

L2 skipping: Influence of word length, predictability, proficiency, and spelling skill

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About one third of all words are skipped during reading (Rayner, 1998). The greatest factor contributing to whether a word is skipped is word length, with shorter words being skipped more frequently than longer words (e.g., Rayner, 1979). When matched for length, predictable words within a sentence context are more likely to be skipped than unpredictable words (e.g., Balota et al., 1985). The majority of what we know about skipping comes from monolingual speakers, and it is generally assumed that readers skip fewer words in their L2 than in their L1 (e.g., Cop et al., 2015). However, no study has systematically investigated L2 skipping behaviour. As discussed in Staub (2015), predictability effects during reading may be the result of a top-down pre-activation of related words, which in turn facilitates the bottom-up extraction of orthographic and visual features of words outside the central field of vision (i.e., parafoveal area). Since this type of facilitation can be seen in the earliest possible eye movement measure, word skipping, we believe that skipping behaviour may provide some insight into the ability (or lack thereof) of L2 speakers to predict upcoming linguistic information (see Kaan, 2014).

Using the materials from Rayner et al. (2011) and Slattery and Yates (2018), we tested skipping behaviour (and gaze duration) of a critical word, varied by length and predictability, of late English L2ers with a German L1 (N=45). Additionally, individual difference measures of quality of lexical representation (via spelling skill) and of language proficiency (via English morphosyntax knowledge) were included. Similar to L1ers, skipping likelihood decreased (and gaze duration increased) as word length increased, and predictable words evoked greater skipping likelihood (and shorter gaze durations) than unpredictable words, but only when individual differences were included in the model. This suggests that when proficiency and quality of lexical representation are accounted for, L2 speakers (similar to L1 speakers; Slattery & Yates, 2018) are able to incrementally use top-down predictability information as well as bottom-up visual (parafoveal) information during reading. Interestingly, among moderate to high proficiency L2ers, lower-scoring spellers skipped predictable words more often than higher-scoring spellers (see Figure 1), suggesting that lower-scoring spellers may over rely on context and use a “riskier” reading strategy (Rayner et al., 2006). It may even signify that in adult L2 readers, in line with developing readers, linguistic skill and not oculomotor skill impact reading performance (e.g., Johnson et al., 2018). Therefore, during reading, L2 speakers are able to use predictability information to the same extent as L2 speakers

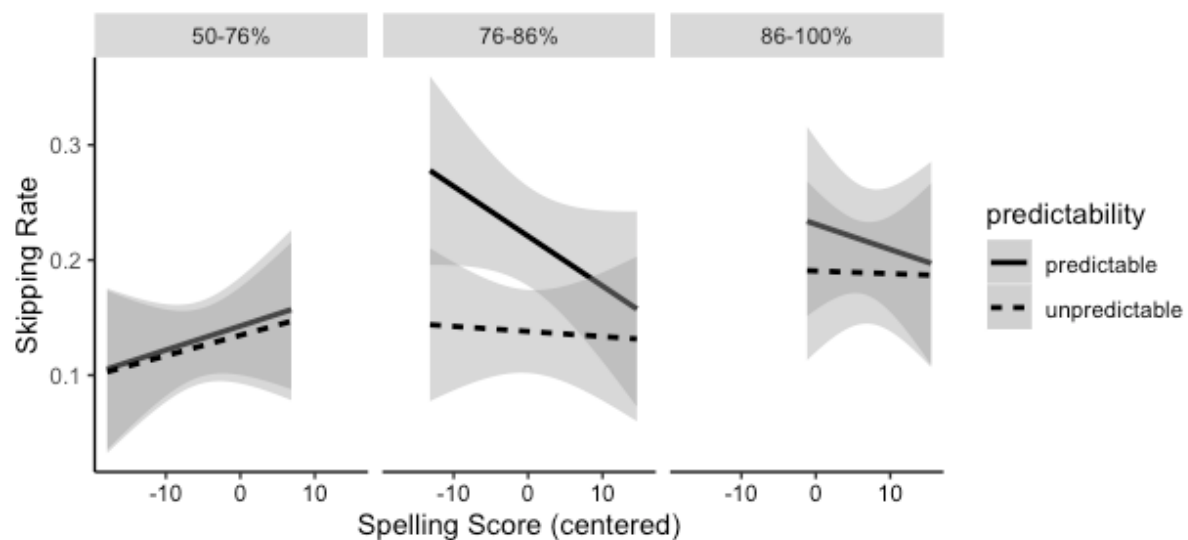


Figure 1. Skipping rate of predictable and unpredictable words by word length (centered) broken down by proficiency score out of 100 (each facet corresponds to approximately 1/3 of the participants). Grey shading indicates 95% confidence interval.

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