



DIGITAL READING AND COMPREHENSION PLATFORM IN EFL: ENGAGEMENT PATTERNS AND GRAMMAR OUTCOMES

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Abstract:

This study examines patterns of engagement with a digital reading and comprehension platform among EFL learners at two proficiency levels (B2 and C1) and explores the relationship between platform-based performance indicators and formal grammatical achievement. The participants were 44 university-level EFL students who used the same digital platform over the course of one academic semester. Platform data included the total number of completed quizzes, accumulated knowledge points, quiz success rates, and average platform level, while grammatical achievement was measured using final course grades. The results revealed statistically significant differences between proficiency groups in engagement intensity, with C1 students completing more quizzes and accumulating higher knowledge point totals than B2 students. No significant differences were found in quiz success rates or average platform levels. Correlational analyses showed no statistically significant associations between individual platform variables and grammar grades in either group. However, distinct patterns emerged across proficiency levels. In the B2 group, grammar grades showed weak positive tendencies in relation to measures of task quantity, whereas in the C1 group, relatively stronger tendencies were observed for performance-related indicators such as quiz success rate and average platform level. Multiple regression analyses further indicated that platform engagement variables did not significantly predict grammar course grades when considered simultaneously. Overall, the findings suggest that the relationship between digital platform engagement and grammatical achievement is indirect and mediated by learner proficiency, highlighting the need to distinguish between quantitative and qualitative dimensions of digital engagement in EFL contexts.

Keywords: EFL learners, digital platform engagement, grammar achievement, proficiency levels B2 and C1

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1. Introduction

The increasing presence of digital platforms in EFL instruction has generated a substantial body of research examining their potential to support language learning. Reading and comprehension platforms, in particular, are frequently promoted as tools capable of enhancing linguistic development through sustained exposure, immediate feedback, and flexible access to input. While such platforms are now widely integrated into university-level language courses, their pedagogical value is often inferred indirectly, most commonly through general measures of academic achievement. This practice has contributed to a persistent assumption that higher levels of digital engagement should be reflected in improved formal outcomes, an assumption that remains insufficiently examined in empirical work on technology-enhanced language learning (Burston, 2014). Recent research in computer-assisted language learning has begun to question the simplicity of this relationship. A growing number of studies report mixed or inconsistent effects of digital tools when learning outcomes are operationalised through institutional assessment measures such as course grades or final exam scores (Burston, 2014; Burston, 2015). Grammar achievement, in particular, presents a methodological challenge. As a multidimensional construct, grammatical competence develops gradually and unevenly, while formal grammar grades typically represent aggregated performance across limited assessment points. The resulting mismatch between process-oriented learning data and outcome-oriented assessment complicates attempts to draw straightforward conclusions about the instructional impact of digital platforms (Norris & Ortega, 2000). An additional issue concerns the role of learner proficiency. Although proficiency level is frequently treated as a background variable in digital learning research, there is increasing recognition that it may function as a moderating factor shaping both engagement patterns and learning outcomes. Learners at different stages of development do not necessarily benefit from the same types or intensities of digital output, and effects observed at one proficiency level may not generalise to others (Verpoor et al., 2008).

Despite this, relatively few studies have examined platform engagement and achievement separately across proficiency levels within the same instructional context. The present study addresses this gap by examining patterns of engagement with a digital reading and comprehension platform among EFL learners at two CEFR proficiency levels, B2 and C1. The platform used in the study was ReadTheory, an adaptive online environment that provides levelled reading texts accompanied by comprehension questions and generates detailed learner performance data. Rather than assuming a direct causal relationship between platform use and grammatical achievement, the study adopts a cautious analytic approach that distinguishes between quantitative and performance-oriented dimensions of engagement and treats learner proficiency as a central explanatory variable. Platform-general indicators, including task completion, accumulated knowledge points, quiz success rates, and average platform level, are

analysed alongside final grammar course grades collected over the course of academic semester.

