Online Extensive Reading in an EFL Context: Investigating Reading Fluency and Perceptions

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Abstract

One of the challenges for the successful implementation of extensive reading (ER) programmes, especially in Asian contexts, stems from curricular factors where class time is often prioritised for tasks requiring the presence of a teacher. This paper investigates the role of extensive reading online (ERO), an alternative approach to traditional ER, in enhancing first-year university students' reading fluency and their attitudes to reading in an English as a foreign language (EFL) context. Seventeen English learners from a university in Vietnam participated in the 10-week study. The findings revealed that the ERO programme had a generally positive impact on the development of learners' reading fluency with conservative analysis methods showing increases of around 20% in reading speed. Evidence from qualitative data gathered through questionnaires and interviews showed that there were positive changes in participants' attitudes toward ER and provided insights into implementing ERO.

Keywords: extensive reading online, web-based reading, computer-assisted language learning, reading perceptions, reading engagement, reading fluency development

Extensive reading is often discussed for its significant role in promoting language learners' proficiency development. As various studies have pointed out, extensive reading has positive impacts on the progression of learners' reading fluency and different skill areas including listening, speaking, writing, vocabulary and attitudes towards reading in the target language (Beglar & Hunt, 2014; Nation, 2009). It is often proposed as superior to traditional intensive reading; Jeon and Day (2016), for instance, argued that their meta-analysis based on 49 primary studies "demonstrated the overall effectiveness of an ER approach compared to an intensive or traditional reading approach" (p. 261). Despite its benefits, the implementation of extensive reading seems to be limited in many higher education classrooms where English is a foreign language (EFL) due to teachers' time commitment (Grabe, 2001) and the sceptical view of many educators on "silent classrooms" (Hermann, 2003; Prowse, 2002). As a result, reading is often advocated as an activity for learners to do outside the classroom. Given the ubiquity of technology in much of the world today, reading online rather than in traditional print format becomes an option. Thus, this research seeks to explore and address this possibility by investigating the impact of an online extensive reading programme on the

development of first-year university students' reading fluency and their attitudes to reading in an EFL context.

Literature review

Extensive Reading

Many scholars have long believed that the teaching of reading should encourage students to free themselves from their habit of dissecting and translating sentences (Kelly, 1969). Rather, reading should be an enjoyable task with the focus on meaning (as cited in Kelly, 1969, p. 150). In line with this view, conceptions of ER have been developed and proposed by scholars who share a consensus that ER is a reading pedagogy in which language learners are encouraged to freely choose reading materials that match their interests and are within their linguistic competence; to read for pleasure; and to read a great deal (Day & Bamford, 1998; Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Renandya, 2007). In other words, according to Waring (2011), "READ" can be interpreted as "**R**ead quickly and **E**njoyably with **A**dequate comprehension, so they **D**on't need a dictionary" (p. 3). For the successful implementation of ER, Day and Bamford (2002) proposed the following ten principles:

1. The reading material is easy.
2. A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be 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.
10. The teacher is a role model of a reader. (pp. 137–139)

According to Macalister (2010), these ten principles have played a significant role in the development of ER teaching approaches, and although they have been revisited (e.g., Day, 2015; Jeon & Day, 2016; Macalister, 2015) and some principles judged to be more important than others, these principles were employed as the framework for the development and implementation of this study. The exception is the final principle, as students were reading independently of the teacher.

Reading Fluency Development and Extensive Reading

For many researchers, reading fluency development is considered one of the most critical aspects of second or foreign language reading instruction (Grabe, 2009; Nation, 2009; Tabata-Sandom, 2018). Although defining reading fluency is a complex issue with various dimensions involving automaticity, accuracy, reading rate, and prosodic structuring (Grabe, 2010), a common definition of reading fluency is that it is the ability to read at a reasonable reading rate, using efficient and fast word recognition skills to comprehend a text in the target language (Grabe, 2009; Tran, 2012). With regard to what Grabe (2010) referred to as "reasonable reading rate," (p. 72) Nation and Macalister (2021) claimed that, for second language learners, a reading rate of around 250–300 words per minute, making around 90

fixations per 100 words, would be considered a feature of a skilled reader. The importance of reading fluency to successful reading has been underscored in many studies, and Nuttall's (1996) virtuous circle of good readers is often cited as an illustration of the good reader's characteristics and contrasted with those of a poor reader (Figure 1). In Nuttall's (1996) virtuous circle, reading faster or reading fluency, has a close connection with readers' pleasure in reading, their motivation to read in greater quantity, and better understanding. In contrast, when reading does not facilitate learners' comprehension, they will be likely to read at a slower speed, show no interest in the task, and, as a result, read less.

Figure 1

Nuttall's (1996) "Virtuous Circle of the Good Reader"
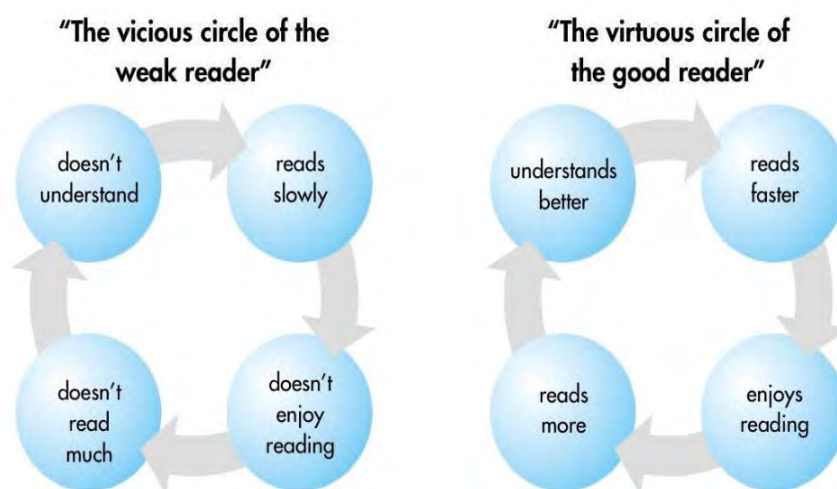
Note. Adopted from the ER Foundation's website.

The effectiveness of ER on the development of learners' reading speed has been well-documented in various studies conducted with university students and adults (e.g., Beglar & Hunt, 2014; Bell, 2001; Boakye, 2017; McLean & Rouault, 2017; Shiki, 2011). One key requirement is that learners read easy material. The language should be familiar to them. This was demonstrated by Beglar, Hunt and Kite (2012) who reported on a one-year reading programme with Japanese university students. Greater reading speed gains were reported for those who read simplified texts. The same study also highlighted the importance of the quantity of reading. Further investigation (Beglar & Hunt, 2014) revealed that those participants who read the most made the greatest fluency gains and confirmed the importance of reading simplified texts. Similar results have been found in the Vietnamese context, where Tran (2018) found that ER helped students increase their reading rate and, at the same time, facilitated their reading comprehension.

ER has also been compared with and combined with other treatments. For instance, Hadley and Charles (2017) combined ER with data-driven learning (defined as a "student-centered inductive method of language learning, in which learners explore grammar and vocabulary issues using a corpus" (p. 131)). On their measure for reading fluency, they found that the control group, which did ER only, outperformed the experimental group, although both groups showed significant improvement. As another example, McLean and Rouault (2017) combined ER with speed reading and compared ER with traditional intensive reading. They found that the ER group increased their reading rate significantly, and the researchers argued

for the superiority of ER over the traditional approach, echoing the conclusions of Jeon and Day's (2016) meta-analysis.

