

Short Attention Spans in EFL Learning: A Descriptive Qualitative Study of Cognitive Characteristics, Skill-Specific Impacts, and Instructional Strategies

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ABSTRACT

The increasing prevalence of short attention spans in digitally mediated learning environments presents significant challenges for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. This descriptive qualitative study investigates (1) the behavioral and cognitive characteristics of short attention spans among EFL learners, (2) their effects on vocabulary development, reading fluency, and listening comprehension, and (3) instructional strategies that may mitigate their negative impact. Conducted in a natural classroom setting at the university level, the study employed purposive sampling and collected data through in-depth interviews, structured observations, and document analysis. Data were analyzed inductively through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, with triangulation ensuring credibility. The findings indicate that short attention spans are reflected in task-switching behavior, digital distraction, and mind-wandering, which disrupt sustained cognitive engagement. Listening comprehension was found to be the most vulnerable skill due to the transient nature of auditory input, while reading fluency and vocabulary retention were also adversely affected by attentional fragmentation. However, pedagogical strategies such as task chunking, interactive learning, multimodal instruction, and structured breaks were identified as effective in enhancing attentional stability. The study underscores the importance of integrating attention management into EFL instructional design to improve learner engagement and learning outcomes.

Keywords: short attention spans, EFL learning, vocabulary development, reading fluency, listening comprehension, instructional strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Decades of cognitive science and second language acquisition studies have substantiated the idea that "attention is the gateway to learning." Learning a language is essentially a cognitive activity; in order to observe, process, and ultimately integrate forms and meanings, learners must pay attention to linguistic information. Every significant learning task in the context of learning English as a foreign language (EFL), from speaking fluently and reading accurately to vocabulary development and listening comprehension, depends heavily on attention. However, it seems that the very nature of attention is evolving in a number of significant ways in modern educational settings. Content that requires quick and shifting attention has become more popular due to the rapid advancements in digital media, particularly short-form multimedia platforms. These factors have contributed to a phenomena that researchers now refer to as short attention span, which makes it harder to retain prolonged attention, especially for educational tasks that call for significant cognitive involvement (Borgonovi, 2021; Chen et al., 2023)

The most common foreign language taught globally, particularly in formal educational systems, is still English. Proficiency in English has an impact on intercultural communication, career opportunities, global mobility, and academic achievement. To convert input into language knowledge, EFL learners must consciously engage their attentional and cognitive processes, in contrast to native language acquisition, which frequently develops over years of ambient exposure. They must control cognitive load throughout complex processing, recognize linguistic structures in the face of noise, and stay engaged during prolonged practice sessions. In order to build teaching methods that complement learner capacities and real-world media contexts, it is crucial to comprehend how modern short attention spans combine with the cognitive demands of EFL learning.

Attention is a dynamic construct that is essential to learning outcomes, according to research in language education, cognitive psychology, and educational technology during the past ten years. According to research on second languages, attention is a technique that helps students filter information, concentrate on pertinent forms, and actively engage in processing tasks (Leow, 2020). A fundamental tenet of second language acquisition is that attention mediates the noticing processes that enable input to become intake (Yang, 2025). Critical linguistic traits could go overlooked without constant attention, endangering acquisition.

The latest developments, inspired by the extensive use of social media and short-form video content, indicate that modern learners are interacting with information in shorter bursts and with more frequent context switches, despite this fundamental consensus. Frequent short-form video consumption is associated with lower sustained attention throughout lengthier academic tasks, according to empirical research conducted outside of EFL contexts (Adler et al., 2025). Students who report watching short videos for several hours every day also admit to having trouble focusing when studying. These results raise concerns about how learners' digital attention patterns may influence their capacity to concentrate on linguistically demanding EFL tasks, tasks that often call for deep processing, pattern recognition, and prolonged practice in formal learning settings.

