

## Understanding Extensive Reading Implementation Issues: Insights From Indonesian Tertiary EFL Students' Experiences

Afiani Fitriasti<sup>1</sup>, Endang Setyaningsih<sup>2</sup>, Hefy Sulistyawati<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, Indonesia; afiani.fitriasti@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, Indonesia; endang\_setyaningsih@staff.uns.ac.id

<sup>3</sup> Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, Indonesia; have\_i@staff.uns.ac.id

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### ABSTRACT

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This case study investigates issues regarding the implementation of extensive reading (ER) and explores students' experiences and feelings during an ER course in higher education. The participants were five female university EFL students who were selected purposively. Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, and respondents' diaries and processed using the stages of an interactive model. The analysis yields two major findings. First, the students held contrasting views on ER, with two respondents reporting pleasure while the other expressed motivation, joylessness, and challenge. This finding can be attributed to the lack of freedom in choosing what to read and the unfit level of reading. Second, five factors are attributed to the success of ER: love for reading/ self-motivation, freedom to choose what to read, supportive reading environment, lecturers' guidance, and variety of ER-based activities. These findings imply that the core principles of ER should be instituted. Failure to maintain these principles may deter students' sustained engagement in ER.

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### Corresponding Author:

Endang Setyaningsih

Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, Indonesia; endang\_setyaningsih@staff.uns.ac.id

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Extensive Reading (ER), or reading large quantities of interesting and comprehensible texts for pleasure, has been widely viewed as an approach to reading, giving numerous benefits for language learning. Empirical studies have shown that ER helps learners whether in first language context or second language context to (1) develop their vocabulary (Chang & Hu, 2018), (2) increase reading rates (e.g., Beglar, Hunt, & Kite, 2011; Chang & Millett, 2015; McLean, & Rouault, 2017; Robb & Susser, 1989; Suk, 2017), (3) improve reading fluency and comprehension (Grabe & Stoller, 2013), (4) enhance writing and speaking skill (e.g., Azizi, Tkáčová, Pavlíková, & Jenisová, 2020; Mermelstein, 2015), and increase students' motivation and attitudes towards reading activities (e.g., Cho & Krashen, 1994; Al-Homoud & Schmitt, 2009; and Chen, 2018). In brief, ER helps improve reading and expand overall language proficiency.

Regardless of the long list of benefits, some are still reluctant to implement ER as part of their class program or curriculum. Renandya, Hidayati, & Ivone (2021) listed 10 issues of ER implementation, and on the top list is "limited time" (p.12). While teachers agree that ER is good

for their learners, they think ER will be time-consuming. In Indonesia, teachers in primary and secondary schools have to conduct their teaching under a blanket curriculum. Since ER is not part of the mainstream curriculum, implementing ER is considered to reduce the “curriculum time” (p.12).

In higher education, lecturers have more privileges in terms of freedom in designing the course, and this could make ER more feasible. In reality, however, ER still faces issues with time constraints. The inclusion of ER as one of the courses is common in many universities, particularly in English majors. However, the students always have to take the ER along with other courses. This means that the students have to do ER under-cramming assignments from other classes, which could increase to more than 20 credits in one semester. This issue potentially makes students read-only during the ER course and unable to develop reading habits. Under such a cramming situation, along with the perspective that ER cannot give an immediate boost to their exam scores, a study by Huang (2015) found that motivation to read cannot be enhanced. Thus, it is likely that the students will stop reading after the semester ends.

In addition to time, lack of relevant reading and the delayed impact often caused students' and teachers' reluctance to conduct ER. Renandya (2007) found that the effect of ER is not immediate. Since teachers are often under pressure to produce tangible results in their teaching, they tend to avoid projects that have a delayed impact on learning. Based on one of Huang's (2015) findings, ER is a beneficial and helpful program, but it takes a long time to see the effect. Therefore, instead of doing ER, teachers invest their time only to cover the topics in the syllabus/ curriculum.

Another oft-found issue in ER is access to books and finding the ‘right’ books. Camiciottoli (2001) reported that quite a number of the participants stated they had no access to English reading materials or did not know what to read as their reading materials. In addition, Suk (2017) also stated that teachers often found their students struggling to find books that suited their interests. It can be more challenging for students who got ER as their reading activities program for the first time.

Along with the issues on the implementation, numerous studies have reported successful ER programs and provided insights on how to deal with the problems. One of the studies was conducted by Anandari & Iswandari (2019) in their article entitled “Extensive Reading in Indonesian Schools: A Successful Story”. The purpose of this study was to describe the steps to establish a successful ER program at Indonesian schools and report factors that contribute to the success of the ER program. They found that establishing a successful ER program in a school requires support from the school, students' enthusiasm, and the availability of the book. Moreover, for the success of the ER program, factors that contribute are a culture of home literacy, a teacher as a reader model, and the program's consistency.

