

## **Enhancing Learner Autonomy through Extensive Reading: The Case of Book Reports**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper investigates the autonomous learning strategies employed by students while participating in extensive reading (ER) and their perception of this method. Semi-structured interviews and autonomy strategies questionnaires are used as research instruments. The 25 participants are freshmen majoring in English. The findings illustrate some favored autonomous strategies that students used, such as summarizing, making inferences, taking notes, and using imagination. It is noticeable that using translation is an uncommon strategy chosen by these participants, which is somewhat unexpected in the Vietnamese context where students prefer it the most. For metacognitive and effective strategies, a sense of responsibility and monitoring received the most attention from the students. This result shows a positive attitude among the students in claiming that their autonomous learning can be enhanced via completing book reports. The findings from the current study provide insights into the implementation of book reports in extensive reading to enhance learner autonomy.

*Keywords:* Extensive reading, learner autonomy, reading strategies

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### **INTRODUCTION**

According to Mikulecky (2008), reading comprehension is one of the most crucial factors in English language learning because it functions as the backbone of instruction in all aspects of language learning. As Rodrigo et al. (2014) claim, good reading ability develops reading skills as daily habits. Nonetheless, recently, there has been a

concern that students lack love for habitual reading, even at the tertiary level.

In Vietnam, Mr. Nguyen Manh Hung, Minister of Information and Communications (Vietnamnet.vn), emphasized his worries about its reading rate because it has barely risen during the last 30 years. Specifically, in a survey conducted by Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh city in 2016, only 30 percent read regularly, while over a quarter had no idea of reading. At the tertiary level, research conducted by Nguyen (2017) at People's Police University found that most non-major English students do not read much. This fact has created an alarming situation for educationists because the negative consequences can be foreseen. Some can be identified as poor academic performance, examination malpractice, mass failure, anti-social behaviors, poor understanding, fear and anxiety towards examinations and tests, poor execution of research projects and assignments, fall in the standards of education, among others (Issax & Kingley, 2020)

Teachers should motivate students to learn independently and take responsibility for learning to solve this problem. It means that effective variables, particularly motivation, are crucial to students' learning reading skill. For example, interactive reading activities may increase motivation to read more (Day & Bamford, 2002). In the EFL context, it is suggested that one way to improve reading skills in English is to read extensively (Nuttall, 1996) or what can be known as extensive reading (ER). To reinforce the belief in ER, Yamashita (2013)

argues that ER has positive impacts on learners' attitudes or even fosters a love for reading. However, what is left uncertain is how students respond to ER implementation and what their attitudes are. Thus, this paper was conducted to gain an insight into the issue of how ER can be applied in an EFL context to motivate students' autonomous learning. The study was guided by the following two research questions to achieve that purpose:

*Question 1:* What are autonomous learning strategies used by students while participating in extensive reading activities?

*Question 2:* What is students' attitude toward the extensive reading implementation?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Learner Autonomy and Autonomous Learning Strategies

Learner autonomy is a concept coined by Holec (1981) as a person's ability to take charge of their learning. The term was reported as reflecting critically, making decisions, and acting independently by Little (1991) and Sinclair (2000). It is known as a cognitive approach to motivation that focuses on "the individuals' thoughts and beliefs" (and recently also emotions) transferred into actions. Somehow, these processes are leveled up to another state where learners can experience active monitoring and consequent regulations of the cognitive process to active cognitive goals, which is considered metacognitive. Thus, when learners engage in autonomous learning, they can experience moving

from cognitive to metacognitive states. Literature has shown that those who can use cognitive learning strategies can succeed, differentiating them from less successful ones. Some sub taxonomies of cognitive strategies have been listed by Oxford (1990) as analysis, note-taking, summarizing, outlining, and reorganizing information. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) state that these strategies are specific measures or steps learners take to fulfill learning tasks.

For example, summarizing skills can help improve comprehension of texts and increase recall (Kinch & Van Dijk, 1978). Apart from summarizing, other cognitive skills can be named making inferences, making decisions, translating, applying grammar rules, taking notes, guessing meaning from texts, and using imagination (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). At a higher level, metacognitive strategies refer to the ability of learners to analyze items by themselves. Metacognition is cognition about cognition or thinking about thinking. It relates to active monitoring and consequent regulations and the orchestration of cognitive processes to achieve cognitive goals. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) consider metacognitive strategies as skills relating to planning, monitoring, or evaluating the success of a learning activity, which means evaluating the whole learning process.

The literature in reading comprehension reveals that readers with effective cognitive and metacognitive strategies have a good awareness of how to approach reading and monitor their learning, which boosts their learning autonomy. In this paper, the author

considers the two strategies mentioned above in one particular reading activity: extensive reading to enhance students' learning autonomy. Furthermore, students imbuing these strategies also articulate their attitudes towards personal responsibility and learning capacity motivating their active participation in the learning process and encouraging them to learn responsively and independently.

