



## Enhancing the skim reading skills of English learners with *Copilot*: A case study in the Australian ELICOS sector

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### Abstract

The 2024 end-of-course results at our English Language Intensive Course for Overseas Students (ELICOS) institution indicated that many pre-intermediate students struggled with reading, particularly identifying main ideas in texts and paragraphs. Research shows that difficulty with skimming for main ideas is a major challenge for English learners (Torgesen, 2002). Pedagogical literature also highlights the importance of skimming as a strategic reading skill that supports comprehension by helping readers anticipate a text's topic, purpose, and structure (Brown, 2004). This case study aimed to improve students' skimming skills, promote independent learning, and increase engagement in reading through AI support. Four integrated lessons combining Copilot with targeted skimming strategies were implemented with 32 students. Data from pre- and post-course surveys, end-of-class polls, classroom observations, and focus group interviews showed a marked increase in students' confidence and willingness to use Copilot. Overall, 88% of students rated the lessons as "helpful" or "very helpful." It is hoped that these findings will encourage greater collaboration among educators and contribute to shared repositories of AI-enhanced reading resources and teaching tasks.

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### Publication

Received: 03 November 2025

Revision: 22 March 2026

Accepted: 06 May 2026

Published: 19 June 2026

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Keywords: *AI; Copilot; ELICOS; skimming skills; pre-intermediate level; English education.*

## **Introduction**

The motivation for this research arose from our observation of ongoing trends in student performance and skill development within our pre-intermediate level English course. This ELICOS 10-week course is designed to improve students' reading, writing, speaking, listening, and independent learning skills. The students eligible for this module must have an IELTS (International English Language Testing System) score of 5.0. This score corresponds to a B1/B2 – as independent users within the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (equivalent to pre-intermediate) level of English proficiency. Each class consists of approximately 18 students aged 18-24. Students attend four hours of classes each day and are expected to complete regular homework and independent study tasks to support their classroom learning. These tasks prepare them for various in-class activities, presentations, collaborative projects, and assessments.

The English course syllabus is carefully designed to prepare students for academic success in a diploma or university course, and includes lessons that teach academic and test-taking strategies, review key grammar points, and provide practice tests aligned with assessment tasks. Students need to complete a series of formative assessments throughout the course, including three listening quizzes, three reading quizzes, four writing assessments, and three speaking assessments. To successfully pass the course, students must achieve minimum scores (of at least 60%) in each of the four core skill areas: Writing, Listening, Speaking, and Reading.

Despite this rigorous and supportive structure, internal data reveals a consistent trend: pre-intermediate level students tend to perform better in speaking and writing, while their results are noticeably weaker in reading and listening quizzes. In particular, many struggle with reading question types that require deeper comprehension skills, such as identifying main ideas, determining the purpose of the text, understanding the author's viewpoint, and matching headings to paragraphs. In response to this challenge, our research aimed to explore how students can use Generative AI - specifically Microsoft Copilot - as a digital support tool to improve their reading skills with a focus on assisting students to become more confident and independent in identifying main ideas in academic texts.

## **Literature review**

The following literature review provides a critical analysis of views on AI in English as a second language education, and AI for reading and skimming skills.

### ***AI in English education***

In English as a second language education, AI-based technology has brought about positive effects and beneficial changes such as improvements in autonomous learning (Han, 2019), and

it has increased interaction and performance (Sun et al., 2021), and heightened engagement (Shin, 2021) among learners. Smith et al. (2022) assert that incorporating ChatGPT into language learning activities enhances student engagement and motivation. AI also plays a crucial role in implementing personalised teaching and learning (Huang et al., 2021), offering instant feedback, and providing adaptive learning environments (Abas et al., 2023). Experimental studies have explored AI's impact on English language skills including: AI that select suitable listening materials based on students' needs, to boost learner confidence and motivation (Hu & Hu, 2020); AI-assisted writing models to enhance writing abilities (Chong, 2021); AI-based robots to facilitate oral training (Thinh et al., 2020); and AI machine translation software which improves translation quality (Dai, 2022).

### ***AI and reading/ skimming skills***

Research also demonstrates the benefits of AI in enhancing English reading and comprehension. AI tools play a significant role in motivating students to read by generating or recommending materials tailored to their interests, reading skills, and learning objectives (Li et al., 2023). These AI algorithms can dynamically adjust the difficulty of texts to match the reader's level, ensuring both comprehension and engagement. For example, AI systems such as ChatGPT have been shown to improve reading comprehension (Xu et al., 2019). Additionally, chatbots and intelligent tutors offer coaching and support when human assistance is unavailable. These platforms analyse reading patterns and adapt the complexity of texts and instructional methods to suit individual student proficiency (Sarker, 2021). A comparative study by Chen et al. (2022) found that students using ChatGPT showed greater improvements in vocabulary and grammatical accuracy compared to those using traditional materials.

Despite some research focusing on English reading skills, reading and grammar remain the least explored areas in current studies (Crompton & Burke, 2023; Sharadgah & Sa'di, 2022). The existing research also lacks emphasis on subskills essential for language development, with vocabulary being the sole focus in reading studies. For instance, Zheng et al. (2015) examined vocabulary learning during gaming quests involving Japanese pupils and an English native-speaker participant. Although prior studies have investigated the educational potential of AI tools like ChatGPT and Copilot, there is limited research on their effectiveness in reading and skimming practice for English learners. Consequently, these studies provide an incomplete understanding of how Copilot can enhance reading and skimming skills. This study aimed to address this gap by evaluating Copilot's effectiveness in engaging students, especially in reading for main ideas.

### ***L2 English reading skills and skimming strategies***

Reading is a complex activity that involves cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, and social processes (Sarig, 1987). While it engages various mental functions such as attention, memory, analysis, and inference, making it a cognitive task, readers use metacognitive skills

to monitor and regulate their understanding. Additionally, as motivation plays a key role in initiating and sustaining reading, reading is also influenced by social contexts including classroom environment and family encouragement.

