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**COMPARING B2 AND C1 EFL STUDENTS' PROGRESS IN READING
COMPREHENSION USING *READTHEORY***

Abstract

This paper investigates the progress of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in reading comprehension tasks measured using an online tool ReadTheory. We draw comparisons between the results of two groups of students in different stages of their studies, attempting to determine how well the ReadTheory tasks reflect the expected achievement for their respective levels. The data was collected from the tasks completed by 24 freshmen (1st year) students and 20 junior (3rd year) EFL students at the English Language and Literature department at the Faculty of philosophy, University of Zenica, who are nominally expected to be at B2 and C1 proficiency, respectively. The quantitative measurement consisted of their task completion success rate, total number of tasks completed, knowledge points (KPs) acquired (a RT internal achievement metric), maximum task level attained and the speed reaching that level, and the ability to maintain that level having reached it. The results suggest that the difference in performance between the two groups is not as pronounced as initially expected, with freshmen students on average scoring somewhat better than the junior students, while showing less uniformity in success rates within the group. The KP metric is shown to offer a more precise framework for measuring performance, tilting the average success rate in favour of the junior group, but only by a slight margin. Both groups managed to reach similar levels of task difficulty and, once reached, the maximum level was on average easily maintained by both groups. The surprising result was the marked speed advantage in reaching the maximum level that freshmen students have over their junior colleagues. The results would imply that the usage of ReadTheory improves the reading comprehension skill at the levels of study investigated, measured both by average tasks scores and KPs earned. However, RT appears to have limited use in assessing the progress in reading comprehension skill over time between the 1st and 3rd year students, not allowing for a quantitatively accurate insight into the advancement in reading comprehension skill that is expected to occur.

Keywords: *EFL, reading comprehension, B2/C1 comparison, ReadTheory*

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension and text analysis as a skill is given a prominent spot in the curriculum of the Faculty of Philosophy EFL study program at the University of Zenica. It is integrated first and foremost in the English language proficiency classes that students take each semester, which aim to raise the students' overall proficiency in English. It is, more or less explicitly, also trained in other courses and study modules, for example literature analysis requires the application of the related skill set to understand, and then interpret works of art, and linguistics tasks have to be approached by a careful analysis of data derived from corpora built on real-life language use. Yet, while many teaching modules and practical exercises on offer at the EFL department are built with reading comprehension at its core, until recently there were no modules that emphasized this skill as such to the extent of teaching it separately and testing the student progress in it in a non-integrated context. Having in mind the intrinsic usefulness of advancing this skill in students, and the benefits that carry over to other areas of study, reading comprehension was introduced two years ago as a separate module in the language proficiency courses Contemporary English Language 2 and Contemporary English Language 6 in the first and third year of study, respectively. With the introduction of the module there arose a need to conduct an internal analysis of the benefits of this curriculum modification and determine what role it plays in the advancement of student proficiency.

The module made use of the online tool *ReadTheory*, which is a web-based, free-to-use platform that offers reading comprehension tasks designed for students at K12 levels (comparable to elementary and high school ages in the Bosnia and Herzegovina educational system). Teachers can create classrooms, or student groups, on the platform, with individual student accounts, assign reading comprehension tasks to their students and monitor their progress. Students can access the platform from any device with Internet connection (personal computers, laptops) and the website is adapted to the mobile version as well. They can complete the tasks, called quizzes, in or outside the school environment and can also keep track of their individual progress. A quiz consists of a text, accompanied by a single illustrative image, and a number of multiple-choice questions testing for key ideas and details (vocabulary, author's purpose, inferences), integration of knowledge (tone, purpose, comparing texts) and craft and structure (citing evidence, understanding main ideas). The platform provides the students not only with quizzes which they can complete, but also

teaches reading comprehension strategies by including model answers for each question featured in the quizzes. This self-study format allows students to check every wrong answer they provided, read the detailed elaboration of how to reach the correct answer, and learn from their mistakes. The *ReadTheory* work was assigned to EFL students in both the B2 (1st year) and C1 (3rd year) group in the form of weekly homework tasks. They were graded for their task completion and success rate and the grade earned in the module amounted to a quarter of their course grade.