The research in the field of educational pedagogy is increasingly supporting adaptive tactics that are intended to capture students' attention in digital environments. To better grab and hold students' attention, educational reviews, for instance, emphasize the incorporation of interactive and aesthetically pleasing features in learning materials (Goode et al., 2022). Other research points to the potential benefits of gamification and technology-enhanced learning methods that might offset the attention costs associated with conventional classroom instruction (Lampropoulos, 2024). Though these observations are insightful, most of the research to date has been on digital distraction and general education rather than on learning English as a foreign language. This distinction is significant because language acquisition necessitates not only general attentional involvement but also certain cognitive processes that may be more vulnerable to attentional fragmentation, such as noticing, retention, and production.

Even though it is widely acknowledged that attention is essential to language acquisition, little is known about how short attention spans caused by digital media consumption affect English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in particular. The cognitive demands of EFL tasks, such as listening comprehension, grammar acquisition, written fluency, or vocabulary internalization, are not consistently linked to attention problems, despite the fact that studies in general educational psychology and digital pedagogy document these issues (e.g., short-form video effects on concentration).

There is currently no substantial corpus of research examining whether learners with shorter attention spans (because to the intake of digital content) do worse in EFL or, on the other hand, whether specific instructional methods lessen such impacts. In addition, although cognitive concepts like working memory and attentional control have been examined in more general language learning contexts, these studies primarily concentrate on linguistic processing mechanisms rather than the attentional habits fostered by modern media environments.

This gap is important because it intersects with two distinct yet convergent research domains digital attention behavior and applied EFL pedagogy. EFL educators routinely report that students struggle with tasks requiring prolonged focus such as extended reading assignments or listening comprehension tests. Yet there is limited empirical evidence connecting these classroom observations with underlying cognitive patterns shaped by media and technology. Without a clearer understanding of this connection, pedagogical recommendations risk being speculative or generic rather than targeted and evidence-based.

Based on the gaps identified in previous studies, this study aims to examine the effects of the short attention span phenomenon, influenced by modern digital media use, on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning outcomes. Specifically, the study explores the behavioral and cognitive characteristics associated with short attention spans among EFL learners, investigates how these attention patterns influence key learning activities such as vocabulary acquisition, reading fluency, and listening comprehension, and identifies teaching strategies that may help mitigate the negative impact of short attention spans on EFL learning outcomes. The goal of this study is to systematically unpack these questions to produce actionable insights for both researchers and educators. By examining the *interaction between attention dynamics and EFL learning processes*, this research aims to align theoretical constructs from cognitive psychology with pedagogical needs in EFL settings.

There are four main goals for this study. In order to ensure that the construct is firmly rooted in both cognitive theory and applied language education, it first aims to define and operationalize the idea of short attention span within the particular context of learning English as a foreign language (EFL). The study's second goal is to find relationships between EFL performance in important language skills including speaking, listening, reading, and vocabulary acquisition and attention patterns. Third, in order to capture both quantifiable performance outcomes and experiential aspects of learning, it aims to investigate learner views and behaviors related attention and involvement in EFL tasks. Fourth, the study offers evidence-based teaching suggestions that promote sustained focus and promote more efficient language learning. When taken as a whole, these goals both answer the current research issues and provide the groundwork for upcoming empirical studies, such as experimental and longitudinal ones, that can confirm and expand on the results.

This article makes a number of original contributions to the study of language instruction. By bridging the conceptual divide between applied foreign language training and research on digital attention practices, it primarily offers an empirical combination of attention studies and EFL pedagogy. The study creates a coherent analytical framework for comprehending how digitally shaped attention patterns affect language learning outcomes as a result of this integration. Furthermore, instead of presenting attention as a static cognitive property, it contextualizes it within modern learning contexts, reflecting the dynamic and media-saturated reality that today's learners encounter. In addition to theoretical research, the study produces useful pedagogical insights based on cognitive principles and observable learning patterns, providing educators with useful tactics to improve student engagement and instructional efficacy. Lastly, it

takes a forward-looking stance by establishing the framework for interdisciplinary cooperation between cognitive scientists, instructional designers, and language teachers, promoting a more complex and contextually appropriate research agenda that satisfies the needs of learning in the twenty-first century.