Two main perspectives in second language reading research- text-based and reader-based views- offer a comprehensive framework for exploring how language readers interact with texts in a second language. The text-based view examines how features of texts - such as vocabulary, syntax, semantics, and text type - influence understanding. Meanwhile, the reader-based view focuses on how individual factors - like prior knowledge, reading strategies, and language proficiency - affect comprehension and the transfer of skills from a first to a second language (Al-Mekhlafi, 2018). Adult learners who are already proficient readers in their first language can enhance their reading comprehension in a second language by applying effective strategies they have previously acquired in their first language (Al-Mekhlafi, 2018).

Reading strategies are defined as mental operations used intentionally to understand a text, and they can be either conscious or automatic (Al-Mekhlafi, 2018). While reading strategies are essentially techniques readers use to tackle challenges in understanding texts, there is no clear agreement among researchers about what constitutes a reading strategy. Based on the view of second language reading as an interlingual transfer of skills from a reader's first language idea, Sarig (1987) developed four types of strategies: technical-aid moves to help with decoding through actions like skimming, scanning, and summarising; clarification and simplification moves which involve rephrasing or substituting text to make it clearer using synonyms and paraphrases; coherence-detecting moves which aim to create logical connections in the text using prior knowledge and textual clues; and monitoring moves which reflect the reader's active regulation of their reading process.

Afflerbach et al. (2008) distinguished reading *skill* from *strategy*. While reading skills are considered as “automatic actions that result in the decoding and comprehending of texts with speed, efficiency and fluency, usually without the reader's awareness of the components or controls involved”, reading strategies are “deliberate, goal-directed attempts to control and modify the reader's efforts to decode texts, understand words and construct meaning out of texts” (p.15). With sufficient practice, a reading strategy that is used deliberately can eventually become an automatic reading skill. This supports the emphasis on developing metacognitive awareness to help readers become more conscious of how to process texts while reading.

Skimming is a rapid reading technique used to quickly grasp the main idea of a text without reading every word or sentence (Brown, 2004). It helps readers save time by focusing only on key points and ignoring less important details. Therefore, Simanjuntak (1988) suggests that skimming demands strong focus, a broad vocabulary, and solid comprehension abilities. In practice, Hancock (1987) suggests a reader, when skimming a text, should focus on key elements such as the introduction, headings and subheadings, and any available summary. The steps to skim a text are also suggested by Fry (2000) including reading the first few paragraphs, leaving out the detail, finding the main idea, and reading fast. Similarly, Abdelrahman and Bsharah (2014) propose that readers need to increase concentration, memory and recall, and

reduce interruptions and stress. They further propose a three-step procedure for skimming: reading the first sentence of paragraph; reading the last sentence of paragraph, and reading key words in between. More specifically, Arundel (1999) proposes detailed skimming strategies like reading the title of a text, reading the introduction, reading the first sentence of each remaining paragraph, and reading the final paragraph completely. Readers can also read body paragraphs completely and quickly to see the link between main ideas, and then dip into the text to look for clues or key words.

Besides skimming, reading aloud is also recognised as an effective strategy for enhancing students' reading skills and comprehension. According to Mckeown and Gentilucci (2007), it serves as a way to assess cognitive reading processes and reading competence. This method involves students vocalising the text with correct pronunciation and intonation, which helps them gain vocabulary, improve pronunciation, and better understand the meaning of the text. It also fosters confidence, motivation, and enjoyment in the learning environment, contributing to a more engaging and productive classroom atmosphere. As an active learning strategy, reading aloud encourages student participation, supports concentration, and promotes deeper comprehension through interaction and feedback between students and teachers (Sajid & Kassim, 2019).

### ***Theoretical framework for this case study***

These above theories provide a framework for this study with reading being defined as involving cognitive, metacognitive, motivational and social processes (Sarig, 1987). Cognitively, reading in English specifically in this study could be viewed from the reader-base (Al-Mekhlafi, 2018) with a focus on skimming strategies where learners are encouraged to utilise such strategies as reading the title, the first and last sentences, and highlighting key words with rapid eye movement. Metacognitively, students would be encouraged to reflect on each lesson to adjust their reading strategy. Besides, a reading aloud strategy would be also used to promote student motivation by enhancing engagement and positive attitude towards reading, and interaction with texts (Sajid & Kassim, 2019). Practically and socially, Copilot would also be integrated into in-and-out class reading practice to help students enhance their independent reading. These strategies would be integrated into reading classes to support and prepare students for the three reading quizzes. In these quizzes, two main types of questions to test skimming skills include multiple choice questions for the whole text's main idea, and heading-matching questions for the paragraphs' main ideas; students would thus practise skimming strategies with these types of questions, using Copilot.

### ***Research question***

The research question for the study is: How can pre-intermediate English students in ELICOS use Copilot to improve their skimming skills?

## Methodology

### *Participants*

The study involved 32 students from two pre-intermediate level English classes. Each class was taught by a different member of our research team. While class 1 with 18 students was run from 14 April to 27 June 2025, class 2 with 14 students commenced five weeks later, running from 26 May to 1 August 2025. The structured and sequential nature of these two classes enabled ongoing observation, reflection, and adaptation of the lessons in response to student feedback and performance. This approach ensured the research remained flexible and responsive to the evolving needs of the participants (Burns, 2013).

There was a variety of cultural and academic backgrounds among these 32 students. Most of the participants were of Chinese background. The exceptions were two students from Saudi Arabia, one from Thailand, and one from Oman. Nine students aspired to a postgraduate or master's degree, while the others planned to continue into the Foundation year or a Diploma program upon completing their English course. Fourteen students (44% of the participants) scored below 60% in the diagnostic reading test, indicating that difficulties with reading comprehension and identifying main ideas were common.

### *Four skimming lessons with Copilot*

The 32 students participated in four lessons on reading with Copilot, which were integrated into the syllabus. These lessons were planned to be delivered in Weeks 3, 4, 8, and 9 of the 10-week course, and the readings were designed based on the weekly themes in the set syllabus: *multiculturalism*, *my society*, *communication*, and *technology*, respectively.