Before proceeding to the description of the research procedure, it will benefit the understanding of the researcher's choice and use of this particular online tool to settle it in the context in which it was developed and made available for public use. To do so, we need to define the concepts of close reading and reading comprehension, as well as briefly outline the educational context in which *ReadTheory* was proposed as a resource for teachers to implement in their classrooms.

Close reading is defined by Jeff Flygare as “a way to drill down into a selected text and approach what an author is doing on a deep level” (2018: 17). As most skills, it is in a feedback loop with its intended outcome, which is in this case a functional understanding of a text. Isabel Beck and Cheryl Sandora stress this interconnectedness:

The core of the confusion seems to be whether comprehension is an outcome of close reading or a prerequisite to close reading. Well, depending on what kind of comprehension, it's both! Surface or gist comprehension comes first and allows one to go on to close reading, which then enables deep or deeper comprehension. (2016: 5)

It has been recognized that a basic comprehension of text characteristics such as its genre and the general intent of the author enable the reader to retrieve more value from the text and evaluate it in an objective manner, while the very act of deep reading in turn enhances the comprehension of it. Since this skill is ubiquitously necessary in all learning contexts, its development is crucial at all stages of education. It has been a part of the Common Core State Standards initiative launched in 2009 in the USA (Beck and Sandora, 2016: 3), which came to be adopted across the United States. They define and propose a common framework for Mathematics and English Language Arts, the latter of which include reading standards for literature and informational texts (*Corestandards.Org*). Nancy Hennessy terms reading comprehension a proxy

for skilled reading and a measuring stick by which overall progress is typically determined” (2020: 35), and describes the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) which is

administered every 2 years in Grades 4 and 8 as well as periodically in Grade 12. Students are asked to read varied text types, including literary (fiction, nonfiction, and poetry) and informational passages (exposition, argumentation and persuasive texts, procedural texts, and documents), and then locate or recall, integrate or interpret, and critique or evaluate the information read. (ibid.)

The Common Core does not, however, propose or prescribe the best methodological way to develop the competences in learners, and the teachers have the freedom, and the responsibility, to use tools they deem most beneficial and best suited for their students. *ReadTheory* attempts to fill the gap some educators have experienced in finding suitable materials for use in classrooms and the wider setting, and purports to include texts of varying types listed above and exercises that foster the textual analysis built on the skills described above (location of facts, integration and evaluation of knowledge).

The value of *ReadTheory* as a tool for enhancing reading comprehension skills in similar context to the one observed in this paper has already been investigated. Mohamad Yunus and Ika Rahmawati (2025) measured the scores of a group of students in the 6th semester of university studies with validated proficiency tests before and after using *ReadTheory*. Their results conclusively demonstrate *ReadTheory*'s effectiveness in improving reading comprehension skills in students. Christopher Tempest (2018) underscores that the platform was perceived as useful by the students themselves, and based on their feedback, it compares favorably to other similar platforms available that were used with the same group, such as *MReader*. Endang Setyaningsih (2021) conducted a survey with a group of students from the same field of study (EFL) and of comparable size (72 students) who used *ReadTheory* in a similar manner as the students involved in our present study. The RT activities were embedded in a reading course and done as home assignments. The results indicate that the reading proficiency was improved, along with listening proficiency, grammar and vocabulary, while the students were content with the platform's interface and reported positive feelings about using it. Javahir Aghayeva (2025) evaluates very positively *ReadTheory* in terms of reading comprehension metrics, and emphasized the attained improvements in critical analysis capabilities, textual interpretation and inferential reasoning in

students. Nurlila Syaripudin et al. (2025) conducted their analysis with secondary students in vocational training. They outline the challenges teachers face in a schooling system where language proficiency does not rank high on list of learning outcomes, and emphasize the value of *ReadTheory* in improving learner motivation, enthusiasm, and self-study habits, which helps offset the existing systemic problems. Not all research measuring objective improvement in student proficiency provides positive reports. Abdurrazzag Alghammas (2025) states that their research of the benefits of RT use did not include significant proficiency gains, but that the accessibility, interactive content and personalized feedback proved to be great advantages of the platform that stimulated student engagement. Applying statistical analysis of several engagement metrics recovered from completed *ReadTheory* tasks over the course of a full semester, Melisa Bureković and Goran Grubešić (2026) attempted to determine whether university level EFL students' performance using the platform can be used to predict their success in grammar courses. The results indicated that the two cannot be conclusively linked and that, despite weak to moderately strong tendencies observed, other factors must be in play, thus limiting the scope of RT applicability in gauging overall student progress at the tertiary level.