Overall, this introduction establishes a theoretically informed and pedagogically useful conversation. It admits that although attention has long been understood to be a necessary condition for learning a language, the environment in which attention functions has changed dramatically. Examining the effects of these developments on fundamental teaching methods is becoming more and more crucial as digital technologies continue to alter how students distribute and maintain cognitive resources, especially in EFL contexts where consistent exposure to intricate linguistic systems is crucial. This article addresses that requirement with a framework that is up to date, rigorous, and significant by defining specific research topics, highlighting existing research gaps, and laying out a logical course for further study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1. Research Approach and Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design. A qualitative approach was selected because the primary objective of the research was to explore, describe, and interpret the experiences of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners regarding short attention spans within their natural learning environments. Rather than testing hypotheses or manipulating variables, this study sought to understand how learners perceive, experience, and respond to attention-related challenges during EFL learning activities.

Qualitative descriptive research is particularly appropriate when a study aims to present a comprehensive summary of events in everyday terms and to describe phenomena as they naturally occur (Doyle et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2017). Unlike experimental or correlational research, qualitative descriptive studies prioritize rich, contextualized accounts over statistical generalization. The focus is on presenting participants' voices and observable behaviors without imposing theoretical abstraction beyond what is necessary for interpretation.

In the context of this research, the phenomenon under investigation short attention spans in EFL learning, cannot be fully captured through numerical measurement alone. Attention in classroom settings involves cognitive engagement, behavioral responses, emotional reactions, and contextual influences. Therefore, a qualitative descriptive design enabled the researcher to capture these multidimensional aspects in a holistic manner.

The study did not manipulate instructional strategies, alter classroom structures, or introduce experimental treatments. Instead, it examined naturally occurring learning situations and documented how students demonstrated attentional engagement or disengagement during English language learning activities. This non-manipulative approach aligns with the principles of qualitative descriptive research, which aims to describe phenomena "as they are" within their natural contexts (Sandelowski, 2010).

2. Research Setting and Time

The research was conducted at Muhammadiyah University of Bengkulu, specifically within the English Education Study Program. This setting was selected because it provides a natural environment in which students regularly engage in EFL learning activities, including listening comprehension, grammar instruction, speaking practice, and academic reading tasks.

The choice of location was based on several considerations. First, students

in this program are required to use English as a medium of academic engagement, making them appropriate participants for examining attention-related challenges in EFL contexts. Second, the researcher had access to classroom activities and institutional permission, ensuring ethical feasibility and sustained engagement with participants. Third, the setting represents a typical higher education EFL environment in Indonesia, allowing the findings to reflect realistic academic conditions.

The research was conducted over a period of approximately three months, from September 2025 to January 2026. This timeframe allowed for sufficient observation cycles, repeated interviews, and documentation review to ensure data saturation. Prolonged engagement in the field is recommended in qualitative research to enhance credibility and depth of understanding (Nowell & Albrecht, 2019).

3. Research Participants

The participants of this study were undergraduate students enrolled in the English Education Study Program. The selection of participants was conducted using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique in which participants are chosen based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives (Campbell et al., 2020).

The participants were selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique in which participants are chosen based on criteria relevant to the research objectives (Campbell et al., 2020). Eligible participants were undergraduate students who were actively enrolled in EFL-related courses, reported frequent use of digital media platforms, and were willing to participate in both interviews and classroom observations. A total of 12-15 students were recruited as primary informants, which is considered sufficient to achieve information power and analytical depth in qualitative research (Malterud et al., 2016). To provide a range of perspectives, participants represented different levels of academic achievement and engagement in English learning. Their demographic information, including age, semester level, and digital media usage habits, was documented to contextualize the findings. A total of 12-15 students were selected as primary informants. This number is considered sufficient in qualitative research to achieve data richness while maintaining analytical manageability. According to recent qualitative research guidelines, sample adequacy in qualitative studies depends on information power rather than numerical size (Malterud et al., 2016).

The participants represented varying levels of academic achievement and engagement in English learning to ensure diverse perspectives. Their demographic data, including age, semester level, and digital media usage habits, were documented to contextualize findings.

1. Research Instrument

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument (human instrument). The researcher's role involves designing questions, conducting interviews, observing behaviors, interpreting responses, and synthesizing findings (Kim et al., 2017).