The four lessons were initially designed and trialled with class 1. The first lesson introduced students to the research project and the use of generative AI (GenAI), specifically Microsoft Copilot, and the aim of this tool to support reading comprehension, in particular, identifying main ideas in a reading text. This lesson began with an introduction to the research project, and was then followed by obtaining consent, and a pre-course survey, and the first Copilot-integrated reading lesson. The outcome skills for this first lesson were skimming skill, highlighting keywords, and using Copilot for keywords and main ideas. After providing consent and completing a pre-course survey, participants were briefly introduced to the Copilot guidelines. The second part of the lesson focused on reading strategies, namely identifying main ideas through skimming, which built on skimming strategies taught in the course. Participants highlighted keywords in a paragraph and used Copilot to check their selections, reinforcing their understanding of how key terms relate to main ideas. Then with Copilot, the students were instructed to create a multiple-choice question based on the paragraph with Copilot. With teacher-provided prompts, and scaffolded interactions with Copilot, students were encouraged to develop their own prompts and explore the tool independently at home.

Lesson 2 extended Lesson 1's focus on identifying keywords and main ideas in a text by introducing heading-matching activities aligned with question types, which were already familiar to students from their course materials. Participants used Copilot to create heading-matching questions, answered them, and then used Copilot to check their responses. They were encouraged to prompt Copilot to explain both correct and incorrect answers, helping them better understand the structure and reasoning behind multiple-choice question formats and 'distractors' (incorrect but convincing answers designed to mislead). This interaction supported deeper engagement with reading strategies and reinforced analytical thinking.

Lessons 3 and 4 were built on the previous lessons by focusing on multi-paragraph texts. Further, lesson 4 also further developed participants' skills through the creation of multiple-choice questions using Copilot to check and verify their understanding of main ideas as well as details.

For class 2, the four lessons were modified and adjusted based on the teacher reflections from class 1. These adjustments included a shared Google document created for the reading text, which the students could copy and save in their personal folders, and a list of Copilot prompts developed to support students working with Copilot. Homework tasks were also clearly set, and carefully checked in class sessions, and a reading aloud strategy was added in lessons 2, 3 and 4. To further challenge students, more complex reading texts than those used in class 1 were selected and incorporated into lessons 3 and 4.

### ***Data collection***

Four primary data collection tools were employed in this research project: pre- and post-course surveys, after-class polls, teacher class observation notes, and post-course focus group interviews.

The pre-course survey aimed to investigate the participants' prior knowledge of and their previous use of AI, and Copilot; their perception of the difficulty level of reading and skimming skills; and their expectations for the four upcoming reading-with-Copilot lessons. This survey consisted of seven questions: four with multiple choice, two with Likert scale, and one open-ended question. The post-course survey mirrored the initial seven questions and included five additional questions (three multiple choice and two open-ended) about the impacts of Copilot on students' skimming skills. These additional questions aimed to explore how frequently students read and skimmed using Copilot after class, as well as their three most-preferred and three least-preferred skimming strategies following the course.

Four after-class polls were designed to gather students' feedback and comments on each class. These polls included one Likert scale question about students' level of enjoyment in the class activities, four open questions about two or three strategies students liked or disliked, and their suggestions for the following lessons. Additionally, the teacher class observation notes were used to generate teacher reflection after each lesson with a focus on the effectiveness of each

class activity, impacts of skimming skills, use of Copilot in class, student response, and activity timing and management.

The post-course focus group interviews followed a semi-structured format with five open-ended questions exploring the ways students' skimming skills improved and challenges in practising reading. These interviews allowed deeper exploration of the students' perceptions of the use of Copilot and skimming skills. The interviews were conducted in focus groups with participants selected on a voluntary basis.

After obtaining consent from the participants, the data collection process started with a pre-course survey that generated background information about our participants including perception about reading and skimming, and their experience in using AI and Copilot. The result of the survey informed the design of the first lesson, which introduced students to the process of signing up for Copilot. Student feedback from lesson 1 guided the development of lesson 2, which focused on practising highlighting skill and applying heading-matching strategies with Copilot. Based on feedback from lesson 2, lesson 3 provided extended practice in heading matching using Copilot. In lesson 4, scanning skills were integrated with skimming, and reading aloud activity. Throughout these four lessons, the class teachers, who were also the two researchers, maintained detailed observation notes. Finally, two 20-minute focus group interviews were conducted during the final week of the course after the participants had completed the last reading quiz. Each focus group had six to ten volunteer students, and aimed to explore the students' feedback on the four lessons.

The collected data were classified into two categories: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative data derived from the surveys were analysed using a Likert scale. Qualitative data obtained from the teacher notes and interviews in the shared Google documents were examined using a thematic analysis approach to identify recurring patterns and insights about the application of Copilot to improve skimming skills. This thematic analysis involves familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, constructing and reviewing themes, defining and naming those themes, and producing an interpretative report that addresses the research question through reflexive engagement with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

### ***Ethical considerations***

Ethical considerations were a central focus throughout the research process and must be carefully considered and planned at every stage of the project (Merriam, 2009). This case study was classified as low risk, and ethics approval was formally granted by our institution. All ethical protocols were strictly followed during the data collection process. Specifically, key ethical principles including voluntary participation, protection from physical or psychological harm, and protection of participants' privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality (Babbie, 2017) were upheld.

All participants were fully informed of the study's objectives, their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty or consequence. They were provided with an explanatory statement describing the study and invited to participate in the research study. They were also informed that their responses would be kept anonymous and would not be linked to any assessment or final results. Students joined the study voluntarily, and their identities were protected by de-identifying names to ensure anonymity. They gave consent by completing the surveys, and verbal consent for the interviews. To minimise the potential pressure on students, focus groups were facilitated by the class teacher. Data collected from the surveys and interviews were managed responsibly and securely, in accordance with our institution's ethical guidelines and data storage regulations, and pseudonyms were used for the interviewees.

