



# Challenges Setting up Extensive Reading Programs in Vietnam

ROB WARING

Notre Dame Seishin University

VŨ THỊ HOÀI

University of Science and Technology of Hanoi

Waring and Chu (2017) presented data showing some of the beliefs and attitudes of teachers in Vietnam regarding Extensive Reading (ER). The data showed some of the Vietnamese teachers surveyed had an adequate understanding of ER, but others were still unclear of its role and purpose in the wider EFL setting. This paper presents more data about the development of ER in the past two years in Vietnam, as both a follow-up to the original study, and to ascertain whether the several Extensive Reading Foundation (ERF) lecture roadshows held in Vietnam in the past few years have had a real effect. The data show that not much has changed in the past two years. Many teachers still confuse Intensive Reading (IR) and ER and face the same challenges to fund, set up and run an ER program. However, some encouraging signs were found.

*Keywords:* Extensive reading, Vietnam, Questionnaire

## Background

### *A Default View of ER*

Extensive Reading (ER) is at one level a very simple approach to reading (Nation and Waring, 2020). It involves the students fluently reading massive amounts of text at their level of fluent understanding with high levels of comprehension. The simplest practical form of this is to give the students books to read that the student likes and can read comfortably. However, at another level this 'simple' act can be complex. When teachers implement ER in their programs, they have many things to consider such as how much reading is needed, and of what materials; who selects the texts to be read

and whether it is done individually or as a class; whether there should be assessment, or not; as well as what follow-up activities should be done, among many other decisions.

While no two ER practitioners will completely agree on what ER is, we suggest that most ER teachers hold a broad 'default view' on what ER is and how ER is typically taught or introduced into the classroom.

Following Nation and Waring (2020) and Waring and McLean (2015), we would expect them to say:

- the aim of ER is to read a lot to build reading speed and fluency while reading enjoyably.

Waring, R. & Vu, T. H. (2020). Challenges setting up extensive reading programs in Vietnam. *Extensive Reading World Congress Proceedings*, 5, 11-22.

- students should read something easy so they can build reading speed (about 98% of the words should already be known prior to reading).
- the aim is not to meet a lot of new words and grammar but to deepen their knowledge of previously met language to strengthen and consolidate that knowledge.
- students will select their own books.
- students probably do not need to be tested as they choose books they can understand.
- a main aim is to build reading confidence and motivation.
- reading short and simple texts followed by discussion.
- reading with the aim of learning new language and vocabulary.

We would **not** expect them to say:

- the aim of ER is to learn lots of new words and grammar.
- students should read difficult texts written for native speakers.
- students should read each text carefully for detailed understanding and careful analysis.
- students need to be tested on their understanding.

Conversely, we would expect them to say Intensive reading (IR) is characterized by:

- reading a text in detail to get a deep understanding of its contents.
- conducting followed by comprehension questions.
- using materials related to what students have read or studied in class.

## **Reading in Vietnam**

In order to gain insights into the way Vietnamese students learn how to read, it is essential to note that teacher-centered approaches are still widely popular in most Vietnamese classrooms despite radical changes in teaching practices in big cities. Most teachers are required to strictly follow the set curriculum due to the time constraints and exam-oriented learning culture (Nguyen, 2002). The exam-oriented learning culture has strongly influenced the students' choice of reading strategies and materials to help students to pass the exams. According to Le (1993: 35), what all students need is "a sufficiently good knowledge of grammar and vocabulary of the target language [English] to pass the national grammar-based and norm-referenced examinations."

In Vietnam, reading is either taught as an element of an integrated subject or as an independent one. In reading classes in Vietnam, IR is the main focus while ER is neglected, or largely unknown. Most reading classes focus on grammatical forms, discourse markers, and other surface structure details to understand the literal meaning, implications, rhetorical relationships and the like. Bottom-up and top-down processing are deployed purposefully to achieve reading comprehension. Therefore, students can achieve a greater command of language. However, in an IR class, students might not be able to read fluently due to the presence of many unknown words or are not allowed to choose the reading materials of their interests. In contrast, ER allows students to read large amounts of

high interest material, usually out of class, concentrating on meaning. Despite the fact that a significant amount of research has proven the benefits of ER for students such as improving vocabulary and grammar, building confidence, enjoyment and a love for reading, ER is not widely popular in Vietnam. Given the aforementioned challenges related to the learning culture and educational policies, ER is not well known by teachers and might be unaffordable for Vietnamese students due to their low incomes.