Despite differences in scope and context, these studies have demonstrated a strong link between paper-based ER and learners' reading rate gains. In short, "most studies of extensive reading that measure fluency find a significant improvement" (Nation & Waring, 2020, p. 106).

Learner Perceptions of Extensive Reading

Ever since the early research on ER began to appear, there have been claims about the positive impact on learner perceptions towards reading, and willingness to read. Often these have been observational or anecdotal, along the lines of noting that "[t]he students really got into reading books in English" (Macalister, 2008, p. 27), but over time general comments about affective changes have been supplemented by more in-depth studies. Yamashita (2013), for instance, used a questionnaire to probe attitudes towards reading among 61 Japanese EFL learners using five attitudinal variables and concluded that ER produced increases for Comfort and Intellectual Value, and a decrease for Anxiety. Positive attitudes are likely to shape motivation (as shown in Figure 1) and attitude research has also been extended to studies around the complexities of motivation. In a study dealing with Japanese as foreign language learners, de Burgh-Hirabe and Feryok (2013) identified ten factors that influenced their participants' motivation to read in a foreign language. These factors interacted in different ways resulting in three main motivational trajectories, demonstrating the complexity and dynamism of motivation in ER.

After reviewing research on motivation in ER, Nation and Waring (2020) identified factors that incline learners to read. These factors align with some of the Day and Bamford principles listed earlier:

- The pleasure of reading (2, 3, 5).
- The reward of success in reading (1, 6).
- The satisfaction of obvious progress (4, 7).
- The virtuous feeling of doing something of value (9).
- The power of independence and control (3, 8).

In other words, the design of an ER programme can affect learners' perceptions and willingness to read. The more that a programme design takes account of these factors, the more likely it is to result in positive perceptions and a willingness to read.

Extensive Reading Online

As already noted, teachers face constraints. One of the constraints that exists in every language learning situation is the constraint of time. There is, after all, only so much that can be covered in the classroom in the time available. This is the reason why one of the decisions a teacher contemplating ER must make is where the reading will happen. In recent years, attention has been given to ways in which learners and teachers can work against this constraint through engaging in activities out of or beyond the language classroom (Benson & Reinders, 2011; Nunan & Richards, 2015). With the development of technology and the Internet over recent decades, the availability of electronic versions of texts has created many opportunities for language learners to access a wide range of online resources (Godwin-Jones, 2003). Reading, therefore, has transformed from printed papers to a variety of forms

that involve online or web-based reading (Huang, 2013a). These innovations have not only dramatically changed the direction of ER (Kwon et al., 2017) but also offered many opportunities for teachers to make full use of these advantages in incorporating ER into their course syllabus.

The advantages of e-books over paper-based texts have been underscored and supported in many empirical studies (e.g., Arnold, 2009; Cote & Milliner, 2016; Kwon et al., 2017; Sun, 2003). According to Cote and Milliner (2016), electronic reading can be offered at a lower cost than traditional printed books, facilitate the ability to browse or search for texts, share books through online libraries, and significantly, provide "ready-to-use mechanisms for selecting authentic online texts" (Huang, 2013b, p. 356) of interest. Learners do appear to respond positively to these features of electronic reading. In a preliminary evaluation of an ERO programme for EFL learners in Taiwan, Sun (2003) drew on questionnaire responses from 59 students to conclude that the participants had positive attitudes towards the ERO system and that they considered it an effective approach in enhancing their language skills. However, despite the "extensive" nature of its name, this example of ERO appeared to have been a form of intensive reading, and the reading materials were not easy. A similar comment can be made about the materials used by Arnold (2009). This example of ERO in German for advanced learners used authentic texts, and although learners were encouraged to choose easy texts and reduce their reliance on dictionaries, some of the eight participants opted for challenging texts. In this study, there were no measures for language learning gains, and the study reported on reflections and questionnaire responses. The learners were positive about ERO, and the majority felt their reading rate had improved, which may have resulted from reduced dictionary use.

While the development of online English reading programmes has suggested potential benefits and positive influences that ERO can bring about, as Cote and Milliner (2016) highlight, research on the effects of ER using technology is still in its infancy. There has been a reliance on self-report data and little investigation of language learning gains through ERO, and the self-reports do not always seem to reflect the principles of ER. Therefore, based on recent innovations in connecting ER with technology, this study investigates the impacts of ERO on the development of language learners' reading fluency. The study also aims to explore the perceptions of learners towards ERO and find out whether this approach can enhance their reading motivation. The study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. To what extent can an extensive reading online programme help increase learners' reading fluency?

2. What are the perceptions of learners towards extensive reading online? Does extensive reading online enhance learners' motivation to read?

Methodology

Materials

Data collected through a background questionnaire (Appendix A) helped to inform the development of an ERO website (https://exreading.wordpress.com) on the WordPress platform to provide students with a small-scale digital library of free graded readers and

simplified texts (Figure 2). The reading materials in this digital library were adapted and collected from various websites and resources such as English ER Central, gradedreading.com, Lit2Go, Paul Nation's website, World Stories UK, and 365 ESL Short Stories. In line with the ER Foundation's suggestion on the number of books needed for a small group of readers (Guide to Extensive Reading, n.d.), the digital library in this programme consists of 20 books, containing approximately 49,000 running words in total.

Figure 2

Home Screen of the Extensive Reading Online Website
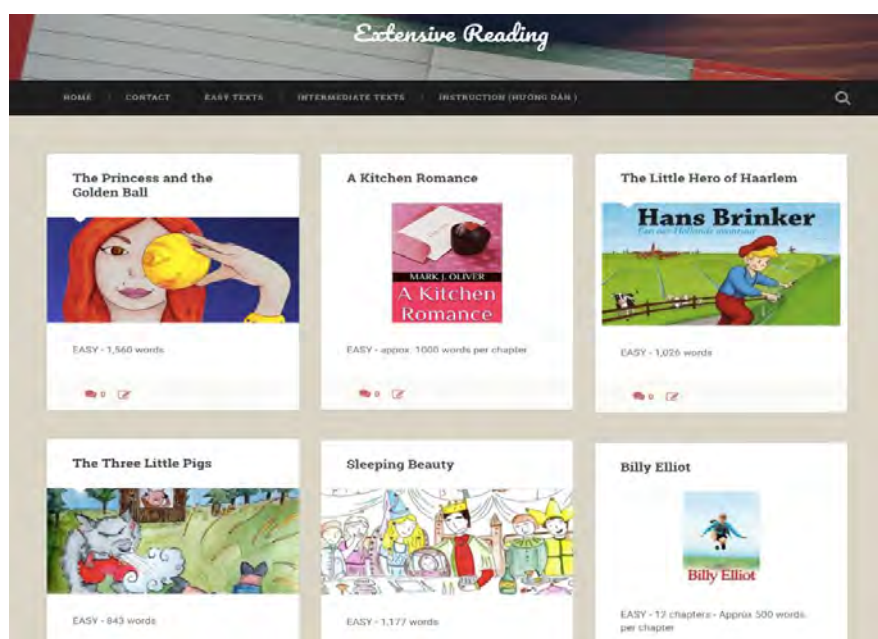
Based on the participants' vocabulary sizes, the reading materials of the digital library were categorised into easy texts at the 2000-word level and intermediate texts at the 5000-word level. In this way, the students could select suitable texts at their proficiency level, ensuring that "95-98 percent of the running words in a text are already familiar to the learner or are no burden to the learner" (Nation and Macalister, 2021, p. 57). To measure the vocabulary knowledge of participants in the study, a bilingual version of the online Vocabulary Size Test (https://my.vocabularysize.com) was employed.