### ***Trustworthiness***

The trustworthiness of the research was ensured by adopting a mixed-methods research approach (Clark et al., 2020) incorporating four main data collection tools and a multi-stage data collection approach. The four tools included pre- and post-course surveys, after-class polls, after-class observation notes by the teacher, and post-course focus group interviews. To capture both quantitative and qualitative insights, the surveys and interviews were designed using a variety of question formats, including Likert scale items and open-ended questions to elicit individual perspectives.

The pre-course survey provided an insight into students' prior knowledge of AI and Copilot, which informed the development of the four Copilot-integrated lesson plans. Feedback collected through after-class polls guided us in the focus group interview design, allowing a deeper exploration of student experiences with Copilot and skimming skills. In addition, the end-of-course survey was used to triangulate findings from both the after-class polls and focus group interviews. An investigator triangulation approach (Stahl & King, 2020) was applied in the data analysis in which three researchers were involved in data collection, interview transcription, and data analysis and interpretation. Additionally, results from the diagnostic reading, and three reading quizzes were referenced to evaluate the impacts of the lessons on any skimming skill improvement, and triangulate the findings from the qualitative data.

### **Results**

In this section, key findings from the pre-and post-course surveys, after-class polls, class observation notes, and focus group interviews will be presented. These findings will also be supported by the results from the three reading quizzes, and the final reading results of the 32 students after the course.

**Results from the pre- and post-course surveys**

The pre- and post-course survey results were summarised from 32 and 27 responses, respectively. Four main findings were revealed: (1) a growth in AI skills and the use of Copilot for English learning; (2) a growth in the use of Copilot for reading practice; (3) a reduction in the number of students perceiving difficulty in reading; and (4) effective use of Copilot and skimming strategies.

*Growth in AI skills and use of Copilot for English learning.*

Students’ confidence in their ability to use Copilot improved considerably after the course, and the frequency of students using generative AI tools like Copilot increased by a noticeable amount across both general English learning and reading-specific tasks. At the beginning of the course, 38% and 31% reported that they knew “Very much” and “Much” respectively about Copilot. By the end of the course, these numbers increased to 48% and 38%, indicating increased familiarity with and self-assurance in the use of AI (Figure 1).

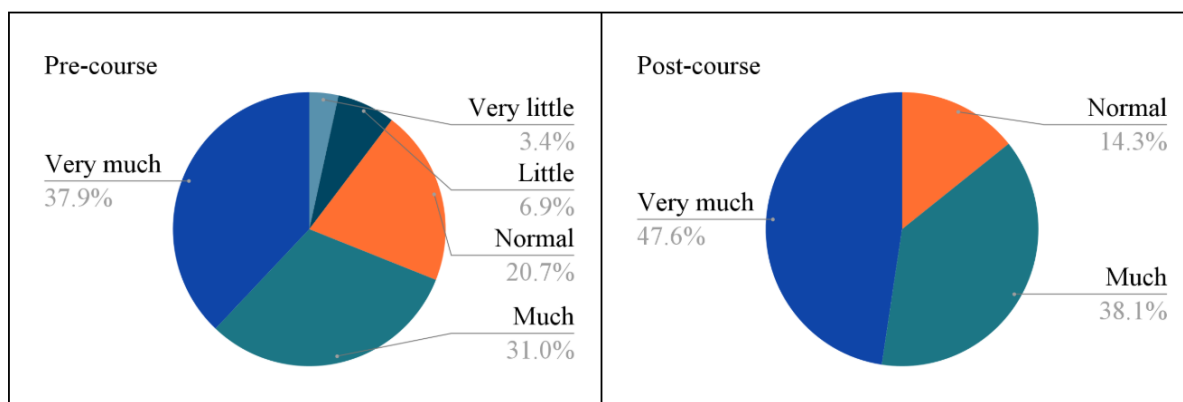


Figure 1. Self-perceived knowledge of AI before and after the course.

In the pre-course survey, 36.15% of students reported using AI tools at least once a week to support their English learning, while 14.95% said they had never used them. In the post-course survey, 48.35% reported using them weekly, and 43.95% reported daily use, partly because Copilot and AI tools were incorporated in the teaching and learning process (Figure 2).

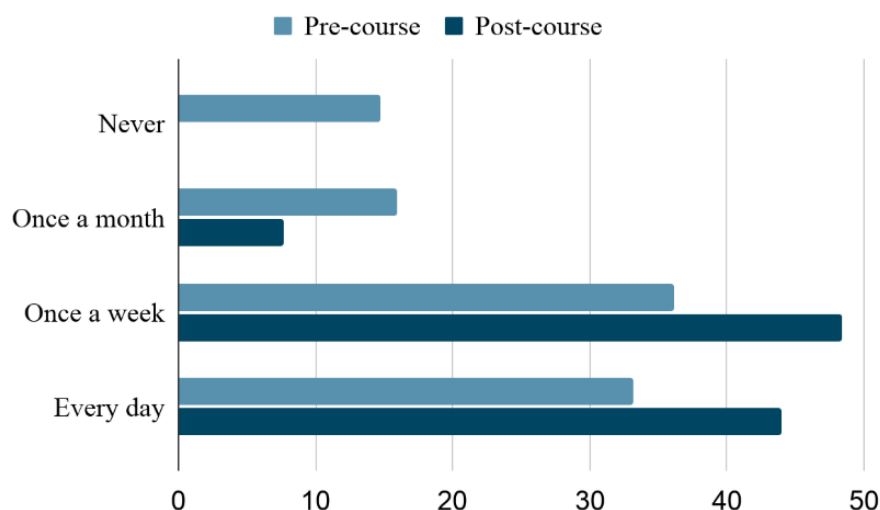


Figure 2. Frequency of use of GenAI/Copilot for English learning.