Another example came from Ro (2016), who explored two teachers' classroom practices of ER in the context of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and the impacts of those practices on their students' L2 reading motivation and reading amount. This study found that the reading motivation of one of the classes significantly increased, particularly concerning values of intrinsic motivation, while the students in the other classes read comparatively larger amounts with less reading motivation enhancement throughout the course. This study revealed that specific elements of the teachers' practices (e.g., the ER classroom activities and the degree and type of teacher guidance), as well as inherent characteristics of ER (e.g., reading for pleasure, and the benefits to language skills of extensive L2 reading), affected the student's motivation and the amount they read.

Despite the different foci and contexts, the findings of the studies imply that the principles of ER are central attributes to the success of the program. Providing access to various readings, giving freedom to choose what to read, creating a supportive reading environment, and teachers being role models could be the working solution for ER issues. These research-informed issues and solutions, however, are built from studies focusing on ER implementation from the perspective of the teacher or institution. To solidify the findings and enhance the potential of the solutions,

students' perspective needs to be considered. This study aims to provide insight into the matter and formulate the research questions as follows:

1. How do students narrate their experience in joining the ER program in Higher Education?
2. From the students' perspectives, what factors can be attributed to the successful ER program?

## 2. METHODS

This study applied a qualitative method, i.e., a case study. A case study is a specific instance (a child, a clique, a class, a school, or a community) that is frequently designed to 'the study of an instance in action' (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 253). The instance in this research was the sixth-semester students of the English Education Department who practiced ER as a mandatory course in an English Education Department of a university in Central Java, Indonesia. This study recruited six participants who were purposively chosen based on three main criteria: (1) they know what ER is, (2) they are currently taking an ER course, and (3) they are willing to participate fully in this study. The five participants of this study were given pseudonyms Amy, Maureen, Nora, and Timmy. All of them are female and between 20-21 years of age. They were in their sixth semester and sat in different classes. Data were collected from the participants using three techniques namely interview, questionnaire, and diary. The questionnaire focuses on eliciting the students' reading profile, their views on an ideal ER program as well as their own experiences with ER. While the questionnaire was distributed online, the interviews were conducted in person. We did two group interviews and an individual interview with the five respondents to clarify the information and add depth to the answers that the participants provided in the questionnaire. We also asked the respondents to write a diary that would capture their ER journey.

Before writing, the participants were briefed on (1) the length of the diary, (2) the expected recount: what kind of activities they did during ER class, what they felt during the program, and other perceived critical events during the program, (3) the time: when to begin and submit. We used the diary to capture detailed first-hand experiences that were told immediately while they were still fresh. The collected data were then pooled and sorted to eliminate irrelevant information. The data were condensed through coding. Themes and categories were developed based on the emerging pattern that we found from the coded data. The data were then tabulated to help us see 'what was happening'. This kind of display eventually helps us to draw justified conclusions. We followed the steps of interactive model data analysis as forwarded by Miles, Huberman, & Saldana (2014). To ensure the validity, the data triangulation method was applied to check data trustworthiness. In this study, data obtained from a method of data collection is verified and cross-checked with data obtained from different methods of data collection.

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Findings

The findings of this study are presented in this section following the order of the two research questions. To begin, the main themes that emerged from the data analysis are tabulated as follows.

**Table 1.** Summary of the themes

The students' experience during ER		Perceived attributes of ER success
What they feel	What they encounter	
Pleasure/ Enjoyment	Level of reading	Love for reading/ internal motivation
Motivation/Challenge	Reading selection and variety	Agency in reading
Joylessness	Quantity of reading selection	Supportive reading environment Provision of guidance/ role model Varied and engaging ER-based activities

### 3.1.1. Students' ER experiences

The five respondents in this study: Amy, Maureen, Nora, Ruby, and Timmy reported different experiences of ER. They expressed different feelings toward ER: pleasure, motivation, challenge, and joylessness. Timmy reported the pleasure of doing ER. In the interview, Timmy firmly noted that she enjoys aesthetic reading.

*"I love reading, especially things like literature: novels, short stories, lyrics, and many more. I read them happily." (Timmy).*

On the contrary, Amy voiced her disinterest in reading. She asserted that it does not matter what type of reading is, be it fiction or non-fiction; she dislikes reading. *"I personally don't like reading. I am more into listening to podcasts or watching videos."* She added that after reading a lot of assigned materials during ER class, she still has no interest in reading.

