

The Attention Economy and the Reading Crisis: Linguistic and Pedagogical Impacts of Shortened Focus on Youth Literacy

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Abstract

In the attention economy, where digital platforms compete relentlessly for human focus, today's youth experience shortened attention spans that contribute to a measurable decline in deep reading skills. This article examines the linguistic and pedagogical impacts of fragmented attention on youth literacy, with particular relevance to English language education. Drawing on recent scholarship, it argues that frequent attentional shifts impair core linguistic processes, including syntactic parsing, inference generation, vocabulary depth, and narrative coherence. These effects are especially pronounced for students learning English as an additional language, who face additional cognitive demands during sustained reading. The paper reviews evidence of the reading crisis, including declining reading proficiency, reduced pleasure reading, and diminished reading stamina. It analyzes how these changes manifest in English language classrooms, affecting literate identity development, academic engagement, and long-term learning outcomes. Importantly, the article moves beyond problem identification to offer practical, evidence-based pathways forward through scaffolded sustained reading, attention-aware task design, print-digital balancing, and targeted linguistic strategies. By integrating linguistic analysis with pedagogical recommendations, this article equips English teachers and higher education instructors with actionable approaches to support deep reading in an age of distraction, while highlighting future research directions for curriculum design and multilingual contexts.

Keywords: *attention economy; reading crisis; reading stamina; deep reading; fragmented attention; English language teaching; discourse processing; digital distraction*

Introduction

In a quiet university classroom, a group of English language students sits with open texts. The assigned chapter is a thoughtful exploration of cultural narratives, rich in layered ideas and complex sentence structures. Within minutes, several students begin shifting in their seats. One checks a phone notification discreetly under the desk. Another highlights a single sentence before scrolling back to the beginning, as if restarting might help. A third stares at the page with focused effort but admits later that the words “slipped away” after a few paragraphs. This scene, familiar to many educators today, captures more than momentary distraction. It reflects a deeper shift in how young people engage with sustained written language (Brady, 2025).

This paper argues that in the attention economy, shortened focus is contributing to measurable declines in deep reading skills among youth, with significant linguistic and pedagogical consequences for English language education. The attention economy refers to the contemporary marketplace in which digital platforms compete aggressively for limited human attention through constant notifications,

personalized feeds, and rapid content cycles. Deep reading involves immersive engagement with extended texts that demands sustained concentration, critical reflection, and the construction of coherent mental models. Reading stamina is the capacity to maintain focused attention over longer periods, while fragmented attention describes the frequent switching between tasks or stimuli that characterizes much digital interaction. These interconnected phenomena shape the reading experiences of today's students in profound ways (Davenport & Beck, 2001).

Current trends underscore the urgency of this issue. Longitudinal data reveal notable declines in reading proficiency, particularly at secondary and post-secondary levels. Recent national assessments indicate that average reading scores for older students have continued to fall, with growing percentages performing below basic thresholds in comprehension and analysis. Complementary studies document reduced time spent on pleasure reading and diminished ability to sustain engagement with long-form texts. Educators frequently observe that students accustomed to quick digital consumption struggle with the cognitive demands of extended narrative or academic prose. These patterns appear across various educational contexts, including those involving second-language English learners who face additional processing demands (Doty et al., 2026).

The linguistic consequences are particularly noteworthy. When attention fragments, readers have less opportunity to process complex syntax, resolve distant references, or build rich inferential connections across paragraphs and chapters. Vocabulary growth slows as encounters with unfamiliar words become superficial rather than deeply contextualized. For students learning English as an additional language, these challenges compound because sustained reading supports the development of collocational knowledge, discourse markers, and rhetorical structures essential for academic success. Pedagogically, the implications extend to classroom practice, curriculum design, and teacher preparation. Traditional approaches that assume steady focus may need rethinking in light of these realities (Wolf, 2018).

This article offers a distinctive contribution by integrating a linguistic perspective with practical pedagogical recommendations. Drawing on classroom realities in multilingual educational settings, it examines how shortened attention influences language processing and proposes constructive ways forward for English teachers and higher education instructors. The analysis bridges theoretical understandings of the attention economy with observable outcomes in reading development, emphasizing actionable strategies that respect both digital realities and the enduring value of deep textual engagement (Brady, 2025).

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section explores the mechanisms of the attention economy and its penetration into educational environments. Subsequent parts examine evidence of the reading crisis, analyze specific linguistic impacts of fragmented attention, and discuss pedagogical consequences in English language classrooms. The final sections present evidence-based interventions and practical strategies before concluding with reflections on future directions for research and teaching.