*Growth in use of Copilot for English reading practice.*

A similar trend was observed in the use of GenAI/Copilot for reading practice in class. In the pre-course survey, only 22% of students reported using AI tools at least occasionally for reading, and 17.65% had never used them. By the end of the course, 52% of students reported using these tools every week for reading, and 32% using the tools every day. For reading in English outside the classroom, there was an increase from 13% to 41% in students who said they used Copilot every day. This shift reflects a strong uptake in the regular use of GenAI/Copilot tools for both general English learning and targeted reading practice both in class and after class (Figure 3).

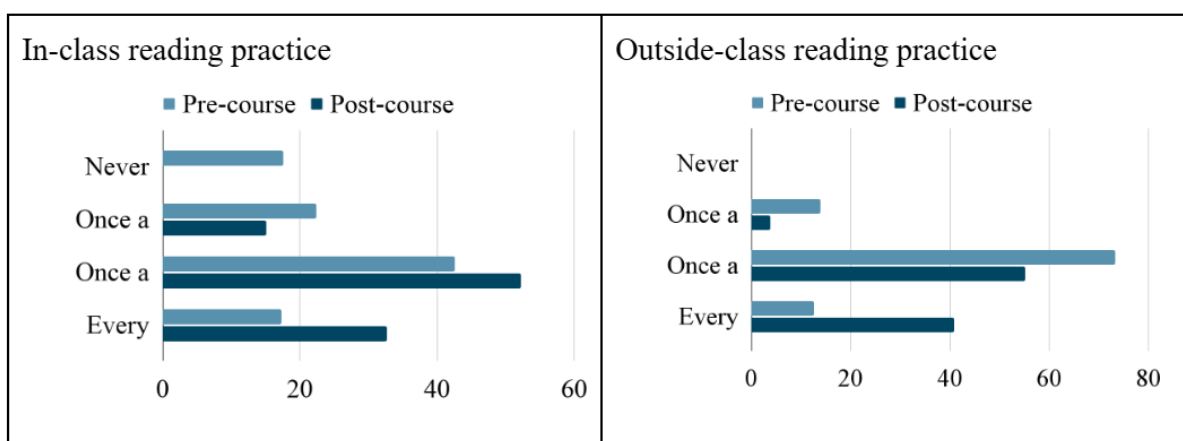


Figure 3. Frequency of use of GenAI/Copilot for reading practice.

*A reduction in the number of students perceiving difficulty in reading.*

Notably, survey responses in Figure 4 suggest that students felt more confident reading in English after the course with Copilot. Before the course, 25% of participants reported finding reading difficult and 13% found it very hard, while 20% found it easy. After the course, 10% reported difficulty. However, 52% still viewed reading as “neither particularly easy nor hard”, which suggests that it remained a challenging skill for many, even though 37% described it as easy or very easy.

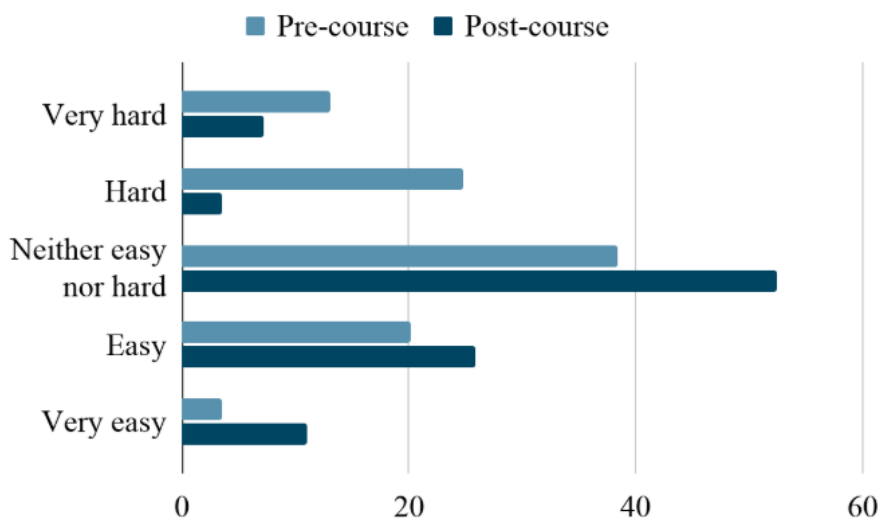


Figure 4. Perceived difficulty in reading.

Meanwhile, more participants were familiar with specific reading strategies after the course: skimming increased from 62% to 77%, scanning from 56% to 60%, and reading aloud from 35% to 44% (Figure 5).

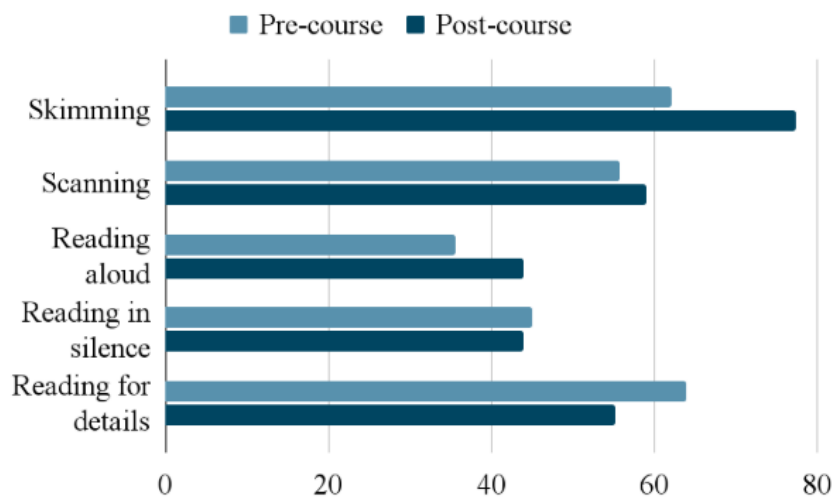


Figure 5. Familiarity with reading strategies.

Additionally, results from the three reading quizzes at pre-intermediate level, which were carefully designed and piloted by the assessment team, also support these findings when 97% passed the reading hurdle, a significant improvement from the low pass rate of 56% in the diagnostic test before the course. Only one out of 32 students did not pass over 60% of the reading hurdle while 12 students (37%) achieved above 80% and 8 students (25%) achieved above 70% (Figure 6).