However, research by Gorsuch and Taguchi (2008) and Yen (2018) suggest that systematic training in reading fluency in the Vietnamese context can bring benefits. Moreover, Renandya, Rajan and Jacobs (1999) showed that adult Vietnamese EFL workers could also benefit from systematic ER programs. What we need to know is what Vietnamese teachers know about ER despite the use of traditional approaches in typical Vietnamese classrooms and how ready they are to take on ER. However, very few studies (e.g. Chang and Renandya, 2017; Waring and Chu, 2017; Vuong et.al, 2019) have been conducted to determine the attitudes to reading by Vietnamese teachers. This paper researches what some Vietnamese teachers know about ER in more depth.

## Research Questions

The research questions for this paper are as follows:

1. What are the attitudes of Vietnamese teachers to ER?
2. What do they understand ER to be?
3. What are their attitudes towards graded readers?

4. What challenges do they face when setting up and running an ER program?

## Method

The Extensive Reading Foundation ([www.ERFoundation.org](http://www.ERFoundation.org)) has published a guidebook to ER in Vietnamese, has conducted several lecture tours of Vietnam since 2017 and set up the Vietnamese Extensive Reading Facebook page trying to build up awareness of ER. The questionnaire data presented here looks at the current state of understanding and acceptance of ER after conducting the workshops. As the general knowledge about ER is still low in Vietnam (Chang and Renandya, 2017; Waring and Chu, 2017; Yen, 2018), we decided to collect data only from teachers who had some understanding of ER. We did not see value in asking teachers with little understanding of ER as their data would have produced floor effects and distorted the data. Rather, we felt it more beneficial to ask teachers who had heard of ER to determine whether their perceptions of ER were accurate, and to determine if the workshops had had an effect. However, some subjects with little knowledge of ER took part in the survey. This population was determined by asking those who had already attended an ER workshop by giving out a link to the questionnaire to the attendees. The questionnaire was also posted to the Vietnamese ER Facebook page. Our assumption was that they would have at least some familiarity with ER.

## Participants

112 Vietnamese native speaking teachers living in different areas of Vietnam responded to the questionnaire. They worked in a variety of teaching institutions such as universities, high schools, or English training centers and teach students at a

range of English proficiency from beginner to advanced. Most of them had had some, usually limited, experience with ER before, but others had no experience with ER.

### The Questionnaire

The questionnaire contained 47 questions categorized into three parts. Most questions were multiple choice, check questions or open ended. A modified version of the questionnaire is at <https://bit.ly/2TF7gou>. The questionnaire was written in English because parallel data were being collected from other teachers in the South East Asian region following Chang and Renandya (2017). The first section asked about the teachers’ personal information including their teaching circumstances and their teaching experience. The second part collected data about their understanding and

their experience of ER and IR as well as their thoughts on the suitability of graded readers for their students. The third part asked teachers about the challenges they might encounter when setting up ER programs at their institutions. The questionnaire was made using Google Forms and distributed to teachers throughout Vietnam.

### Results

First, we will look at the data for the teachers’ overall understanding of what features are typical in IR or ER classes and compare them to our expectations as set out above. Then we will look at their thoughts on graded readers and the challenges they face when setting up or conducting an ER class.

Table 1: The teachers’ responses to the question “What does the term “Extensive Reading” mean to you? Check any that apply.”

Reading a text in detail to get a deep understanding of its contents	44%
Reading followed by comprehension questions	28%
Reading materials related to what students have read or studied in class	1%
Reading to learn new language and vocabulary	35%
Reading authentic materials	49%
Reading short and simple texts followed by discussion	11%
Reading at a difficulty level at which you can read smoothly and quickly without looking up words or translating them	**0%
Reading a lot	**39%
Reading and being able to understand 98% of the content of the text	**34%
Reading as fast as possible	**17%
Reading fluently without using a dictionary	**44%
Understanding 80% the text without using dictionary	1%
Reading for pleasure	**55%

Mark \*\* denotes a typical ER feature.