The Attention Economy and Its Reach into Education

The attention economy has emerged as a defining framework for understanding value creation in the digital age. First articulated by Davenport and Beck (2001), the concept describes a competitive marketplace where human attention becomes the scarcest resource. In this economy, platforms, content creators, and advertisers vie for limited cognitive capacity rather than traditional material goods. Subsequent theoretical developments have expanded this idea, emphasizing how attention is

commodified through continuous data collection and algorithmic optimization (Bueno, 2016). At its core, the attention economy treats focus as both a personal resource and an economic asset, with far-reaching implications for daily life and learning.

Digital platforms are intentionally engineered to capture and fragment attention. Features such as infinite scrolling, push notifications, personalized recommendation algorithms, and variable reward schedules are designed to maximize engagement time. These mechanisms exploit psychological tendencies toward rapid switching, creating habitual patterns of brief, interrupted consumption. As a result, sustained focus on any single task becomes increasingly difficult. Theoretical analyses highlight how such design choices prioritize immediate stimulation over prolonged engagement, reshaping users' cognitive habits at a fundamental level (Terranova, 2012).

Among young people, these design features translate into observable shifts in behavior. Studies of digital activity patterns show that individuals frequently switch between applications and tasks, with average focused attention on a single screen often lasting less than one minute. Notification culture reinforces this fragmentation, as constant alerts interrupt thought processes and encourage rapid context switching. Daily habits have adapted accordingly: many adolescents and young adults report spending significant portions of their waking hours in a state of divided attention, moving fluidly between social media, entertainment, and brief information checks (Mark et al., 2005). These patterns are not merely superficial but reflect deeper changes in how attention is allocated and maintained.

The influence of the attention economy extends naturally into educational environments. Students bring their digitally shaped attentional habits into classrooms and study sessions. Lectures, reading assignments, and discussions now compete with the persistent pull of devices and background digital activity. Educators observe increased challenges in maintaining collective focus during extended activities, as students accustomed to rapid switching may struggle with tasks requiring sustained concentration. This dynamic affects not only individual learning but also the overall classroom climate, where shared attention becomes more difficult to cultivate (Brady, 2025).

Importantly, these patterns do not operate in isolation. The attention economy's reach creates a broader context in which educational practices must adapt. Traditional models of teaching and learning that rely on prolonged focus face new pressures in environments saturated with competing stimuli. Recognizing this reality allows educators to respond thoughtfully, balancing acknowledgment of digital realities with deliberate efforts to support deeper engagement.

The Reading Crisis: Evidence and Patterns

Recent educational data point to a noticeable decline in reading proficiency among youth, presenting a significant challenge for language educators. National and international assessments show that average reading scores, particularly at secondary and post-secondary levels, have trended downward in several contexts. These declines appear in both overall comprehension and the ability to engage with complex texts requiring analysis and synthesis. Studies examining long-term trends suggest that many students are graduating with weaker skills in sustained reading than previous cohorts, even as access to information has increased dramatically (Doty et al., 2026). This pattern reflects broader shifts in how young people interact with written language rather than a simple lack of exposure.

A key dimension of the reading crisis involves the sharp reduction in reading for pleasure. Time spent on voluntary, leisure reading has decreased steadily among adolescents and young adults. Many

students now report preferring short digital formats over extended narrative or informational texts. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that leisure digital reading habits often show weaker associations with text comprehension compared to traditional print-based reading. While digital formats offer convenience and variety, they frequently correlate with shallower processing and lower overall engagement (Altamura et al., 2025; Cremin & Scholes, 2024).

Reading stamina has emerged as a central concern within this crisis. Stamina refers to the ability to maintain focused attention and comprehension over extended periods. Educators increasingly observe that students can engage with short texts or excerpts but struggle when required to read continuously for 20–30 minutes or more. Comparative studies of oral and silent reading highlight that many young readers experience fatigue or reduced comprehension as session length increases. This limitation affects not only academic performance but also the development of deeper literary appreciation and critical thinking (Trainin et al., 2015).

Clear differences exist between digital and print reading experiences. Digital reading tends to encourage skimming, hyperlink navigation, and multitasking, which can reduce the construction of rich mental models of the text. In contrast, print reading supports greater immersion, better recall of details, and stronger inferential connections. Research on long-form reading in higher education documents a measurable shift away from extended print engagement, with students reporting greater difficulty sustaining attention in digital environments (Baron & Mangen, 2021).

The patterns are evident across adolescents and young adults, including those learning English as an additional language. L2 readers often face heightened cognitive demands due to vocabulary gaps and syntactic complexity, making sustained attention even more critical for building proficiency. Digital habits can exacerbate these challenges by limiting the repeated, contextual exposure needed for deep language acquisition. Studies of individual differences in second-language processing underscore the role of attention in successful comprehension and vocabulary development (Li & Clariana, 2019; Wallace, 2022).