### **Extensive Reading**

Various researchers have attempted to provide a comprehensive definition for extensive reading (ER). Davis (1995) considers ER as a way to give learners time, encourage them, let them read as many materials as possible with pleasure, within their levels, and without washback effects. Grabe and Stoller (2002) believe that ER means learners read large quantities of material within their linguistic competence. Brown (2012) explains that extensive reading refers to the reading of large amounts of material, the level of which is convenient for the reader, and more importantly, which they choose themselves. According to Maley (2009), extensive reading is understood as a method that motivates learners to read for their pleasure and information regularly, in a vast number of materials and a wide range of topics with their own choices of books and at a fast speed. However, in this paper, the author will tailor the idea of fast speed into learners' suitable speed because she wants to encourage students' enjoyment of reading. Thus, extensive reading is defined as choosing their topic and genre

and reading at their pace in this study. All in all, based on the above researchers, some principles of ER given by Grabe and Stoller (2002) are applied in this study such as: (1) how students engage in reading activities; (2) what fluent reading skill is; (3) how reading is performed as a cognitive process; and (4) how the learners can draw meaning from their reading activities and (5) how their reading proficiency can be specified. Consequently, if learners participate in ER activity, they will gradually become more autonomous in their learning.

### **Extensive Reading on Learner Autonomy**

Brown (2012) claims it is apparent that learner autonomy has strong links with extensive reading. Research has also shown a positive correlation between extensive reading and learner autonomy, which has been beneficial to students in language learning. Specifically, Dickinson (1995) argues that successful individualized reading experiences foster learner autonomy, learning success, and enhanced motivation. According to Bell (1998), the idea of giving students autonomy to choose the genre of material to read, as well as the pace at which to read, is in itself motivational because it addresses the needs and interests of individual learners. In addition to this, ER acknowledges and supports the fact that reading is an individual undertaking that allows individuals to learn at their pace, depending on their level of proficiency (Nation, 1997). From another perspective, this implies that ER offers flexibility to

learners and teachers in teaching and learning and would match the teacher-researchers teaching goal.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

The participants were twenty-five university freshmen students who studied reading two-course, approximate to a B1 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) level. The course for the spring semester of the 2018–2019 academic year lasted three months with 9 hours per week. Their English level is pre-intermediate.

### **Instruments**

Semi-structured interviews for ten students and autonomy strategies questionnaire are used as research instruments for the study. An autonomy training strategies questionnaire was developed to measure the students' use of autonomous learning strategies. This questionnaire was adapted in part from Oxford (1990), O'Malley & Chamot (1990), and Channuan (2012). The questionnaire was divided into three main categories or parts with 29 statements in the form of a 5-point Likert scale as follows:

**Part 1: Cognitive Strategies.** Using background knowledge, summarizing, predicting, making inferences/ guessing, using resources, using imagination, taking notes, using mechanical means to store information, transferring, using keywords to find information, using translation and self-talk.

**Part 2: Metacognitive Strategies.** Using items such as planning, monitoring, and self-evaluating.

**Part 3: Students' Attitude toward Teacher's Roles.** It is emphasized that the questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese to avoid ambiguity before being administered to students. It was explained to them that they would remain anonymous and the collected results were for research purposes only. Then, a semi-structured interview was conducted at the end of the course to get a deeper understanding from students' feedback. The learner autonomy questions for the interview, which were adapted from Channuan (2012), include:

*Question 1: Which strategies do you often/rarely use while reading outside the class?*

*Question 2: When a teacher assigns you to write a book report:*

- What do you normally do before you start reading extensively and writing a book report?
- While reading and writing a book report, have you encountered any

problems, and how did you solve these problems?

- After you complete your book report, do you make other self-assessment?

*Question 3: After finishing the course, can you take responsibility for your reading? How?*

Regarding reliability, the conversations between the author and interviewees were conducted in Vietnamese, then transcribed into English, and that data were coded by numbering the students (e.g., Student 1 or Ss1).

**Procedure**

As for the reading skills, students had their textbook that followed the curriculum given by the university. However, apart from that textbook for the present study, they were also introduced to extensive reading, the goal and requirements they need to achieve and fulfill. Thus, the procedure was announced as the steps in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Timeline of ER implementation*

Timeline	Content
Week 1	Teacher introduces extensive reading for students Teacher informs students with timeline and requirements that they need to fulfill
Week 2	Students hand in their plan for their reading, including the title of their chosen books

Table 1 (Continued)

Timeline	Content
Week 3	Students follow their plan in reading and ask the teacher for help if they need
Week 8	Students follow their plan in reading and ask the teacher for help if they need
Week 9	Students write and revise the book reports
Week 10	Students submit book reports
Week 11	Students answer the questions given by the teacher relating some points written their paper
Week 12	Students exchange their paper with one partner in the class and give thoughts on that paper orally on the last day of the course

This timeline was announced and explained in the first week of the course. Then it was sent to students individually to keep track of their process and follow the timeline. In addition to this class instruction, the teacher prepared a word file to denote other guidelines in detail, such as difficulty level for the reading materials, desired length of a book report, numbers of parts, or content. All of this preparation aimed to help students understand what they needed to do with the given task.