To support the researcher as the primary instrument, two complementary research instruments were employed. The first was a semi-structured interview guide consisting of open-ended questions designed to explore students' perceptions of attention, digital distractions, learning difficulties, and engagement strategies in EFL contexts. The second was an observation checklist used to document behavioral indicators of attention and disengagement during classroom activities, including note-taking behavior, device usage, eye contact,

and task completion patterns. The semi-structured interview format allowed flexibility for probing participants' responses while maintaining consistency across interviews. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility for probing deeper into participants' responses while maintaining thematic consistency across interviews.

2. Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through two primary techniques: Semi structured interview and observation checklist. The use of multiple techniques supports triangulation and enhances data credibility (Nowell & Albrecht, 2019).

Semi-Structured Interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with each participant and lasted approximately 45–60 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent. The interviews explored participants' understanding of attention and concentration, the challenges they experienced in maintaining focus during EFL learning activities, the influence of digital media habits on their learning behaviors, and the strategies they used to manage distractions. Open-ended questions enabled participants to elaborate on their experiences, while follow-up questions were used to clarify responses and explore emerging issues in greater depth.

Observation Checklist

Classroom observations were conducted during regular EFL learning sessions using a moderate participant-observation approach in which the researcher observed classroom activities without interfering with the instructional process. The observations focused on behavioral indicators of attention, such as sustained eye contact, note-taking, and participation in classroom discussions, as well as signs of distraction including phone checking, task avoidance, and frequent posture changes. In addition, the researcher documented patterns of student engagement during listening and reading activities. Observational notes were recorded immediately after each session to ensure completeness and accuracy.

Data Analysis Technique

Data were analyzed inductively following the qualitative data analysis Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) proposed by (Smith, 2019), which remains widely applied in contemporary qualitative research and reaffirmed in recent methodological discussions (Sandelowski, 2010). The analysis process consisted of three stages:

Data Reduction

Data reduction involved selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming raw data from interviews and observation notes. Transcripts were coded manually to identify recurring themes related to attention challenges, digital distraction, learning engagement, and coping strategies. Initial coding was followed by thematic categorization, grouping similar patterns into broader themes such as "digital interruption," "task fatigue," "fragmented listening," and "self-regulation strategies."

Data Display

The reduced data were organized into descriptive narratives, thematic matrices, and summary tables. Data display facilitated pattern recognition and comparison across participants. Quotations from interviews were included to preserve authenticity and represent participants' voices.

Conclusion Drawing and Verification

Conclusions were drawn through iterative reflection on identified themes. Verification was conducted by revisiting field notes, transcripts, and documentation to ensure consistency. The researcher continuously compared emerging interpretations with raw data to avoid premature conclusions.

3. Trustworthiness and Validity

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, this study employed source, technique, and time triangulation. Source triangulation involved comparing information obtained from different participants, while technique triangulation compared data gathered through interviews and classroom observations. Time triangulation was implemented by conducting observations and interviews at different times to verify the consistency of participants' responses and observed behaviors. In addition, member checking was carried out by sharing summarized findings with selected participants to confirm the accuracy of the researchers' interpretations. Prolonged engagement in the research setting and reflective journaling further strengthened the dependability and confirmability of the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Finding

This study was conducted in the English Education Study Program at Muhammadiyah University of Bengkulu. The participants consisted of 13 undergraduate students enrolled in various EFL-related courses, including Listening Comprehension, Academic Reading, Vocabulary Development, and Grammar in Context. The participants were in their third to fifth semesters, aged between 19 and 22 years old. All reported daily engagement with digital media platforms, particularly short-form video applications and social networking sites.

Data were collected over a three-month period through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. Observations were conducted in naturally occurring classroom sessions without manipulation of teaching strategies or instructional design. Each classroom session lasted approximately 90 minutes. The researcher adopted a moderate participatory role, observing attentional behaviors without interfering in the learning process.

Interviews were conducted individually, lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. Participants were encouraged to describe their experiences maintaining attention during English learning activities, especially those requiring sustained cognitive engagement such as reading long texts, listening to extended audio recordings, and memorizing vocabulary.