**Data Showing Understanding of Extensive Reading (ER)**

The data in Table 1 report which features the participants said were typical features of ER. The data show the subjects sometimes correctly rated some features that would typically be called IR lowly such as only 11% of the subjects thought *reading short simple texts followed by discussion* was an ER features as it is a typical IR feature. However, most of the items that are typically ER items were rated lower than 50% which shows that many of the teachers are confusing ER and IR. It was a little surprising to see only 55% of the teachers say *reading for pleasure* and *reading a lot* (39%) are typical features of an ER class. We would have expected 80-90%. Moreover, 49% of the teachers said *authentic materials* should be used in ER classes when typically graded readers are used, or at

least materials chosen to be easy. Only 17% of the subjects associated ER with reading as fast as possible. Possibly there was some confusion with speed reading. As many of the teachers teach students of intermediate level and below it is surprising that non-simplified materials were so widely considered useful. These data suggest that even if simplified materials are available, many teachers may not understand their purpose and would continue to use materials that might be too difficult for the students even when doing IR. Most of the other data do not match our suggested typical features of an IR program including *reading fluently without using a dictionary* (44%) and *reading while knowing 98% of the language in the text* (34%) which are typical ER features. Other data were confusing, such as *reading a lot* recorded 39%.

Table 2: Data for the question “The aim of ER is ...”

... to build confidence	**65%
... motivation	**65%
... enjoyment and a love of reading	**65%
... to build a life-long habit of reading and learning	**70%
... to learn lots of new words and grammar	34%
... to learn new vocabulary and grammar points through the careful analysis of the language of the text	28%
... to build up learner autonomy	**1%
... to read a text carefully so that they can understand the content deeply	23%
... to recycle and consolidate the language learnt in textbooks	**45%
... to build their vocabulary	63%
... to become effective readers by going from the word-by-word level to the idea-by-idea level of reading	**69%
... to improve reading speed and reading fluency	**74%
... to develop a sense of the language by seeing how it flows in its natural context time and time again	**64%

Items marked \*\* show typical responses for extensive reading classes

### Data Showing Understanding of Reasons for ER

The data in Table 2 show some understanding of ER. For example, the teachers thought ER would *build confidence* (65%), *motivation* (65%) *enjoyment and a love of reading* (65%), *a life-long habit of reading and learning* (70%), and they would *become effective readers by going from the word-by-word level to the idea-by-idea level of reading* (69%), *improve reading speed and reading fluency* (74%), *develop a sense of the language by seeing how it flows in its natural context time and time again* (64%) and somewhat lower at 45%, *recycle and consolidate the language learnt in textbooks*. We also see encouragingly low responses for features we would typically find in IR classes such as *read a text carefully so that they can understand the content deeply* (23%), *learn new vocabulary and grammar points through the careful analysis of the language of the text* (28%), and *learn lots of new words and grammar* (34%).

However, *build up autonomy* at 1% was not expected. One of the hallmarks of an ER program is to develop autonomous readers who can select, read and digest materials on their own without the need of dictionaries, teachers or other forms of study (Nation & Waring, 2020). However, the Vietnamese teachers may not yet be familiar with the term or concept.

The two items *build their vocabulary* and *learn lots of new words and grammar* were also interesting. We suspect that most of the teachers would consider the term 'learn vocabulary' to refer to the meeting of new words. Because students need to know 98% or more words on a page to be able to read naturally and fluently with minimal interruptions, there will be very few *new* words they meet, and thus very few to learn (Nation and Waring, 2020). However,

it could be said the students would develop deeper aspects of vocabulary knowledge such as noticing collocations, making connections between words as well as developing receptive generative use (Joe, 2010). We conclude that the data for this question are somewhat unclear.

### Teachers' Thoughts About Graded Readers

Table 3 presents the data for the teachers' thoughts about graded readers. The questionnaire showed images taken from graded readers and asked the teachers their thoughts about the suitability for the Vietnamese classroom.

The data in Table 3 show a very positive image of graded readers saying they *can help students to read more naturally* (94% agree) and *look interesting* (83%) and they *want their students to read some* (86%). They also understand that students *should select what graded readers they will read according to their ability and their interest* (94%) and *schools should set up libraries of graded readers* (92%) and *teachers should explain to their students why Extensive Reading is important and how it consolidates what they learn in their textbook* (90%) and *should give their students instructions on what graded readers to choose* (88%). 65% agreed that *ER should be part of the curriculum*.