Furthermore, in order to investigate the appropriateness of the texts in terms of language, content and vocabulary, a pilot with a text written at the 2,000-word level was also employed. The participants in this pilot were 22 first-year English major students who later agreed to participate in the current study. There was no restriction on reading time, nor were there follow-up comprehension questions. The students used their own mobile phones to keep track of their reading time. Data from the pilot showed that, with a 1,046-word length text written at the 2000-word level, the participants achieved an average reading speed of 212 words-per-minute (wpm). This, according to Nation and Macalister (2021), can be considered a good reading speed and suggested there was a match between students' proficiency and texts.

Unlike other online reading sites that provide students with learning-assisted functions like online dictionaries or translation tools, the intention of this site was to provide readers with the most natural reading experience. Therefore, in each story and book chapter on the

website, there were only two functions integrated to support their reading experience. These were a stopwatch to help learners calculate their reading time and an online progress graph to help them keep track of their reading progress throughout the programme. With these characteristics, the design of the online platform is aligned with Day and Bamford's (2002) principles 1–2 for reading materials and 5–8 for the nature of the reading.

Participants

Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis and in accordance with the permission granted by the head of the school. Initially, 22 students accepted the invitation to participate. However, after the first four weeks of the study, five students withdrew due to their inability to fulfil the time commitment of the research schedule. Thus, the total number of participants who completed the study is 17. Information about these students is provided in Table 1 below. Most had very little or no experience with ER and reported doing little or no reading each week. Based on the vocabulary size test results, the average vocabulary size of these participants is approximately 7,000-word families.

Table 1

Background Information of the Participants

Participant ID	Previous experience with ER (Yes/No)	Reading habits	Vocabulary Size	Pilot Reading Speed (wpm)
1	N	Not very often	6,700	237
2	N	Approx. 3 hours per day	9,100	142
3	Y	Approx. 1 hour per week	8,000	228
4	Y	Approx. 1 hour per week	6,000	233
5	Y	Rarely	7,800	209
6	N	I don't really like reading	7,800	192
7	N	Approx. 7–14 hours per week	7,300	420
8	N	Rarely, only when I accidentally find books that interest me.	7,100	198
9	N	Approx. 7 hours per week	6,500	139
10	N	Approx. 1 hour per week	6,600	231
11	N	Approx. 2–3 hours per day	7,800	198
12	N	Not interested in reading because I think my English is not good enough	7,800	174
13	N	Approx. 1 hour per week	6,400	165
14	N	Approx. 1.5 hours per week	8,600	201
15	N	Approx. 1–2 hours per week	6,400	231
16	Y	Approx. 8 hours per week	9,200	228
17	N	Sometimes	7,200	242

Procedures

At the outset of this study, a background questionnaire was distributed to the participants (Appendix A). These questions were designed to determine the suitability of the study for the participants, allowing the authors to scrutinise their reading habits and frequency (Q2–Q4); identify the reading topics that are of the students' interest (Q5–Q7); explore difficulties that students may face when reading in English (Q8); and discover the students' perceptions on the benefits of reading English materials as well as their experience with ER before participating in the study (Q9–Q10). These data are reported in Table 1.

All participants were expected to read outside the classroom using their personal computers or tablets over the 10 weeks of the study. Before starting the ERO programme, students were given in-class instructions with a demonstration of how to use the website. As a part of the study's requirements, each week students were asked to read 1,000 words at least twice a week, on different days. Since the reading tasks on the website focused solely on reading for enjoyment (in line with Day and Bamford's (2002) principles 5–6), there were no follow-up comprehension questions after each text. At the end of each reading task, however, each participant was asked to record online the number of words read (this was provided automatically) and the time (in minutes) they needed to finish the text. Each week the students had to submit individual reports on the books/texts that they had read and the equivalent time needed to finish each book/text. Thus, the first author could keep track of the participants' weekly progress and remind them to complete the task when necessary. At the end of each reading week, the students were contacted to reconfirm their completion of the given tasks.

After completing 10 weeks of the programme, an online post-questionnaire was distributed to all participants (Appendix B). The questionnaire consisted of four questions aiming to elicit rich information from the respondents. These questions were designed to gain insights into the participants' perception (Q1 & 4), and explore whether the ERO programme, to some extent, motivated them to form reading habits after the programme (Q2 & 3). Following their completion of the post-questionnaire, stimulated recall interview sessions were conducted by telephone to clarify learners' answers and gain a better understanding of their experiences. A typical interview (Appendix C) lasted for approximately 10 minutes, but some extended to 15 minutes depending on the participant's responses. The interviews were not recorded, and the first researcher took notes as the interviewee spoke. In summary, Table 2 illustrates the procedures of the study for 10 weeks.

Table 2

Research Procedures

Week		Procedures	Materials/Notes
1	Pre-task 1	• Introduce the purposes and procedures of the study. • Distribute and collect students' consent forms. • Distribute and collect students' background questionnaires (Appendix A). • Measure the vocabulary size of participants through the vocabulary size test.	• Vocabulary size test
	Pre-task 2	• Provide students with instructions on the pilot. • Give student in-class instructions with a demonstration of how to use the website	• Printed graded readers based on learners' vocabulary size.
2–11	10 weeks of the ERO programme	• Students complete extensive reading online tasks.	• The ERO website.
12	Post-task 1	• Distribute and collect students' self-evaluation questionnaires (Appendix B).	
	Post-task 2	• Conduct stimulated recall interview sessions (Appendix C).	

Analysis

The reading speed of participants was calculated by the number of words they read per minute (wpm). To measure any change in the reading speed of the participants in the ERO programme, four scoring methods were used to gain better insights into the variation of learners' reading rates during the 10 weeks of the study. These methods included Chung and Nation's (2006) average scoring, highest minus lowest scoring, and 20th minus 1st scoring (here called last minus first) methods, and Tran's (2012) three extremes scoring method.

The highest minus lowest and the last minus first methods are less reliable than the other two, as each compares just two data points. The three extremes method is a more reliable version of the highest minus lowest scoring, taking as it does the three highest and three lowest scores. As defined by Tran (2012), this scoring method "takes the average score in the best three sessions minus the average score in the worst three sessions" (p. 27). This approach can be seen as a combination of the average scoring method and the highest minus lowest method. Similarly, the average scoring method takes the first three and last three scores, rather than just the first and the last. It subtracts the average score on the first three texts from the average score of the last three texts. As Chung and Nation (2006) suggest, by calculating the average of the first and last three scores, the method would ensure that the reading rates

are not exaggerated or lowered by an unusual first and last score. Thus, it is considered "the most conservative" (Chung & Nation, 2006, p. 192) among the four scoring methods.

In the Results section below, we include data from all four methods in Tables 3 and 4, but it is worth pointing out that we are not attempting cross-validation. We present the data to be transparent about the different results produced by the different methods, but we will focus on the two methods that seem more reliable.

For the qualitative data exploring learners' perceptions on the role of the ERO Programme in promoting them to read extensively (RQ 2), content analysis of the responses identified themes that emerged and categorised them as either positive, neutral, or negative responses (see Figure 4).