The findings are organized according to the three research questions guiding this study. Each theme presented below directly addresses one research question and integrates interview and observational data to ensure triangulated interpretation.

THEME 1 : Behavioral and Cognitive Characteristics of Short Attention Spans in EFL Learners

Behavioral Indicators of Attentional Decline

Classroom observations consistently revealed that students demonstrated strong initial engagement at the beginning of instructional sessions. During the first 10 to 15 minutes, most participants maintained eye contact with the lecturer, took notes actively, and responded to questions. However, as sessions

progressed, observable signs of attentional decline emerged. The most frequently observed behaviors included:

- Repeated checking of mobile phones
- Opening unrelated applications during tasks
- Shifting posture frequently
- Resting heads on desks
- Engaging in brief side conversations
- Reduced participation in question-and-answer segments

In listening classes, several students were observed pausing note-taking midway through audio recordings. In reading sessions, some students turned pages without sustained focus or appeared to skim rapidly without visible comprehension effort.

One participant explained:

"When the explanation is too long, I automatically check my phone. It's not because I don't care, but I just feel restless."

Another student stated:

"After some time, I start thinking about other things. I'm still in class, but my mind is not there."

These behaviors suggest that short attention spans do not manifest as overt disruption but rather as gradual disengagement and divided attention.

Cognitive Fragmentation and Processing Interruptions

Beyond observable behaviors, interview data revealed cognitive characteristics associated with short attention spans. Many students described difficulty maintaining mental focus during extended instructional input. Common cognitive patterns included:

- Losing track of explanations mid-session
- Forgetting instructions after brief distractions
- Difficulty integrating information from longer texts
- Inability to recall earlier parts of listening materials

One participant described:

"When I listen to long audio, I understand the beginning, but in the middle, I lose focus, and then I miss important information."

Another noted:

"If the reading passage is more than two pages, I read it, but sometimes I don't remember what I just read."

These cognitive interruptions often required students to re-read paragraphs or request repetition of audio segments. Observation confirmed that students frequently asked lecturers to repeat instructions, especially when tasks involved multiple steps. The data indicate that short attention spans affect working memory processes, limiting sustained cognitive engagement necessary for complex language tasks.

Emotional and Motivational Dimensions

Short attention spans were also associated with emotional states such as boredom, mental fatigue, and reduced motivation. Students reported feeling "mentally tired" during lecture-based sessions and described certain classroom formats as "too long" or "monotonous."

One participant commented:

"If the lecturer only explains without interaction, I feel tired quickly."

Another stated:

"I prefer activities. If it's only explanation for a long time, I can't focus."

Observation data supported these claims. During interactive sessions, such as group discussions or vocabulary games, students displayed increased participation, laughter, and visible engagement. In contrast, during extended teacher-centered explanations, visible disengagement increased progressively.

Together, these findings answer Research Question 1 by demonstrating that short attention spans in EFL learners manifest behaviorally through micro-disruptions, cognitively through fragmented processing, and emotionally through decreased sustained motivation.

THEME 2 : Effects of Short Attention Spans on Specific EFL Learning Activities

Vocabulary Development

Vocabulary acquisition requires repetition, contextual integration, and memory consolidation. However, participants reported difficulty retaining newly introduced vocabulary over extended periods. Students commonly described short-term memorization followed by rapid forgetting.

One participant explained:

"I can memorize vocabulary today, but next week I forget most of it."

Observation revealed that during vocabulary drills exceeding 20 minutes, participation decreased. Some students began copying answers from peers rather than actively recalling word meanings.

Additionally, when vocabulary was introduced through lengthy explanations without interactive reinforcement, engagement levels dropped noticeably. Students appeared to process vocabulary superficially rather than deeply.

The impact on vocabulary development included:

- Limited long-term retention
- Reduced ability to use new words in context
- Minimal transfer to productive skills

Short attention spans thus interfere with the encoding and consolidation processes essential for vocabulary growth.