METHODOLOGY

Having completed a full cycle of using *ReadTheory* in EFL classes at the English language and literature department, the feedback received from the users of the platform during the semester was overwhelmingly positive. Barring the technical issues that got promptly resolved in the first week of classes, some students expressed a degree of confusion when completing the tasks, not having previously done tests of this kind. Some felt that multiple answers to questions were viable, and could not easily distinguish the subtle nuances of meaning and reference. Still, most students in both groups showed remarkable speed in adapting to the tasks and grasping their underlying logic and format, aided by similar in-class practice tasks and teacher guidance. However, we could not rely on oral feedback alone to evaluate the *ReadTheory's* usefulness as a tool to measure student progress. To do that, we decided to take full advantage of the data *ReadTheory* offers course instructors on student achievements and use it to gain a more objective insight.

The choice of the two groups of students whose work was to undergo analysis was based on the underlying assumption that their group results would differ in a significant way. The reasoning behind this was, at least, two-fold. To begin with, the first group comprised 24 freshmen

(first year) EFL students who are nominally at the B2 proficiency level, though there typically exists significant in-group variation. They enroll from various high schools and come from diverse backgrounds with divergent experiences in foreign language learning. The second group comprised 20 junior (third year) students from the same department. Having reached the same (6th) semester at the English language and literature study program, passing the same courses and receiving the same training, with lower-achieving first year colleagues not progressing to the same stage alongside them, less variation in their individual levels is present, though this is in no way a reliable rule. In addition to this distinction, first year students typically have not benefitted from teaching content in their elementary and high school education that utilizes the approach where reading comprehension is specifically targeted as a skill and explicitly taught, as might be the case in the USA and other English-speaking countries. Contrary to this, the C1 group had already undergone 5 semesters at the English department where the exercises to develop this skill are integrated into the curriculum and emulate to an extent the foreign teaching practices in terms of course objectives and modern teaching methodology. These two reasons alone, in addition to other considerations, would ensure that the two groups do not share the same starting point. The main hypothesis derived from this was

H1: C1 students will perform at a higher level than B2 students when completing reading comprehension tasks on the ReadTheory platform.

To assess the validity of this hypothesis, and to attempt to quantify the difference between the referenced achievement levels between the two groups, we used 5 metrics that allowed us to measure the achievement in concrete terms. These were:

M1: Quiz success rate

ReadTheory adjusts the grade level (1-12) after each completed quiz. Passing the quiz by having 90% accuracy or more promotes the student to the next higher level, while scoring less than 70% downgrades the level by one. Scoring between 70-90% keeps a student at the same level. The score for each quiz is recorded and a teacher can access them in the statistics page for each student, and (limited) class-wide statistics are also available with the free teacher account. This allows for the comparison of quiz success rate and average quiz level for each student across the full semester of work.

M2: Maximum quiz level attained

When planning the grading aspect of including *ReadTheory* tasks in homework assignments, the working assumption was that the two groups would differ in the average maximum level that can be achieved. The grading was accordingly adjusted so that students could earn partial in-class points for reaching a minimum set level and full points for reaching a target level (6 and 8 for the B2 group, and 8 and 10 for the C1 group). This reflected the above-mentioned (assumed) differences in the ability to solve this type of task and the limitations to the rate of improvement that could be expected over the course of a single semester. Also, students who scored higher than required and reached the maximum level available at the platform were also rewarded, motivating them to do quizzes even when they had already satisfied the syllabus-set objectives.

M3: Speed required to reach the maximum level

Having in mind that the two groups have two years of language instruction at the college level between them, one would expect there to be a significant difference between freshmen and junior students in the rate of adapting to the RT tasks which are relatively novel to them, if not in form, then in format. Tasks targeting reading skills structured specifically to reflect the testing formats prevalent in the USA, but not common in Bosnia and Herzegovina, are expected to prove challenging to students coming straight out of high school, but should be less so to junior students who have been exposed at the university level to the teaching more in line with the US formats. To test this, we examined the rate at which the maximum level is reached by checking how many quizzes were required for each student to be promoted to what eventually became their maximum level.