2. Literature Review

Digital reading and comprehension platforms have become an increasingly common component of EFL instruction, particularly at the tertiary level. Their pedagogical rationale is closely aligned with principles traditionally associated with extensive reading, including sustained exposure to meaningful input, learner autonomy, and reading for meaning rather than for form (Day & Bamford, 1998). In recent years, these principles have increasingly been realized through online environments, leading to the development of extensive online reading practices. Theoretical support for extensive reading is often linked to input-based accounts of language acquisition. Krashen's (1985) input hypothesis emphasizes the role of comprehensible input in fostering implicit language development, suggesting that reading-based exposure may contribute to linguistic growth without explicit focus on form. Building on this perspective, Grabe (2009) and Nation & Macalister (2026) argue that extensive reading supports vocabulary development, reading fluency, and overall language proficiency, while grammatical development tends to occur indirectly and cumulatively over time. Recent syntheses of online extensive reading research further highlight the pedagogical potential of digital reading platforms. In their narrative review, Ounissi, Romly, Ahmad Tajuddin, & Hasan (2025) report that online extensive reading environments consistently promote learner engagement, autonomy, and reading volume. However, they caution that gains observed in digital reading contexts are uneven across linguistic domains and highly dependent on instructional design, learner proficiency, and assessment practices. In particular, improvements in engagement and reading behaviour do not necessarily translate into measurable gains in formal grammatical accuracy.

Assessing grammatical achievement within digital learning environments presents persistent methodological challenges. Grammatical competence develops incrementally and interacts with multiple dimensions of language use, including vocabulary knowledge, reading comprehension, and metalinguistic awareness (Grabe, 2009; Nation & Macalister, 2026). In institutional settings, grammar is commonly evaluated through cumulative course grades that integrate performance across various assessment components. Norris & Ortega (2000) argue that such aggregate outcome measures often lack the sensitivity required to capture subtle instructional effects, particularly over relatively short instructional periods. This limitation is especially relevant in online extensive reading contexts, where platforms are designed to promote reading fluency and exposure rather than explicit grammatical practice. As noted by Ounissi et al. (2025), the pathways through which extensive reading contributes to grammatical development remain insufficiently specified, making direct associations between platform engagement and grammar grades difficult to establish. Research on extensive reading further suggests that grammar-related gains supported through

reading are typically indirect and cumulative. Waring & Nation (2004) and Renandya and Jacobs (2002) emphasise that extensive reading primarily facilitates incidental language development, with grammatical accuracy emerging gradually as a by-product of sustained input rather than as an immediate outcome. Consequently, weak or inconsistent correlations between digital engagement metrics and grammar grades should be interpreted cautiously and in light of broader developmental processes.

The relationship between digital reading engagement and learning outcomes is further complicated by learner proficiency. From a developmental perspective, language acquisition follows non-linear trajectories, with learners drawing on different cognitive and linguistic resources at different stages of proficiency (Verspoor, Lowie, & van Dijk, 2008). As proficiency increases, learners tend to engage with input more selectively and strategically, prioritising efficiency and accuracy over volume of exposure. Empirical research in extensive reading supports this distinction. Hu & Nation (2000) demonstrate that higher levels of lexical coverage are required for effective reading comprehension, suggesting that more advanced learners are better positioned to benefit from extensive reading practices. Waring & Nation (2004) similarly note that reading volume and engagement patterns vary substantially across proficiency levels, influencing the nature and extent of incidental learning. In online extensive reading environments, these proficiency-related differences may further be amplified by the autonomous nature of digital platforms. Ounissi et al. (2025) observe that advanced learners often exercise greater control over text selection and reading strategies, while less proficient learners may rely more heavily on structured scaffolding. Despite this, proficiency level is frequently treated as a background variable in digital learning research, rather than as a central analytic focus. Previous research in the Bosnian EFL context has extensively documented persistent challenges related to grammatical phenomena such as negation, subject-verb concord, and conditional constructions at the university level (e.g. Bureković, 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2023, 2025; Brdarević-Čeljo et al., 2018; Rizvić-Eminović et al., 2018; Rizvić-Eminović et al., 2025; Bureković et al., 2023; Bureković et al., 2025). These findings provide an important contextual backdrop for interpreting grammar course grades as outcome measures that reflect cumulative grammatical competence rather than sensitivity to isolated instructional interventions. Recent studies have also highlighted the increasing role of machine translation and other digital tools in the learning practices of Bosnian EFL students, raising questions about how technology-mediated input interacts with grammatical development and assessment outcomes (Bujak & Bureković, 2025; Šukalić et al., 2025). These findings suggest that learner engagement with digital resources extends beyond formal instructional platforms and may influence grammatical performance in indirect and complex ways.