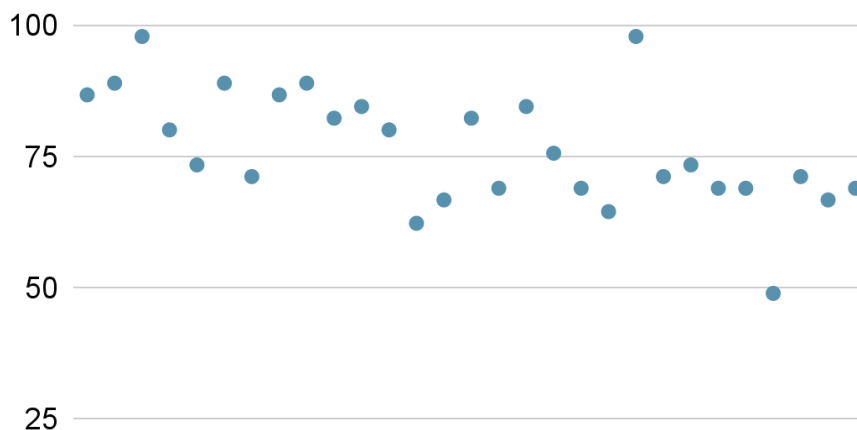


Figure 6. Final reading result from three reading quizzes.

*Effective use of Copilot and skimming strategies.*

The post-course survey shows 74% of the participants practised skimming reading with Copilot at home every week, and 11% practised every day (Figure 7). This may be partly due to the fact that Copilot was incorporated in the reading lessons, and homework.

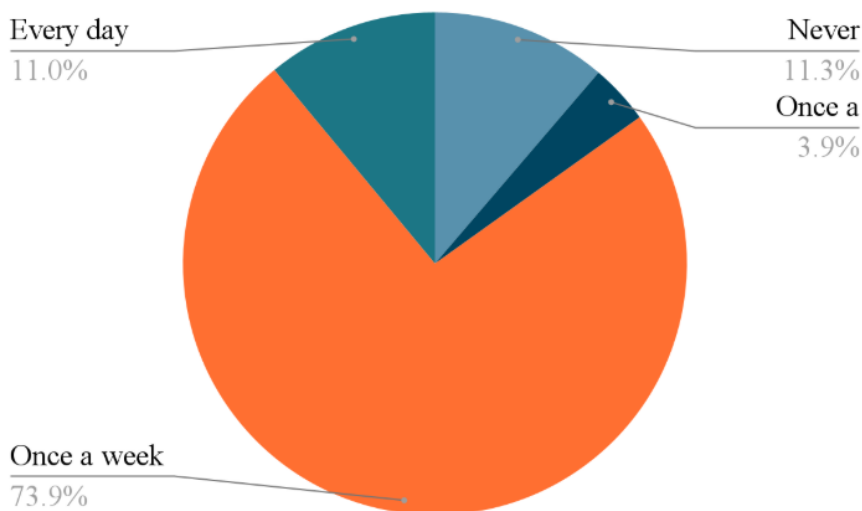


Figure 7. Frequency of use of GenAI/Copilot for skimming practice at home.

In terms of skimming strategies, nearly 78% found highlighting keywords useful, and 66% preferred using Copilot with the heading-matching task; 43% liked reading aloud, and 37% used Copilot with highlighting keywords, and nearly 33% used the quick eye movement technique (Figure 8).

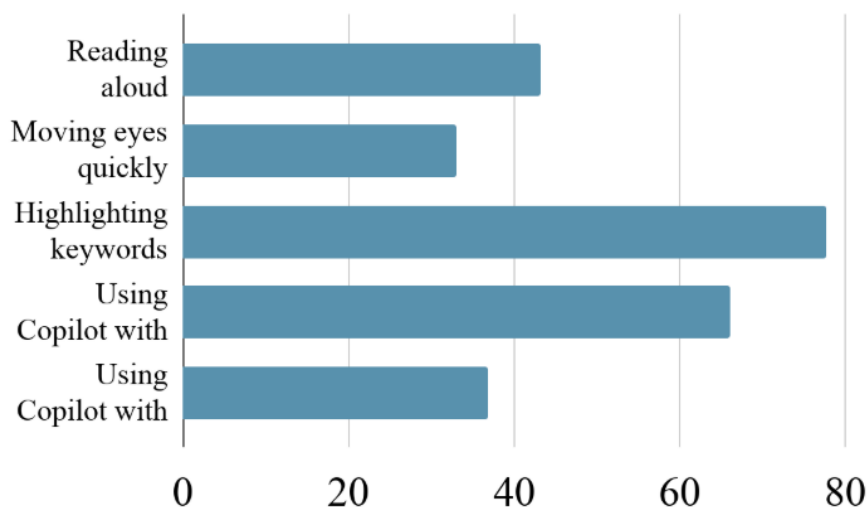


Figure 8. Effective skimming strategies and Copilot use.

Additionally, results from the reading quizzes also support this finding. When looking closely at the specific questions about the main ideas of paragraphs and texts, the results are also positive, showing a significant change in students' skimming skills. These questions are heading-matching, and they provide 5 points. In quiz 1, most students got 2 or 3 out of 5, while the trend is reversed in quiz 3 when most students got 4 or 5 for this question (Figure 9).