Overall, the reading crisis represents a pedagogical challenge rather than an insurmountable barrier. While digital environments have transformed access to information, they have also altered the conditions under which deep reading develops. Recognizing these evidence-based patterns allows educators to design thoughtful responses that build stamina, support L2 learners, and preserve the unique benefits of sustained textual engagement in English language education.

Linguistic Impacts of Fragmented Attention on Reading

Fragmented attention exerts profound effects on the linguistic processes that underpin skilled reading. When sustained focus diminishes, readers face greater difficulty in performing the cognitive operations required for deep textual understanding. These impacts extend beyond general comprehension to core linguistic competencies, including syntactic parsing, inference generation, vocabulary acquisition, and the construction of narrative coherence. These challenges are observed daily in higher education classrooms, where students increasingly encounter texts through the lens of habitual digital distraction (Wolf, 2018).

One of the primary linguistic consequences involves syntactic parsing — the real-time analysis of sentence structure to extract meaning. Complex sentences with embedded clauses, long-distance dependencies, or sophisticated grammatical constructions demand continuous attention to maintain

accurate interpretation. When attention switches frequently, readers often process only local chunks of text, missing hierarchical relationships between clauses. This results in incomplete or inaccurate mental representations of the author's intended meaning. Discourse processing models emphasize that successful comprehension relies on building connections across sentences through cohesive devices such as pronouns, conjunctions, and transitional phrases. Fragmented attention disrupts this integrative process, particularly in extended academic or literary texts where meaning unfolds gradually over many paragraphs (Li & Clariana, 2019).

Inference generation represents another area of vulnerability. Deep reading requires readers to draw logical connections between explicit information and implied meanings, filling gaps using background knowledge and contextual cues. Shortened attention spans limit the working memory resources available for these higher-order operations. Readers may grasp surface-level content but struggle to generate predictive or elaborative inferences that enrich understanding. Consequently, texts lose much of their interpretive richness. Narrative coherence — the ability to track characters, themes, and plot developments across an entire work — suffers similarly. Without sustained focus, readers find it difficult to maintain a unified mental model, leading to fragmented recall and reduced appreciation of authorial craft (Baron & Mangen, 2021).

Vocabulary development is also affected in subtle but significant ways. Deep contextual encounters with new words facilitate robust semantic networks and collocational knowledge. When attention is fragmented, encounters become superficial: readers may recognize a word but fail to internalize its nuanced usage or syntactic patterns. This shallow processing slows lexical growth, especially for academic and discipline-specific vocabulary essential in higher education. Studies of reading habits show that frequent digital skimming correlates with weaker vocabulary gains compared to immersive print reading (Altamura et al., 2025).

These challenges are particularly pronounced for students learning English as an additional language. L2 readers already manage higher cognitive loads due to gaps in automaticity at phonological, lexical, and syntactic levels. Fragmented attention further taxes limited working memory resources, as learners must simultaneously decode language forms and construct meaning. Attention allocation becomes inefficient: students may focus excessively on local word recognition at the expense of global text integration. This imbalance hinders the development of fluent reading and academic literacy. Research on individual differences in L2 processing highlights that attention and working memory capacity significantly predict comprehension success, especially under conditions of distraction (Wallace, 2022).

The contrast between shallow skimming and deep, sustained reading illustrates these impacts vividly. Consider a hypothetical excerpt from an academic article on language and society: *“Although globalization has facilitated cultural exchange, its uneven distribution of resources often reinforces existing hierarchies, a dynamic that scholars have termed ‘soft power asymmetries’.*” A skimming reader might register key terms such as “globalization” and “hierarchies” but miss the causal relationship signaled by “although” and the evaluative weight of the final phrase. In contrast, a reader with sustained attention would integrate the concessive structure, connect it to prior paragraphs, and generate inferences about real-world implications. Students frequently report understanding individual sentences yet feeling lost when asked to summarize an entire chapter — a direct outcome of attentional fragmentation.

Established models of reading comprehension provide a useful framework for understanding these phenomena. Construction-integration theory, for instance, posits that successful reading involves both the construction of propositional meaning and its integration into a coherent situation model. Sustained attention serves as a prerequisite for the integration phase. When attention is repeatedly interrupted, the construction-integration cycle breaks down, resulting in weaker situation models and poorer retention. Similarly, interactive models of L1 and L2 reading stress the dynamic interplay between bottom-up decoding and top-down processing, both of which require stable attentional resources (Li & Clariana, 2019).