Reading Fluency and Comprehension

Reading fluency requires sustained attention to text structure, coherence, and lexical detail. However, participants reported difficulty maintaining focus during long reading passages. Common patterns included:

- Skimming without deep comprehension
- Re-reading paragraphs due to loss of focus
- Incomplete completion of assigned texts

One student stated:

"When the text is too long, I read it, but my mind goes somewhere else."

Observation supported this finding. During silent reading sessions lasting more than 15 minutes, students increasingly shifted posture, looked around the room, or paused reading without apparent engagement.

Some students completed reading tasks but struggled to answer inferential comprehension questions, suggesting fragmented understanding rather than integrated processing. Short attention spans therefore affect not only reading speed but also comprehension depth and textual integration.

Listening Comprehension

Listening tasks were particularly vulnerable to attentional disruption due to their continuous and time-bound nature. Unlike reading, listening does not allow easy backtracking unless replayed.

Observed difficulties included:

- Missing key details
- Requesting repetition frequently
- Providing incomplete responses to comprehension questions

A participant reported:

"If the audio is long, I lose focus in the middle, and then I can't follow the rest."

During observation, several students stopped writing notes halfway through listening recordings. Some appeared to mentally disengage when audio segments exceeded five minutes. Short attention spans therefore disrupt real-time processing and reduce overall listening comprehension accuracy.

THEME 3 : Teaching Techniques with Potential to Mitigate the Effects of Short Attention Spans

Task Chunking and Micro-Learning

Students consistently expressed preference for shorter instructional segments. When lessons were divided into smaller parts followed by brief activities, engagement increased.

One participant explained:

"It's easier to focus when the explanation is divided into smaller sections."

Observation confirmed that 10-15 minute instructional segments followed by active tasks maintained higher engagement levels compared to uninterrupted lectures.

Interactive and Collaborative Learning

Group discussions and pair-work significantly improved attentional engagement. Students appeared more alert and participatory during collaborative tasks.

A participant stated:

"When we work in groups, I feel more involved."

Interactive activities reduced passive listening and encouraged sustained cognitive participation.

Multimodal Instruction

The use of short videos, visual aids, and multimedia presentations increased sustained attention.

One student remarked:

"If there is video or media, I can focus better."

Observation showed fewer instances of phone-checking during multimedia-supported lessons.

Structured Breaks and Attention Reset

Brief breaks between instructional segments were associated with improved refocusing. Students reported feeling "refreshed" after short pauses. Observational data indicated renewed note-taking and eye contact following brief cognitive resets.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the behavioral and cognitive characteristics of short attention spans among EFL learners, examine their effects on specific language learning activities, and identify instructional techniques that may mitigate their negative impact. The discussion below interprets the findings in relation to existing theoretical frameworks and recent empirical research, while maintaining alignment with the three research questions.

Behavioral and Cognitive Characteristics of Short Attention Spans

The findings indicate that short attention spans among EFL learners manifest through subtle but consistent behavioral, cognitive, and emotional indicators. Behaviorally, students demonstrated micro-disruptions such as frequent phone checking, posture shifting, and reduced eye contact. These patterns align with contemporary research suggesting that attention fragmentation in digitally saturated environments often appears not as overt disengagement but as divided attention and intermittent focus (Gonz & Manuel, 2023).

From a cognitive perspective, participants reported difficulty sustaining concentration beyond 15-20 minutes, particularly during extended listening or reading tasks. This supports theories of limited attentional capacity and working memory constraints. According to cognitive load theory, when learners are exposed to prolonged or dense instructional input, their working memory becomes overloaded, leading to decreased processing efficiency (Baxter et al., 2025; Cotto & Medrano, 2026). In this study, listening comprehension tasks were particularly vulnerable to overload, as they required continuous processing without the opportunity for natural pausing or review.

The emotional dimension observed in the findings, such as boredom and mental fatigue, further reinforces the interconnection between attention and motivation. Sustained attention is not solely a cognitive function but also a motivational and affective process. When instructional delivery lacks variation or interaction, students experience reduced engagement, which subsequently weakens attentional persistence. This interpretation is consistent with self-determination theory, which emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in sustaining learner engagement (Guo et al., 2025).