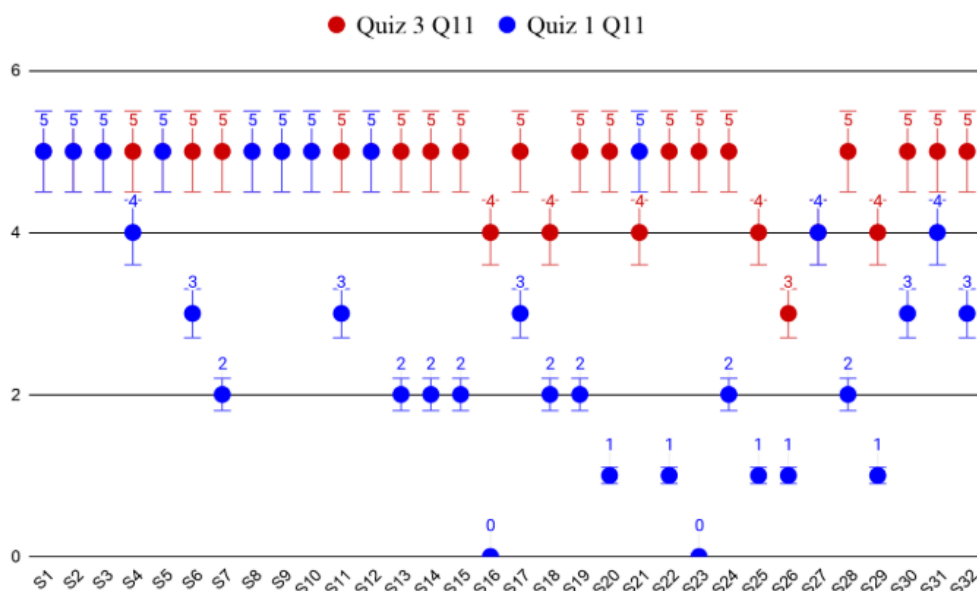


Figure 9. Results of the heading-matching questions in quizzes 1 and 3.

### ***Results from the four after-class polls and class notes***

Results from the after-class polls and observation notes support the course survey results, which showed that 88% of participants found the lessons useful and reported learning effective skimming strategies.

Across the four lessons, on average 74% of students reported that they liked the lessons, indicating a consistently positive response to the integration of Copilot into reading activities. Additionally, most participants found highlighting keywords helpful. This finding was supported by a lesson 2 observation note: “Class discussion was engaging when students discussed highlighted keywords and asked about paragraph 2 and the heading. We discussed the distractors and the way to choose the best heading for this paragraph.” Additionally, over 20% of participants in lessons 1 and 4 used reading aloud as a helpful strategy, while 36% in lesson 3 found checking keywords with Copilot particularly beneficial. This finding aligns with lesson 3 notes: “all students show a good focus on reading aloud and highlighting keywords” and “most students are confident with the prompts and can use Copilot for heading-matching tasks”.

To elaborate on their response to the effectiveness of Copilot and heading-matching tasks, some participants commented in the after-class polls that “it’s useful because Copilot can generate questions for us to practice” (after-class poll 1); “I really enjoyed how I worked with matching headings with Copilot to paragraphs. It’s a smart way to deepen reading comprehension and identify main ideas” (after-class poll 3); and “I think do [doing] more reading skimming skills with Copilot can make me get more quickly [faster] reading speed” (Poll 1).

### ***Results from the two focus group interviews***

Data from the focus group interviews with 14 students (8 and 6 students respectively from class 1 and class 2) revealed a deeper insight into participants’ perception about the use of Copilot to improve skimming skills. Four key activities participants liked when using Copilot and skimming strategies during reading lessons include skimming with key word highlighting for main ideas, generating and answering questions, grammar and sentence analysis, and prompt writing. The following quotes are from the transcript of the interview with class 1. As one student explained, “so if you have the keywords, it helps you find the answers faster” (line 81). Another added, “I can skim the keywords and it helps me. I can find keywords easily and I can understand the main idea and practise again” (lines 150–1). Several students also appreciated Copilot’s support in clarifying complex sentence structures and enhancing vocabulary, with one noting, “Copilot helps me quickly identify and find the key information and it can help me understand the complex sentence” (lines 154–5).

Most interviewees reported improvement in identifying main ideas quickly and acknowledged Copilot’s support in understanding key content. They found highlighting keywords helpful for understanding and clarifying texts and matching main ideas with headings. This insight is

captured in the following excerpt with the quotes from the transcript of the interview with class 2.

By using the co-pilot, I have improved my skill of knowing the main idea of each paragraph quickly, and I use the Copilot to create some highly matching questions to practise...whether I really understand each paragraph, the main ideas. I think it's very useful. (lines 44, 45)

Some interviewees in class 2 found reading aloud effective because, as one recalled, "I think reading aloud is cool. I think it's helpful for me, because it can help me remember when I see, when I read, and focus on my reading" (line 136). Another participant explained that "the practise benefits specifically as well because when we read aloud, when we speak aloud, we can hear our voice" (line 139), and "when reading aloud, I can keep a focus on the whole text" (line 125); thus, this strategy helped a better understanding of reading texts "because your brain gets the meaning" (line 134).

However, perceived improvement in class 1 varied. While some students felt their reading skills had improved – "I think my reading skill improves, because I can find main ideas" (Class 1) – others expressed uncertainty or no change – "I think it is the same. My skill is not good. And I can't really know what keyword is working" (class 1). Additionally, multiple-choice activities (e.g. for heading matching) received mixed feedback. Some participants found them too easy or repetitive – "I think the heading-matching question is ah low level ... and I think that the multiple-choice question is too easy" (class 1) – while others valued the multiple-choice quizzes for reinforcing vocabulary. A few students preferred other GenAI tools (e.g. ChatGPT or DeepSeek) over Copilot, citing broader functionality and better support for Chinese language users.

## Discussion

At the start of this study, the following research question was set: How can pre-intermediate English students in ELICOS use Copilot to improve their skimming skills?

Over the course of our research, three main themes have emerged as the answer to the research question: the importance of explicit teaching of skimming skills and Copilot; Copilot as an effective tool to help students master skimming skills; and Copilot to enhance reading and skimming engagement in and after class.