M4: Ability to maintain the maximum level

We also wanted to investigate if students managed to remain at a high level after they reached their maximum level, or whether their subsequent results dropped significantly. A precipitous drop from their maximum level could mark a lack of motivation to do the assignments, or could signify that the maximum level attained does not represent an accurate measurement of that student's ability. In any case, we felt that the previous metric should be complemented by

another that provided more in-depth assessment that would offset outlier maximum scores within the data of individual students.

M5: Knowledge points acquired per quiz

Knowledge Points (KPs) scores were deemed a more accurate metric. These are points which the platform, implementing a gamification approach, awards students and which are intended, according to *ReadTheory*'s own description, to “motivate students and provide a simple way to track progress on *ReadTheory*. They encourage consistent reading, thoughtful participation, and goal setting, making them great for personal or class incentives” (readtheory.org). The KPs reflect not only whether a student has passed a particular quiz, but also their performance within the space of a single quiz by rewarding higher accuracy of answering questions and doing better on the questions termed “challenge questions” by the platform – those which require higher order skills and reliance on logical connections between scattered pieces of information in the text, but also inference and reading between the lines. In addition, since two accuracy scores, e.g. 75% and 85%, are treated the same (level retained), and two scores even further apart, e.g. 10% and 60%, are also treated the same (a decrease of a single level), some differences between scores might not be revealed if only average levels are observed. Therefore, we also calculated average KPs per quiz as an alternative to above metrics based on quiz levels.

All the data to be considered, namely the student progression through quiz grade levels and their accumulation of KPs, was copied manually from the *ReadTheory* website's classroom statistics page and entered into an Excel spreadsheet, which was used to calculate the results for the metrics discussed above.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 1791 quizzes were completed by the two groups, 796 by B2 students (33 per student on average) and 925 by C1 students (46 per student on average). This difference is due to the workload defined by the syllabi for the respective courses, whereby B2 students had to complete 3 quizzes per week, while C1 students had the option of completing up to 5 quizzes per week. The full cycle of RT assignments that the students underwent lasted 14 weeks.

The analysis of M1 (quiz success rate) was measured by calculating and comparing the average quiz level between the B2 and C1 groups over the course of the entire semester. Each student is tested by the platform prior to being assigned their first regular quiz with a series of questions to help determine their initial reading level, which are called a pretest. In the chart below are shown the average pretest levels for both groups, the average quiz levels and the deviation from the average quiz level.

Table 1. Average quiz levels for B2 and C1 students

	Average pretest level	Average quiz level	Deviation from the average quiz level	Deviation as % of the average level
B2 group	7.41	9.33	1.90	20%
C1 group	6.10	9.08	1.18	13%

The deviation from the average quiz level was calculated by measuring how far off was the average quiz level of each student from the average quiz level of their entire group, irrespective of the direction (whether it was higher or lower than the average). This provides some insight into the dispersion of scores within a group, which sheds some light on the assumption that first year students might exhibit larger differences in performance due to the skill sets they bring to college. The data suggests that the differences between the two groups are not as pronounced as was initially expected. The average level of quizzes completed is in fact higher for freshmen, but not by much. Their pretest levels were, surprisingly, also higher. This could be interpreted as an outright refutation of the assumptions made about the starting point for each group. However, the pretest should not be taken as the most accurate assessment of the student level prior to their engagement with *ReadTheory*. During the classes, when requesting feedback about their progress, a few oral reports by students suggested that they were not fully focused when completing the pretest, and apparently there was some careless click-through to get started with the first regular quiz. On the other hand, the average deviation from the average level is more visible with the freshmen as well, indicating less uniform performance, as is expected. Junior year exhibits more

uniformity due to the levelling effect: students undergoing training under same conditions had advanced to the same level, while those who could not progress at the same pace had been left behind, making the group more uniform in their results. This is a normal development and it is not unconceivable to read this as an explainer into the data.

