale dimensions of oral reading fluency. This means that gender does not affect the oral reading fluency level of the second-year students, as shown in table (6):

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**Table 6**
**Differences Between the Mean Scores of Males and Females in the Second year**

| Variable | Group | N. | Calculated Mean | Std. Division | t-Value | Df | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Expression & Volume | Male | 22 | 1.5455 | .73855 | -1.667 | 72 | .100 |
| | Female | 52 | 1.8462 | .69690 | | | |
| Phrasing | Male | 22 | 2.3182 | .64633 | .162 | 72 | .872 |
| | Female | 52 | 2.2885 | .74981 | | | |
| Smoothness | Male | 22 | 2.3182 | .64633 | .057 | 72 | .955 |
| | Female | 52 | 2.3077 | .75507 | | | |
| Pacing | Male | 22 | 2.3182 | .64633 | -1.658 | 72 | .102 |
| | Female | 52 | 2.5962 | .66449 | | | |
| Total Score | Male | 22 | 8.5000 | 2.57737 | -.809 | 72 | .421 |
| | Female | 52 | 9.0385 | 2.63432 | | | |

**Discussion**

Based on the results of the first aim, the level of students' overall ORF achievement was low. The low progress of students' ORF might be attributed to many factors. First, the students did not have background Knowledge in phonetics since they did not take this course in the first year. This is supported by Van DijK (2018), who points out that when students have a good foundation of English literacy skills and phonics, they score much higher in their reading fluency than those who do not have receive any. Second, the influence of the Kurdish Language (L1) on ORF of English Language (L2), as the direction of Kurdish literacy is from right to left, the contrary with the English language. This is asserts by Nations (2005), who maintains that EFL learners cannot achieve a good ORF level when the direction of the L1 script is different from the script direction of L2. Third, the duration of modeling training at home and the online study during the covid-19 pandemic could also be reasons behind the overall low ORF of the first-and the second-year Kurdish EFL students.

Findings of the second aim show that the second-year students' ORF level is better than that of the first year. It is worth mentioning that although the texts of the second year were longer and more complex than the texts of the first year, in terms of the type of sentences and grammatical structure, the second-year students scored higher in all four dimensions, which is evidence that using extensive reading passages with modeling are successful strategies to a good extent of improving EFLs' ORF, taking the circumstances of Covid pandemic and short training duration into consideration. The second-year students have achieved more progress in the pacing dimension, which is an indicator for developing word recognition. This might be attributed to the students' exposure to six different extensive reading passages in the first year and two more passages in the second year using the modeling strategy. Milliner (2021a) supports this finding by saying that students' exposure to many different types of reading passages and implementing extensive reading as a strategy could promote

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EFL learners' word recognition level. Also, students were listening and imitating the native reader. So, by repeating this process, the students could memorize the image of the words and their sounds. This finding is in line with Sinambela (2017), who found that more students have progressed in the pacing dimension. However, it is in disagreement with Rahmawati, Rosmalina, and Anggraini (2020), who found out that the students' higher achievement was in the smoothness dimension. Additionally, second-year students have achieved some progress in smoothness and phrasing; yet it was below the average. Above all, students slightly progressed in the expression and volume because reading the words in the context was difficult for them since this type of reading depends on how much the students are aware of the intonation that affects the expression dimension. Rahmawati et al. (2020) agree that prosodic reading is one of the most challenging skills for EFL learners. We have concluded that expression or maintaining prosodic reading was the most severe challenge for the participants of this study. In a nutshell, the ORF level of the second-year students has progressed sequentially in the four MDFS dimensions, starting with pacing, phrasing, smoothness, then expression and volume. This finding is in accord with Bailly et al. (2022), who maintains that developing oral reading fluency is a sequential ordered process that starts with decoding, automaticity, meaningful group of words, and eventually expressivity.

The findings of the third aim indicate that gender is not a significant variable in the first-and-second year ORF assessment. This finding is supported by Aldhanhany and Abu-Ayyash (2020), who mentioned that gender variable could not be controlled in students' ORF achievements.

**Limitations**

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, direct interaction with the participants was quite challenging; participants' e-learning platform known as moodle was used to communicate with them. This has made testing their reading comprehension almost unattainable as they were not available on campus due to the imposed lockdowns. Moreover, online learning was not a convenient substitute for the majority of the students as they were unfamiliar to such ways of teaching and learning. They did not have enough experience in using digital devices for learning purposes.

It is worth mentioning that 21 participants failed to pass their first year to the second year; as a result, they were skipped as they did not have any assessment in the second year. Based on their first-year oral reading assessment, almost all of those who failed their first year were non-fluent readers.

**Conclusion**

Based on the findings and interpretations, the present study has come to conclude that after using extensive reading and a modeling technique, the Kurdish EFL first-and-second year students achieved little progress in overall ORF. However, the ORF level of the second-year students was better than that of the first year, and they scored higher in the four MDFS dimensions; pacing, phrasing, smoothness, and expression and volume, respectively. More progress was attained in the pacing dimension, which

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is a sign for developing the word recognition of the Kurdish EFL second-year students. Very little improvement was achieved in the expression and volume dimension since it is a challenging skill for EFL learners. Additionally, there was no significant difference in the gender variable, which indicates that it is not a significant variable in ORF assessment. It is recommended that teachers should expose their students to as many extensive and intensive reading passages as possible. Further research could focus on developing oral reading fluency and comprehension in the English Language Departments at the University of Duhok.

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