In summary, fragmented attention undermines fundamental linguistic processes that enable deep reading. The consequences extend from sentence-level parsing to global text comprehension, with amplified effects for L2 English learners. Recognizing these impacts allows educators to move beyond general observations of distraction toward targeted linguistic and pedagogical responses that rebuild reading stamina and support richer language development.

Pedagogical Consequences in English Language Classrooms

The pedagogical consequences of shortened attention spans are clearly visible in English language classrooms at both secondary and higher education levels. Teachers regularly encounter students who begin reading tasks with good intentions but lose engagement after a short time. Assigned readings that once sustained lively discussion now frequently result in superficial participation or incomplete preparation. This shift has transformed lesson dynamics: group discussions on literary texts or academic articles often rely on selected excerpts rather than full chapters, as many students report difficulty maintaining focus beyond 15–20 minutes of continuous reading (Martin et al., 2025).

One significant challenge lies in the development of literate identities. Sustained reading plays a central role in shaping how students see themselves as capable, reflective readers. When fragmented attention limits deep engagement, students may view reading primarily as a task to be completed rather than a meaningful personal or intellectual pursuit. This affects their confidence and motivation. Pre-service teachers, in particular, benefit from positive experiences with pleasure reading to build strong literate identities that they can later model for their own students. However, when digital habits reduce opportunities for immersive reading, the cultivation of these identities becomes more difficult (Price & Simpson, 2024).

Sustained engagement with texts also suffers in noticeable ways. Many students can handle short, self-contained digital texts but struggle with the cumulative demands of longer academic or literary works. This leads to weaker connections between ideas, reduced enjoyment of reading, and lower persistence when encountering challenging material. In higher education English courses, this manifests as incomplete annotations, limited contributions to seminars, and reliance on summaries rather than original interpretation. The pattern creates a cycle in which students miss the rewarding aspects of deep reading that could otherwise reinforce continued engagement (Cremin & Scholes, 2024).

In multilingual classrooms, these consequences appear across diverse learner backgrounds. Students learning English as an additional language often require extended, contextual exposure to develop advanced proficiency. When attention is frequently interrupted, opportunities for noticing linguistic patterns, building vocabulary depth, and internalizing rhetorical structures decrease. This can slow progress toward academic literacy goals. While digital tools provide valuable supplementary resources, they do not fully replace the benefits of sustained print-based reading for language

development. Teachers in multilingual settings therefore face the additional task of designing activities that accommodate varying attentional capacities while maintaining high expectations for all learners (Li & Clariana, 2019).

These classroom realities connect directly to broader educational outcomes. Strong reading stamina supports academic achievement by enabling students to handle complex course materials effectively. It also nurtures critical thinking through careful analysis, evaluation of arguments, and synthesis of ideas across texts. Over time, these skills contribute to lifelong learning habits that extend beyond formal education. When attention-related challenges limit deep reading, students may achieve adequate surface-level performance but miss opportunities for richer intellectual growth and personal development (Surma et al., 2025).

Many students express genuine desire to improve their reading but feel constrained by habitual patterns formed in digital environments. This situation calls for thoughtful pedagogical adaptation rather than resignation. By recognizing these consequences, educators can move toward targeted support that helps students rebuild reading stamina while respecting the realities of contemporary life.

Pathways Forward: Interventions and Practical Strategies

Educators possess effective, evidence-based tools to counteract the effects of fragmented attention and rebuild reading stamina in English language classrooms. Rather than accepting shortened focus as inevitable, teachers can implement structured interventions that gradually strengthen students' capacity for sustained engagement. These approaches combine attention-aware design with explicit linguistic support, offering practical pathways that respect digital realities while prioritizing deep reading development (Martin et al., 2025).

Scaffolded sustained reading serves as a foundational classroom technique. Teachers begin with shorter, manageable sessions of 10–15 minutes of uninterrupted reading and gradually increase duration over weeks. Students receive clear goals, such as noting three key ideas or one powerful image, before extending to full chapters. This gradual build helps learners experience success and develop confidence. Print-digital balancing further supports progress. Assigning core texts in print while using digital versions for supplementary activities reduces the temptation of multitasking and enhances immersion. Many students report improved focus and retention when alternating formats thoughtfully (Trainin et al., 2015).

Attention-aware task design represents another powerful strategy. Teachers can structure lessons to minimize distractions by establishing phone-free reading zones, using timed focus periods, and incorporating brief reflection breaks rather than constant device checks. Pre-reading activities that activate background knowledge and post-reading discussion protocols help anchor attention. Effective protocols include structured pair-share activities or small-group “text talk” circles where students discuss specific linguistic features they noticed during reading. These protocols transform solitary reading into a shared, accountable experience that sustains motivation (Gellen et al., 2024).