## RESULTS

### Use of Language Learning Strategies

**Use of Cognitive Strategies.** Table 2 shows the means obtained for each item in the questionnaire. The results were used to determine the strategies employed by the students and the frequency of the strategy used. From the results, it was found that students generally use all language learning strategies with high frequency.

Specifically, some cognitive strategies used most often were guessing the meaning of unknown words from the context (M=4.2), using a dictionary to find the meaning of the really important words (M=4.2), and using keywords to find information in the text (M=4.1). The other skills such as summarizing, making a prediction, using imagination, and background knowledge were preferred by students with mean scores ranging from 3.7 to 3.9. Surprisingly, that the translating strategy was used at a slightly lower level of frequency with M = 2.5.

**Use of Metacognitive Strategies.** In terms of metacognitive strategies, which involve planning, monitoring, and evaluating, the students regulated metacognition at a high level. For example, as revealed in Table 3, learners seem to be aware of their learning process when claiming that they know their weaknesses in reading and try to improve them (M = 3.7), or always ask themselves whether they understand what they are

reading (M = 4.2). In contrast, these students perceived that they had less responsibility towards making a reading plan (M = 2.8) and following their reading schedule (M = 2.5) or checking if they could finish the reading in time (M = 2.7).

Table 2  
*Use of cognitive strategies*

Statements	Mean Score
Before I read, I thought about what I already knew about the topic, which helped me understand the story better.	3.9
I try to summarize (in my head or writing) important information that I read.	3.9
I usually predict a story while I am reading along.	3.6
I usually try to guess the meaning of unknown words from the context.	4.2
I use a dictionary to find the meaning of the really important words that I do not know.	4.2
If there are pictures in the text, I usually imagine what the text would be about.	3.7
I take notes while reading.	3.0
I write down or make lists of new words or phrases I see in the reading passages to be learned several times.	3.1
I try to understand the vocabulary from its prefix or suffix.	3.8
I periodically focus on specific information to achieve my reading objectives.	3.6
I usually ask myself questions about the texts and check if they make sense to ensure reading comprehension.	3.5
When I need to find some information in a text, I usually look for keywords.	4.1
I usually review the strategies I use while reading.	3.7
I translate from English into Vietnamese when I read the texts.	2.5
When I encounter a long, difficult text, I tell myself that I can read it, and I will try my best by using all the strategies that I have practiced.	3.6

Table 3  
*Use of metacognitive strategies*

Statements	Mean Score
I start reading by browsing throughout the book and focusing on the content that interests me.	3.6
Before reading, I set my reading objectives in advance and read with those objectives in mind.	3.0
I have set a reading schedule, and I could follow it.	2.5
I finish reading faster after I make a reading plan.	2.8
While reading, I usually ask myself whether I understand what I am reading.	4.2
I know my weakness in reading and try to improve them by myself.	3.7
I always keep track of my reading progress.	3.4
I check my understanding by doing the follow-up exercise or summarizing the story.	3.5
After reading, I decided whether the reading strategies I used helped me understand the passages better, and I think of other strategies that I could have helped.	3.2
After reading, I check whether I accomplished my reading objectives, such as finishing the reading in time.	2.7

In the qualitative data, students provided more details to explain their choices in the survey questionnaire further. Most of the reading strategies used in extensive reading favored cognitive strategies such as guessing and predicting unknown words based on given clues or images. Some highlighted comments are as follows:

*When I read the book **Silence of the lambs**, there were many difficult words, so I had to use a dictionary to check up meanings, and sometimes I guessed with the context of the story.*

(Ss 5)

Or

*My chosen book for the book report is **The fault in our stars**. I read it because the*

*content interests me. But a lot of words I do not understand, so I had to guess or look at the prefix or even checkup dictionary.*

(Ss 8)

In short, the quantitative and qualitative data show that while many participants prefer to employ cognitive strategies in their extensive reading, especially with books that have complicated content, and those who used metacognitive reading strategies were limited.