Results

Speed Increases in the Extensive Reading Online programme

In what follows, for reasons of space, we will present only the results of the average scoring and three extremes scoring methods in detail. However, Table 3 summarises the results for 16 of the participants of all four methods of analysis. Participant 7's performance will be discussed separately in the Discussion section below, as he proved to be an outlier whose results inflated average increases.

Table 3

Summary of Reading Speed Changes in Four Scoring Methods (Results in Wpm)

	Amount read (words)	Average scoring	Last minus first	Three extremes	Highest minus lowest
Average	**23,409**	**36**	**22**	**128**	**207**
1	19,016	28	-54	131	234
2	28,834	11	11	69	114
3	21,173	-26	42	73	106
4	23,634	32	27	145	196
5	15,749	84	100	111	128
6	17,603	-46	-72	86	145
8	19,103	46	42	148	266
9	20,180	121	192	248	297
10	20,733	-15	-78	87	105
11	20,906	3	14	36	50
12	24,091	12	23	68	75
13	15,110	183	108	204	271
14	32,901	-11	60	196	268
15	35,853	62	46	89	208
16	40,099	-24	-43	142	399
17	19,558	122	-59	209	454

As Table 3 suggests, there is a considerable variation in result by method, although all showed that on average participants have increased their reading speed. Three students (6, 10,

16), however, recorded negative results on two of the methods and they will be discussed in more detail in the Discussion section.

Among the four scoring methods, the highest minus lowest scoring method generated the highest scores on the amount of reading speed gained, with the total increase on average being 207 wpm, or 161%. In this method, the amount of increase was determined by the difference score between the highest and the lowest speed reached, regardless of the position of the two scores (Chung & Nation, 2006). Thus, this method not only produced the extreme lowest (135 wpm) but also the extreme highest (343 wpm). In the same vein, the percentage of total increase in the three extremes scoring method also suggests dramatic growth in the learners' reading speed with 128 wpm on average, or 90%.

Regarding the last minus first scoring method, it is noticeable that the percentage of the total increase in this method is the lowest in comparison with other scoring methods, with the total increase on average being 22 wpm, or a 20% increase. The reason for this modest growth was because there were a number of unusual last scores that lowered the average scores of all participants.

Lastly, the increase of 36 wpm or 23% in the average scoring method is less than those in the highest minus lowest scoring method (161%) and the three extremes scoring method (90%), while slightly higher than the last minus first scoring method. Therefore, the average scoring method can be considered more conservative than the two methods relying on extremes and more reliable than the last minus first method, as it draws on more data points.

As the study involved just one group and a single measurement (change in reading speed), a one-sample t test was conducted, and this determined that there was a significant effect resulting from the treatment (ERO) for three of the scoring methods. There was not enough evidence to determine a significant difference for the last minus first though, as the mean change in reading speed did not significantly differ from 0.

Table 4

Comparison of the Four Scoring Methods

	t	d	p-value	mean	SD	SE mean
Average scoring	2.29	15	.037*	36.37	63.59	15.9
Last minus first	1.22	15	.240	22.44	73.4	18.35
Three extremes	8.25	15	< .001***	127.6	61.14	15.28
Highest minus lowest	7.19	15	< .001***	207.25	115.33	28.83

*Note. * p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001*

Focusing on the two scoring methods that we judged to be the more reliable and that are discussed below, for the average scoring method, the mean change in reading speed was 36.37 wpm (95% CI: 2.49–70.26), which was significantly greater than zero, $t(15) = 2.29$, $p = .037$. For the three extremes scoring method, the mean change in reading speed was 127.6 wpm (95% CI: 95.04–160.21), which was also significantly greater than 0, $t(15) = 8.25$, $p = < .001$.

The Average Scoring Method

The following table demonstrates the variations in the participants' reading speed as recorded by the average scoring method. In line with Chung and Nation's (2006) approach, the data in Table 5 were ranked by the percentage of the total increase, from the highest to the lowest percentage increase.

Table 5

Average Scoring Method Results

Students	No of texts read	No of words read	Average of the first three scores (wpm)	Average of the last three scores (wpm)	Total increase (wpm)	% of the total increase
13	16	15,110	154	337	183	**119%**
9	18	20,180	150	272	121	**81%**
5	14	15,749	116	199	84	**72%**
17	20	19,558	255	377	122	**48%**
15	33	35,853	230	292	62	**27%**
8	15	19,103	199	245	46	**23%**
4	24	23,634	171	203	32	**19%**
1	20	19,016	202	230	28	**14%**
2	20	28,834	111	122	11	**10%**
12	21	24,091	164	176	12	**8%**
11	16	20,906	166	169	3	**2%**
14	31	32,901	236	225	-11	**-4%**
10	16	20,733	248	233	-15	**-6%**
16	36	40,099	218	195	-24	**-11%**
3	20	21,173	182	156	-26	**-14%**
6	18	17,603	189	143	-46	**-24%**
Average	21	23,409	187	223	36	**23%**

As revealed by the data, the average number of texts read by participants in 10 weeks is 21 texts, which is equivalent to 23,409 words in total. While the students were expected to read at least 1,000 words twice per week, or 20,000 words in 10 weeks, the data indicates that most students not only met the initial expectation but exceeded it. Three students were found to read more than 30 texts in 10 weeks.

Regarding the participants' reading speed, 11 out of 16 students increased their reading speed. Two of these students (#13, #9) almost doubled their reading rates. On the other hand, five students did not make any progress in their reading speed but, instead, had their scores decrease up to 24 percent. Even though these students were among those who read the most

and whose initial reading speed was around the average, their performance on the last three texts did not seem positive compared to other students. Despite these negative results, however, this scoring method indicates that the participants' reading speed on average increased approximately 23%, which equates to 36 wpm.

Three Extremes Scoring Method

In line with Tran's (2012) approach, the following table illustrates the variations in the participants' reading speed order by the percentage of the total increase.

Table 6

Three Extremes Scoring Method Results

Student	No of texts read	No of words read	Average score in the worst three sessions (wpm)	Average score in the best three sessions (wpm)	Total increase (wpm)	% of the total increase
9	18	20,180	92	340	248	**270%**
4	24	23,634	107	252	145	**136%**
13	16	15,110	159	363	204	**128%**
14	31	32,901	168	364	196	**117%**
17	20	19,558	208	417	209	**100%**
5	14	15,749	117	228	111	**95%**
16	36	40,099	150	292	142	**94%**
8	15	19,103	174	321	148	**85%**
1	20	19,016	178	309	131	**74%**
2	20	28,834	97	166	69	**71%**
6	18	17,603	139	225	86	**62%**
3	20	21,173	134	208	73	**55%**
10	16	20,733	188	275	87	**46%**
15	33	35,853	201	290	89	**44%**
12	21	24,091	158	226	68	**43%**
11	16	20,906	148	184	36	**24%**
Average	21	23,409	151	279	128	**90%**

Similar to the highest minus lowest scoring method, the data from Table 6 suggests that this type of measurement provides extreme values with exaggerated gains. All students, as a result, increased their reading speed after 10 weeks of the study. In comparison with the highest minus lowest scoring method, even though there are ups and downs in the reading rates of the participants, these two scoring methods indicate positive results both in words per minute and percentage terms. For instance, in the case of student #4, whose percentage of the total increase in the highest minus lowest scoring method was 189%, the seventh highest score among all participants, in the three extremes scoring method, her increase fell to 136% but moved up to the second position. On average, the increase for the 16 students was 128 wpm, or 90%.