The scores for M2 (maximum quiz level attained) and M4 (ability to maintain the maximum level) defy the primary hypothesis.

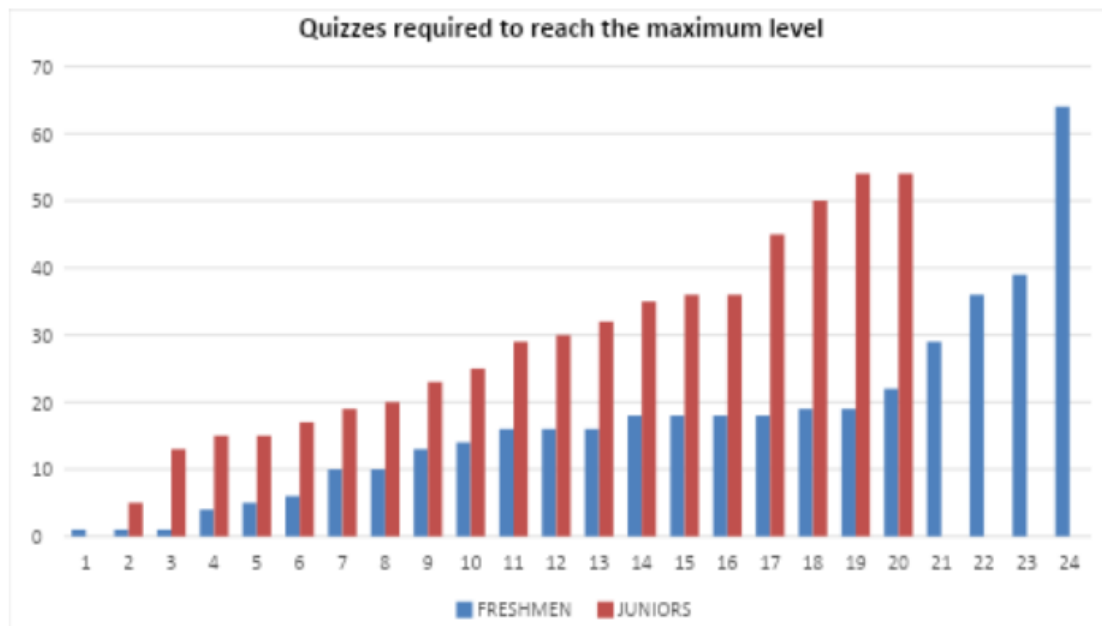
Table 2. Average maximum levels for B2 and C1 students

	Average maximum level	Percentage of students reaching level 12	Deviation from the average maximum level	Average drop after reaching maximum level
B2 group	11.25	71%	1.06	0.54
C1 group	11.40	70%	0.84	0.59

The data offers counterintuitive results when groups are compared to their nominal status and projected proficiency levels. Neither group struggled to reach a very high level and both groups' average scores were close to the ceiling value of 12, with around 70% of students in both groups reaching the highest level. Once the maximum level was reached, the average drop from it was around half of one level for both groups, indicating that the students did not struggle to maintain that level. The maximum level shows little dispersion from the average level, meaning the achievement of students within each group was not extraordinarily diverse, even for the B2 group. It was somewhat higher for them, but that is understandable since their average level was slightly lower, leaving more room for variation. The *ReadTheory* platform does not provide quizzes designed for levels above K12 (e.g. university level tasks) which could reveal differences between the groups under consideration in this research. Those differences might become apparent only above the ceiling level of *ReadTheory* quizzes. *ReadTheory* does provide, in a separate section on its website, quizzes tailored for ABE (adult basic education), but these also do not go beyond the grade/lexile level of quizzes in the main section, and are in any case not integrated into the automated assignments, but are on offer as printable worksheets.