In the particular ER class that Timmy, Amy, and other respondents sat in, the assigned reading texts were of two types: fiction and non-fiction. Each week the lecturer assigned a specific kind of fiction i.e. short story, poem, song, and kind of non-fiction i.e. journal research article and e-book that focused on EFL teaching/ learning. For weekly assignments. The lecturer did not specify the scope or the area further. Students may read anything as long as it is relevant to the assigned type and area of study. For the midterm and final tests, however, the lecturer decided what the students had to read. No specific amount of text is explicitly required but the more the students read the higher the score they will get.

Timmy disclosed in the interview that although she loves reading, reading non-fiction, specifically research papers, gave her a splitting headache. Likewise, another participant, Maureen, revealed how she was struggling to comprehend the assigned academic. Maureen recounted that:

*"The level of the text makes it very difficult to understand...I have to read the text repeatedly to gain comprehension."*

Nonetheless, Timmy and Maureen, who both admitted that they love reading, took the challenge in their ER class positively. Timmy thought that the assigned reading texts enriched her reading repertoires. She mentioned that *"Reading paper gives me a bad headache, but it's okay, reading them gives me more reading options"* (Timmy). Similarly, Maureen mentioned that the topics that she chose in ER class were familiar. She told in the interview that she had taken TEFL courses before ER, which helped her in her struggle to comprehend the texts. She also revealed that the reading she did during ER class enriched her knowledge of EFL teaching methodology.

*"The texts are relatively still readable because the topic is familiar. I learned about it when I took TEFL courses. It helps. The readings make me know various teaching methodologies that I can use later on when I teach" (Maureen)*

The acknowledgement of the benefits of reading is indicated as one of two main sources of motivation for the respondents to read regardless of the pleasure. Besides Maureen, Nora and Ruby also reported that they read because they knew that reading was beneficial. They asserted that:

*"Any kind of reading certainly broadens my horizon. Although I may not like the subject, there must be information that we can take in. I can get a new skill, new vocabulary, which will ease me when later I am asked to write" (Nora)*

*"I am challenged to understand, to know (because) it gives me knowledge" (Ruby)*

Another source of motivation for reading in this ER class under investigation is the urge or challenge to accomplish the task. Maureen stated in her diary that she is strongly determined to comprehend what she reads and accomplish or submit the task the best she can. She felt proud whenever she could finish reading a challenging paper. Finishing reading a difficult reading task gives her some kind of satisfaction. Similarly, Ruby in the interview, asserted that to her, any assignment, including the reading assignment, must be finished. Even if it's hard, she'll find a way.

*"Bottomline, tasks must be accomplished. If it's difficult, I can ask my friends who read a similar topic and we can discuss our reading, share what we comprehend." (Ruby)*

External encouragement from the lecturer was also mentioned by Ruby as a factor that motivated her to accomplish the assigned reading materials during her ER course.

*"...if the lecturer asked us to read, that's kind of motivated me more to finish the reading." (Ruby)*

The different feelings that the students experienced during ER were mainly rooted in their attitude toward the assignment instead of toward reading. The ER class neglected some basic principles of ER, in particular: reading light materials, freedom to choose what to read, and reading is its own reward (Day & Bamford, 2002). As observed from the data, the students emphasized their difficulty in understanding what they read. Reading texts that they dislike was a turn-off to their pleasure in reading. While the students indicated a positive response toward the assignment as shown by their determination and expressed self-satisfaction after accomplishing the task, they did not indicate a positive response toward reading. Since the motivation is mostly extrinsic, time-bound, and instrumental (to fulfill a specific course assignment), the students will likely cease reading or at least cease reading a similar type of reading when the course ends.

In addition to feelings, based on the respondents' recounts, there are four themes from the data analysis that emerged to describe their ER experience: (1) the level of reading, (2) the reading selection and variety, and (3) the quantity of reading. First, the level of the students' reading is mostly at and higher than the students' level of proficiency. Four out of five respondents, whether reader or non-reader, mentioned explicitly that they encountered difficulty in comprehending the texts. One of the respondents, Nora, boldly expressed that while the topic is familiar, understanding an academic paper is hard.

*“I think the level of a journal article is quite high because the language used is formal and rigid.... Well, choosing what I want to read maybe make it easier but not really. Even an easy article is still hard. “ (Nora)*

Unlike Nora, Ruby encountered difficulty when she had to read poems. She wrote in the diary: *“It’s hard to understand the poem because I think the language used is advanced and it was written in the past”*. The language used in poems is often styled in a way to meet poetic conventions such as rhyme and rhythm. Many well-known poems were written by poets in old English. In addition, comprehending a poem requires more than literal understanding. The words chosen often deliver imagery and figurative meaning for further interpretation. These inherent aspects of a poem may explain why Ruby had difficulty deciphering the poem she read.