*Learners' Self-Evaluation and Perceptions towards Extensive Reading Online*

In exploring learners' perceptions towards ERO after 10 weeks of the programme, participants' responses from the post-questionnaires and interview sessions were collected for

examination. This information not only suggested insights about learners' experiences with ERO but also revealed factors that negatively affected the reading speed of students who, according to Table 3, did not make any progress.

Regarding learners' self-evaluation of ERO based on their post-task survey and interviews, most expressed positive attitudes towards the implementation of the programme for its overall effectiveness in enhancing their language skills. Those responses related to improvements in their reading speed, vocabulary knowledge, reading comprehension, and pragmatic use of the target language. One student, however, reported that she did not find the ERO Programme effective. The following figure provides an overview of students' perceptions of the effectiveness of ERO after completing the programme.

Figure 3

Learners' Perceptions towards the Effectiveness of the ERO Programme
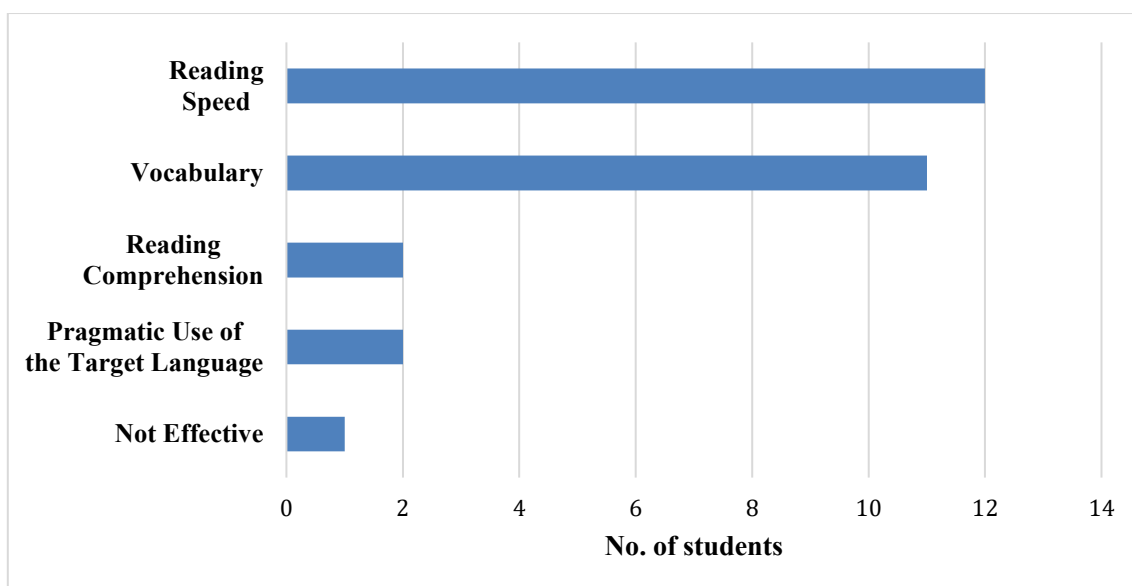
A majority of students (12 out of 17) agreed that the ERO Programme helped them read more fluently with higher reading rates. These responses account for more than 70% of all participants. As student #1 commented:

> *"This English reading programme helped me a lot. I found myself my reading speed increased clearly compared to the time before taking part in the project. Reading in English has become a more natural task for me. I used to read very slowly because I had to read and translate each word at the same time. Now I don't need to translate anymore when I read, and I feel my reading skill has become better and more fluent. I can get the gist of the sentence faster when I read stories with vocabulary that match my level and ability."*

From this extract, it is clear that the ERO Programme had significant impacts on the development of this student's reading fluency.

Acquiring new vocabulary through reading extensively is another benefit that most participants claimed through taking part in the ERO Programme. As student #15 said:

> *"After participating in the programme, I found this approach to teaching reading is quite good. It helped me improve my reading comprehension ability because those were not academic essays but interesting stories that are easy to understand, and not boring. Through the reading process, my vocabulary was also improved partly."*

In the same vein, the benefit of ERO was also confirmed by student #12, who shared that:

> *"I find this programme interesting. First of all, I feel its contents are quite good. The programme has not only folk stories but also love stories and even a bit of detective, I really like it. Besides, its forms and words are not too complicated, so it is not difficult to read, and I can read without feeling uncomfortable because of new and unfamiliar words. I also learned a bit of natural writing and storytelling skills. Although not much, I found my reading speed has improved slightly. I think if I read more and worked harder, I would have improved even more."*

As these two extracts suggest, apart from facilitating the enhancement of their reading speed and vocabulary, ERO also helped student #15 improve her reading comprehension and student #12 acquire "the natural writing and storytelling skills." In other words, those can be considered as the uptake of pragmatic use of the target language and reading comprehension skills. These two benefits of ERO were also reported by another student, who claimed that reading extensively helped her gain a better understanding of the texts and know how to use certain phrases and structures in real-life settings.

The Role of Extensive Reading Online in Strengthening Learners' Reading Motivation

Learners' perceptions on the role of the ERO Programme in motivating them to read extensively were collected for analysis. Figure 4 shows the main themes and whether they were categorised as positive, neutral, or negative responses. The main themes are discussed below.

Figure 4

Learners' Perceptions on the Role of the ERO Programme in Motivating Them to Read Extensively
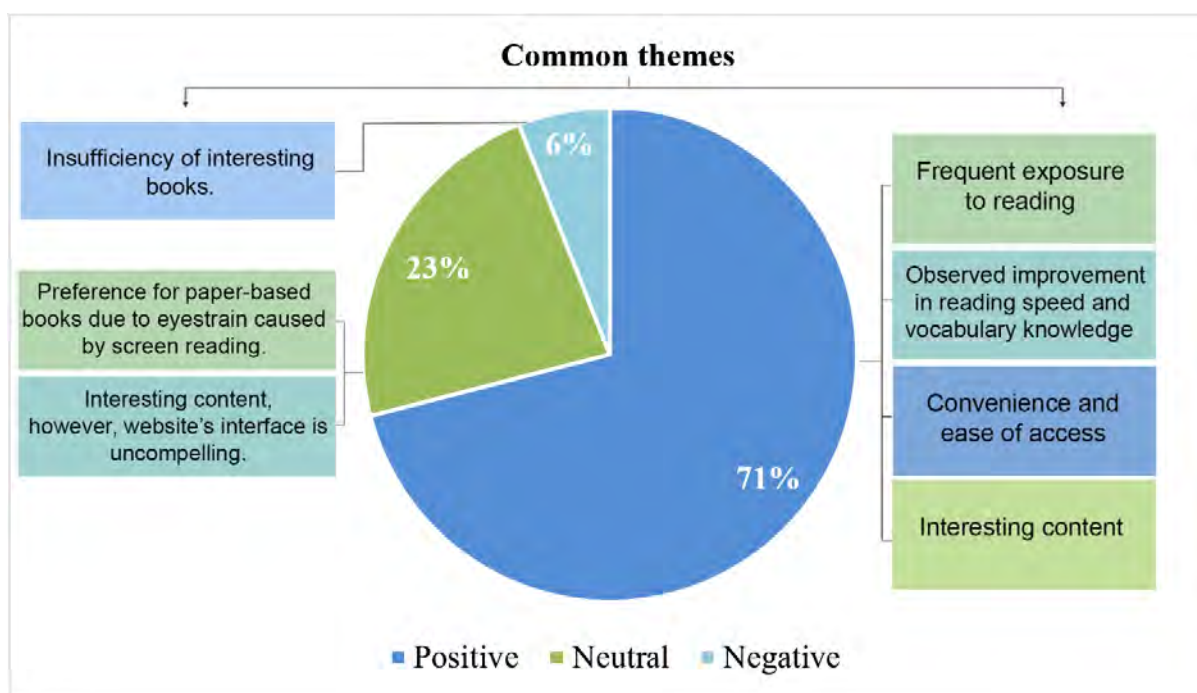
According to Figure 4, the majority of learners felt that the ERO Programme had a role to play in enhancing their reading motivation. As a result of frequent exposure to reading, most students shared the view that the implementation of the ERO Programme has helped them establish the habit of reading English books after completing the programme. As revealed by a student (#6) who previously had no experience with extensive reading:

> *"After taking part in the programme, I feel that reading in English is not as challenging as I used to assume. It helped me a lot in improving my English reading skills and motivated me to form the habit of reading English books more frequently."*

In analysing this participant's response, it is significant to highlight that the ERO Programme helped her overcome the stereotype that reading in English is a demanding task that requires a lot of effort, a great amount of vocabulary and language skills. In this case, it appears that interaction with texts and reading materials that are within this learner's language competency played a vital role in improving her reading skills and motivating her to read more frequently. In the same vein, according to another reader (#1):

> *"Reading English stories online helped me create a habit of reading books and English materials. The progress in my reading speed as I acknowledged during 10 weeks of the programme was one of the motivations for me to continue my reading habits. With the improvements that I have gained through the reading habit, I will continue reading so that I can become a good reader in the future."*

Similar to the previous participant's experiences, the apparent improvements achieved through ERO were identified as the major incentive for this student to maintain his reading habit. Significantly, this notion is also shared by many students who claimed that it was the effectiveness of ERO in promoting their reading fluency and vocabulary knowledge that made them want to continue the habit of reading English books routinely. Besides, there were a number of students who reported that it was the books' content and the convenience of ERO that motivated them to form the reading habit. Specifically, according to these students,

> *"Reading weekly made me feel more interested in reading books and thanks to this frequency, reading has become my habit after participating in the programme." (#14)*

> *"Reading English books online motivated me to maintain my habit of reading in English because it's convenient, easily accessible via the Internet." (#3)*

All in all, it can be seen that it was the efficacy of reading that intrinsically motivated the participants to maintain their reading habit after 10 weeks of the ERO Programme. With improvements achieved through ERO, most learners discovered reading is a useful language learning source that can accelerate their proficiency development.

Besides positive feedback from most students on the efficiency of the ERO Programme, there were also a number of neutral opinions about the implementation of the programme. This number represents 23% of all participants or four out of 17 students in total. According to these students, although the ERO Programme helped them improve their reading fluency, it could not motivate them to form the habit of reading online materials due to some problems. As two students said:

> *"Although reading is one of my hobbies, I'm still a fan of reading paper-based books. Because I am short-sighted, reading on the computer or phone screen for too long is not good for me, especially when reading often takes a lot of time." (#7)*

> *"As I mentioned earlier, this programme did not only help me to improve my reading fluency but also make me see that reading and exposure to everyday English is important, especially with English major students like myself. Books and stories are also quite easy to read and approach these days, so I will try to maintain the habit of reading from today. However, reading online makes my eyes tired, so I think I will buy books and paper books to read." (#17)*

In analysing the responses made by these two students, it seems that the negative side-effect of screen reading (eyestrain) is a hindrance that demotivated them from forming the habit of reading online. Nevertheless, both of them still expressed great interest in reading paper-based books. This may suggest that the programme still encouraged them to keep exploring and reading English books. Although the eye fatigue issue caused by long exposure to the computer screen was only reported by two students, this is a particular concern that needs to be taken into consideration when considering online reading.

Furthermore, as reported by two other students who held a neutral opinion about the ERO Programme, the lack of various genres and attractive design of the website were identified as

the main reasons that impacted their reading motivation during their participation in the programme.

> *"Although I find reading stories regularly helped me establish the habit of reading, allowed me to read more fluently and know how to use English words in real life, the design of the website is not attractive enough for me to see reading as an interesting task." (#11)*

> *"The site is easy to use, and the vocabulary in readings is quite simple and easy to understand. The reading program helped me acquire the habit of reading and expand my vocabulary. However, the site's interface is slightly boring for me. I think it would be more convenient if there were an online dictionary integrated on the website." (#4)*

Finally, as Figure 4 suggests, one student (#5) claimed that the ERO Programme was neither efficient for her reading fluency development nor helpful in motivating her to engage with the reading tasks. Similar to her previous evaluation on the effectiveness of ERO, according to this participant,

> *"Personally, I don't think books' content was compelling enough for me to establish the habit of reading." (#5)*

Here the importance of having materials that interest learners is underscored.

To sum up, in addition to the majority of positive responses that support the role of ERO in enhancing learners' reading motivation, students also mentioned several difficulties and obstacles that demotivated their reading. Those include eye strain when reading online, the unappealing design of the website, and the shortage of reading materials that were of their favourite genres.

Discussion

This study set out to answer two research questions. The first asked to what extent an extensive reading online programme could help increase learners' reading fluency, and this study found that on the most conservative measure used the average increase was 23%. Engagement with simplified texts that are within a learner's vocabulary knowledge allowed faster reading, and most importantly, freed learners from the old habit of translating while reading in the target language. This supports Kelly's (1969) statement that the teaching of reading should encourage students to be free from their fixed habits of dissecting and translating sentences.

Yet, while the positive impacts of ERO on fluency were experienced by most students, their experience was not uniform. In the next section, we discuss four students who differed from the others in some way as a way of understanding the complexity and diversity of the learners' experience (cf. de Burgh-Hirabe & Feryok, 2013).

Students with Decreases in Reading Speed

As noted previously, three participants (#16, #10, and #6) recorded negative scores using two of the analysis methods. Table 7 summarises the reading speed data of these three students in the last three reading sessions and their percentage of total increases in the two scoring methods. Stimulated interview sessions were conducted to explore their perceptions regarding this decline in the last weeks of the programme.

Table 7

*The Reading Speeds of Three Students Who Had the Lowest Scores*

Student	Students' reading speeds in the last three reading sessions (results in wpm)			The last minus first scoring method	The average scoring method
16	194	190	200	-17%	-11%
10	213	283	206	-20%	-6%
6	147	153	128	-36%	-24%

Student #16: Lost in a book.

Despite being the participant who read the most among the seventeen students of the study (with 36 texts, or 40,099 words read in total), student #16's performance in the last reading sessions appeared to be on the decline, which produced negative scores on both the average scoring and the highest minus lowest methods. In exploring the reasons for this unusual recession, it was revealed by the participant that:

> *"As I recall, in the last three weeks of the ERO programme, I was reading a detective story. The text was not difficult for me as I could understand almost everything. However, since this story has many plots in each chapter and I was so engaged with its content, I read the texts more carefully at a slower pace in order to gain a better understanding of the book's storyline and events that occurred in the story."*

Based on the learner's response, it seems that the genre of the book, or the text type, had certain influences on the reading speed of this student. Involvement with the story made the student slow down her reading speed so that she could enjoy it. In analysing this student's reading speed variations in the 36 texts that she had read, the data (Figure 5) revealed that although her reading speed was gradually increasing, it declined from the 27th text and after the aberrant spike on the 26th text. This decline coincided with the time when she began to read detective stories and confirms her explanation for the decrease in her reading rates.