Taken together, existing research highlights several unresolved issues within EFL pedagogy. While extensive online reading has been shown to support learner engagement and reading development (Day & Bamford, 1998; Ounissi et al., 2025; Nation & Macalister, 2026), its relationship with formal grammatical achievement remains unclear. This uncertainty is compounded by the methodological limitations of grammar

grades as outcome measures (Norris & Ortega, 2000) and by the limited attention paid to proficiency-specific engagement patterns in digital reading contexts. The present study addresses this gap by examining how engagement with a digital reading and comprehension platform relates to grammar course grades among B2 and C1 EFL learners enrolled in the same university course. By foregrounding learner proficiency and distinguishing between multiple dimensions of platform engagement, the study seeks to provide a more nuanced pedagogical interpretation of digital reading data within an EFL context.

Drawing on the reviewed literature, the study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: Are there significant differences between B2 and C1 EFL learners in their engagement with a digital reading and comprehension platform?

RQ2: Is there a relationship between platform engagement variables and grammar course grades within each proficiency group?

RQ3: Do platform engagement variables significantly predict grammar course grades for B2 and C1 learners when considered jointly?

Given the indirect and cumulative nature of grammar development reported in extensive reading research (Krashen, 1985; Renandya & Jacobs, 2002), the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: C1 learners will demonstrate higher overall levels of platform engagement than B2 learners.

H2: Platform engagement variables will show weak to moderate associations with grammar course grades, with differing patterns across proficiency levels.

H3: Platform engagement variables will not emerge as strong predictors of grammar course when entered simultaneously into regression models.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants and Instructional Context

The participants in this study were 44 undergraduate EFL students enrolled at the University of Zenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina. The students attended regular English language instruction within the course *Contemporary English Language*, which focuses on the development of integrated language skills alongside formal grammatical competence. Based on institutional placement procedures aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), the participants were divided into two proficiency groups, B2 (n=24) and C1 (n=20). The study was conducted over the course of one academic semester during the 2024-2025 academic year. All participants followed the same course syllabus during the observed academic semester and were exposed to identical instructional content. The digital reading and comprehension activities analysed in this study formed a supplementary component of the course and were implemented alongside regular classroom-based grammar instruction.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Descriptive Statistics and Group Differences

Descriptive statistics for all platform engagement variables and grammar course grades by proficiency level are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for platform engagement variables and grammar grades by proficiency level

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD
Total tests completed	B2	24	33.17	16.50
	C1	20	46.25	11.70
Knowledge points	B2	24	767.42	333.27
	C1	20	1164.00	338.88
Quizzes passed (%)	B2	24	83.94	8.34
	C1	20	82.15	8.69
Average platform level	B2	24	9.33	2.17
	C1	20	9.08	1.48
Grammar course grade	B2	24	6.58	0.50
	C1	20	7.39	1.33

As shown in Table 1, C1 learners completed more reading tests and accumulated substantially more knowledge points than B2 learners. Differences in quiz success rates and average platform levels were comparatively small. C1 learners also obtained higher grammar course grades, although with greater variability. To examine whether these observed differences were statistically significant, independent-samples t-tests were conducted (Table 2).

Table 2: Independent samples t-test results comparing B2 and C1 learners

Variable	t	p
Total tests completed	-3.07	.004
Knowledge points	-3.89	< .001
Quizzes passed (%)	0.69	.492
Average platform level	0.45	.654
Grammar course grade	-2.55	.018

The results indicate statistically significant group differences in total tests completed, knowledge points, and grammar course grades, providing support for RQ1 and H1. No significant differences were found for quiz success rates or average platform levels, suggesting that higher proficiency is associated primarily with engagement volume rather than performance accuracy.