Text selection plays a crucial role in pedagogical success. Choosing materials that are engaging yet accessible — with compelling narratives, relevant themes, or clear rhetorical structures — increases the likelihood that students will persist. Teachers should balance challenge with interest, starting with shorter, high-interest texts before progressing to more complex academic or literary works. Allowing

students some autonomy in selecting supplementary texts fosters ownership and intrinsic motivation, countering the passive consumption patterns encouraged by the attention economy.

Linguistic tools provide targeted support for deeper processing. Explicit instruction in discourse markers (however, therefore, although) helps students recognize organizational patterns even when attention wavers. Chunking strategies — breaking longer texts into meaningful segments with guiding questions — reduce cognitive overload and build successful completion experiences. Reflective journaling after reading sessions encourages students to articulate what they understood, what challenged them, and how their focus evolved. These practices strengthen metacognitive awareness and reinforce the linguistic connections essential for L2 English development (Surma et al., 2025).

Teacher training and curriculum design must evolve to support these interventions. Professional development programs should equip educators with practical strategies for attention-aware teaching, including how to integrate stamina-building activities into existing syllabi. Curriculum frameworks can incorporate dedicated time for sustained reading practice rather than treating it as an assumed skill. Institutions might consider embedding “reading stamina modules” in English language courses, particularly in teacher education programs, so that future educators experience and internalize these approaches themselves.

Progress can be measured through simple, practical evaluation methods. Teachers can track reading duration and self-reported focus levels using weekly logs. Comprehension checks that combine multiple-choice items with open-response questions reveal both surface understanding and deeper integration. Pre- and post-intervention reading stamina assessments — such as timed silent reading followed by summary tasks — provide concrete data on improvement. These methods allow educators to adjust strategies responsively while demonstrating growth to students, reinforcing the value of sustained effort.

Implementing these interventions requires patience and consistency, but the rewards are substantial. Students who rebuild reading stamina often report greater enjoyment, improved academic confidence, and stronger analytical skills. By combining attention-aware pedagogy with targeted linguistic support, educators can help today’s youth reclaim the profound benefits of sustained engagement with written language — benefits that extend far beyond the classroom into lifelong learning and personal growth.

Conclusion and Future Directions

In the attention economy, shortened focus is contributing to measurable declines in deep reading skills among youth, carrying important linguistic and pedagogical consequences for English language education. This article has examined how fragmented attention disrupts core linguistic processes such as syntactic parsing, inference generation, vocabulary depth, and narrative coherence. It has also highlighted the pedagogical realities in English language classrooms, including challenges to literate identity development, reduced reading stamina, and the particular demands faced by students learning English as an additional language. These insights underscore that the reading crisis is not merely a matter of digital habits but a fundamental shift affecting language processing and learning outcomes (Wolf, 2018; Brady, 2025).

The key linguistic insight is that sustained attention serves as a foundation for rich textual engagement. Without it, readers struggle to construct coherent mental models and fully benefit from extended written language. Pedagogically, the findings point to the need for deliberate, attention-aware teaching

practices that rebuild stamina through scaffolded reading, thoughtful task design, and linguistic support strategies. Together, these elements demonstrate that while digital environments pose real challenges, educators are well-positioned to respond with practical and effective interventions.

Looking forward, reclaiming deep reading offers a valuable counterbalance in the digital age. Far from rejecting technology, educators can harness its strengths while deliberately protecting space for sustained, immersive engagement with texts. This balanced approach can help students develop the focus, comprehension, and reflective capacities essential for academic success and lifelong learning. Deep reading remains one of the most powerful tools for intellectual and personal growth, even amid constant digital stimulation.

Future research should explore several promising directions. Longitudinal studies in diverse multilingual educational contexts would provide deeper understanding of how attention patterns evolve over time and interact with language development. Investigations into innovative teaching methods — such as hybrid print-digital approaches and technology-supported stamina-building tools — could yield new evidence-based strategies. Comparative research across different age groups and cultural settings would further strengthen pedagogical recommendations.

Ultimately, sustained reading nurtures not only linguistic proficiency but also the quiet patience, empathy, and critical insight that define thoughtful engagement with the world. By guiding today's youth toward this enduring practice, English teachers and higher education instructors can help them discover the lasting rewards of deep focus — gifts that transcend the fleeting demands of the attention economy and enrich both learning and life.

Declarations

Ethical Approval: This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee of Nakhchivan State University. All participants were fully informed of the study's purpose and voluntarily provided written consent. Data collected were anonymised and used solely for research purposes.

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