There were however, mixed results for whether they agreed (37%), had no opinion (36%) or disagreed about assessing the reading (27%). This is not surprising as various institutions have varying policies regarding assessing the reading. Many require it, while others might evaluate the reading in other ways such as through reports, presentations and so on. This is also seen in the split over whether they agreed (42%), had no opinion (38%) or disagreed

Table 3: The teachers' thoughts about graded readers

	Agree	Do Not Agree or Disagree	Dis-agree
They can help students to read more naturally	94%	6%	1%
They seem a little childish	18%	36%	46%
They are not really appropriate for my students	11%	35%	54%
They look interesting	83%	14%	2%
I want my students to read some	86%	12%	2%
They seem too easy for my students	10%	57%	33%
Students should be allowed to use a dictionary when they read graded readers	40%	42%	18%
There should not be any assessment because Extensive Reading is for pleasure only	37%	36%	27%
Teachers should give students grammar and vocabulary exercises as post-reading activities	42%	38%	19%
Students should write reports/summaries/reflections on each graded reader OR discuss their reading so the teachers can assess their reading	74%	24%	2%
Teachers should give their students instructions on what graded readers to choose	88%	10%	2%
Students should select what graded readers they will read according to their ability and their interest	94%	5%	1%
Students should only read graded readers in class	5%	26%	69%
Students should read graded readers both in class and out of class	79%	15%	6%
Schools should set up libraries of graded readers	92%	8%	0%
Schools should make Extensive Reading a mandatory part of the curriculum and require students to read a certain number of books every month	65%	26%	9%
Students should read at least one graded reader every week	60%	33%	7%
Teachers should explain to their students why Extensive Reading is important and how it consolidates what they learn in their textbook	90%	10%	0%
Teachers should decide what graded readers the whole class will read together	49%	34%	18%
Teachers should decide what graded readers each student will read on their own	29%	42%	30%

(19%) about giving students grammar and vocabulary exercises as post-reading activities, or whether they should be allowed to use a dictionary when they read graded readers (40% agreed, 42% no opinion and 18% disagreed) suggesting some teachers might see the ER as a form of study, rather than a form of fluency practice.

In terms of where, what and how much the students should read, the data varied. 49% agreed that teachers should decide what graded readers the whole class will read together, 34% had no opinion and 18% disagreed, whereas 29% agreed that teachers should decide what graded readers each student will read on their own, 42% had no opinion and 30% agreed. 60% of the teachers said students should read at least one graded reader every week, 33% had no opinion and 7% disagreed. It is unclear whether this meant they should read more or less. The teachers were much clearer about students should write reports/

summaries/reflections on each graded reader OR discuss their reading so the teachers can assess their reading with 74% agreeing, 24% having no opinion and 2% disagreeing. These data seem to show that the Vietnamese teachers see the relevance of embedding the ER in the class and assessing it in some way either directly (e.g. a test) or indirectly (e.g. a report). The data in Table 4 are largely what one might expect given Vietnam's uptake rate of ER at the present time. The teachers report there is not sufficient funding for setting up a library of graded readers (68% agree or strongly agree), not enough time in the curriculum (58%), schools have poor management systems of graded readers, for cataloging, labeling, checking out, recording and returning them (66%), it is difficult to make Extensive Reading compulsory especially when the main objective is to help students pass tests (76%), it takes a long time to evaluate the success of an Extensive Reading Program (72%), schools are not willing to modify the curriculum (74%),

Table 4: The data outlining the challenges teachers face when setting up an ER program.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Do Not Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
There is not sufficient funding for setting up a library of graded readers	31%	37%	21%	8%	3%
There is no suitable place to set up a library of graded readers	7%	29%	40%	16%	8%
There is not enough time for Extensive Reading in the curriculum	23%	35%	21%	18%	2%
Schools have poor management systems of graded readers, for cataloging, labeling, checking out, recording and returning them	20%	46%	21%	11%	2%
Students might steal graded readers or forget to return books	10%	31%	34%	20%	5%