Figure 5

Reading Progress Graph of Student #16
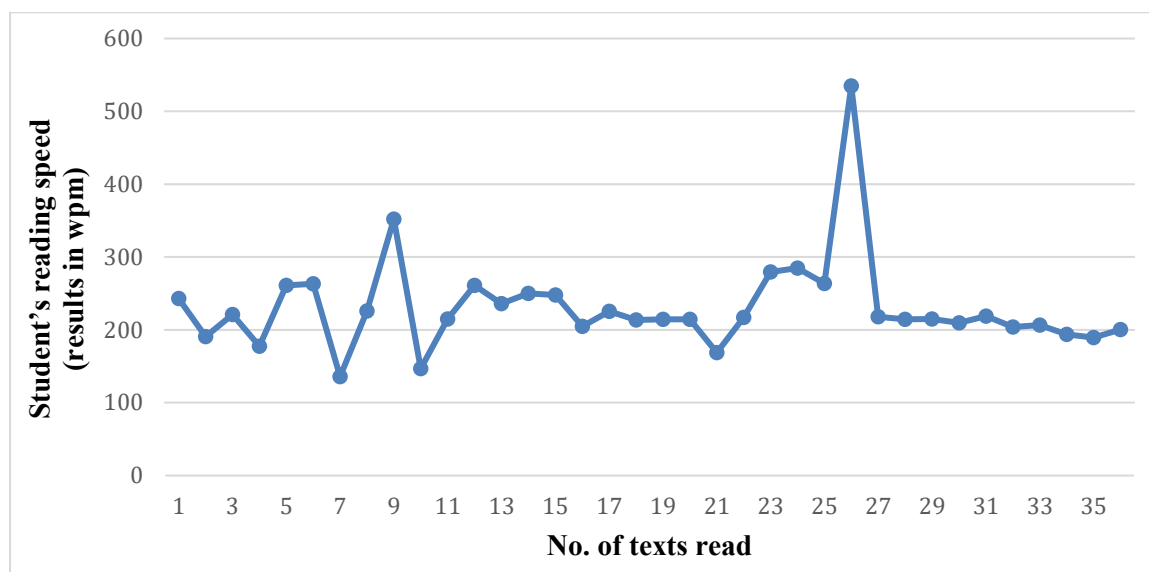
Thus, this result appears to be in line with Nell's (1988) observation that when readers "savour" passages that they most enjoy, they tend to read more slowly.

Students #10 and #6: Students have lives.

As reported by participant #10 in the interview session for the question, "Did you encounter any interferences that impacted your reading experience in this programme?" she disclosed that:

> *"I read quite slowly on texts that I was not familiar with or texts that were not of my favourite genres. But for texts in which I was interested, I think I read it a bit faster…. In general, the texts' difficulty was suitable for me as I found it quite easy to understand. Furthermore, because I love reading (I once tried to read the original version of Harry Potter in English before, but I had to give up on the half-way because it was too difficult for me), I wanted to continue reading instead of withdrawing from the reading programme…. However, because I was too busy with my part-time jobs, and other responsibilities, sometimes I was quite tired when I read. Therefore, I think my reading speed was slower at those times."*

In analysing this student's response, it appears that even though she was highly motivated in reading tasks as she always managed to complete her reading plan, the lack of interest for some reading materials, to some extent, affected her reading rates. Besides, the impact of a busy life was also found to be a factor that made her read slower (cf. Robb, 2002).

In the same vein, student #6, whose scores were found to be the lowest among all participants, believed that the unexpected interruptions caused by her friends and families were one of the main factors that interfered with her reading progress. Significantly, since the last three weeks of the programme was on the Lunar New Year holiday, she found it extremely difficult to stay focused on the reading tasks.

Students #6 and #7: Not reading extensively.

In addition to the incursions of a busy life, the motivation to gain new vocabulary words in each reading was also a cause of student #6 reading more slowly. As she further revealed, "*I was interested in acquiring new vocabularies through those reading that sometimes, I paused reading to guess to take note of a certain word.*" This explanation appears to match her self-evaluation that "*the course helped me gain a significant amount of new vocabularie*s.".

Student #7 was also a case of a participant reading in a manner other than that intended. This student's data was excluded from that presented earlier as his reading appeared to increase almost five times higher than the average scores of all participants in the average scoring method (see Table 8 below). As this student revealed in an interview session,

> "*During 10 weeks of participating in this programme, sometimes I used the skimming skill which I learnt at school to read texts that I found easy. But, that does not mean that I skipped most parts of a certain text, I just tried to read at a faster pace, but still, I understood the whole story.*"

It appears that when texts were seen as easy to this participant, he took the opportunity to practice the skimming skill that he acquired in his reading class. Whether he was reading with adequate understanding was not tested, although he claimed to understand.

Table 8

Summary of Participant 7's Results (in wpm)

	Amount read (words)	Average scoring	Highest minus lowest	Last minus first	Three extremes
7	14,718	449	1133	286	850

In sum, these results suggest that when taking part in the online reading programme, students are likely to encounter unexpected obstacles that appear to hinder their reading fluency development. These hindrances, as perceived by participants in this study, include external factors like the social environment, work, family, and internal factors like learners' motivation to read for details, to gain more vocabulary, and the lack of interest.

Perceptions of Extensive Reading Online

The second research question asked about learners' perceptions of ERO, and whether ERO enhanced their motivation to read. As in previous studies (Arnold, 2009; Sun, 2003), the majority of participants (71%) reported positive perceptions, and the majority exceeded the target of 20,000 words read over a 10-week period. Only one student expressed negative views, and these are discussed below.

Student #5: Interesting texts.

The ERO Programme was perceived as ineffective by one student. In explaining the reason why this programme was ineffective, she provided three reasons.

> *"I think this approach to reading is still quite new to me and caused me some troubles. Firstly, I think the implementation of this programme is inconvenient because sometimes when I forgot to count my reading time, I had to read again. Secondly, since I don't have a personal computer, I found it difficult to read on an online platform. And lastly, I was not so interested in the books' content. I hope the website could have had self-help books or books and stories in the fiction genre."*

As Day and Bamford's (2002) second principle and Nation and Waring's (2020) stress on the importance of the pleasure of reading remind us, without a sufficient provision of books and reading materials that are interesting and within learners' vocabulary size, the implementation of any ER programme would be unlikely to be successful. Thus, the lack of books and stories to match this student's interest appeared to demotivate her from engaging with the programme. As a result, this impacted the student's reading experience and contributed to her thinking that the programme was not a practical approach for her language development. In order to gain better insight into her reading progress, the following chart illustrates the performance of this student during the 10 weeks of the study.