### **The Implementation of ER in Enhancing Students' Autonomous Learning and their Attitude**

According to Thanasolous (2000) and Sinclair (2000), the learners' capacity to

control their learning positively impacts on their autonomy. In fact, from the semi-structured interview data, it can be assured that ER can help foster learner autonomy. In this book report project, ER allows learners to choose books they are interested in, no matter the genres. In addition, they could enjoy their own reading time, favorite place, or the manner or speed they preferred. To measure learner autonomy level, the author emphasizes two components: (1) *students' attitude towards their independence in learning*; and (2) *students' attitudes toward the teacher's role*. Firstly, in terms of independence in learning, most participants agree that ER helps them be more independent in their learning. Therefore, most participants claimed that a teacher should be a counselor instead of a controller who takes overall responsibility for students' learning ( $M = 4.0$ ). A lot of language learning can be done without a teacher ( $M=3.3$ ). Furthermore, they did not believe that the best way to learn a language is by teachers' explanation ( $M=2.7$ ) or a teacher should choose materials for language classes ( $M=2.7$ ). Thus, it is obvious that these participants are confident with their independence in managing the learning process.

In terms of students' attitudes towards ER, the transcribed information from the interview revealed that the majority of students stated that they felt motivated and excited with their book reports. The first reason is their freedom in choosing reading materials. As Ss 4 claimed:

*I felt very excited and relaxed because I could choose my favorite type of book to read. I love to read non-fiction novels which are not allowed in the school textbook.*

(Ss 4–Interview section)

Some others pointed out that they love the ER activity because, they had the chance to write their comments on what they had read in the critical part of their book reports. Sometimes, it is not easy to reflect on another person's writing. However, once they overcame that feeling, students felt more confident. From the researcher's perspective, the critical part is the most challenging in the book report because it requires a high level of metacognition.

In a nutshell, the participants show a positive attitude toward the implementation of ER with book reports. Nevertheless, they believed that this learning approach fosters their motivation to learn and helps them become autonomous learners.

## DISCUSSION

The results reveal that students use most of the autonomous language learning strategies at a high-frequency level. Furthermore, cognitive strategies appear to be used most frequently by these students, which is similar to the results of the study carried out by Channuan (2012), Shin and Crandall (2014), and Nguyen (2018). These authors believe that cognitive strategies such as prediction and visualizing with given images effectively promote students' reading comprehension.

Besides, it is noteworthy that the finding of this present paper that the usage of the translating technique is the least used by the participants surprises the author because it opposes to the common belief that Vietnamese students seem to favor this reading strategy. For decades, Vietnamese learners have been used to learning in an exam-oriented environment. Consequently, they need to equip themselves with good grammar-based and translating methods in reading to be compatible with norm-referenced examinations (Le, 1999). However, up to now, the situation with the national examination system still witnesses no significant change. Therefore, the finding that fewer translating techniques are used in reading as claimed by the participants is a positive signal indicating the gradual reform in their perception of learning a foreign language.

Apart from the abovementioned issue, consciously or at least partially so, promoting independent learning is crucial for both learners and teachers in foreign language teaching. Therefore, with respect to reading skills, it is recommended that EFL students be exposed to extensive reading activity as an effective approach in enhancing their reading ability and their learning autonomy. Consequently, ER should be integrated into the training curriculum so that both teachers and students can navigate the potential benefits of implementing this activity. Nonetheless, some issues need addressing, such as the role of the teacher in manifesting the activity and interacting with students. Firstly, students should be responsible for

their reading processes, such as choosing materials and setting up a reading plan or reading pace. Secondly, teachers should be a counselor in helping them apply ER reading strategies to select suitable reading materials and gradually create their reading habits in the long term. Benson (2001) confirms that the teachers should not leave the learners to learn autonomy alone. Instead, they should actively encourage and provide the necessary support for the learners to enable them to take control of their learning. As a result, learners are more engaged in their learning process, and become more autonomous learners.

## CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate autonomous learning strategies used by students during extensive reading and figure out their attitude towards the implementation of ER to enhance their reading autonomy. The findings support the belief that ER has positive effects on fostering learner autonomy. It allows learners to self-control their learning process and encourages them to be active learners. Therefore, it is understandable that students have positive comments on the implementation of ER. As a result, this study contributes to the literature on promoting the application of ER in reading training courses so that learners can be familiar with learner autonomy and the use of necessary learning strategies. Once students can control their learning process, they are ready to become autonomous learners as a part of their

lifelong learning. Therefore, it is strongly believed that extensive reading (ER) can enhance students' learning autonomy in English reading classes.

Due to the limited number of participating students, this study is small-scale and preliminary. Therefore, it cannot be expected to provide conclusive evidence regarding how students view ER implementation in general nor their favored autonomous learning strategies in English reading skills. Nonetheless, the results obtained may reflect the realities of the wider educational context beyond the local setting. The study's findings may also provide useful references to English teachers or educational reformers in other language teaching communities, where similar challenges exist in the implementation of ER in the English language.

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