Extensive Reading post-reading activities may vary across classes, and therefore, assessment may not be fair for students of different classes	17%	40%	26%	17%	1%
It is difficult and time-consuming for teachers to assess students' reading compared with comprehension or vocabulary/grammar tests	22%	47%	16%	13%	2%
It is difficult to make Extensive Reading compulsory especially when the main objective is to help students pass tests	39%	37%	13%	8%	2%
It takes a long time to evaluate the success of an Extensive Reading Program	28%	44%	18%	9%	2%
Schools are not willing to modify the curriculum	27%	47%	18%	7%	1%
Schools find it hard to choose which graded readers to buy	20%	37%	24%	17%	2%
Teachers do not understand what Extensive Reading is and why it is necessary for language learning	9%	29%	27%	26%	10%
Teachers are not willing to get involved in the Extensive Reading program because it will create more work for teachers	14%	39%	22%	20%	5%
Teachers are not well-trained for Extensive Reading	25%	40%	22%	10%	2%
Students do not understand the need for Extensive Reading	28%	41%	13%	15%	2%
Students are not motivated enough to select and read graded readers out of class	34%	43%	15%	6%	2%
Students do not even read books in Vietnamese	33%	39%	13%	10%	6%
Students are unsure about their reading ability	22%	48%	17%	10%	2%

and it takes a long time to evaluate the success of an Extensive Reading program (72%) shows a short-sighted view of the benefits of ER.

Other issues concern the lack of students' willingness to read or understanding of the need to read, even in Vietnamese. 72% agreed or strongly agreed that *students do not even read books in Vietnamese, students are not motivated enough to select and read graded readers out of class (67%) and students are unsure about their reading ability (70%)*. 69% agreed or strongly agreed that *students do not understand the need for Extensive Reading*. Teachers also face problems in the curriculum design with 57% agreeing or strongly agreeing that *Extensive Reading post-reading activities may vary across classes, and therefore, assessment may not be fair for students of different classes, and 69% saying It is difficult and time-consuming for teachers to assess students' reading compared with comprehension or vocabulary/grammar tests*. These problems are compounded with only 36% of the teachers agreeing or strongly agreeing there is *no suitable place to set up a library of graded readers*. One presumes each school which has reading as part of its curriculum would have a library of sorts, and why this is not available is not clear, but most likely concerns funding and training. However, research by Vuong et al. (2019) suggests libraries are quite common in Vietnamese Junior High schools, but research by Yu (1993) suggest that ER must be incorporated into the reading curriculum; if not, students would find reading unrewarding and not do it.

## Discussion

Overall there seems to be an understanding among these teachers that ER exists and that it is valuable. However, there is no consensus on what it is, or the principles underlying ER as the data in Tables 1

and 2 show teachers confusing some of the major tenets of the "default" view of ER. This suggests that there needs to be a concerted awareness raising campaign to get across the basic "default" view of ER more clearly without overly complicating the message. Once the default view has been accepted, the second round of awareness raising should be a more in-depth series of lectures and workshops to deepen awareness, provide options and develop an ER community in Vietnam.

A major reason ER is not well practiced in Vietnam is the lack of access to, or knowledge about, graded reading and graded readers which are an integral part of the ER class at least in North Asia. The data showed that many of the teachers had never seen graded readers prior to being shown images of them in the questionnaire or shown physical copies at the workshops. However, once they were introduced to them (either in person in the lecture tours or in images on the questionnaire), there was an overwhelming desire for teachers to get access to them. The authors therefore call upon the graded reader publishers to enter the Vietnamese market more aggressively as there is certainly pent up demand.

Many teachers want to try ER, but find structural issues a barrier (time, institution knowledge, lack of resources, curriculum issues etc.). These are by far the hardest challenges because ER needs to be understood not only at the chalk-face but also in the halls of power at schools, boards of education, both local and national. Without their support, encouragement, training and funding, little will be achieved quickly to ensure Vietnam catches up with North East Asia in its understanding and acceptance of ER as a critical part of the learning of a foreign language.

## **Conclusion**

The data from Waring and Chu (2017) and these data here show that there are still considerable barriers to introducing ER more fully in Vietnam. The data show a need for more teacher training because 36% disagreed or strongly disagreed that *Teachers do not understand what Extensive Reading is and why it is necessary for language learning* with a further 27% undecided. This leaves only 38% of the teachers understanding ER quite well. However, 65% agree or strongly agree that *teachers are not well-trained for Extensive Reading*. Once teachers understand clearly what ER is, the teachers will need training on how to implement ER, how to build libraries, assess the reading and motivate the students to read. The authors consider it our mission to continue to work to develop the practice of ER in Vietnam in the coming years.

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