4.2. Relationships between Platform Engagement and Grammar Achievement

To address RQ2, Spearman correlation analyses were conducted separately for each proficiency group. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Correlations between platform engagement variables and grammar grades

Variable	Grammar grade (B2)	Grammar grade (C1)
Total tests completed	.28 (p = .193)	-.01 (p = .965)
Knowledge points	.29 (p = .165)	.08 (p = .737)
Quizzes passed (%)	-.02 (p = .932)	.10 (p = .681)
Average platform level	-.20 (p = .360)	.08 (p = .729)

Across both proficiency groups, correlations between platform engagement variables and grammar course grades were weak and statistically non-significant. For B2 learners, small positive associations were observed for total tests completed and knowledge points, whereas correlations within the C1 group were negligible. These findings indicate that increased engagement with the digital reading platform does not correspond to higher grammar grades, particularly at advanced proficiency levels, reinforcing the indirect nature of grammar development through reading-based input.

4.3. Predictive Value of Platform Engagement Variables

To address RQ3, separate multiple regression analyses were conducted for each proficiency group, with grammar course grade as the dependent variable. The regression models are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Multiple regression models predicting grammar grades by proficiency level

Predictor	B2 β	B2 p	C1 β	C1 p
Total tests completed	-0.05	.182	-0.02	.827
Knowledge points	0.00	.132	0.00	.776
Quizzes passed (%)	-0.01	.745	0.02	.755
Average platform level	-0.06	.347	-0.04	.906
R²	.19		.04	

As shown in Table 4, none of the platform engagement variables emerged as significant predictors of grammar course grades in either proficiency group. This finding fully supports H3 and indicates that engagement metrics, whether considered individually or collectively, explain only a limited proportion of variance in grammatical achievement. For C1 learners, the absence of predictive effects despite higher engagement levels suggests that grammar performance at advanced proficiency stages is shaped primarily by factors beyond platform use, such as prior linguistic competence and classroom-based instruction.

4.4. Integrated Discussion and Pedagogical Interpretation

The descriptive findings indicating higher levels of platform engagement among C1 learners are consistent with previous research on online extensive reading. Studies grounded in the extensive reading framework have repeatedly shown that more proficient learners tend to engage more autonomously and extensively with reading materials (Day & Bamford, 1998; Nation & Macalister, 2026). Similarly, Ounissi et al. (2025) report that advanced learners in online extensive reading environments often

demonstrate higher reading volume and more sustained engagement, although with greater individual variation. The present findings extend this line of research by demonstrating that such patterns also emerge in platform-based digital reading environments used as supplementary tools in university-level EFL instruction. Importantly, the lack of significant differences between B2 and C1 learners in quiz success rates and average platform levels suggests that increased engagement among higher-proficiency learners is primarily quantitative rather than accuracy-driven. This observation aligns with Grabe's (2009) argument that reading development at advanced levels is shaped more by strategic engagement and efficiency than by measurable gains in surface-level performance.

The weak and non-significant correlations between platform engagement variables and grammar course grades observed in the present study are in line with earlier research emphasizing the indirect nature of grammar development through reading-based input. Extensive reading scholars have long argued that grammatical development supported by reading is cumulative and implicit, rather than immediately observable through formal assessment instruments (Krashen, 1985; Nation & Macalister, 2026). In this respect, the present findings corroborate the concerns raised by Norris and Ortega (2000) regarding the use of aggregate outcome measures, such as course grades, to capture instructional effects. As grammar grades reflect performance across multiple assessment components, they may not be sensitive to subtle developmental changes resulting from increased exposure to written input. Ounissi et al. (2025) similarly caution that improvements in engagement and reading behaviour in online extensive reading contexts do not necessarily correspond to gains in formal grammatical accuracy, particularly over short instructional periods. Notably, the lightly stronger, though still non-significant, associations observed in the B2 group suggest that intermediate learners may benefit more directly from increased exposure and practice, a pattern also reported in earlier extensive reading studies (Waring and Nation, 2004; Renandya and Jacobs, 2002). However, these benefits remain difficult to capture through institutional grading practices.