Importantly, the findings suggest that short attention spans are not necessarily fixed traits but context-dependent responses to instructional structure. Students were capable of sustained engagement during interactive or multimodal sessions. This indicates that attention stability may fluctuate depending on pedagogical design rather than inherent cognitive limitation.

Effects on Vocabulary Development, Reading Fluency, and Listening Comprehension

The second research question examined how short attention spans influence specific EFL learning activities. The findings demonstrate that attention instability

significantly affects vocabulary retention, reading fluency, and listening comprehension.

Vocabulary Development

Vocabulary acquisition requires repeated exposure, elaboration, and memory consolidation. However, students reported rapid forgetting of newly introduced vocabulary, particularly when instruction involved prolonged explanation without active engagement. This finding aligns with research on shallow versus deep processing. When attention is fragmented, learners engage in surface-level encoding rather than semantic integration, resulting in weak long-term retention (Teng & Teng, 2023).

Additionally, observation revealed decreased participation during extended vocabulary drills. Rather than actively recalling meaning, some students relied on copying answers. This behavior suggests cognitive fatigue and reduced effort investment. Without sustained attentional engagement, vocabulary input fails to transition from short-term memory to long-term lexical storage.

Reading Fluency

Reading fluency was also compromised by attentional fragmentation. Students frequently reported mind-wandering during longer texts and difficulty integrating ideas across paragraphs. Research in reading comprehension indicates that sustained attention is critical for maintaining coherence representation in working memory (Bonifacci et al., 2023). When attention lapses occur, readers fail to construct integrated mental models of the text.

The observational data revealed increased posture shifts and visual disengagement during extended silent reading sessions. These micro-signals suggest cognitive fatigue and declining attentional stamina. Consequently, reading tasks that require endurance and deep processing may be particularly sensitive to attention instability.

Listening Comprehension

Listening comprehension appeared to be the most vulnerable skill area. Unlike reading, listening does not allow self-paced processing unless replayed. Participants frequently missed key details in longer audio recordings and requested repetition. This finding supports research indicating that listening requires continuous allocation of attentional resources, making it highly susceptible to distraction (Nagaraj, 2021).

Because listening input is transient, momentary lapses in attention result in irreversible information loss. Therefore, fragmented attention directly compromises comprehension accuracy and task performance.

Collectively, these findings suggest that short attention spans interfere with sustained cognitive engagement necessary for complex language processing. While vocabulary, reading, and listening are all affected, skills requiring continuous processing without visual scaffolding appear most sensitive.

Instructional Techniques to Mitigate Attentional Decline

The third research question explored teaching strategies that may reduce the detrimental effects of short attention spans. The findings indicate that pedagogical design plays a significant role in shaping attentional stability.

Task Chunking and Micro-Learning

Students reported higher engagement when instructional input was divided into shorter segments. This supports research advocating micro-learning approaches in digitally mediated educational contexts (Lim & Song, 2020).

Breaking lessons into 10-15 minute segments reduces cognitive overload and aligns with contemporary attention rhythms.

From a cognitive load perspective, chunking reduces intrinsic load and allows learners to process information incrementally. The findings therefore suggest that structuring instruction into manageable segments enhances attentional sustainability.

Interactive and Collaborative Learning

Group discussions and pair work significantly increased observable engagement. Social interaction appears to reactivate attention through participation demands and peer accountability. This aligns with sociocultural theories of learning, which emphasize collaborative meaning-making as a driver of cognitive engagement (Nungu et al., 2023).

Interactive activities also reduce passive cognitive states. When students are required to respond, explain, or negotiate meaning, attentional resources are actively mobilized.

Multimodal Instruction

The use of videos and visual aids enhanced attention during lessons. Multimodal input engages multiple sensory channels, potentially increasing encoding strength and reducing monotony. Research in multimedia learning suggests that well-designed visual-auditory integration improves engagement and retention when cognitive load is managed appropriately (Kestin et al., 2022).

However, it is important to note that multimedia must be pedagogically purposeful rather than decorative. Overstimulating media may itself become a source of cognitive overload.