Figure 6

Reading Progress Graph of Student #5
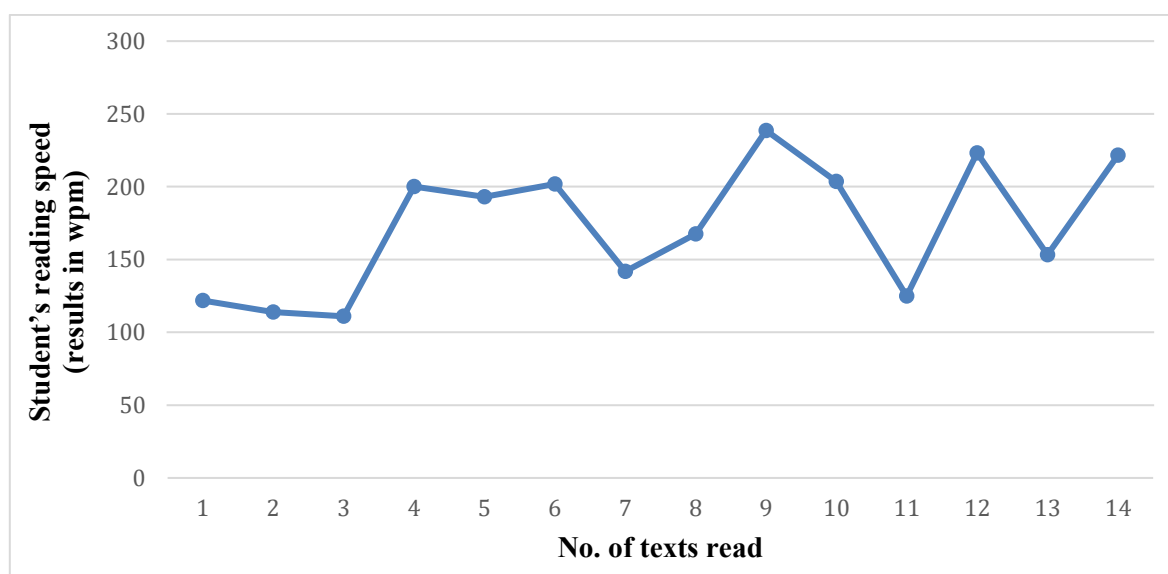
In comparing this student's self-evaluation and empirical data on her performance, two salient features emerged from this figure. Firstly, during the 10 weeks of the ERO Programme, the total number of texts that she read was only 14, which is the lowest number read among all participants. This confirms the participant's statement that she was not interested in the books' content and therefore, she did not read much. Secondly, although this student claimed that the programme was not useful, Figure 6 recorded increases in her reading rates. According to Tables 5 and 6, these increases were 19% in the average scoring method and 136% in the three extremes scoring method. In other words, contrary to this student's assumption, her reading speed increased after taking part in the 10-week ERO Programme.

Despite the difference between perception and reality, it is the student's perception that shapes her belief about the programme's effectiveness. If the texts had been different, would she have read more? If she read more, would she view the programme more positively? If the experiences of the other participants in this study are any indication, the answer is probably yes. This relates to the point made earlier that a shortage of books can have a demotivating effect on reading.

Pedagogical Implications

This is a small-scale study undertaken in a specific EFL context, which may be viewed as a limitation, and yet it provides a number of insights that might have wider implications. The first of these is a reminder of the importance of the second of the Day & Bamford principles - when ER is a stand-alone activity, as opposed to being integrated into the curriculum, having a variety of reading materials on a wide range of topics is important. Using online reading resources is one way to provide learners with a greater range of reading materials.

A second insight draws attention to the word 'usually' in the seventh of the Day & Bamford principles. When reading for fluency development, reading speed may be expected to be faster, and to increase over time, but the reality is that when a reader is engrossed in a book, she may, in fact, slow down. This is not a reason for the teacher to feel despondent.

Related to reading speed is the reminder that vocabulary size does not correlate neatly with reading ability. The participants in this study had an average vocabulary size of around 7,000-word families and yet the majority were not reading these easy-to-intermediate level texts at the reading rate of 250–300 words per minute suggested by Nation and Macalister (2021) as the speed of a skilled reader. Fluency development is often characterised as 'learn a little, use a lot.' It may have been the case that, until this study, these learners had been doing the opposite - 'learn a lot, use a little'.

A final insight is the reminder that students have lives beyond the classroom, or lives that can impede the development of a reading habit. The implication here would seem to be that teachers should make space in the timetable for reading to happen in the classroom, as well as beyond, and to integrate the reading into classroom activities. In such cases, having a wide variety of reading materials may be less important because classroom activities are likely to require the learners to read the same material.

Conclusion

The first question that this study aimed to explore is whether the implementation of an Online ER Programme can help increase learners' reading fluency. The four scoring methods used in this study all demonstrated a positive impact upon the average increase of participants' reading speed; in other words, ERO facilitated the development of learners' reading fluency. For the small number of students who made no improvement, different factors and distractors were identified. These factors include the side effects of pleasure reading that made them read more slowly in order to enjoy the text, the distraction caused by their social environment (e.g., work, family, etc.), and their motivation to read for details and to gain more vocabulary instead of enhancing their reading fluency. These negative results, however, did not unduly affect the whole groups' results.

The second question that the current study sought to investigate is the students' perceptions towards ERO and their evaluation on the role of the Online ER Programme in motivating them to read extensively. The results demonstrated that the majority of students expressed positive attitudes towards the programme and this approach to extensive reading. Extensive reading online provided them with opportunities to choose different reading materials that are of their interest and within their language competency. They considered ERO effective in enhancing their reading fluency development, vocabulary knowledge, reading comprehension skills and pragmatic use of language.

In exploring the role of the Online ER Programme in enhancing their reading motivation, the results suggest that most students perceived the habit of reading online books and materials extensively encouraged them to establish the habit of reading regularly. As the findings reveal, the satisfaction gained after finishing a book, the personal realisation that their language proficiency was improving, and the easy accessibility of ERO were considered the key factors that motivated them to maintain their reading habit after the Online ER Programme.

This study has demonstrated what a motivated teacher can do to bring ER to students in an EFL setting. It has provided a number of practical insights through the implementation of an Online ER Programme for a group of first-year students at a university in Vietnam. Although for most students, extensive reading was a new approach to reading, the majority of them increased their reading speed and gained other benefits from ERO. Furthermore, the study extends the understanding of learner's perceptions of the ERO and factors that impact their reading motivation.

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Appendix A

Background questionnaire for participants

 1. How much do you like reading in English? Do you enjoy it?
 _____
 2. How much time (hours) do you spend each week reading in English for pleasure?
 _____
 3. Do you often read English books/stories/news online?
 _____
 4. How many English books/stories do you read averagely in a year?
 _____
 5. What kind(s) of English books/stories/websites do you enjoy reading most?
 _____
 6. What is the best English book/story/text you have read?
 _____
 7. Please share briefly about an English book/text you have recently read.
 _____
 8. What is the most difficult challenge that you have when reading in English?
 _____
 9. What do you think are the benefits of reading English materials frequently?
 _____

 10. Have you ever experienced an extensive reading programme before?
 Yes ☐   No ☐

Appendix B

Online post-task questionnaire

1. After participating in the ERO programme, how do you feel about this approach to learning/teaching reading? Is it helpful for your study in class?
(Please explain in detail)

_____

2. Do you think this programme, to some extent, helped or motivated you to maintain the habit of reading in English?

☐ Yes   ☐ No   Other opinion: _____

3. Why did reading English stories online motivate, or did not motivate you to maintain the habit of reading in English? *(Please explain in detail)*

_____

4. In 10 weeks participating in this reading project, did you encounter any problems that made you feel unhappy about the programme?

_____

_____

Appendix C

Stimulated recall interview questions for participants

1. How did you feel while and after participating in the ERO programme?

2. How would you assess your performance in the last week of the ERO programme?

3. Did you observe any improvement in your reading speed after 10 weeks of the study?

4. Did you have any difficulties or problems while participating in the programme?

5. Do you think this activity is helpful in improving your English? Why, or why not, and in which way?

6. Did you enjoy the reading tasks of the ERO programme?

7. After participating in the reading activity, do you want to continue using extensive reading as a way to improve your English? Please explain in detail.

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