The regression analyses further reinforce the need for a proficiency-sensitive interpretation of digital engagement data. The absence of significant predictors in both regression models supports the view that platform engagement metrics alone are insufficient to explain grammatical achievement. This finding is particularly consistent with research suggesting that, at higher proficiency levels, language development is increasingly influenced by learner-internal factors such as prior knowledge, metalinguistic awareness, and strategic competence (Verspoor, Lowie, & van Dijk, 2008). For C1 learners, the lack of predictive power despite high engagement mirrors observations in online extensive reading research that advanced learners' engagement is often selective and goal-oriented rather than uniformly intensive (Ounissi et al., 2025). In contrast, the modest explanatory power observed in the B2 regression model aligns with claims that intermediate learners may experience more noticeable gains from increased

input, even if these gains are not robustly reflected in formal assessment scores (Nation & Macalister, 2026).

Taken together, the results of this study are broadly consistent with online extensive reading research, while also highlighting important methodological and pedagogical considerations. The findings confirm that digital reading platforms can support learner engagement, particularly among more proficient learners, but they also reinforce long-standing concerns regarding the mismatch between process-oriented learning activities and outcome-oriented assessment practices. From an EFL pedagogical perspective, the present study supports the position that digital reading platforms should be integrated as complementary tools that facilitate exposure, autonomy, and sustained engagement, rather than as mechanisms expected to yield immediate improvements in grammatical accuracy. This interpretation aligns with the cautious stance adopted by Burston (2014, 2015) in his evaluations of CALL and MALL effectiveness and echoes broader arguments within EFL pedagogy that instructional impact must be interpreted in relation to proficiency level and assessment design.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between engagement with a digital reading and comprehension platform and grammatical achievement among university-level EFL learners at two proficiency levels, B2 and C1. By combining platform-generated engagement data with institutional grammar course grades, the study adopted a cautious, proficiency-sensitive approach to interpreting digital learning outcomes within an authentic instructional context. The findings indicate that learner proficiency is associated with distinct patterns of digital engagement. C1 learners demonstrated significantly higher engagement in terms of reading volume and accumulated progress than B2 learners. However, this increased engagement did not translate into a stronger relationship with grammatical achievement. Across both proficiency levels, correlations between platform engagement variables and grammar course grades were weak and non-significant, and regression analyses confirmed that engagement metrics did not function as reliable predictors of formal performance. These results are consistent with extensive online reading research suggesting that reading-based digital tools primarily support learning processes rather than immediate, measurable gains in grammatical accuracy. Grammar development facilitated through sustained exposure to written input appears to be indirect and cumulative, making it difficult to capture through aggregate outcome measures such as course grades. The findings also reinforce concerns raised in earlier research regarding the limitations of institutional assessment instruments when used to evaluate the impact of process-oriented digital learning activities. From an EFL pedagogical perspective, the study underscores the importance of interpreting digital engagement data with caution. High levels of platform activity may reflect productive learning behaviour and learner autonomy, but they should not be equated with improved grammatical achievement. Digital reading platforms are, therefore, best understood as

complementary instructional tools that support exposure, engagement, and reading development, particularly at intermediate proficiency levels, rather than as mechanisms for predicting formal assessment outcomes. Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study relied on grammar course grades as the sole indicator of grammatical achievement, which may not fully capture subtle developmental changes. In addition, the relatively small sample size and focus on a single instructional context limit the generalisability of the findings. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating more fine-grained measures of grammatical development, longitudinal designs, and comparative analyses across multiple instructional settings. In conclusion, the present study contributes to ongoing discussion in EFL pedagogy by highlighting the need for proficiency-sensitive and methodologically grounded interpretations of digital learning data. Rather than asking whether digital platforms ‘work’, the findings encourage a more nuanced consideration of how, for whom, and under what conditions digital reading tools can meaningfully support language learning in formal educational contexts.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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