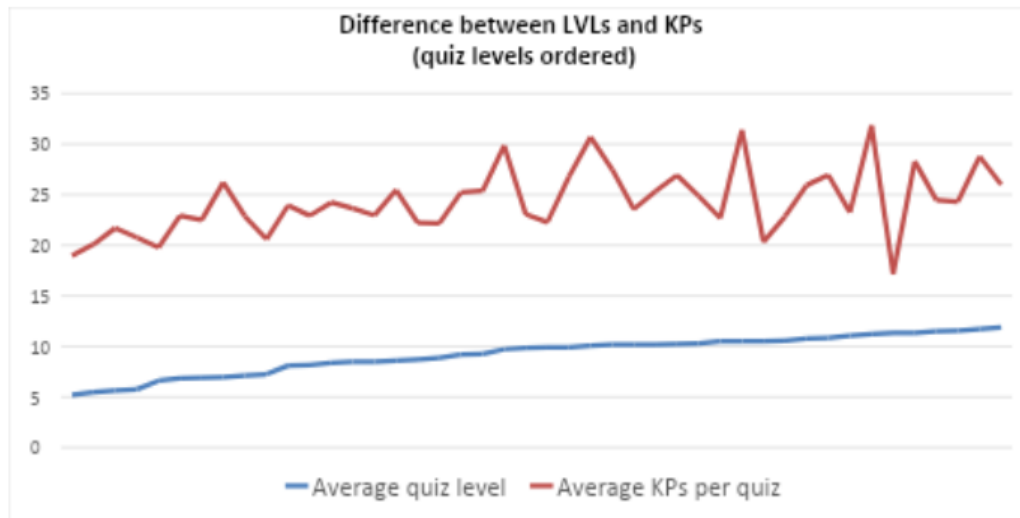
When M3 was investigated (the speed required to reach the maximum level), there was a stark contrast between the groups, which again went against our preliminary expectations. It took the B2 group on average 17.21 quizzes to reach the maximum level. The progress to the maximum level is not straightforward and reflects the learning curve that is a result of adjusting to the format and type of the questions featuring in quizzes. The students might experience streaks of drops in their results, or plateau for a significant period before managing to break through and reach higher levels. On the other hand, it took the C1 group 27.65 quizzes on average to reach the maximum score. Observing the data in Chart 1 below, which plots the number of quizzes it took each B2 and C1 student to reach their maximum level, one can notice that the data is even skewed in favor of the C1 group by a single B2 outlier who took many more quizzes compared to their classmates before reaching the maximum level. If one were to compare only the best 20 students in each group, B2 students performed significantly better. Having in mind the data above which showed that there was no marked difference between the maximum levels attained between the groups, it is hard to propose possible reasons why what is on paper a more advanced group would take that much longer to unlock the highest individual level.

Chart 1. The speed of reaching the maximum level



Before looking into M5 (knowledge points acquired per quiz), we will show the results for all 44 students, juxtaposing average quiz levels and average KPs scores.

Chart 2. Comparing average quiz levels and average KPs scores



As is visible from the chart, in which all average quiz levels have been ordered from the lowest to the highest, and the corresponding KPs scores for each student are placed above, the data points, while they follow the same overall trend, are in no way aligned and 41% of them do not follow the same pattern. The two metrics offer different insights and deciding which metric to use can affect the final interpretation of the data.

Reviewing the data obtained for the KPs scores reveals less pronounced results than those from quiz levels and they tilt towards confirming the primary hypothesis.

Table 3. Knowledge points per quiz for B2 and C1 students

	Average KPs per quiz	Deviation from the average KPs per quiz	Deviation as % of the average KPs per quiz
B2 group	23.59	2.32	10%
C1 group	25.18	2.77	11%

The KP scores support the H1, but not to the extent that would signify a marked difference. The C1 group did earn about 1.5 KPs per quiz more on average than the B2 group. The deviation from the average level is more in tune between the two groups, and much lower compared to that

observed in the average quiz levels. This would imply that this metric downplays the more dispersed scores observed for the B2 group above. Seeing that the calculation of KPs involves the assessment of several tasks, including earning points for individual answers within each quiz, with the challenge questions weighted more, and that the distinct levels are more precisely spaced (only 12 quiz levels compared to quiz points ranging from zero to several dozens), a case can be made that this metric provides a more accurate insight into the achievement level of both groups.