Second, the lecturer largely decided on the reading selection during the ER class. A certain degree of agency, however, was given to the students. As students told me in the interviews, in most sessions, the teacher decided the type and focus area, and the students were free to specify what to read. For the tests, the lecturer took full control of the reading selection. This arrangement of ER made the variety of reading in the ER class relatively vast. Students experienced different kinds of texts, both fiction and non-fiction. Reportedly, the degree of variety is wider in fiction than in non-fiction. Third, the quantity of reading was different between the fiction and non-fiction types. The respondents read approximately two to four EFLTL-related articles (non-fiction) and more than 10 texts for fiction (such as song lyrics and short stories). Predictably, the difference is caused by the level of text complexity and level of interest.

### **3.1.2 Attributive factors to successful ER**

The in-depth interviews with the five respondents, the diary, and the questionnaire results indicated that from the students’ perspectives, there are five factors that they think will build a successful ER program: (1) love for reading/ internal motivation, (2) agency in reading, (3) supportive reading environment, (4) provision of guidance/ role model, and (5) varied and engaging ER-based activities.

Three students Maureen, Amy, and Nora all mentioned that the students’ interest in reading is key in ER. Nora articulated in the interview that in ER students should read without being asked. Amy observed and wrote in her diary that she found her friends who are readers seemed engaged in the ER class and did not show any sign of boredom, thus she assumed that it was the love reading that is vital in ER. Correlatively, Maureen and Timmy reasoned that if they were given more freedom, they would read voluntarily because they read what they like. It can be inferred that the agency of reading may grow the love of reading.

Meanwhile, another factor that is pointed out by one of the respondents to be central to a successful ER is a supportive reading environment. Nora articulated that students’ immediate environment literacy, including home literacy, is important. In the interview, she mentioned that the habit of and love for reading should be nurtured since childhood. She suggested a rule of ‘one book per month’ to begin with. She added that scheduling and providing targets will make students accustomed to reading. In parallel with Nora’s view, Timmy forwarded the role of the teacher as a contributing factor to the success of ER. Timmy argued ER is not a “free” course, and to a certain degree, guidance, monitoring, and feedback are required. The absence of feedback and monitoring, she added, would confuse the students as to what to do in the ER and possibly jeopardize the program because some students may just do a fake reading. Timmy exemplified that:

*"...even if, let's say, we are to describe or summarize what we read, if there's no feedback on what we summarize, there's a chance some of us will just write anything as long as there is a report to submit." (Timmy)*

What Timmy mentioned is closely linked to Amy's perspective on the significance of the varied ER-based activities. Reflecting on her ER class experience, she thought that it would be a lot better if the reading was followed up with various activities instead of similar ones that were repeated for the whole semester. Timmy emphasized that the activities should be interactive which can be associated with the need for feedback as mentioned by Timmy.

### 3.2 Discussion

Reflecting on the emerging themes, the students experienced an ER class that neglected some of its basic principles, which led to the ineffectiveness of the program. Day and Bamford (1998, 2002) mentioned ten principles of ER which also characterize successful ER. They are (1) the reading material is easy, (2) a variety of reading material on a wide range of topics is available, (3) learners choose what they want to read, (4) learners read as much as possible, (5) the purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding (6) reading is its own reward. (7) reading speed is usually faster rather than slower, (8) reading is individual and silent. (9) teachers orient and guide their students, and (10) the teacher is a role model for a reader. A number of these principles were not used in the observed ER program.

First, the ER, as portrayed by the students, did not aim at pleasure. Both fiction and non-fiction are read to fulfill the assignment and disregard the students' enjoyment of reading. Enjoyment in reading can be achieved when the students read what they like and relatively easily comprehend (because it is no longer fun if the text is hard to follow). In this case, the ER course in this study provided only limited freedom to choose what to read, which also infringed yet another principle of ER. Day & Bamford (2002) noted that reading in ER is more of a personal experience, in which they read for themselves, not for the teacher. When the students read what they like (which guarantees sufficient comprehension) either to gain information, enjoyment of a story or pass the time, they will grow into confident readers. Renandya (2007) mentioned that no student dislikes reading, but they probably have not found the book they want to read. This implies that once the students find the book they like, they will like reading. Such agency in selecting what to read is basic.