Structured Breaks

Short breaks between instructional segments appeared to restore attention. Attention recovery aligns with research on cognitive restoration, which indicates that brief disengagement from sustained mental effort can replenish cognitive resources (Infantes-paniagua et al., 2021). Structured pauses may therefore function as attentional reset mechanisms within extended class sessions.

Theoretical and Pedagogical Implications

The findings contribute to the broader discourse on attention in second language acquisition by highlighting its contextual and dynamic nature. Rather than conceptualizing short attention span as a fixed learner deficiency, the data suggest it is an interaction between cognitive capacity, emotional state, and instructional design within digitally shaped learning environments.

Pedagogically, the findings imply that traditional extended lecture formats may be increasingly misaligned with contemporary learner attentional rhythms. However, this does not suggest lowering academic rigor. Instead, it calls for restructuring content delivery to align with cognitive processing patterns while maintaining learning depth.

Attention management should therefore be integrated into instructional planning. Designing varied, interactive, and segmented lessons may enhance engagement without compromising complexity.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the behavioral and cognitive characteristics of short attention spans among EFL learners, examined their effects on vocabulary development, reading fluency, and listening comprehension, and identified instructional strategies that may mitigate these challenges. The findings reveal that short attention spans are manifested through behavioral disengagement, fragmented cognitive processing, and reduced motivational persistence during language learning activities. These patterns indicate that attentional instability is not merely an individual learner characteristic but is strongly influenced by the interaction between digitally shaped learning habits and instructional practices.

The study further demonstrates that attentional fragmentation negatively affects learners' ability to sustain cognitive engagement across different language skills. Among the three skills investigated, listening comprehension was the most vulnerable because learners were required to process continuous auditory input without opportunities for self-paced review. Vocabulary development and reading fluency were likewise affected through reduced retention, superficial information processing, and diminished comprehension of extended texts. These findings reinforce cognitive theories suggesting that sustained attention serves as a prerequisite for effective language acquisition and meaningful processing of linguistic input.

An important finding of this study is that instructional design substantially mediates learners' attentional engagement. Classroom practices such as task chunking, interactive and collaborative learning, multimodal instruction, and structured cognitive breaks consistently promoted higher levels of participation and sustained concentration. Rather than lowering academic expectations, these approaches enable teachers to organize learning experiences that are more compatible with learners' cognitive processing capacities in digitally mediated environments.

This study contributes theoretically by extending the discussion of attention beyond cognitive psychology into the field of EFL pedagogy, demonstrating that attention should be conceptualized as a dynamic, context-dependent construct shaped by learner behavior, instructional design, and digital learning environments. Practically, the findings provide evidence-based guidance for designing attention-aware EFL instruction that balances cognitive demands with learner engagement. As digital technologies continue to reshape learning behaviors, integrating attention management into pedagogical planning becomes increasingly essential for improving the effectiveness of English language teaching.

SUGGESTION

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be proposed for educational practice and future research.

First, EFL teachers are encouraged to integrate attention-aware instructional practices into their classroom instruction. Organizing lessons into shorter instructional segments, incorporating collaborative learning activities, utilizing pedagogically meaningful multimedia resources, and providing structured cognitive breaks may help learners maintain sustained attention while supporting deeper language processing. Such instructional adjustments are particularly relevant in contemporary classrooms where learners are increasingly exposed to digitally mediated learning environments.

Second, educational institutions and curriculum developers should

recognize attention management as an essential component of effective EFL instruction. Professional development programs should therefore equip teachers with practical knowledge of cognitive load management, active learning strategies, and the pedagogically appropriate use of educational technologies that foster learner engagement without creating additional cognitive overload.

Finally, future studies should broaden the scope of investigation by employing longitudinal, mixed-method, or experimental research designs to examine causal relationships between instructional interventions and learners' attentional development. Future research may also include participants from different educational levels, compare learners with varying digital media usage patterns, investigate additional language skills such as speaking, writing, grammar, and pronunciation, and incorporate objective measures of attention, including eye-tracking technology, learning analytics, or physiological indicators. Such investigations would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how attention functions within contemporary EFL learning and strengthen the empirical foundation for attention-based pedagogical innovation.

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