CONCLUSION

The two groups, one having recently enrolled in college and the other having had more than 2 years of training, show similar performance when it comes to the average quiz level and the average maximum level attained, although the junior students show more uniform results within the group. This could indicate two separate things: one, that the proficiency level in reading comprehension is not significantly improved during the two years of training, meaning the study program does not target this particular skill set extensively, or not effectively enough. This defies the teacher's predictions about the levels of assignments given to each group. From this standpoint, the students seem to retain the same level they bring to university. It could also be interpreted as the inability of the online platform to distinguish between the CEFR levels expected as learning outcomes at the English language and literature study program, notably that *ReadTheory* tests at upper levels that peak below the development space available to university students. This would not be surprising, since the platform was designed for K12 (elementary and secondary school equivalent) and that, while not native speakers, the informants are studying at the tertiary level and majoring in EFL studies. This finding is bolstered by the scores of average levels obtained, which are relatively close to the highest score for both groups. The Knowledge Points metric has proven in some ways to offer a more accurate framework for assessing student progress, despite not being the main metric put forward by the platform itself. The result that stood out was the speed by which the B2 group advanced through the levels compared to that of their C1 colleagues, and we could not account for it by referencing any particularities of the study program or other factors we are aware of.

Overall, the usage of *ReadTheory* as a tool has led to quantifiable individual progress for most students taking part in classes. Combined with the qualitative feedback gained from the students and their oral accounts of how *ReadTheory* fits in their weekly workload, it has proven to

be an engaging and easy-to-use tool for self-study. The payoff of its inclusion in the curriculum has justified the space the *ReadTheory* homework assignments took in the limited workload allowed by the syllabi for the language proficiency courses. This confirms the overwhelmingly positive outcomes reported by other researchers cited above in various educational contexts. However, due to the inherent design limitations of the platform resulting from its intended users being students below the tertiary level of education, *ReadTheory* usage could not conclusively demonstrate the existence of a gap in skill levels between B2 and C1 groups and fails to act as an accurate tool for assessing the progress of students between years of study at the university level.

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POREĐENJE NAPRETKA STUDENATA ENGLESKOG KAO STRANOG JEZIKA NA NIVOU B2 I C1 U RAZUMIJEVANJU TEKSTA KROZ UPOTREBU READTHEORY

Sažetak

Ovaj rad istražuje napredak studenata engleskog kao stranog jezika u zadacima čitanja i razumijevanja teksta izmjeren upotrebom online alata ReadTheory. Napravljeno je poređenje rezultata dvije grupe studenata u različitim fazama studijskog programa, sa ciljem provjere preciznosti alata ReadTheory u predviđanju njihovog uspjeha koji se očekuje na njihovom nivou. Podaci su prikupljeni iz zadataka koje su uradili studenti prve godine (24) i studenti treće godine (20) na studijskom programu Engleski jezik i književnost na Filozofskom fakultetu Univerziteta u Zenici koji bi trebali biti na B2, odnosno C1 nivou. Kvantitativno mjerenje je uzelo u obzir uspješnost u polaganju zadataka, ukupan broj urađenih zadataka, zarađene knowledge points (interna RT statistika uspjeha), najviši dosegnuti nivo zadataka te brzina kojom je taj nivo ostvaren, te sposobnost održavanja visokog nivoa zadataka nakon toga. Rezultati ukazuju na to da razlika u uspjehu između dvije grupe nije naglašena koliko bi se moglo očekivati, a rezultati studenata prve godine su u prosjeku minimalno bolji od rezultata studenata treće godine, mada pokazuju manju ujednačenost unutar grupe. KP statistika nudi precizniji okvir za mjerenje uspjeha, te pokazuje da studenti treće godine imaju malu prednost u odnosu na studente prve godine. Obje grupe su postigle slične maksimalne nivoe težine zadataka, te su ih nakon toga uspješno održavale. Iznenaduje razlika u brzini dostizanja najvišeg nivoa koja je mnogo bolja kod studenata prve godine. Prema svim korištenim pokazateljima, korištenje online alata ReadTheory poboljšava vještinu čitanja i razumijevanja teksta kod obje grupe. Međutim, ReadTheory ima ograničen kapacitet da se koristi kao alat za provjeru napretka tokom vremena između studenata

prve i treće godine godine studija, te ne nudi kvantitativno precizan uvid u očekivani napredak u vještini razumijevanja teksta.

Ključne riječi: *engleski kao strani jezik, razumijevanje teksta, poređenje B2 i C1, ReadTheory*