Reading to fulfill a task or worse to do a test, is in contrast to what ER is aiming at. Testing in the ER may eradicate the joy of reading, even when reading a text is fun and easy. Extensive reading, as mentioned in Extensive Reading Central, is not about testing but more about helping students enhance their reading speed and fluency and become more confident readers. Renandya (2007) mentioned that ER is for recreation and general understanding but not for study purposes. In the observed ER class, the students mentioned that they made book reports in the form of PowerPoint presentations. However, examining the points in the report, it was evident that the PowerPoint presentations highly emphasized the text's understanding for study purposes and less on the pleasurable experience, progress, and lessons from the reading. Several alternatives to testing have been forwarded in numerous sites dedicated to ER such as the Extensive Reading Central (<https://www.er-central.com/>), the Extensive Reading Foundation (<https://erfoundation.org/wordpress/>), and Rob Waring's site (<http://robwaring.org/>).

Another crucial principle in ER that the students had not fully experienced was the use of light or easy material. To comprehend a text without assistance, a reader has to know at least 98% of the vocabulary (Nation & Hu, 2000). In this study, the data show that the students were struggling to comprehend research papers which is in contrast to their experience when reading light texts such as song lyrics (as indicated by the quantity of reading). Day & Bamford (2002)

acknowledge that the use of easy material in ER is controversial because there is a view that students need to be accustomed to and trained to read 'real-world' reading. However, they argued that the light material is the means, not the end. Reading light material will motivate students to read more and study more, and eventually, as they improve their language ability, they will be able to read real-world texts.

Correlative to the previous principle, Day & Bamford (2002) also argued that students have to be allowed to select what they want to read. They can choose texts that they think they can understand and enjoy learning from. Ideally, students should be encouraged to stop reading texts that they find too difficult or turn out to be uninteresting. Contrary to this principle, the respondents of this study reported that they had limited freedom to select what they wanted to read, and they kept reading what they found difficult and uninteresting in fulfilling the assignment.

Meanwhile, reflecting on what they perceived to be the factors for successful ER, it is evident that the respondents want the establishment of ER principles. The students noted that they would possibly read more if they read what they liked (and could understand). Renandya, Hidayati, & Ivone (2021) argued that having all the 10 principles in the ER is good but in some cases, ER would still run if keeps the five core principles that include: (1) the reading materials are interesting and comprehensible, (2) students read as much as possible, (3) reading speed is faster rather than slower, (4) students choose what they want to read, where possible, and (5) the purpose of reading is mostly for enjoyment and general information.

The study also reveals that the students acknowledge the preponderance of home literacy, that reading should be nurtured from childhood, and that people should be involved in the closest environment. This factor reinforced what was reported in the earlier study by Anandari & Iswandari (2019) who also revealed the role of home literacy as a contributing factor to the success of ER.

Interestingly, the students in this study implied that they did not experience good home literacy as indicated by their need for constant feedback and monitoring. This and their confusion about what to do in the ER other than reading are strong indications that they read just for the task/ assignment. In this case, the respondents need to be given a reader model. Anandari & Iswandari (2019) reported that teacher modeling plays a significant role. In their study, when the teachers were reading during ER sessions, the students' reactions were great. They silently started to read along. A similar positive reaction was observed in their study when the teachers shared their reading of a book with the students. The students came to the teacher to ask about the book, borrowed it, and talked about the book with the teacher when they finished reading it. This explicit modelling seemed to be absent in the ER course that the respondents in this study took. In fact, Day (2015) in a meta-study of 44 ER articles published from 1998-2015 reported that the teacher being the role model of the reader is the principle that was least used in the ER program compared to the other nine principles. The current study indicates that teacher-readers will have a higher chance of producing student-readers.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the issues identified in the ER course are rooted in the nonobservance of the ER basic principles. ER may range from pure to fringe ER depending on the number of principles or the characteristics that are maintained. In this study, it is evident that the ER is not pure and tends to lean toward the fringe ER. The neglect of the principle of reading light enjoyable material did not promote the love for reading. The students were indicated to read for the assignment instead of for internal/ personal drive. All of the factors that the students mentioned to be key is a successful ER program pointed back to the enactment of the ER

principles or at least the core principles. In addition, the students also highlight the primacy supportive ER environment which includes home literacy and interactive as well as varied ER-based activities in the program. These findings imply that the principles of ER are the pillars of a working and sustained ER program. The absence of the principles in the ER course also presupposes that not all ER facilitators (teacher or lecturer) may either be unaware or, due to some reason, refuse/ unable to maintain the principles of ER. Either way, the students' ER experience is likely negative and may have further consequences on their future practice. It is therefore suggested that school or university members as well as parents and students cooperatively build a well-designed ER program that ensures that it aims at what it aims.

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