### *Theme 1: The importance of explicit teaching of skimming skills and Copilot*

The key findings from the course and class surveys, teachers' class notes, and interviews consistently show the importance of explicit teaching of skimming skills and the use and

functions of Copilot in class. The four Copilot and skimming lessons to an extent accommodated the student needs as identified in the pre-course surveys: more teacher explanations for reading and skimming techniques; and various class reading activities for main ideas. These skimming skills included highlighting keywords, reading aloud and rapid eye movement, reading headings and subheadings, reading the first and last sentences in each paragraph, reading main idea questions, eliminating wrong options/distractors, and heading matching for main ideas. In these four classes, skimming techniques were gradually and explicitly taught and practised with Copilot with teachers' careful scaffolding. The four lessons were designed from an easy level with texts of one paragraph to more difficult with two and three paragraphs, and finally with six or seven paragraphs. Each lesson was focused on one particular skimming strategy and Copilot support. Consequently, participants found the lessons useful and the skimming techniques effective, and most students became confident with the Copilot prompts for heading-matching tasks. This finding complements the work of Hu and Hu (2020), which emphasised that AI, used properly, would help boost learner confidence and language skills.

### ***Theme 2: Copilot as an effective tool to help students master skimming skills***

Copilot was found to play an important role in supporting skimming skills. After learning skimming skills, students were directed to use Copilot to check keywords in a paragraph or a text, which was found most effective by participants. Copilot could also be used to generate multiple-choice questions for main ideas. Additionally, most participants found Copilot useful in heading-matching tasks, eliminating wrong options, and explaining wrong answers. With Copilot's support, participants found skimming in English less challenging, and they became familiar with specific reading strategies after the course. Most participants revealed an increase in reading comprehension and confidence in skimming skills, which was supported by the results from the three reading quizzes with 100% success (compared with 60% in the diagnostic result). This finding fills the gap of the current literature about the use of AI in teaching reading skills, which remains the least explored area in current studies (Crompton et al., 2023; Sharadgah & Sa'di, 2022).

### ***Theme 3: Copilot enhances reading engagement in class and independent reading after class***

Student reading engagement increased in both classes as can be seen from the results of the pre- and post-course surveys and after-class polls from the two cycles. As Copilot could create different multiple-choice questions and headings for matching tasks, students were engaged in class activities where they could share and learn from their partners' Copilot-created questions. Although participants were more focused on reading aloud strategy, working with Copilot to check keywords and find main ideas helped students deepen their understanding of the reading text. Additionally, Copilot helped participants increase independent reading after class. The vast majority of them claimed that they would practise their reading and skimming skills with Copilot outside class time because it helped them improve their reading speed and provided

useful advice and thus helped enhance their self-study. In this way, Copilot could act as a knowledgeable other to support the student reading and learning process. This observation resonates with Vygotsky's theory on the role of peers and a knowledgeable other (Vygotsky, 1978).

## **Limitations of the project**

Although participants found Copilot to be a valuable tool for supporting reading strategies such as keyword identification, they also noted several limitations in its usability. Specifically, they reported that Copilot's question generation was often repetitive and lacked sufficient challenge, particularly in tasks like heading matching and multiple-choice questions. To address this, it is recommended that students be equipped with the skills to refine and adapt their prompts. This would enable them to tailor their input to better suit the learning context and guide Copilot's responses more effectively. For instance, if a heading-matching activity generated by Copilot is too easy or too difficult (e.g. due to inappropriate distractors or to high-level language), students should be shown how to independently modify their prompts so that Copilot adjusts the heading-matching activity to be more cognitively engaging or level-appropriate. In other words, students should be empowered to interact autonomously and effectively with generative AI tools. This may pose a challenge for lower-level learners who lack the linguistic range to express themselves clearly in prompts. Nonetheless, the lessons demonstrated that this is achievable when students are explicitly shown how to do so during the lesson. For example, participants successfully learned to include phrases such as "in B1 or B2 language" (reflecting their CEFR level) to adjust Copilot's output, which tends to default to higher-level language. Regarding the teaching materials, occasional ambiguity in worksheet instructions – particularly for more complex tasks like heading matching – highlighted the need for further refinement. As this was a pilot program delivered within a tightly structured curriculum, many materials and instructions were often adjusted spontaneously during lessons to meet student needs. While this flexible approach allowed for responsiveness, it also underscored the importance of dedicating time to planning, refining, and trialling materials to ensure they are clear, consistent, and ready for integration into the curriculum.

Another limitation was Copilot's memory and adaptability, making it difficult for some participants to build on previous interactions. Students who had prior experience with other GenAI tools (e.g. ChatGPT, DeepSeek) often felt that Copilot was less versatile. To address this, it is recommended that the variety and complexity of question generation be improved, particularly for reading tasks, to better challenge students and promote deeper engagement with reading texts.

The selected methodology in this project is also subject to two limitations. The dual role of the two researchers as class teachers may have influenced the quality of the data, as participants may have felt reluctant to provide fully candid feedback on the four reading classes.

Additionally, as this study constitutes a small-scale case study, the findings are context-specific, and thus cannot be readily generalised to other classes or institutions.

## **Conclusion**

We expect the main benefit of the study to be English language students gaining a greater understanding of the efficacy of using AI/Copilot as an element of the learning process for when developing their reading skills. It is hoped that after four Copilot-integrated lessons, the students would be able to improve skimming skills and maintain using Copilot to practise these skills independently in their next course. These four lessons and the accompanying learning materials can be embedded into the syllabus, allowing other teachers to use them and thus contributing to an overall increase in student engagement in the reading learning process.

Although the findings from this case study should not be generalised, initial findings suggest promising potential for broader application beyond our institution to foster student engagement and motivation in reading for gist. Other TESOL institutions might also promote collaboration among teachers and develop shared repositories of reading resources and AI-supported activities, facilitating the integration of technology into diverse English learning contexts.

## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to extend our sincere gratitude to the many individuals who whole-heartedly supported us throughout the development of this paper. We first would acknowledge the leadership at our institution, for their continuous support during this project. Our heartfelt thanks also go to our colleagues, and the reviewers in the blind review process for carefully proofreading and editing our first drafts, as well as for providing constructive feedback that helped us improve the quality of this work. We also acknowledge the use of Copilot during the revision stage to refine our wording, and referencing accuracy. The paper was thoroughly reviewed and revised by all group members as part of the peer-review process.

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